

Toward a Universalist Mode of Discourse

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James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword* is a history of Christian and specifically Roman Catholic attitudes toward and treatment of Jews and Judaism over the course of nineteen centuries. Beginning with an extended meditation on the cross planted outside the Auschwitz barracks and the controversy that continues to surround it, Carroll unflinchingly traces the history of Christian anti-Judaism all the way back to the Gospels themselves. Over the course of more than 600 pages of narrative, he takes the reader through the history of the Western world—touching on politics, philosophy, theology, and a host of other topics—all from the viewpoint of the Church's "Jewish Question."

But this book is also James Carroll's own story, and the weaving together of historical and personal narrative is masterfully done. A former Paulist priest and still a committed Catholic, Carroll gives an account of his own adolescent spiritual strivings. His mother was the dominant Catholic influence in his early life and the way in which spiritual quest is nurtured by a search for maternal love is a *leitmotif* that Carroll expresses

in touching and personally revealing ways. His later questioning of his Catholic faith and his struggles with the institutional Church are also part of the story.

In the concluding chapters, Carroll calls for the convening of a Third Vatican Council to complete the work of reconciliation that was so admirably begun by Vatican II under the leadership of Pope John XXIII. Carroll gives the present pope good grades for his devotion to continuing that work, culminating in his visit to Israel and his praying at the Western Wall in 2000. But he also decries the undercutting of Vatican II's intentions by the conservative forces represented in this same papacy. Special condemnation is placed on the ongoing papal resistance to democratization and the re-introduction of exclusivist claims to salvation, particularly in the recent encyclical *Dominus Iesus*. That document, issued by the Vatican in September 2000, stands in direct contradiction to the spirit of all that has been accomplished over decades of what seemed like real progress in interfaith dialogue, reaching beyond calls for "tolerance" to a real mutuality of respect and understanding.

I have tremendous respect for the daring moral courage and intellectual honesty of this book. I am also deeply moved by the personal character of Carroll's undertaking. It is always interesting to see in another person's story close parallels to my own religious journey, despite our

great differences. We grew up and engaged in our seeking in the contexts of very different, and in those days really opposing, religious traditions. It has been the case for me over the course of 40 years that, although I live wholly within Judaism, as a seeker, a scholar, and a theologian—and I like to think I learn from exposure to all the world's great traditions—the significant other for me has always been Roman Catholic. My own faith and questioning over the years have been nurtured both by reading and by personal contacts with individuals raised within, and usually struggling with, the Catholic Church and their Catholic Christian faith.

Let me begin with the struggle. If we Jews are the original dissenters of the Western world, as Carroll suggests early in the volume, I heartily welcome him to the club. To stand up in sharp criticism of an institution and tradition you love is no easy matter. We in the Jewish community are new at that for different reasons than he is. Our historical role was as dissenters from truths the Catholic Church would have liked to believe were held universally. That is, we dissented from somebody else's religion, and we paid the price for it. But over the past quarter century, some of us have learned how vital it is to speak up clearly against actions and attitudes found among your own people and committed in the name of your own religion or in the name of an institution (a state, for example) that is in some way the embodiment of it.

Without minimalizing the complexities of the Middle East conflict, many words have been said and deeds done that diminish the good name of Israel, which is also the name of the entire Jewish people. Learning to dissent in the context of love and ongoing commitment, while well-meaning loyalists hurl accusations of perfidy and betrayal, is not easy. Knowing the moral anguish caused by such experiences vastly increases my respect for Carroll's undertaking.

So here it is, the history we have known to be true all along, laid out for all to see by a Catholic writer. This is something of vindication, to be sure, but it is all too sad and ugly to lead to any sense of triumph. The direct line that runs from the Gospel of John to the Crusades, through the ritual murder and charges of the desecration of the host, the Chmielnicki massacres (in which, incidentally, Jews and Catholics were fellow victims of Cossack Orthodox rage), the ghettos, the expulsions, the early and later pogroms of Eastern Europe, and into the Holocaust—that line has been clear to Jews all along. The viciousness with which this legacy of hatred was pursued through the ages—long after *ecclesia* was clearly triumphant over *synagoga* by any standard of measurement—looks like sibling insecurity. It is much like the story of the younger brother, never secure enough in his victory to stop beating his weakened older brother on the head, a clear token that he will never quite *believe*

that he has been chosen to replace the firstborn. It is as though the key theme of Genesis—the endless anxiety of that younger brother, who we once were with regard to the older inhabitants of Canaan, the tale of Jacob and Esau, of Ephraim and Manasseh—has been placed on its head and turned against us.

