

Moral Judgement in the Historian: British Documents on Pope Pius XII during the War 1940-1944

By OWEN CHADWICK

I had the duty of reviewing Jedin's volumes as they appeared, and therefore had the duty of comparing his conclusions with some of the texts. The only time that he disturbed me as a reviewer was in the article in *Kirche des Glaubens* about *Kirchengeschichte als Heilsgeschichte*, because I see Church History as part of Profangeschichte and in this mighty debate am wholly on the side of Professor Conzemius. But my opinion of the History of the Council is that it is a lasting monument of historical endeavour; and though I never knew the man I formed the impression from his writing that this was not only a historian but a delightful and humane person. Accordingly I proposed to my university, on behalf of the Faculty of History and not the Faculty of Theology, that he should receive from the university the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. He died before any decision could be taken on that proposal; so that we cannot say that he died, as Denifle died, on his way to receive an honorary degree at Cambridge. But perhaps the knowledge that this proposal was made will help to underline the international importance of the man whom we commemorate.

In the Vatican the British kept, not an ambassador which history and public opinion would not allow, but a minister, d'Arcy Osborne. In June 1940, when Italy came into the war, he moved into a flat in the Convent of Santa-Marta inside Vatican City. The British government discussed whether it was sensible so to immure an official of their Foreign Office in an enclave inside enemy territory and decided that he ought to stay.

At first he was very little use. But from the late autumn of 1940 he began to send reports regularly to London, using the Vatican diplomatic bag; for the Italian government would not respect the Lateran treaty of 1929 sufficiently to allow representatives accredited to the Pope, to have free communication with hostile governments. These reports are now accessible in the Public Record Office at Kew and make interesting evidence on war-time Rome.

Osborne found that he had a host of minor matters on his hands. He must try to pacify the Pope over British actions in the war, like the expulsion of missionaries from Ethiopia or Italian Somaliland. He must try to pacify the Pope over British awkwardness over the Vatican representative to the Polish government in exile. He must try to pacify the Pope over the British restraints on free communication with Catholic bishops inside territory newly occupied by the British army. But much his most important duty

was the attempt to use the Pope in the interests of the British war effort, and to stop the Pope being used in the interests of the German or Italian war effort.

The German and Italian ambassadors demanded that the Pope protest if the British and American bombers destroyed Monte Cassino, or killed monks and nuns and the Archbishop of Reggio Calabria, and destroyed numerous churches and hospitals and five Capuchin fathers were buried under the ruins of their church in Turin. The Pope, however furious he might feel, or however insane he thought the action (as he thought over Monte Cassino) always refused to protest lest he give a political advantage to one side and abandon the rigid neutrality which seemed to be his only protection.

In just the same way Osborne's duty was to persuade the Pope to speak out publicly and condemn acts by Germans or Italians; the bombing of Coventry; or the treatment of occupied France; or the Nazi methods of waging war upon civilian populations; or Nazi behaviour in Poland; or Nazi behaviour to the Jews in the East or elsewhere. He achieved extremely little success with these appeals because he always came against the doctrine that the strictest neutrality was the only possible way to behave in these conditions where both sides were pressing with a vehement pressure that the other side be condemned. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine the tone of the reports that came out of Rome in consequence of these failures and this policy. And it is easy to record the contempt and fury in the minutes written in desks at the Foreign Office.

Laskey:

"A sorry record of capitulation to German pressure and threats. The most that can be said is that the Pope's utterances were usually directed against the Nazis and Fascists rather than ourselves, but their tone was so mild as to make little impression on either side. This timorous attitude appears to have cost the Roman Catholic Church a large part of its prestige and influence even in Italy."

Pierson Dixon on Osborne's report for 1941

"Useful as a comprehensive record of Papal pusillanimity during the worst year of the war for the Allies." FO 371/33436

Osborne to Anthony Eden, 23 Juni 1942

"The careful preservation of political neutrality and the assertion of purely spiritual authority have inevitably involved the abandonment of moral leadership and the resultant atrophy of the moral influence of the Papacy. To this the Pope would reply that he has frequently and openly condemned major offences against morality in wartime. It is true that he has done so on occasion and in general terms, but the answer is that the recital of the Decalogue is not moral leadership and that universal paternity does not preclude particular reproof."

FO 380/36

Vansittart, 3 December 1940

"The Vatican cannot possibly become more feeble than it is."

FO 371/24967/554

Minute by R. J. Meade in Foreign Office, 12 August 1942

"Papal timidity becomes ever more blatantly despicable."

