

SMITHSONIAN LINKED TO ANTI-CATHOLICISM

The June edition of Smithsonian, the magazine published by the Smithsonian Institution, featured a lengthy article by James Carroll, notorious for his venomous attacks on the Church. Bill Donohue wasted no time in addressing the matter of an anti-Catholic article running in a government publication. Below is the text of the letter he sent to the members of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees, the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, the Editor-in-Chief and Publisher of Smithsonian magazine and the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

A slightly amended version of this letter will be published in the magazine.

May 31, 2006

Dear Sir or Madam:

One week before the June edition of the Smithsonian reached the newsstands, and was made available online, I was contacted by scholars who subscribe to the magazine about an incredibly inaccurate, and ultimately unfair, piece by James Carroll titled, "Who Was Mary Magdalene?"

I have now read the article and concur with those who brought it to my attention: Carroll's work is an ideologically driven attack on Catholicism written by a journalist who has a long history of bearing his animus in public. It is the type of article one might expect in a journal of opinion with a decidedly left-of-center orientation—not in a serious publication that is so closely associated with the federal government.

Five years ago, Carroll published Constantine's Sword. *Despite*

its subtitle, The Church and the Jews, the book had little to do with the Catholic Church's alleged passivity to the Holocaust. How else to explain why a book on the Holocaust would end with a plea for the Vatican to radically change its teachings on women and sexuality?

Similarly, Carroll's piece in the Smithsonian has little to do with its alleged subject matter, namely Mary Magdalene. In this instance, he concludes that "what most drove the anti-sexual sexualizing of Mary Magdalene [by the Church] was the male need to dominate women."

Make no mistake about it: James Carroll is not a disinterested writer—he is a man with an agenda. His goal is to discredit the contemporary Catholic Church by seeking to impair its historical record: after all, any institution that is anti-Semitic and anti-woman is inherently flawed. That he has succeeded in hijacking the good name of the Smithsonian to accomplish his objective is deeply troubling.

"The whole history of western civilization," writes Carroll, "is epitomized in the cult of Mary Magdalene." This claim, which is the first sentence in the article, is so extraordinary that no credible historian would ever choose to be identified with it. The next sentence is equally preposterous: "For many centuries the most obsessively revered of saints, this woman became the embodiment of Christian devotion..." It would be equally difficult to find any theologian who would raise Mary Magdalene to such an exalted status. So mixed up is Carroll that he even says Christians "worship" the Blessed Virgin. An error this profound is all the more startling coming as it does from a man who was once ordained a Catholic priest (it also doesn't speak too well of the magazine's editors).

In Carroll's fevered imagination, Mary Magdalene has been promoted to rival—if not trump—the role of Peter. To get to where he wants to go—which is to paint the Catholic Church as

anti-woman—he relies on Gnostic texts, treating them as if they carried the same historical weight as the New Testament. In particular, he seeks legitimacy in two books: *Mary Magdalene: Myth and Metaphor* by Susan Haskins and Karen L. King's *The Gospel of Mary Magdala: Jesus and the First Woman Apostle*.

The volume by Haskins was quickly dismissed by *Commonweal*, a magazine not shy about challenging the teachings of the Catholic Church: “Marred with trivial errors of fact, reliance on tendentious sources as well as citations almost always culled from secondary sources (and, thus, mostly unusable), the author trumpets her own prejudices with wearying regularity.” This kind of review is considered terminal, but it clearly had no effect on Carroll.

Ken Woodward, *Newsweek*'s senior religion editor for decades, sheds perspective on what's going on when he says that “*Mary Magdalene* has become a project for a certain kind of ideologically committed feminist scholarship.” He was referring to authors like Karen King who are bent on reconstructing history to suit their politics. For example, writers like King would have us believe that Pope Gregory in 591 intentionally sought to discredit Mary Magdalene because he was a sexist: “Blaming a pope fits the feminist agenda here,” Woodward observes, “injecting an anti-hierarchical, indeed, anti-papal note. In short, patriarchy is again the culprit.”

In Karen King's world, there is no such thing as truth—there are only truths. “All religions have within them plural possibilities,” she told the *Harvard Gazette*, “which means we are always selecting materials to apply to situations in which we find ourselves, and so people are responsible for what they appropriate and how they interpret tradition.” The plurality of belief is equally seductive to Carroll: He goes so far as to say we need a “new Christology,” one which will allow the Catholic 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."

Such a position holds endless possibilities. It also allows Carroll to fantasize about the ever-sexual Mary Magdalene. He is most impressed with the "clear erotic overtones" of Mary Magdalene's loosened hair, and sees "erotic energy" in biblical descriptions of women. So enthralled with sexuality is Carroll that he even questions whether a line from the play "Jesus Christ Superstar"—which has Mary Magdalene wondering aloud about her love for Jesus—is reflective of "eros or agape." Indeed, he wants to know whether this signals "sensual or spiritual" love.

Were it not for the source of Carroll's commentary, all of this could be written off as interesting discourse, or the mere chatter of cynics. But the Smithsonian is not just another magazine: it is the flagship publication of the highly revered Smithsonian Institution, and thus carries the implicit imprimatur of the federal government.

For the Smithsonian Institution to be associated with an article about Roman Catholicism that is written by a man who questions the Resurrection, the need for salvation and the divinity of Christ is reprehensible. It is obvious that anyone who would deny the heart and soul of Judaism or Islam would not find a receptive audience at the Smithsonian. What needs to be explained is why the same level of editorial scrutiny broke down in this instance.

I look forward to hearing from you about this matter.