Yes, the Church must fully admit its responsibility. In theological language, that means confessing its sin. It is the Church, the body of Christendom with all its attraction to worldly power that carried it to greatness, that needs to attest to its sin. The responsibility lies not just in the errant ways of some Christians who “distorted” or “failed to understand” the Church's message of love. Nobody in the world understands the game of casuistry better than the two of us, Jews and Catholics, and we will have none of it. I affirm and rejoice in the fact that Carroll allows for no evasion of real accountability by means of elegantly drawn distinctions.

So I am an enthusiastic supporter of James Carroll's call for a Vatican III. Too bad it is no more in his hands than in mine. But I want to push the agenda a bit beyond his own bold steps. We need to move toward a deeper psychological understanding of this sibling story as a whole, and especially its denouement in the Holocaust, an approach first suggested by Richard Rubenstein more than 30 years ago. Carroll does not sufficiently come to

terms, it seems to me, with the degree of anti-Christian rebellion that Nazism marks. In this sense, he leaves too much room for the Christian apologetic that points out the resurgence of Teutonic paganism and Wagnerian mythos at the heart of Nazism, and will thus attempt to absolve Christianity of responsibility for an ideology that is anti-Christian at its core. For this reason I believe that a true day of reckoning and repentance for the Church must deal with the deep ambivalence with which the peoples of the Roman Empire, and especially the fierce tribes of Northern Europe, accepted their submission to the rule of Christ.

The codes of violence, vengeance, and honor by which they had lived from time immemorial were vitiated when they were conquered in the name of this skinny Jew hanging from a tree. Yes, they accepted his love, longing for salvation from death and the promise of life everlasting. But they also must have resented him terribly for imposing on them a demand for love of neighbor, for contrition of heart, for doing good unto others, and, worst of all, for loving and forgiving their enemies. What manly Goth, Viking, Slav, or Roman ever lived that way?

So the love of Christ became Christian devotion, the Church after Constantine. The hatred of Christ was displaced and turned against the Jews, those who had

foisted this 98-pound weakling of a savior upon them. Vengeance has been wreaked upon the Jews ever since. And some of it touches close even to the most sacred act of Catholic piety. Those who aspired to salvation through the Christian Paschal rite, the ritual ingestion of what the Church averred to be the very body and blood of God's martyred son, turned around and said of the Jews, their shadow people, the "bad" twin brother. They celebrate their Passover by consuming the blood of our innocent martyred Christian children. There are psychological factors here that one would have to work hard to overlook.

I am suggesting that true reconciliation between Jews and Catholics will not happen without examining and accepting the deep psychopathology of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Nazism was a horrible attempt by forces at the heart of Europe to break loose, to free it once and for all, of the yoke that links our two traditions and histories to one another. The distorted Nietzschean proclamation of freedom from the Christian ethos went hand in hand with the freedom to exterminate the Jews, the people who had, through Jesus of Nazareth, given that ethos to the world. If our recovery from the Nazi debacle is truly going to change us, all of that must be examined.

Of course it takes two to have a psychopathological relationship. We Jews for too long reveled in the moral righteousness granted us by our victimhood. Any hint of talk about Jewish complicity in the nightmare of our history, any sense that Christian exclusivism, for example, had been inherited from our claims of unique chosenness as God's only people, was dismissed as a cruel way of "blaming the victim." But our collective re-entry into the world of power politics and our often powerful voice as citizens in democratic countries no longer allows us the luxury of this dismissal. As we ask that Christians go farther than is comfortable in examining their history and attitudes in relation to us, we have some serious questions to ask of ourselves as well. The limiting of noble biblical ethical proclamations to one's fellow-Jew rather than extending them to all humanity, as found in many rabbinic commentaries, is unacceptable. The relative tolerance of halakhic authorities in the past for taking economic advantage of non-Jews, including governments, has to be re-examined and repudiated. The daily blessing that thanks God "for not having made me a gentile" is as worthy of rejection as the one in which we men are to thank God "for not having made me a woman," all apologetics notwithstanding. The rabbis' demonization of Esau, the supposed ancestor of Christendom, and of Balaam, the prophet of the non-Jews, speak ill of our tradition.

