History That Addresses Biography: Ethics and the Vatican

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Popes, like American presidents are a wonderful subject for the comparative study of Biography.\(^1\) Every pope has a whole range of biographies, movies, television series and novels. Like one can build a cathedral of all the American presidential biographies. And probably there are more Bio Pics of Popes than of Presidents. All those Pope biographies give us the possibility to say something about Ethics in Biography, about the ethics of the biographer. Not only because I didn't like all those crap movies of Popes, especially about the so called Female Pope Johanna (she never existed although many movies are made about her life, certainly since Liv Ullmann played in 1972 the role of Johanna) but more because I understood more than ever the urge of ethics of doing biography, or in print or on celluloid.

The question of what is wrong and right takes us right to the heart of ethics. Almost every occupational group has a code of ethics that dictates what is allowed, and what is not. Central to ethics is the question of what is the correct way to handle in concrete situations. Aristotle, founder of the term ethics, argued that practical questions form a starting point for developing morality, which is a reflection of a society’s or occupational group's norms and values.

Which occupational group does the biographer belong to? A biographer is an artist under oath. He is not allowed to make up facts, has to do his archival research as adequately as possible, and, like any author, cannot plagiarize other authors’ texts. Biography is a genre that can be found somewhere between journalism and history; two occupational groups that have no legal occupational protection, but follow their professional codes are the more for this lack. For the historian, this means he has to handle his sources responsibly, and has to be unbiased. The journalist is expected to honor the custom of double-checking his sources and searching for counter opinions. Being unbiased is an important attribute of both biographers and journalists. Being open-minded and having a benevolent attitude towards your subject results

in the fact that biographers tend to shy away from ideology. The biographer should refrain from hero worship. When reading a Karl Marx biography, readers should not be able to tell if the biographer is or is not a Marxist.

The biographer has nothing to defend, except his reputation as biographer. This sounds all logic, but the practice is barbarous, certainly for former Pope biographers. It was the French historien Jacques Le Goff who explained why the church and the university are the oldest institutions that have survived until now: because they are not thinking in years but in ages.

The statement of Le Goff can be illustrated by the process against Galileo Galilei, the scientist who was banned by the Vatican because he stated in the early seventeenth century (like Copernicus early sixteenth century) that the sun is the center of the universe and not the earth. The procedural documents were lost for ages in the unmeasurable archive of the Vatican. Probably that was not on purpose, but soon after Galilei was convicted because of his theses, the Holy See acknowledged that the earth actually did revolve around the sun, instead of the opposite. It lasted until 1992 before this papal error was admitted and Johannes Paulus II apologized for it. The practice had adjusted to the idea (ideology) until 350 years after Galilei’s death.

The fact is that ethics and ideology are flexible concepts.

An example of how an idea can adjust the practice is the biography of the so-called purifier of the Vatican, Pope Adrian VI. The Pope represents the heir of the Apostle Peter, the Divine Power on Earth. Since the first century until now we had 308 popes, including the ‘Anti Popes’ from Rome, Pisa and Avignon. One of them was Adriaan Floriszoom Boeyens (1459–1523), also known as Adrian of Utrecht or Hadrian VI, Adrianus VI and Adrian VI. It’s amazing that time and again new biographies of Adrian VI are being published, while he was pope for only 19 months - in theory at least, in reality only one year. One of those biographies is written by Michel Verweij in 2011, published as The tragic pope from the Netherlands. How tragic was Adrian VI? Not at all, claims Twan Geurts in another biography of Adrian, in 2017.

A biopic of Adrian was never made. I’m not surprised because only a few (if any) Popes have been interpreted so differently as Adrian. The decor of such a movie, I mean both the physical and the contextual decor, could be distilled

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3 Twan Geurts, De Nederlandse paus Adrianus van Utrecht 1459–1523, Balans, Amsterdam 2017.
out of his biographies and other literature concerning popes, but the intrigue is in the interpretation and which one is chosen by the director?

In his handbook *Keepers of the Key of Heaven. A history of the Papacy* of 2009, the British medievalist Roger Collins describes how in 1513 the first Florentine pope was elected, Giovanni De Medici, who chose as Pope name Leo X.4 ‘His successor was Clemens VII (1523–1534), during the fiercely contested conclave following the brief pontificate of Adrian VI (1522–1523).’ That was all! Apart from another mention in a summary of names, Adrian is just overlooked by Collins.

