

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Innocence By Dissociation. A Pragma-Dialectical Analysis Of The Fallacy Of Incorrect Dissociation In The Vatican Document 'We Remember: A Reflection On The Shoah'



1. Introduction

The Vatican document '*We remember: A reflection on the Shoah*', (issued on March 16, 1998) has led to many critical reactions throughout the world. The main reason for this is that it did not contain the generally expected apology to the Jewish people for the Roman Catholic Church's complicity in the Holocaust but, instead, turned out to be an apologia in which the Church pleads not guilty. The apologia is based on a twofold distinction:

- (1) between the Church as an institution and its individual members, and
- (2) between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism.

In this paper, I argue that these distinctions both constitute the fallacy of incorrect dissociation. The concept of dissociation was introduced by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. It is one of the two main principles of argumentation they discuss - the other one being association. In pragma-dialectical terms, dissociation aims at changing one of the the protagonist and the antagonist's common starting points. If this is not done properly, the dissociation constitutes a violation of one of the rules for critical discussion. In this case, I contend that Rule 6 has been broken because the document presents the distinctions as self-evident and is therefore guilty of begging the question.

In Section 2, I describe the historical background of the document and sketch its outlines. In Section 3, I summarize the main reactions to it. In Section 4, I explain why the two distinctions made in the document can be analysed as dissociations

in the Perelmanian sense. In Section 5, I argue that these dissociations violate Rule 6 of pragma-dialectics and constitute the fallacy of 'innocence by dissociation', being a special case of the fallacy of incorrect dissociation. Finally, in Section 6, I conclude that this fallacy is the terminological counterpart of the well-known fallacy of 'guilt by association'.

2. Background and outline of 'We remember: A reflection on the Shoah'

'We Remember: A reflection on the Shoah' is a 14-page document issued by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews on March 16, 1998.^[i] It is a long-awaited document because it addresses the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Holocaust during the Second World War. The document acknowledges that individual Catholics did things that were wrong or even sinful in their support of anti-Semitism and of Nazi persecution of Jews, and it repents for this – using the Hebrew word *teshuvah*. But it also absolves the Church as such from complicity in the Holocaust. It even warmly praises the controversial wartime Pope Pius XII (who has long been accused of remaining silent in the face of Nazi genocide and even of pro-German tendencies) for saving hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives 'personally or through his representatives'.

The Vatican commission took up the task of creating this document at Pope John Paul II's request eleven years ago, in 1987 – a year after the pope had a historic meeting with Rome Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff in Rome's central synagogue. It is the third formal document prepared by the commission, following the landmark *Nostra Aetate* declaration of 1965, which marked the first official gesture of reconciliation by the Church to the Jews by repudiating the concept of Jewish guilt for Jesus' death and by calling for mutual respect and dialogue between Catholics and Jews. By the way, it was not until 1965 that the Vatican eliminated the phrase 'perfidious Jews' from the liturgy of the Holy Week service.

The Vatican statement takes pains to distinguish anti-Judaism from anti-Semitism, suggesting that only the Nazis were guilty of anti-Semitism. It also stops far short of taking responsibility as a religious institution from promulgating the tenets of anti-Judaism, in particular the teaching that the Jews killed Jesus. The widely accepted view is that this central Christian teaching provided the theological foundation for the anti-Semitism of the Nazi years that culminated in the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis. Instead, the Vatican's document distances Christianity from the Holocaust. 'The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime,' it says.

3. Reactions to the Vatican document

It is an understatement to say that the document did not meet with general approval. Though Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the Head of the Vatican Commission, said that the Vatican's statement amounts to an act of repentance as well as an apology, most of the reactions to the document clearly indicate that it does not live up to its expectations. The Vatican's apology to the Jewish people still refuses, it is said, to accept full responsibility for the Catholic Church's failure to take action to stop or slow the Holocaust. In this respect, many see the document as a step backwards compared to recent statements by Catholic Bishops in France, Germany and Poland, who admitted that the Church was at fault for its failure to react to Jewish persecution half a century ago. Oddly, they add, the Vatican document fails to do what the current pope, John Paul II, himself has done in less formal documents and speeches – that is, take direct responsibility for the Church's failure to try to ameliorate the attempted genocide of the Jewish people. Many representatives of Jewish groups voiced their disappointment about the document and declared that it 'did not go far enough'. Some news agencies even claimed that the document has been 'greeted with nearly universal dismay and anger by Jewish experts'. Perhaps this is an exaggeration but only a slight one because it cannot be denied that many expressed their dissatisfaction.**[ii]**