For 2,000 years, we Jews were without worldly power, especially on the political stage. Yes, the Catholic Church has at times been drunk with power, and the call for Vatican III to step back from that place is appropriate. We, who are new to power and insecure about how much we really have, should learn the lesson well. Carroll's call for the Church to embrace democracy in an unambiguous way is also an important one. Here we Jews would seem to be in much better shape. Acceptance of democracy and its values scores high on any survey of Jews, especially in North America. But what is the relationship between our Judaism and the widespread identification Jews feel with democracy? We Jews justly take collective pride in the memory of Jewish individuals who contributed to the cause of civil rights in this country as well as in South Africa, even though most of these were quite alienated from Judaism and (especially in South Africa) some were Jewish communists. We should take less pride in Israel's one-time close association with apartheid South Africa as an ally and arms customer. We should take less pride in the past fear of most Jewish leaders to speak out against the Vietnam War because vocal Jewish protest might lead to antisemitism, or to speak out today against violations of human rights in the occupied territories, lest we be seen as divided in our support for Israel. In Israel the relationship between Jewish values and those of democracy is being put to a much more serious test and the results so far are not entirely encouraging.

It was Mordecai Kaplan who first spoke of the need for a Judaism that would truly take democracy seriously. As the Catholic must ask what democratic restructuring would leave of a hierarchy and how the Church could function without it, we must examine *halakhah*, the normative way of Jewish practice and ask how the introduction of democracy would change the most elementary structures of Jewish law. What will replace the old talmudic "order of women," for example, containing all the laws of marriage, divorce, and personal status, once women are fully integrated into a new legislative process? Oh, for a Yavneh II, if only we could!

With regard to exclusivity of claim, I strongly believe that our repentance has to take place together. This is not, I should emphasize, because the situation requires mutuality in change, nor does Carroll call for it in any way. To do so would be inappropriate. The sins of Christendom against the Jewish people are what they are, and it is the churches, all of them, that need to repent. I am not claiming that we share the blame for antisemitism over the ages. It is only the depth of Carroll's longing for change that calls forth in me a response that says: "Yes, and we, too, will have to change." Indeed, we need the Church to repudiate the exclusivity of its claim as a means to salvation. Our world has gotten too small and we are both too aware of other

religions, including those that have their roots outside the biblical tradition, to speak the language of exclusiveness.

But we Jews also need to go back to the midrashic readings of Sinai, cutting through our own exclusivist language, exposing to the light of critical reappraisal, even the text that says the mountain is called Sinai because that sounds like the word *sin'ah*, hatred. This refers to the hatred God presumably feels (or perhaps that which we are to feel) for the "nations of the world" who did not accept God's Torah. We will also have to examine with conscience the biblical teaching on "chosenness" itself, asking whether re-interpretation of this concept in a non-triumphalist and non-exclusivist way is possible—or whether Kaplan was right in demanding that it be excised entirely from our liturgy. Dare we ask others to change and ourselves continue to speak, as we do in the weekly *Havdalah* service at the conclusion of the Sabbath, of a God who distinguishes "light from darkness, the holy from the profane, Israel from the nations"? When we ask ourselves the really hard question of the Holocaust—"Had we not been the victims, how many of us would have risked our lives and our children's lives to save gypsies, or gays, or Catholics, for that matter?"—we do not have the nerve to even try to answer. The next question—"Would our Judaism have demanded of us that we do so?"—is also one that we cannot ignore.