In the historiography, a caricature has been made of Adrian: the barbarian, the miser, the art-hater and the stranger.5 Birgit Emich, a German professor in history, has an explanation for this image. Adrianus VI was a victim of the propaganda exerted by the Medici, the Italian humanist family that was full of prejudice and arrogance against humanism in Northern Europe. Adrian was not the only victim of this arrogance. The lawsuit against the Fleming Christophe de Longueil can serve as an example of this attitude between Romans and not-Romans. He was accused only of ‘Romanitas laesa’, of an insult to the Greatness of Rome.

Adrian wanted to unify Christianity, to battle Luther’s Reformation and to reform the Church. He was not successful in these aims because he died 19 months after the start of his papacy. In fact his reign lasted not even a year, because it took 8 months before he actually took over the Holy See. The pope before him (Leo X) and after him (Clemens VII) were, as said, both from the De Medici family. They flaunted their power, showed it by splendor and beauty. Adrian was a puritan.

Before Adrian arrived in Rome the famous Pasquinades, satyric pamphlets, were distributed in the streets of Rome. Famous satirists like Pietro Aretino and Francesco Berni and even Giorgio Vasari wrote negative about Adrian. Vasari, in his famous *Lives of the Artists* (published in 1550) saw Adrian as a man ‘who took no delight in painting or sculpture or in any other good thing’.6 Indeed a barbarian. Interesting to know that the Florentine chauvinist Vasari worked for pope Clemens VII.

In fact Adrian loved art, which can be illustrated by the paintings made in his assignment and also because he bought back the gobelins that were

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made by Raphael and pledged by the college of Cardinals. Ok, Michelangelo left Rome after the election of Adrian. Like so many others, but not because of Adrian but because the Plague broke out.

Adrian was not a cardinal from the north of the Alps, as is often stated, when he was elected in January 1522, because he then had been living for six years in Spain, where he was translated as bishop of Tortosa but also as great inquisitor-general of Spain, of Castilia and Leon.

To show Adrian was not a tragic figure at all, Geurts stresses in his biography the relationship between Erasmus and Adrian before he was Pope, when he was working as the provost of the Leuven University in Belgium and as a cardinal. Geurts pays attention to Adrian's life before he became pope. That's interesting, because Boeyens was a very wise and cosmopolitan man. Born in Utrecht, he climbed to a position as full professor and provost from the University of Leuven, until he was appointed as the teacher of Charles V. When Charles was crowned as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Adrian became Great Inquisitor and regent of Spain.

When he was elected as Pope, it was chaos in the church. Consecutive popes behaved themselves rather as power-loving fieldmen than as caretakers of the soul, cardinals lived openly with their mistresses, Alexander VI (known by the beautiful interpretation by Jeremy Popkin in the television series The Borgias) even had eight children at three different women. The burlesque life in the Vatican was financed by selling indulgences. These were 'certificates' produced in bulk that had been pre-signed by the pope. They pardoned a person's sins and gave you access to heaven. The scam in these indulgences was an abomination in the eyes of the German theologian Martin Luther. In 1517 he nailed his famous propositions to the church doors of Wittenberg, the beginning of the Reformation and of protestantism. At the other side of Europe the armies of the Muslim leader Sultan Süleyman the Great advanced to conquer the Christian world.

Immediately after he took the Holy See, Adrian announced a series of measures: cardinals were no longer allowed to carry weapons, they had to shave their beards and a whole range of expensive artists and others who lead a luxurious life at the expense of the curia, were fired. His predecessor Leo X employed almost 100 footmen, whereas Adrian only four! The reforms of the pope gave him the name of barbarian who detested the sophisticated manners of Italy. This criticism came mainly from the rich De Medici family.

Adrian called for help from his compatriot Erasmus. Being the most famous intellectual of Europe in his days, he criticized the church but not as radical as Luther. Now something strange. Erasmus was not only the most famous intellectual of Europe, he was also a friend of Thomas More and he was respec-
Tied in the Vatican as well. The famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga payed in his biography of Erasmus, published in 1924, a lot of attention to the contact between Adrian and Erasmus. But still you can find hardly any role for Erasmus in the literature about Adrian, except for Dutch historiography. The Dutch biography of Michel Verweij confirms the cliché that Adrian was a tragic figure, seen from the Roman Curia perspective, but not in reality. Verweij quotes extensively the correspondence between Adrianus and Erasmus. But John Julius Norwich in *The Popes. A History* (2011) doesn’t mention Erasmus at all in relation with Adrianus. That’s odd.

