

Constantine's Sword: A Review Article

By Robert P. Lockwood

When John Cornwell's book, *Hitler's Pope* was released, many critics missed the point in the sensationalism surrounding his unfounded claim that Pius XII was a silent collaborator in the Holocaust. Cornwell wrote the book as an advocacy paper against the leadership of Pope John Paul II within the Church and in favor of a particular so-called liberal vision of how the Church should function.

The latest author to exploit the Holocaust to present an internal Church agenda is James Carroll in his new book *Constantine's Sword*. Carroll's stated goal is to present a "history" of the Church and the Jews to show the linkage between Catholic belief and the Nazi Holocaust.

Carroll's thesis is that the anti-Semitism that resulted in the Holocaust is central to Catholic theology and derived from the earliest Christian expressions of belief, namely the Gospel accounts themselves. He concludes his book with a call for a third Vatican Council to make a series of changes in basic Catholic belief that he envisions purging the Church of this alleged fundamental anti-Semitism. As Carroll himself observes, "Human memory is inevitably imprecise, and it is not uncommon for the past to be retrieved in ways that serve present purposes." That neatly summarizes the whole point of this book. Which is bordering on a blasphemous use of the horror of the Holocaust for Church politicking.

Nazi anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and German acquiescence to it were not caused by religious differences between Catholics and Jews, or anti-Jewish outbursts during the First Crusade. Nazi hatred was of faith in anything but the Aryan race and

the German nation-state. Hitler did not approach the world with a mode of thinking and belief rooted in the 1,900 years of Western civilization. Rather, he was rooted in the 150 years of elitist and racist thought that had abandoned the Judeo-Christian roots of Western civilization.

Carroll's book is described as a "history" of the Church and the Jews, but it is a great deal more personal rumination than serious historical, or theological, study. Half of the action seems to take place as Carroll ruminates at various sidewalk cafes or churches.

Carroll's main sources from a Catholic perspective are disaffected theologians such as Hans Kung and Rosemary Radford Ruether, or Scriptural scholars like John Dominic Crossan from the Jesus Seminar. His knowledge – or at least his citation – of mainstream Catholic sources is limited to non-existent. He makes a single apparent reference to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* but calls it the "World Catechism."

Carroll centers his discussion of the roots of alleged Catholic anti-Semitism on the Gospel accounts of the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The theory goes that the "Jesus movement" of the first century, at war with the Pharisees for control of the "true Israel," enveloped the Passion narrative in anti-Pharisee myths, that would in turn establish an anti-Jewish contempt in Christianity.

As to the bodily resurrection of Jesus, Carroll writes: "Immediately after Jesus' death, the circle of his friends began to gather. Their love for him, instead of fading in his absence, quickened, opening into a potent love they felt for one another. Their gatherings were like those of a bereft circle, and they were built around lament, the reading of texts, silence, stories, food, drink, songs, more texts, poems – a changed sense of time and a repeated intuition that there was 'one more member' than could be counted. That intuition is what we call the Resurrection." This appears to be an

understanding of the Resurrection for the brie and white wine set, rather than a Catholic and Christian understanding.

Constantine's Sword is a slogging journey through the history of the Church over the two millennia. He touches down here and there when it suits his purpose. For example, while the treatment of the 12th through the 16th centuries is endless, he barely touches on the nearly eight hundred years from Constantine to the calling for the First Crusade – which leaves a rather sizeable gap in the alleged causal linkage of anti-Semitism in the Church from the Gospels to the Holocaust.

After meandering quickly through the age of the early Church fathers, Carroll arrives at what he sees as a decisive point: Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 AD. Before the battle, Constantine claimed to have seen a vision of the Cross, and the Christian symbol was placed on his standards on the day of battle. Carroll claims that this would lead to a central theological tenet of Catholicism that wrongly focused on the death of Jesus as atonement and reparation for sin. Thus the concept of salvation would come to dominate Christian thinking as the meaning of the life of Jesus, His death on the Cross an act of atonement for sin. This would lead to a "theology of contempt" that viewed the Jews as "Christ-killers."