In turning so much of Carroll's Vatican III call back on the Jews, I by no means want to diminish my hope that his call be heard within the Church. It is also at moments like this when we Jews tend ever so briefly to envy Catholics for the centralization of authority that characterizes their tradition. They do change slowly, encountering lots of conservative resistance along the way, but, at least on the surface level of praxis and official statement, they change entirely. If any group of rabbis were to undertake the proposals I have made here, they would immediately be denounced by ten other groups of rabbis. If we could convince the Conservatives to join with the Reform in such a gathering, the Orthodox would use it as an occasion to pronounce their exclusive loyalty to authentic Judaism. Were the Modern Orthodox to join—and that is entirely out of the question—others would leap up to say how those traitors were never really Orthodox in the first place. Yes, we live happily without fears of a vindictive hierarchy or threats of excommunication. But some of us experienced a strong sense of *aggiornamento*, envy, after Vatican II. Let me say clearly that the great and positive changes that have taken place in the Catholic Church since the days of John XXIII and by those following in his noble footsteps, have made a real difference in the world. They have impressed us tremendously and challenged us.

But now let me come to the heart of the matter. We *need* each other. Catholics and Jews represent two great spiritual traditions of the Western world, nourished by the shared font of a common Scripture. We both hear and seek to fulfill the biblical call to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." There is much that we still have to say to the world. The most essential teaching of Hebrew Scripture, that every human being is created in the image of God, has still not been heard. We share that Scripture, meaning the call of God to teach it to the world, even if we disagree sharply on some of the details of its demand on us (birth control and abortion, to name the big ones).

We live in a society gone mad in the pursuit of money to buy creature comforts undreamed of by prior generations and a hunger for ever more exotic experiences that seems to know no end. The gap between rich and poor grows daily, a situation not likely to be ameliorated by the new crowd in Washington. Millions are degraded by hunger, by disease—I think especially of the ravages of AIDS—by addictions, by the need to enter prostitution, sweatshop slavery, or other forms of degrading work just to feed their children. Meanwhile, we keep working harder and harder, longer hours, more overtime, and with more wage earners per family, resulting in less quality time with our children, even with ourselves. We Jews and Catholics have such important things to say about all this: love for one another, human dignity, the importance of time

out, rest, the Sabbath. We share a prophetic tradition that speaks of God's special love for the poor and downtrodden. We also have to help post-modern urbanized Westerners to get back in touch with an inner self who is too frightened to come forth in the busy, rough-and-tumble world where we live most of our lives. But our inner self needs to be addressed and nurtured. We live in an age of great spiritual hunger and we need to support one another and others in responding to that need. Only in that way will human behavior begin to change, leading us toward greater harmony with the natural world in which we live and which is itself so gravely threatened.

We are coming out of an age that thought it knew better than the collective wisdom of ancient religious traditions. In the early 20th century, many thinking people assumed that science would have all the answers. The progress of scientific knowledge would turn aside the darkness and the need for religion would recede. But the opposite has been the case. Western science, for all its great and real accomplishments, has not become a source of ultimate values. Living in the shadow of Auschwitz and the constant threat of potential nuclear disaster has led millions of people in the past half-century to quest for some deeper truth. Many of those have turned away from the legacy of the West altogether, finding Judaism and Christianity both to be vacuous and morally bankrupt. But we believe this is not the case. The Western spiritual

traditions, if read with an open heart and a discerning eye, have much to say about the engaged spirituality that is so urgently needed in our day. As we have seen the focus of our ultimate anxiety shift from the nuclear worry to the threat of ecological disaster, it has become clear that we must turn to the wisdom of all the world's spiritual storehouses. These now have to become the common property of all humanity. The translation of their insights into a more universalist mode of discourse is an urgent priority. The real role of religion in this new century will be to help in effecting the great changes in attitude toward ourselves, our environment, and the precious resources required for the very survival of our planet. The rapacious overconsumption and anxious desire of each generation for more, ever more, that has characterized our way of living, especially that of Americans, is going to end soon. For it to end peacefully and by change of heart—that is our shared work as people of faith. It is time to bury all the old hatchets, and bury them finally and deeply, so that we can set about the task that lies before us.

Catholics, Jews, and the Prism of Conscience

Responses to James Carroll's

*Constantine's Sword: The Church
and the Jews, A History*

edited by Daniel Terris and Sylvia Fuks Fried

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