Osborne to Eden - FO 371/37558 (summary)

The Pope is a man of "natural caution". Secondly he must consider how anything he says will react on the welfare of Catholics. Thirdly he is determined to preserve a "meticulous neutrality in the interests of a possible mediation for peace."

"This policy has strained the loyalty of Catholics in the occupied countries, impaired the moral authority of the Holy See, and compromised the Pope's prospects of mediation. In fairness, it should be added that the Axis Powers are also critical of the Pope's policy of silence, especially of his refusal to declare the Russian war a crusade."

Osborne to Eden, 15 December 1942: (he had an interview with Tardini)

"I enquired whether the enormity of Hitler's present campaign of extermination of the Jews of Europe was not realised here and whether the Pope was not going to take notice of it?"

Mgr Tardini said that they were doing all they could, especially in Slovakia and Croatia.

Osborne said "This was no longer a question of local tinkering. It was a question of taking a public attitude on a major crime against humanity".

He had the sensation that Tardini half-agreed with him about the Pope's silence. But, reported Osborne to Eden "I think he knows that the Pope is not likely to do anything and in these circumstances that he himself is helpless".

I have quoted enough, perhaps more than enough, to show how the desks in the Foreign Office were forming an unfavourable view, even a very unfavourable view, of the silence of Pope Pius XII as described in Osborne's reports from Rome.

For further light upon this matter I must now turn to a very different subject: Osborne's means of communication with London.

The Italians refused the free communication of the Pope's envoys hinted at in the Lateran treaty. Therefore the Pope offered the use of the Vatican's diplomatic bag. This was not easy because of the fall of France. Osborne wrote a letter, gave it to the Secretariat of State; it went either by papal courier to Berne, or by papal courier to Lisbon; and usually the Berne correspondence went afterwards by Lisbon. There it was handed over by the papal nuncio to the British, who put it in their diplomatic bag. The bags went alternately to Berne and to Lisbon. It could not quite be predicted when they would go, and that often meant rush at the last minute.

From the full range of Osborne's reports, one thing stands out very clearly; Osborne, not slowly, realized that his secret reports were being tampered with. The evidence rests on various hints and a conversation with his American colleague. On 8 September 1943 the Germans invaded Rome to take over the city from the Italians who wanted to get out of the war. On the axiom that they were sure to violate the neutrality of the Vatican, every embassy and legation at the Vatican destroyed its cyphers – with one exception, the British. He destroyed his card-indexes and any archives that were not innocuous, but not his cyphers. We know from Osborne's letters that he thought that if the time came when a raid of the Gestapo invaded the Vatican, he would not have time to destroy the cyphers. Yet when the Germans appeared at the gates of the Vatican he was the only envoy not to destroy. That can only mean one thing. He did not mind if the Germans got hold of his cyphers.

Then from other sources we know that Osborne did certain things of high importance and danger. For example, from his flat in Santa-Marta, where his every move was watched by Italian agents, he mounted an operation to help British prisoners of war who had escaped in Italy, with food, medical supplies and money. This appears nowhere in Osborne's reports, and therefore he knew it too dangerous to commit to the Pope's diplomatic bag. In the last weeks before the Italian armistice in September 1943, Osborne was one of the means of communication between the British government and Marshal Badoglio; but none of this appears in his own reports via the papal diplomatic bag.

It is clear, Osborne at first suspected that his cyphers were read and later was sure his cyphers were read. And therefore it opened to him the possibility of being of unusual service to the British people. For if the Italians or Germans or both were reading his coded messages and yet they did not know that he knew they were reading his coded messages, he had the chance of feeding them with information which, if not false, might at least be misleading.

So into these reports we find, when we look at them in this new light, a lot of interesting information.

1. The Italians come extraordinarily well out of Osborne's reports to London.
2. He keeps saying how much good the Pope has done by his relief operations for Italian prisoners. He tells how the Vatican is doing all it can for the Italian civilians cornered in Somaliland and Ethiopia.
3. We keep being told how useless the Pope is to the Allied cause because he (the Pope) always speaks in such sybilline words.
4. He keeps telling of the quarrels between Great Britain and the Vatican over the missionaries in the Near East.
5. He is very careful in his reports to deny rumours that might hurt the Pope in the eyes of the Italian people, e. g. that the Pope has come to a

secret agreement with the Russians.

