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Marialuisa Lucia Sergio, *How the Church under Pius XII Addressed Decolonization: The Issue of Algerian Independence*. New York: Routledge, 2023. xii + 203 pp. Notes, references, and index. \$128.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781032136226; \$43.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781032136233; \$43.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781003230175.

Review by Elizabeth A. Foster, Tufts University.

When the archives of Pius XII's pontificate (1939-1958) opened in 2020, scholars raced to Rome to see what they would hold. The first fruits of these forays are now starting to emerge, but much remains to be examined. Understandably, a great deal of this initial research has centered on the Vatican's stances during the Second World War, particularly on the question of the mass murder of Jews (more on that below). Yet there is keen interest in the postwar period as well. A well-funded transnational initiative entitled, "The Global Pontificate of Pius XII: Catholicism in a Divided World, 1945-1958" is currently bringing together historians from Belgium, Germany, Israel, Italy, the UK, and beyond to examine the Vatican's thinking on the Cold War, Christian Democracy, the memory of the Holocaust, and decolonization.[1] Over the last year and a half, as part of this effort, a team of scholars from KU Leuven and the University of Fribourg have held two seminars on the Catholic Church and decolonization (one of them featured the book reviewed here), and they are working on a related edited collection.[2] France, with its vast African empire, was a key player in the Vatican's evolving approach to its mission fields as Europe's colonial powers faced increasing pressure to yield sovereignty to indigenous populations. Because Europeans still dominated the ranks of Catholic clergy in France's holdings in Africa at mid-century, the question of how to navigate possible political change in the French colonies against the backdrop of the Cold War and the perceived threat of communism was top of mind for the Pope and his lieutenants.

In this book, Marialuisa Lucia Sergio, a prolific historian of the Catholic Church and Italian politics in the twentieth century, turns her attention to the question of how the pope, his diplomats, and their interlocutors in the French episcopate positioned the Catholic Church as French colonial Algeria descended into brutal warfare in the 1950s. Sergio is the first scholar to utilize the archives of Pius XII to publish a monograph on this particular topic. She puts the materials she uncovered there in conversation with sources in missionary archives, French state archives, and the CNAEF (*Centre national des archives de l'Église de France*). Her intimate knowledge of the complex array of Vatican archival collections is a great asset--scholars of the twentieth century interested in French relations with the Vatican will find her footnotes useful.

Algeria was a special case both within the French Empire and from the point of view of the Holy See. It was France's only true settler colony in Africa and featured an apartheid regime in which a predominantly European Christian minority enjoyed the rights of metropolitan citizens, and the Muslim majority lacked meaningful representation and basic protections from arbitrary colonial rule. The church was thus more closely tied to the colonial order in Algeria than in any other French colony, both because of the Catholicism of many settlers and their descendants and the fact that very few members of the indigenous population ever converted. By contrast, in much of French sub-Saharan Africa, although the church was still largely staffed by European clergy, there were meaningful numbers of African converts by the 1950s. Even in colonies where the presence of Islam forestalled Catholic growth, such as Senegal or Soudan (Mali), tenacious African Catholic minorities became influential in mid-century politics of decolonization.

As Sergio explains, the Vatican imagined its positioning in Algeria (and North Africa more broadly) in several, sometimes conflicting ways. On the one hand, the twentieth-century church saw itself as the heir to historical Christian communities, such as that of Carthage, which had been swept away centuries before. In this view, the Catholics who settled in French Algeria were celebrated as a reincarnation of Christian civilization in the region. Even if the late nineteenth-century hopes of French Cardinal Charles-Martial Lavigerie to reconquer Muslim hearts and minds had run up against the reality of a largely disinterested population, there remained a missionary impulse to reach Muslims through social work, education, and charitable initiatives. This sat in tension with an interwar turn among some Catholic intellectuals and clergy to approach Islam with real curiosity and empathy and to engage Muslims in mutually respectful dialogue (these people had their own blinders, however, and tended to view Islam as an archaic, unchanging faith). At the same time, against the backdrop of the Cold War, voices within the church articulated the frightening (for them) idea that Islam was a conduit to communism. As a result, church policies and activities in the region featured some incoherence, though they were characterized by caution, temporizing, and conservatism in the face of increasing chaos. And Sergio stresses that because the Vatican envisioned decolonization as something that might happen in a far distant future, church officials were unprepared for the explosion of nationalism in the Maghreb at the very end of the Second World War.

The book is organized chronologically, charting how the church reacted to and tried to position itself as the tense political situation in Algeria evolved rapidly in the postwar period. Though the focus is on Algeria, Sergio also discusses relevant events in Tunisia and Morocco. The first chapter covers Church and State in France and French Africa during the Second World War. The Vatican and the French episcopal hierarchy were favorably disposed towards Pétain's regime and hoped to institute a sweeping agreement akin to the one it concluded with Salazar's Portugal, in which the church wholeheartedly cooperated in the Portuguese colonial "civilizing mission" in Africa. The Vatican pivoted strategically towards de Gaulle when it had to, but harbored misgivings about what would follow.