In many foreign biographical portraits of Adrian, the intensive contact, illustrated by letters, between Adrian and Erasmus is hardly mentioned. Even Italian humanists couldn’t deny the fact that Erasmus was an important humanist, widely considered to have been the greatest scholar of the northern Renaissance. Thus, the collaboration between Adrian and Erasmus didn’t fit into the image of the Barbarian.

Is it Laziness, Ignorance or Ideology to neglect a pope from ‘north of the Alpes’, to make him so little and unimportant in the history of the Papacy? It would last until 1978, before another foreign pope, the Polish Johannes Paulus II, took the Holy See.

The biographer wants to write a true and clearly accountable story, but a well-written story is just as important. According to some, every story structure chosen by a biographer should be considered as an ethical choice. Others consider biography, whatever its story structure, to be the act of ‘stealing’ the lives of others. Academics all too often compare the biographer to the magpie that steals shining jewels from a serious field of research, and leaves the boring material to others. Even if this way of looking at biographers is correct, these academics should remember that they made the decision to work with this ‘boring material’ themselves. However, the position that any narrative choice is an ethical choice relies upon the seldomly mentioned argument that knowledge of the intimate life can be of importance to the bigger history.

The question to what extent the biographer should work from a system of norms and values, or morality, is related to the discussion on posthumous privacy. Is a biographer allowed to tarnish someone’s posthumous reputation? Elaborate articles have been written to assert that this is not allowed. Someone who cannot defend himself – and the dead do not have lawyers – cannot be

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vilified; even his private life should not be tampered with. What to do with ‘rumours’ that are demonstrably incorrect, but that have influenced someone’s reputation? In the biographies of Chester Arthur (US President from 1881 until 1885) and Barack Obama, the biographers rightly mention the rumours that they were not born in the US, which would make them illegal presidents. These rumours played their parts in the social-political debates, which make them relevant for a biographer.

Dutch biographer Elsbeth Etty is very clear on posthumous privacy: ‘The dead do not require privacy protection. Let us stop making excuses for concealing intimate facts of life and keep on searching for ways to track down these facts, and give them their indispensable place in life stories in responsible, reliable ways.’ The Belgian historian Antoon De Baets, however, disagrees: ‘The position that the dead have no privacy or reputation is defensible on its own, and on a strictly judicial ground. Because the dead are not people, they do not possess human dignity, and therefore do not require rights such as privacy or reputation. But because they are former people, they do possess posthumous dignity’.10

In 1994, the French historian Emmanuel Chadeau heard a judge decide that he had done a meticulous job in his biography of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944), even when he suggested the possibility that the author and pilot, who disappeared mysteriously, did not die during a nightly flight accident, but had in fact committed suicide. During the court case, which was brought on by De Saint-Exupéry’s grieving heirs, the judge did reprimand Chadeau for illegally spreading unpublished material on De Saint-Exupéry. The heirs could claim a moral right to this material, according to the judge.11 That is a difficult conclusion for biographers. Countless examples exist of Jewish relatives of holocaust victims that do not wish to hear their loved ones’ names recited during public memorial services, or see their names in (digital) memorial archives. Naturally, they have every right to think so, but a biographer has an ethical responsibility to both his own professionalism and the truth. The biographer’s ethics is always closely connected to the way he handles his sources, even though there will always be people who take issue with that. The paradox is that when a judge forbids the use of certain sources, these incriminated sources will garner extensive media coverage. An American judge in the 1960s forced the historian Francis Russell to delete certain quotations in his biography, which he had found in love letters that he had discovered and that

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11 ‘E if for Ethics, p. 41–50.
had been sent by President Warren Harding (1865–1923) to his lover. Harding’s family asserted they would feel ‘damaged beyond repair’ if passages from these letters, which had been written before he took on the presidency, would be published. For all that, the family was not able to prevent the media from extensively covering passages from several of these letters.