Among the dissatisfied critics were Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of the Department of Interfaith Affairs of the Anti-Defamation League, who called the paper 'a real insult' and 'a pretext for an apology for Pius XII,' and Goldie Hershon, President of the Canadian Jewish Congress, who criticized the Vatican as follows: 'It is inconsistent to admit the failures of ordinary Christians to speak out against the Holocaust, but to ignore the deafening silence of the Pope.'**[iii]**

Others were even more outspoken in their criticism. For example, Yitzhak Minervi, a former Israeli envoy to the Vatican, said: 'All the responsibility is rolled onto the church's flock [...] while the church and its institutions emerges spotless.' And Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League in the United States said: 'The document rings hollow. It is an apologia full of rationalization for Pope Pius XII and the Church. It takes very little moral and historical responsibility for the Church's historic teaching for the contempt of Jews.'**[iv]**

Rabbi Mark Winer, a White Plains, N.Y. rabbi who is president of the National Council of Synagogues, finally, said that 'the "remembrance" is incomplete, the "repentance" is lacking and the "resolve" for the future is pretty weak-kneed.'**[v]**

4. The distinctions in the Vatican document as dissociations

The first distinction in the Vatican document is that between 'anti-Semitism' and 'anti-Judaism':

[...] we cannot ignore the difference [...] between anti-Semitism based on theories contrary to the constant teaching of the Church [...] and the long-standing sentiments of mistrust and hostility that we call anti-Judaism, of which unfortunately, Christians also have been guilty.

Here, we see the first move towards the conclusion that the Roman Catholic Church is not guilty and never has been guilty of anti-Semitism. This point is repeated even more explicitly a little but further in the text:

The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity [...].

Anti-Judaism, on the other hand, does have Christian roots. According to the document, it can be traced back to 'certain interpretations of the New Testament', be it that these interpretations were totally mistaken:

In the Christian world [...] erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability [for murdering Jesus Christ] have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people.

The second distinction in the document is that between the Roman Catholic Church as an institution and its individual members. On the one hand, the document emphasizes that the Church, including its leader, Pope Pius XII, has done everything to resist and fight racism and Nazi anti-Semitism:

During and after the war, Jewish communities and Jewish leaders expressed their thanks for all that had been done for them, including what Pope Pius XII did personally or through his representatives to save hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives.

On the other hand, the document suggests that in 'some Christians minds', 'anti-Jewish prejudices' were 'imbedded' which made them 'less sensitive, or even indifferent to the persecution launched against the Jews by National Socialism' and observes that:

[...] the spiritual resistance and concrete action of other Christians was not that which might have been expected from Christ's followers.

The 'call to penitence' is, therefore, only directed to the individual members of the Roman Catholic Church, not to itself or to its leaders, because, again, they are not guilty. When the document refers to the Catholic Church's desire 'to express her

deep sorrow', it is not because of the things the Church did wrong, but 'for the failures of her sons and daughters'. The 'act of repentance' (*teshuva*) is carried out only indirectly, 'since,' - according to the document - 'as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children'.

To sum up: the Roman Catholic Church pleads 'not guilty' with respect to the horrors of the Holocaust, first by distinguishing between pagan anti-Semitism and Christian anti-Judaism, and second by distancing itself from its individual members.

This twofold distinction amounts to what Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, in Chapter 4 of their landmark study *The New Rhetoric. A treatise on argumentation*, call a 'dissociation' (1969: 411-459).**[vi]** They contrast dissociation with association:

By processes of *association* we understand schemes which bring separate elements together and allow us to establish a unity among them [...]. By processes of *dissociation*, we mean techniques of separation, which have the purpose of dissociating, separating, disuniting elements which are regarded as forming a whole or at least a unified group within some system of thought [...]. (1969: 190).