At the same time, Constantine's exercise of authority in the Church, particularly in the name of Christian unity, brought a heretofore unheard of emphasis on defined doctrinal orthodoxy. Church authority (which would evolve into papal absolutism) now entered the Christian scene as well. Constantine, in Carroll's view, was a very busy man.

All this, of course, sounds a bit like a 16th Century anti-Catholic tract during the Reformation, or one of Jack Chick's contemporary pamphlets claiming Catholic descent from a Babylonian mystery religion. The over 275 years after Christ and preceding Constantine showed a steady development of an

understanding of a distinct Christian faith as well as the development of a rich community, liturgical and theological life. Concerns over unity of belief are evident in the earliest years of the Church and a bewildering list of various heresies addressed by the Church long pre-date Constantine. The theological concept of Christ's atonement for sins was hardly a late-developing concept ingeniously inserted into Catholic life by a theologically illiterate Roman emperor, but is taught directly in the New Testament and in the writings of the early Church fathers.

Though Carroll's book can bend a coffee table at 756 pages, his litany of anti-Jewish incidents in Western history is spotty and lacking historical nuance. He touches on various events within Western history and concludes, actually quite briefly, with the Holocaust. Throughout these diverse and complicated historical trends and events, he sees a theology of the Cross and Church teaching on the atonement as being the dominant factor in generating anti-Jewish violence and anti-Semitic racism.

The Church and Nazism is confined in Carroll's book to less than 70 pages, about the same length that he gives to his suggestions for Church reform. He begins by restating his essential charge that "(h)owever modern Nazism was, it planted its roots in the soil of age-old Church attitudes and a nearly unbroken chain of Jew-hatred. However pagan it Nazism was, it drew its sustenance from groundwater poisoned by the Church's most solemnly held ideology – its *theology*."

This is, of course, a gross mis-reading of history. Hitler and Nazism were created by a rampant social Darwinism, an ubiquitous European belief that it was a virtual biological imperative that the lower classes be dominated by their racial superiors, the ideology of imperialism, the birth of scientism that would dispel the "myths" of religion, the campaign to radically excise the Church from public life, the denial of the sacredness of the individual for the good of the State or,

as in communism, the good of the class, the creation of the myth of the Nietzsche-like Superman who could undertake any evil for the good of his race, and the replacement of Christianity with neo-paganism. The soil and poisoned groundwater for these Nazi aberrations were the views of 19th century liberalism that were the conventional wisdom of the times. The Catholic Church – its *theology* – was viewed as the enemy of this modern thought. The Church was not the progenitor of the beliefs that created Nazism. It was one of the last remaining bulwarks in Europe against it.

Carroll's book is not history at all, but an amateur's meditation on various historical events skewed to reflect the prejudices of his own thesis. This is not careful scholarship. This is simply a very long anti-Catholic essay.

The last section is Carroll's vision of an agenda for "Vatican III." The Church must abandon claims to universal and objective truth, realize the Gospels are anti-Semitic, abandon theology of the atonement by Christ for the sins of mankind, reject papal infallibility, ordain women, elect bishops, dismantle the "medieval clerical caste," forget the belief that Jesus is the only means of salvation, This will allow the Church "to embrace a pluralism of belief and worship, of religion and no religion, that honors God by defining God as beyond every human effort to express God." And while they are at it, forget nonsense like priestly celibacy and birth control.

Rather clearly, the objective solution Carroll has in mind already exists: Unitarianism.

No one can argue that members of the Church throughout the centuries, going to the highest leadership within the Church, engaged and endorsed at times anti-Jewish words, sentiments and actions. At the very same time, many within the Church officially condemned such actions and it was the very Church leadership that Carroll hopes to be abandoned that was most

vociferous in that condemnation.

It was not the belief of the Church, the New Testament, the Church centered in Jesus, the understanding that Christ died for the sins of mankind, or the Church belief in an objective and universal truth that persists in Christ that created the horror of the Holocaust. It was the rejection of those, and the attempt to substitute for Judeo-Christian civilization a secularist pseudo-scientism of race, class and nationalism as the meaning of life.