In the second chapter, Sergio examines the period between 1945 and 1949, highlighting the importance of the MRP, France's Christian democratic party, a center-right alternative that combined social Catholic leanings with strident French patriotism, and which became the Vatican's key ally in France in the years that followed. The MRP favored the maintenance of the French empire, though members harbored a range of positions between the views of a colonial

paternalist like Louis Aujoulat and the ardent nationalist Georges Bidault, who headed the party between 1949 and 1952. In the constitutional wrangling following the war, the party opposed federalist visions for French Africa, such as that proposed by the Algerian nationalist Ferhat Abbas. In 1949, Monsignor Auguste-Fernand Leynaud, the elderly conservative Archbishop of Algiers who had been Lavignerie's secretary in the late nineteenth century, expressed concern about the rising tide of nationalism among the Muslim population. The carefully worded papal response to his cry of alarm was telling: Sergio shows how it evolved through three drafts, each more cautious and anodyne than the last.

In chapter three, Sergio tackles tensions within the Holy See's politics in the early 1950s. On the one hand, its 1951 missionary encyclical *Evangelii praecones* urging European missionaries to train more indigenous clergy before it was too late revealed some forward-looking, reformist impulses, though it was also rife with paternalism vis-à-vis peoples Europeans considered to be less civilized. On the other hand, a conservatism born of a fierce anticommunism dictated the papal approach to metropolitan France and progressive European Catholics. Sergio points out that Nuncio to France Angelo Roncalli, later celebrated as the progressive Pope John XXIII who launched Vatican II, promoted many Africans to the prelature, and blessed the independence of many African colonies, was widely disliked as a diehard conservative during his tenure in Paris between 1944 and 1953. "Good riddance," commented Wladimir D'Ormesson, the French ambassador to the Holy See, upon Roncalli's departure. (p. 85.)

Chapter four explores how the Faure government and the Holy See grappled with the Algerian crisis in 1954 and 1955 and shows that the MRP intervened for the Vatican in France in an effort to find a "third way" between colonial business as usual and French withdrawal. Sergio documents how Cardinal Léon-Etienne Duval, Bishop of Constantine 1946-54 and Archbishop of Algiers 1954-1988, lashed out at his metropolitan colleagues for making pronouncements about a situation he did not believe they fully understood. Though Duval has a progressive reputation in some circles, Sergio argues for a more nuanced view (again, more on this below).

Chapter five, covering the period of the Mollet government of 1956-1957, continues the story of complexity and contradiction. In those years, the Vatican gestured to constituents on either side of widening divides as terrorism and torture in the war in Algeria pushed Catholics to opposite political extremes. Sergio's exposition of fascinating internal church discussions about the *loi-cadre* of 1956, which devolved more local power to peoples across French Africa, reveals that the Nuncio in France, Paolo Marella, and the MRP welcomed it as a pivot that would help France keep hold of its Overseas Territories, whereas the archconservative Marcel Lefebvre, Archbishop of Dakar and Pius's Delegate to all of French Africa and Madagascar, argued that it constituted a catastrophic abandonment of French moral and political authority in Africa.

Sergio's sixth and final chapter looks at how the church navigated the Algiers Putsch of 1958, de Gaulle's return to power, and the advent of the Fifth Republic. Although skeptical of de Gaulle during the Second World War, by 1958, the Vatican saw him as the best guarantor of social and political order in France and rejected the attacks on him by the extreme Catholic right. Marella was displeased when Georges Bidault broke with the MRP in 1958 to found a more conservative Catholic party, Christian Democracy of France (DCF), which wanted to "relaunch France's Christian mission in Algeria in the name of the fight against communism and the preservation of

national greatness” (p. 164). (Bidault would then go on to join the Secret Army Organization (OAS), which unleashed a wave of terror in a bid to keep Algeria French.) Though this discussion is enlightening, the chapter (and therefore the book) gives much shorter shrift to the period between Pius’s death in 1958 and the conclusion of the Evian Accords in 1962.

The subject of the Catholic Church and the Algerian War has been studied before, in several French monographs over the decades and most recently in English in Darcie Fontaine’s *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria*.^[3] Sergio argues, however, that the addition of the new material from the Vatican archives offers a necessary corrective to what she characterizes as a tendency in the recent historiography to stress the Vatican’s decolonizing impulses, allegedly much further developed than those of French state actors. According to her characterization, scholars have been too quick to embrace an overly rosy view of the Church hierarchy’s positioning on issues such as Muslim-Christian dialogue and political rights for the indigenous population of the colonies. She sees this as the triumph of a progressive missionary interpretation that does not take the thinking of the Pope, his nuncios, and the hierarchy into full account.