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca mention several examples of dissociated concepts: 'scientific truth' and 'religious truth', 'reality' and 'appearance', 'verbal' and 'real', et cetera. They also point out that paradoxical expressions such as 'learned ignorance', 'happy misfortune', 'bitter joy', 'thinking the unthinkable', and 'expressing the unexpressible' 'always call for an effort at dissociation'. Another example of a paradoxical expression is: 'I do not mind dying. But it grieves me to depart from life.' Here, the dissociation is 'the result of opposition between a word and what is ordinarily regarded as a synonym for it' (1969: 443).

If association unifies elements which were previously regarded by the audience as separate and dissociation separates elements which were previously regarded by the audience as a unit, it will be clear that the twofold distinction in the Vatican document is, in fact, a double dissociation. The document introduces a division into a concept the audience previously regarded as constituting 'a single entity', 'a natural unity' or 'an indivisible whole': first there was only 'anti-Semitism' and 'the Roman Catholic Church', now there is 'pagan anti-Semitism' versus 'Christian inspired anti-Judaism' on the one hand and 'the Church as an institution' versus 'the individual members of the Church' on the other.

Although Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca clearly believe that dissociation, just like association, is a general principle for defining argumentation schemes, the

only loyal supporters of this idea I know of are Warnick and Kline (1992: 10). But then, they admire Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's work so much that they seem to accept almost everything they say without question. **[vii]** There are several other authors, however, who express their doubts about dissociation as an argumentation scheme. Schellens, for instance, observes that 'it is unclear which argumentation forms or schemes make use of dissociation' and concludes that 'the dichotomy between association and dissociation is impracticable' (translated from 1985: 59). Kienpointner restricts his overview of argumentation schemes to those based on association because he finds the dissociative schemes 'less systematic' (translated from 1991: 189). Garssen even claims that 'dissociation is neither a specific type of argumentation nor an argumentation scheme.' His reason for this is that 'dissociation provides no specific way to connect a starting point with a thesis in such a way that acceptance of the latter is increased' (translated from 1997: 72).

In the Vatican document, the twofold dissociation aims at changing the audience's beliefs about the Roman Catholic Church's role in the Holocaust. The initial dialectical situation the document encounters is the general opinion which holds the Church jointly responsible for the terrors of the Holocaust inspired by Nazi anti-Semitism: 'The Roman Catholic Church is accessory to the Holocaust because it has done too little to resist it and has always endorsed or even promoted anti-Semitism.' The result of the twofold dissociation desired by the Vatican is that after reading the document the audience will believe, first, that only some individual members of the Church have done things to be blamed for and, second, the Church has never adopted an anti-Semitic attitude.

In order to succeed in the endeavour of changing the audience's starting points, the document must convincingly show that the two distinctions (Church as an institution versus members of the Church and anti-Semitism versus anti-Judaism) are justified. The burden of proof is a heavy one. To what extent has the attempt been successful? In my opinion, the attempt has failed totally.

5. Incorrect dissociations as pragma-dialectical fallacies

The twofold dissociation in the Vatican document would have been successful only if it would have proved convincingly that there is no connection whatsoever between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism on the one hand and between the Church as an institution and its members on the other. Judging by the reactions to the document the intended proof was not convincingly at all.

First, though the document admits that anti-Judaism has Christian roots which is

based on 'erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament', it ignores the fact – as is rightly observed in some of the reactions to the document – that the official Roman Catholic doctrine taught the 'sons and daughters' of the Church for centuries that the Jews murdered Jesus Christ. After all, it was only in 1965 that this doctrine was renounced by the Second Vatican Council.

Moreover, the document denies every relation between Christian anti-Judaism and pagan anti-Semitism, as if the second was not at all inspired and legitimized by the first. In this respect, the document is a step backwards compared to other statements, for example, by Dutch bishops who declared already in 1955 that 'the tradition of theological anti-Judaism has contributed to a climate in which the Shoah could take place.'

