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Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews

James Carroll

Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001

576 pages, \$39.95 Hardcover

Is historic Christian anti-Semitism an accident or a disease? Most informed people know something about the history of Jews within Christendom, about ghettos and shtetls, about pogroms and crusades, about blood libels and poisoned-well myths. Christian interpretation of this perverse history has struggled to make sense of it within the category of accident: unfortunate things “happened” because of the concatenation of particular phenomena — people of a certain type, events in a certain sequence, mistaken choices, missed opportunities — all the apparently random factors that go into a mid-air collision. Change any of the factors, and the “accident” would not have happened. There is no necessity binding the factors into an inescapable trajectory of disaster.

An infectious disease is different. It is no accident that it spreads illness and death. Illness and death are of its nature. The less one knows about Christian anti-Semitism, the more it looks like an accident, an unfortunate happenstance requiring honest regret and sincere apology, which ought to be enough to end the matter. But the more one becomes aware of the extent of Christian anti-Semitic behavior, the harder it becomes to avoid the category of disease; there must be something toxic in the Christian tradition itself. So Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her 1974 monograph *Faith and Fratricide*, came to the unpopular conclusion that Christian anti-Semitism is “the left hand of Christology.” The evidence of anti-Semitism in church history, she says, is too pervasive to be called accidental; it is symptomatic of disease, and the locus of the disease is the church’s teachings about Jesus Christ. That is what makes it hard, perhaps impossible, for the church to do anything about it.

James Carroll’s book, *Constantine’s Sword*, is every bit as rigorous and thorough as Ruether’s book. Its difference is its strength; it is narrative history rather than theological analysis. Carroll, a novelist among other things, knows how to write a story so that the reader’s interest does not lag in spite of the 600+ pages of text. History is intertwined with a personal narrative that infuses the story with passion and intensity. This is history that matters.

Like Ruether, Carroll looks unblinkingly at all the evidence of Christian mistreatment of Jews. In this he is ferociously honest. He refuses to excuse the church, to minimize its actions, or to rationalize them. He has little patience with the recent expressions of regret by the Roman Catholic Church which insert a prophylactic space between the "children of the church" who were guilty of wrongdoing, and the "church as such" which can do no wrong.

The book is long because it needs to be. The events, the policies, the passionate hatred, the tortured rationalizations of persecution and harassment pile up like ocean waves in a storm, and the waves keep pounding century after century after century, until finally the tidal wave of the Holocaust, the brutal butchery of European Jewry, overwhelms not just Jews, but the whole continent of Europe, the world looking on, horrified, and the church itself. It is a story that cannot be abridged. There is no alternative to reading the whole thing, because one necessary truth of the story is precisely its extent.

James Carroll is Roman Catholic: he grew up in a faithfully observant home, he was educated in Roman Catholic schools, trained in Roman Catholic seminaries, and ordained into the priesthood, which he eventually left. His faith and piety are as intense as his honesty, and the reader can only be in awe of the struggle between them as he seeks a way to be faithful both to his appalling narrative and to his deeply loved tradition.

Is, then, Christian anti-Semitism a disease? Because Rosemary Radford Ruether is an academic theologian, one who is insulated from the frigid void by the styrofoam of abstractions that conduct neither heat nor cold, she can dare say that it is: Christian anti-Semitism is "the left hand of Christology." But the story-teller has no such protection. So it is not surprising that James Carroll, after pushing the origin of anti-Semitism back farther and farther to within touch of the originating first step of Christendom, stops short of the first generation, the Jewish followers of Jesus. These grief-stricken disciples searched for and found comfort in their holy Scriptures: "he was stricken, smitten by God and afflicted," "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me." This "prophecy historicized" became in the next generation of Christians, Gentile Christians, "history prophesied." Thus began the hijacking of Jewish tradition and the hostility to those "murderers of the prophets" and of Jesus.

It didn't have to be that way. It was an accident, not a toxic disease. It is when Constantine raised up the cross as a sign to conquer the world that this misreading of Jesus' death became toxic for Jews. Within this culture they would be enemies by definition, for they were not only responsible for his death, they continued to refuse to acknowledge him as their promised Messiah. A living Jew was a threat to Christian self-understanding.

It didn't - it doesn't - have to be this way, according to James Carroll. He ends his narrative with an ambitious plan for the reform of the church, his beloved church, which is his mother still.

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Toronto, Ontario

John Chrysostom

Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen

London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2000

230 pages, \$37.99 Softcover

In 1908, Pope St. Pius X declared St. John Chrysostom to be the "patron saint of preachers." Chrysostom, a title of honour and affection meaning "Golden-mouth," was a fourth-century Eastern Church Father who has left a corpus of hundreds of homilies and numerous letters and treatises. In recent decades, new scholarly interest in the life and theology of Chrysostom has led to a variety of books and articles of high academic calibre. One of these recent publications is *John Chrysostom*, part of the "Early Church Fathers" series under the editorship of Carol Harrison of the University of Durham in the UK.

I had the pleasure of meeting the authors of this new book in May of 2001 at the annual meeting of the Canadian Society of Patristic Studies during the "Learneds" conference at Laval University. Wendy Mayer and Pauline Allen are first-rate patristics scholars working at the Centre for Early Christian Studies of Australian Catholic University. This centre, under the direction of Pauline, is now the home for the International Association of Patristic Studies and hosts regular highly-regarded conferences. The principal author, Wendy Mayer, is one of the world's leading Chrysostom scholars, and her careful research of many years duration is reflected in this readable and informative volume.