6. He says how good the relationship between the Vatican and the Vichy government is.
7. When at last he got leave for an assistant to come across Italy from Switzerland to the Vatican, he makes a point, in his report to London, that the policeman was discreet and unobtrusive.
8. If something goes badly wrong in the relations between the Vatican and Italy, he tries to take the blame upon himself. For example, an escaped prisoner took refuge in the Vatican. The Italians demanded his extradition. Very reluctantly and only under pressure the Secretariat of State obeyed international law and refused to let him go – but in his report Osborne says “I refused to let him go”. Osborne of course had no such power of refusal. And in this case, and in that of the handful of prisoners who took refuge on Vatican territory Osborne instantly proposed exchange with Italian or German prisoners.

All this evidence, seen in this light, makes it clear what Osborne was trying to do. He realized that the situation was of an exceptional insecurity – we may ask what Churchill would have thought of a German ambassador living all through the war at Lambeth Palace – and he knew that it was widely believed in Italy that they were a nest of spies. At all costs he must protect the Vatican. He must never report the more extreme utterances of Monsignor Tardini, or the still more extreme utterances of Cardinal Tisserant. He must keep saying how much good the Pope’s relief operations are doing for Italians. He must keep stressing the absolute neutrality of the Pope amid the warring nations. He must keep saying how useless are the Pope’s utterances to the Allied Cause. At any minute the Vatican could be taken over and the Pope become a real prisoner. That would be a calamity for the Allies. The Pope could not say much if anything, but was a symbol of justice and peace and civilized ways of waging war. He was revered by many Italians who did not want to be in this war, and from his tiny neutral State, infested with spies, there existed a relief operation for British escaped prisoners. And at least, when Mussolini was about to be overthrown, and had been overthrown, the British Minister could become a secret channel of communication between London and the new Italian leaders. At all costs the Pope must be protected from a take-over. Osborne realized that his peculiar situation – where he wrote reports for London in cypher, and knew that they were read by enemy eyes, and, believed that those enemy eyes did not know that he knew that they were reading them – gave him a specially advantageous situation for protecting the Pope.

Now I do not want to suggest to you that Osborne’s reports were untrue. Of course he must feed London with what was true. Of course he knew that if he started to tell lies the lies would be spotted and this game would be at an end. What he said was true. The Pope believed neutrality to

be the only possible policy. The Pope thought that if he said too specific things about Poland he could only hurt the Poles.

The Pope thought that if he said too specific things about the Jews he could only harm the Jews.

The Pope by nature was not a forcible man.

But in the last year of Osborne's life, when he had for many years been living in retirement in Rome, Hochhuth published his gross onslaught on the wickedness of Pope Pius XII for his silence and his cowardice; and Osborne, unlike himself in his retirement, stepped out for the last time before the public, and wrote a letter to the press.

By nature Osborne was one of those who could see little practical use in the Pope speaking out. We know this from his arguments with the French ambassadors. He had very good relations with Charles-Roux, ambassador to 1940, and then with d'Ormesson, ambassador during 1940; with Léon Bérard, the ambassador of Vichy, he would have nothing to do. But both Charles-Roux and d'Ormesson thought that the Pope should speak out against aggression more than he did. Osborne steadily doubted their opinion.

His post-war judgment was this (Times, 20 May 1963): Pius XII was charged with being a cool diplomat and not a man of warm humanity:

"So far from being cool (which, I suppose, implies cold-blooded and inhumane) Pius XII was the most warmly humane, kindly, generous, sympathetic (and incidentally saintly) character that it has been my privilege to meet in the course of a long life. I know that his sensitive nature was acutely and incessantly alive to the tragic volume of human suffering caused by the war, and without the slightest doubt, he would have been glad to give his life to redeem humanity from its consequences. And this quite irrespective of Nationality or Faith. But what could he effectively do?"

Osborne agreed that the Pope was concerned to preserve a meticulous neutrality in the hope of being able to mediate. He agreed that he liked the German people, or at least admired German Catholics. There was no doubt that the Pope believed that he believed himself to have condemned Nazism in his Christmas message. Osborne confessed that the condemnation was never "clearcut and unequivocal", and that the Pope's language was "too often so prolix and obscure that it was difficult to extract his meaning from its extraneous verbal envelope". But, concluded Osborne, "I feel sure that the Pope Pius XII has been grossly misjudged and most unfairly condemned in Herr Hochhuth's drama". Osborne ended by telling the world that he was not himself a Roman Catholic.

Thus the true inwardness of Osborne's reports shows why the Foreign Office staff wrote such fierce comments against the Pope. They thought the Pope very weak because they had Osborne's reports which they did not yet

know were written for the benefit of the Italian government. Osborne wanted the Italians to think the Pope useless to the Allies so that the Vatican City could remain in being and unoccupied.