Second, though the document states that 'the Catholic Church expresses her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age', it maintains a sharp distinction between the Church as an institution on the one hand and its individual members on the other – as if the latter are not supposed to do what their religious leaders tell them to do.

The document's failure in convincingly making the twofold dissociation is clearly illustrated by Rabbi Mark Winer: 'In ascribing sinfulness to individual Catholics, it sidesteps responsibility on the part of the church [...]. It never says that Catholic teaching was central to the teaching of contempt about the Jewish people.' Dr. Geoffrey Wigodor, one of the two Israeli representatives on the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations with Christians, is even more outspoken: 'In the document, the line is that it is not the Church that was to blame, but individuals who fell short of the Christian ideal. This flies in the face of history, noting it was the Church fathers themselves who interpreted the New Testament in an anti-Jewish manner; it was the Church councils which ruled against the Jews; and it was the popes themselves who drove the Jews out of civilized life, locking them up in gettos.'**[viii]**

One may add, as an aside, that if it would really be true that the Roman Catholic Church as an institution has done nothing to be blamed for, one may wonder whether the 'call for penitence' is, in fact, not totally out of order. Repentance always comes too late, the proverb tells us. But what is repentance without guilt? To come back to my original question whether the twofold dissociation is justified, it is now possible to analyse the incorrectness of the dissociation in terms of the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion (van Eemeren et al. 1996: 298-306). Since the Vatican document presents the distinctions as self-evident

and ignores the obvious relations between the two pairs of dissociated elements, the document's arguments violate Rule 6 of pragma-dialectics: 'A party may not falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point [...]' (van Eemeren et al. 1996: 284). The protagonist who violates this rule in this way (here: the authors of the Vatican document) is guilty of begging the question (van Eemeren et al. 1996: 305). One cannot resolve a dispute successfully by presenting a dissociation as if it were already accepted by the antagonist (here: the readers of the Vatican document). This special case of begging the question may be christened (no pun intended) the fallacy of *incorrect dissociation*.

6. Conclusion

Only by committing the fallacy of incorrect dissociation, the Vatican document is able to maintain the Roman Catholic Church's claim to guiltlessness of the Holocaust - a claim to 'innocence by dissociation', so to speak. This phrase is the terminological counterpart of the well-known fallacy *guilt by association*: an attempt to 'transfer some perceived discredit to an opponent, based on some association that person has with a supposedly discreditable individual or group' (Johnson and Blair 1983: 82). According to Johnson and Blair, the fallacy of *guilt by association* is 'a special case of *ad hominem*, for it is an attack on the person (instead of the argument), but an indirect one - via some (alleged) association of the person' (1983: 90). As is clear from this definition, the parallel really is only terminological. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the term *association* as well as the term *dissociation* does not refer to relations among people but between things.

Having said that the Vatican document commits the fallacy of *incorrect dissociation*, I am tempted to conclude that, after all, the Roman Catholic Church is guilty of something: if not of failing in fighting the Holocaust, then of committing a fallacy - albeit that the former is, of course, to be taken much more seriously than the latter. But then, I am sure that the Vatican could easily manage to produce a document in which even this less serious accusation would be refuted.

NOTES

- i. The Vatican document is published on The Holy See's Internet site (www.vatican.va).
- ii. The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16 and 29, 1998.

- iii.** The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the BBC News Online (news.bbc.co.uk), March 16, 1998; the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc. virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16, 1998; and the Canadian Jewish Congress (www.cjc.ca), March 16, 1998.
- iv.** The quotations in this paragraph are taken from The Miami Herald, Heraldlink (www.herald.com), March 17, 1998; and The Jerusalem Post, Internet Edition (www.jpost.com), March 17, 1998.
- v.** This quotation is taken from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc. virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16, 1998.
- vi.** The book was originally published in French as *La nouvelle rhétorique: traité de l'argumentation* (1958).
- vii.** Cf. Van Eemeren, Grootendorst et al. (1996: 124-125).
- viii.** The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc. virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16, 1998; and The Jerusalem Post, Internet Edition (www.jpost.com) March 17, 1998.

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