The Pope readmits Holocaust denier into the church

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Pope Benedict XVI is no stranger to controversy. Since assuming the papacy in 2005 he has made a series of pronouncements and decisions in line with his own reactionary interpretation of religious faith, which have led to storms of protest by other religious tendencies, as well as more liberal elements within the Catholic church.

His latest decision, however, to lift the excommunication of four ultra-conservative bishops, has caused particular outrage, leading some critics to call for the resignation of the Pope. One of the four bishops, the British-born Richard Williamson, has repeatedly denied the existence of the Holocaust.

The four bishops are members of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X (SPPX), which was founded in 1970 by the French archbishop, Marcel Lefebvre. Lefebvre became notorious for his ultra-conservative views and virulent opposition to the decisions made at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), which aimed to reform the church in line with modern political and ideological requirements. The founding of the SPPX was an attempt by Lefebvre to undermine the Council. The four bishops reinstated by Benedict XVI were excommunicated by Pope John Paul II in 1988 after Lefebvre ordained them without Vatican permission.

The readmission of the SPPX, estimated to have several hundred thousand members worldwide (a tiny percentage of the total membership of the Catholic church), has been prepared by the papacy over a period of time. The current Superior General of the SPPX, Bishop Bernard Fellay, issued a statement welcoming the election of Cardinal Joseph Alois Ratzinger as Pope, and in August 2006 the two men met to discuss plans to readmit the brotherhood.

The storm of outrage over the readmission of the SPPX brotherhood has concentrated on the figure of Richard Williamson, who recently gave an interview to Swedish television in which he denied the existence of Nazi gas chambers. Williamson went on to claim that only 300,000 Jews perished in the Nazi concentration camps, instead of the accepted figure of 6 million.

Ratzinger has been criticized, not only for readmitting an unrepentant anti-Semite into the church, but also for the timing of his decision—three days before the traditional Shoah commemorations and on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the decision to convoke the Second Vatican Council.

Following a wave of protests from Jewish organizations, European politicians and church officials, including a number of German bishops, Ratzinger issued a statement last week distancing himself from the comments made by Williamson, but held to his decision to readmit the SPPX.

Despite warnings from many Jewish leaders that the Pope's decision to rehabilitate a Holocaust denier could damage ties between Jews and the Vatican, it is significant that the Israeli government has played down the issue. Foreign Ministry spokesman Yigal Plamor told the *Associated Press* that this was "not a matter that concerns the interaction between the states" and said that the dispute would not affect the Pope's planned visit to Israel in May.

In fact, it has since emerged that Williamson is not the only "rotten apple" in the SPPX. In an interview with *Corriere della Sera*, the Italian newspaper, the head of the brotherhood in northern Italy, Floriano Abrahamovic, also denied the mass murder of Jews by the National Socialists. Abrahamovic declared that the Nazi gas chambers had been set up for the purpose of disinfection and that he could not speculate upon whether there had been casualties. The figure of six million Jewish victims of the camps is "symbolic," according to Abrahamovic, and it would be an "exaggeration" to speak of mass murder.

Considering the ideological and political outlines of Pope Benedict XVI's brief reign, his latest decision comes as no surprise. Since assuming the papacy in 2005, Ratzinger has determinedly sought to steer the Catholic church toward the right and reawaken centuries-old prejudices and conflicts with other religious denominations—particularly Islam and Judaism.

Shortly after assuming the papacy, Ratzinger expressed his opposition to Turkish membership of the European Union. Turkey was and still is led by an Islamist government. He also declared his advocacy of an acknowledgment of God in the European constitution, which would define Europe as a Christian entity. In a series of speeches Ratzinger has repeatedly stressed the "uniqueness" of the Catholic religion.

Then in September 2006—just one day after the fifth anniversary of the terror attacks of September 11—Ratzinger

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gave a lecture at the Regensburg University in Germany in which he cited Byzantine sources hostile to the Prophet Muhammad in what amounted to a major public affront to Islam. Following worldwide protests—and in a similar manner to the apology he issued last week—the Pope expressed his regrets over "the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address," but refused to withdraw or qualify his remarks.

One year later, Ratzinger continued his offensive against the reformist Second Vatican Council by re-instituting the Tridentine Mass. The latter is delivered in Latin and with the priest turned away from his congregation. One of the principle reasons for the revision of the mass by the Vatican Council in the 1960s, however, was its inclusion of a prayer which implies the sinful nature of all Jews and calls for the conversion of Jews "from darkness to Catholicism."

In March 2008 Ratzinger followed up his revival of the Tridentine Mass with the unusual step of personally supervising the baptism of a former Muslim, the Egyptian-born, Italian journalist Magdi Allam, who has repeatedly polemicised against Islam. In one of his columns, Allam declared: "The root of evil is innate in an Islam that is physiologically violent and historically conflictual."

Ratzinger has also indicated that he is eager to accelerate the canonization process of the wartime Pope Pius XII, who infamously collaborated with the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany and ignored many appeals from within his own church to intercede and prevent the extermination of European Jewry.

While opening up the Catholic church to all manner of opponents of Judaism and Islam, the Pope has also intervened to purge potential leftist elements from his church—such as the Brazilian-born liberation theologian, Leonardo Boff.

There has been much discussion in the media about the motives and "lack of tact" on the part of the Pope in readmitting the SPPX brotherhood—including an anti-Semitic bishop. We are led to believe that Josef Ratzinger is an unworldly man who for many years led a purely clerical and academic existence, heading the church's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—a direct successor to the Holy Inquisition—prior to taking up his post as Benedict XVI. Now this naïve man has been badly advised by his associates and made an unwise decision.

Such an interpretation beggars belief. While spending many years devoted to the work of the Congregation, Ratzinger has his roots in the real world. As a very young man, Ratzinger was for a short time a member of the Hitler Youth movement towards the end of the Second World War and is fully acquainted with the consequences and crimes of National Socialism.

Equally, the right-wing and anti-Semitic orientation of the SPPX brotherhood is no secret. In his intervention at the Second Vatican Council, SPPX founder Lefebvre notoriously denounced the Jewish people for their "murder of God." And as late as 1985—three years before his excommunication—Lefebvre addressed a letter to Pope John Paul II in which he deplored the moral decline of the church due to the debilitating influence of "Jews, communists and free masons." Up to the present the SPPX maintains close links with ultra-right political groupings in France.

The notion that Ratzinger is surrounded by politically inept and unworldly novices is also untenable. According to one news report which notes, "For a country uninterested in earthly goods, the Vatican City manages its finances surprisingly well," the Vatican took appropriate steps last year to secure its considerable financial investments as clouds loomed on the horizon. A report made public last September indicated that economists employed by the Holy See withdrew its assets from foreign lending institutions and invested instead in gold and land, months before the wave of current bank failures.

The Vatican possesses vast wealth, and it also operates its own bank—the Institute for Works of Religion (founded in 1942)—whose assets are estimated to range between $1 billion and $10 billion. The Pope can thus plead for a new "set of ethics" in the financial world with the assurance that his own fortune is relatively secure.

The Vatican has always been a centre of political intrigue and its current resident is well aware that the world slump will lead to political convulsions. As they have done in the past—with sinister consequences—the guardians of the Catholic church are closing ranks and aligning themselves with deeply reactionary political forces.

The author also recommends:

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