The biographer is often depicted as an unreliable character in novels, similar to the countless novels and feature films in which the journalist is portrayed as unreliable. This can be seen in Henry James’ novel *The Aspern Papers*, where the narrator is prepared to seduce a niece of Juliana Borderea, who may or may not possess letters from the celebrated poet Jeffrey Aspern. This in itself is unethical, but the fact that he presents himself to the old woman as a prospective lodger makes the whole situation unworthy of a biographer. Even worse is the biographer in the novel *Le marchand de masques* by Henri Troyat. After he hands in his manuscript, he discovers a letter which reveals the fact that his main witnesses have been lying to him. That letter is the only proof of his biography’s inconsistency. He rips up the letter and flushes the shreds through the toilet. Needless to say this is a deadly sin for the professional biographer. It’s only cheap, not a sin to retell in every biography and biopic of the female Pope Johanna to recall the story that her successor Benedictus III gave order to produce a *chaise percée*, a chair with a hole in it. He wanted every new pope to take place on it so that the youngest cardinal with his hand under the seat of the chair could shout the liberating: ‘He has testicles!’

Some biographers chose for sensation in the most mysterious story of modern papacy – the death of Paulus I in 1978 after 33 days of pontificate. This modest and wise Pope was indeed about to reveal an international bank scandal. The Curia spread some lies concerning the death of the 67-year young Paul, who was as far as we know a very healthy Italian.

The psychiatrist’s code of professional conduct says: ‘Do no harm’. This is an important starting point for most occupational groups, but it would be quite a weird adage for the biographer. News that ‘harms’ somebody appears daily. Both biographers and journalists enjoy freedom of newsgathering. Edward Hoover’s family is probably not pleased to hear his biographer’s news that Hoover, who had been director of the FBI under seven US presidents, was gay. Still, mentioning this fact is important, because Hoover was famous for pressurizing other politicians with their alleged homosexuality. Rumours that Hoover was a transvestite who enjoyed gay sex orgies were proven to be facts in 1993, with the appearance of Anthony Summers’ *Official and Confidential: The Secret Life of J. Edgar Hoover*.

One of the most difficult ethical issues in relation to privacy revolves around the question how long a certain discretion should persist. Would a letter from Julius Caesar that reveals him as being a paedophile lead to a great fuss in the
public domain? It probably would, but not because his privacy would have been violated by the publication of the letter. Paula Broadwell, co-author of a biography of retired but still living four-star general David Petraeus, then Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), brings up an interesting question: ‘How close can a biographer get to his subject?’ She must have thought about this as she began to have intimate relations with him. On the biography’s cover shone a second name: that of her co-author Vernon Loeb. When the ‘Broadwell scandal’ reached its peak, he published an article in The Washington Post, in which he declared he was only the ghost writer of this biography, which he felt did not deserve to be called a biography. If there ever were to be an ethical code of conduct (God forbid), it would be wise to include the following: choose a subject that has already passed away. Preferably over ten years ago, and on an average age. Furthermore, let the biographer be someone who does not wish to either debunk or worship his subject.

What to do with biographers of mass murderers and dictators? Can we apply the ‘Do no harm’ adage on those? Thankfully, biographers of Hitler and Stalin are not given the cold shoulder, and people understand that understanding someone is not the same as empathizing with someone. You could argue that every biography arouses some sense of compassion for the person described. Some degree of empathy is necessary for understanding another person, or, as Richard Holmes puts it: ‘Biography is a handshake’. But this has nothing to do with condoning another person’s actions.

How close is too close? Doris Kearns Goodwin wrote a remarkably positive biography of President Lyndon Johnson while he was still alive. It was so positive that reviewers suggested that there might have been more at play than only a strict business relationship between biographer and biographee. Goodwin has always asserted that her relationship with Johnson was not sexual, and that ‘she sat in a chair while he unburdened himself from her bed’. In 2002 Goodwin had to retire from the Pulitzer Prize jury, because she was accused of plagiarism in her book The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys from 1988. She acknowledged to The New York Times that her publisher, Simon & Schuster, reached a private settlement in 1987 with another author over accusations of plagiarism, agreeing to a payment and the addition of footnotes to the text. Reaching a settlement is a form of admitting guilt. And she had every reason for that: she turned out to have copied extensively from other biographies. Lynne McTaggart even alleged Goodwin had stolen one third of her book Kathleen Kennedy: Her Life and Times.\(^\text{12}\) Goodwin, however, thought differently about this: she had only forgotten to reference to these other biographies. Bad memory gives good conscience.

\(^\text{12}\) ‘E is for Ethics’, p. 41–50.