Archbishop Duval’s stances and statements during the Algerian War offer a case in point. Sergio suggests that his progressive reputation has been exaggerated by Fontaine and others. Using reports and communications that Duval sent to the nunciature and the Vatican during the 1950s, she underlines how his thinking, particularly about Islam and communism, was quite similar to that of the *intégriste* Lefebvre, his counterpart in Dakar. Her evidence is thought-provoking, though her attacks on Fontaine’s interpretation of Duval are a bit overstated, and she could do more to problematize her own sources. After all, prelates’ communications with their superiors in Rome were often shaped by what they thought their bosses would want to hear, and they frequently expressed differing ideas to colleagues and friends. In fact, Fontaine accessed some of Duval’s correspondence with the Vatican via the archives of the Archbishopric of Algiers, and while her emphasis may be different, both she and Sergio put forth compelling and complex portraits of a man who was treading very carefully amid the bloodshed in Algeria.^[4]

Indeed, at the end of the day, Sergio shows that the Catholic Church hierarchy, including Pius himself (though his voice is not as present in the documents as one would hope), his closest advisors, and his diplomatic corps had one overarching aim: the preservation of Church interests, defined as maintaining its institutional presence and its liberty of action in North Africa. All their decisions, hedges, public and private pronouncements, and tortured attempts to avoid political commitments tended towards this goal. They were thus skeptical of and frustrated by the activism of progressive Catholics on the French left, who denounced their government’s brutal conduct of the war and pushed the hierarchy to do the same, as well as by the radicalism of the extreme Catholic right in France and Algeria, which Nuncio Marella saw as a fascist threat to the French state. These men were not bold thinkers or visionaries, and they were more often in a defensive crouch than launching offensives rooted in Catholic morality--they were terrified of communism and feared that Islam was a waystation en route to it.

This is a compelling, though not overly surprising, conclusion, especially in light of other recent scholarship on Pius XII’s pontificate. To take one example, in *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler*, also the fruit of fresh research in the newly opened

Vatican files, David Kertzer demonstrates that Pius's positioning in the Second World War and his approach to the massacre of Europe's Jews was conservative and timid.[5] Rather than exhibiting strong moral leadership, his priority was safeguarding the interests, liberty, and property of the church in the face of chaos. In the early years of the war, when it looked like the Axis was unstoppable, he was afraid of antagonizing Hitler and alienating Germany's many Catholics, though he was distressed by the fate of Catholic Poland and disliked Nazism's racism and its aggressive indoctrination of German youth, which weakened the church's hold on them. When the balance began to shift against the Nazis in 1942, Pius continued to hold his tongue, because he began to fear how a Soviet victory could injure the church. Moreover, German troops occupying Rome were a physical threat to the Vatican for nine months beginning in September 1943, which helps to explain, though not excuse, why he said nothing as the city's Jews were rounded up under his very nose.[6] Throughout, he shied away from publicly taking a side. As Kertzer puts it, "A mixture of opaque theological language and moralistic bromides, [Pius's wartime] sermons were remarkable for their length and their ability, amid the torrents of oratory, to scatter nuggets that both sides would be able to point to as supporting their cause." [7] Pius's extreme caution and his unwillingness to take political risks in the Second World War thus presaged the Vatican's approach to the war in Algeria over a decade later.

All in all, there is much of interest in Sergio's work for scholars of French Catholicism, the Vatican, decolonization, and the Algerian War. At times, however, the book suffers from a lack of clarity at the sentence level, and in some chapters, she could have done more to foreground her arguments, which sometimes get buried in her relations of political developments. There are also relatively few non-European voices in the book, but that in itself is very revealing. Though North African nationalists appealed to the pope as a possible mediator on more than one occasion, the Vatican declined the role. "A false step in one direction or the other could have drastic consequences" read an internal memo of the Vatican Secretariat of State in 1953, before going on to reiterate the Holy See's fear of communism in Arab lands (p. 77). That eloquently sums up the profoundly conservative balancing act that Pius and his lieutenants tried to pull off amid the tragedy of decolonization in French North Africa.

NOTES

[1] For more information, visit <https://piusxii.hypotheses.org>

[2] On the seminars see https://kadoc.kuleuven.be/english/5_news/2023/n_2023_0023 ; https://kadoc.kuleuven.be/english/5_news/2024/n_2024_0002

[3] Darcie Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity: Religion and the End of Empire in France and Algeria*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[4] For an extended discussion of Duval and the Vatican see Fontaine, *Decolonizing Christianity*, 94-105

[5] David I. Kertzer, *The Pope at War: The Secret History of Pius XII, Mussolini, and Hitler*. (New York: Random House, 2022).

[6] Kertzer, *The Pope at War*, 476-480.

[7] Kertzer, *The Pope at War*, 476.

Elizabeth A. Foster
Tufts University
elizabeth.foster@tufts.edu

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