

# Consensus

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Volume 41  
Issue 2 *Martin Luther and Antisemitism*

Article 10

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11-25-2020

## Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews- A History

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### Recommended Citation

Finkleberg, Norm (2020) "Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews- A History," *Consensus*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 10.

DOI: 10.51644/IZQQ2617

Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol41/iss2/10>

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## Book Review

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

James Carroll

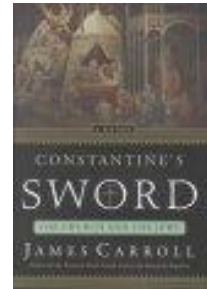
St. Charles, IL: Houghton Mifflin, 2001.

The purpose of the initial Luther Legacy Conference held at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario in January 2020 was to examine the legacy of the antisemitic views held by its namesake. When asked, as a follow-up to this conference, to select and describe a book that opened my eyes anew to the nature of antisemitism, I immediately thought of James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword*.

Having grown up in a liberal, secular, partially observant Jewish family in a cosmopolitan Canadian city with a large Jewish community, my experience of belonging to an "invisible minority" was relatively benign. While aware of our status as the "other" and the monstrous tragedy of the Shoah (Holocaust), I experienced an unexamined, uncrystallized sense of dis-ease in relating to the Christian majority. Reading Carroll's exhaustive narrative tracing the lengthy history of Christian anti-Judaism put that sense of dis-ease into clear focus.

Carroll's impressive account of the political, social and theological history of Jew hatred from the time of Jesus to the present day is skillfully interwoven with his own journey of discovery, which includes a period in the Paulist priesthood from 1969-1975. While not a religious scholar by trade (he self-identifies as a novelist, essayist and "amateur Catholic"), Carroll does a remarkable job of connecting the dots between the crucifixion of Jesus and the Shoah. However, he is careful to distinguish between Christian history of anti-Judaism that made the Shoah more acceptable to its adherents and the actual heinous perpetration by the Nazi criminals. Carroll also holds tightly to the assumption that at every twist and turn of this unfortunate history, things could have gone another way: "To ask what was the alternative to European Christianity's hatred of Jews in the past is to assert that such hatred is not necessary in the future."

Perhaps most revelatory to me in Carroll's book is its exposition of the undeniable DNA of Jew hatred that is embedded in Christian scriptures and informs its theology. In the aftermath of the tragedy of Jesus' death Carroll hypothesizes that his Jewish followers participated in "healing circles" as conduits for their grief to make sense of this paradigm-shaking event. They would naturally turn to their scriptures for solace and guidance and what emerged was the original kerygma, a theologized version of what happened; that Jesus was crucified, died and miraculously risen. By the time the Gospels were written decades later, this original story was "proven" by the seemingly incredibly accurate prophecies in the Hebrew scriptures (e.g. Psalms 22:16 and 18, Isaiah 53:5, Jeremiah 31:31), forgetting that the original stories emerged from these scriptures in the first place; what J. D. Crossan refers to as "prophecy historicized." This, of course, resulted in the supersessionist notion of Christianity's new covenant as a fulfillment and replacement of the original. In addition, the phenomenon of sectarian, internecine conflict between Jews and Jewish Christians at the time of the writing of the Gospels (Carroll uses the metaphor of rivalrous fraternities) was grievously misread by later generations of Gentile Christians who were not able to see the conflict as one among Jews.



As the book's title suggests, Carroll highlights what he calls the Age of Constantine (306-429 CE) as crucial to the narrative: "After the Death and Resurrection of Jesus, the conversion of Constantine may have been the most implication-laden event in Western history" (p. 171). As he strove to consolidate the power of the Roman Empire, Constantine has a mythic vision on the eve of the battle at the Milvian Bridge (312 CE). He saw a cross in the sky above the legend, "In This Sign, Conquer." According to legend, with this favourable sign from the Christian God, his troops rallied to victory behind a long spear overlaid with gold with a transverse bar laid over it in the form of a cross. Carroll argues that the cross lacked religious and symbolic significance before this event and that two consequences of this were: 1) a reversal from the anti-imperial mission of Jesus to the contradiction of the Roman imperium and Roman Catholicism becoming one; and 2) the beginning of the shift of emphasis from Jesus' life and resurrection in Christian imagination to that of his crucifixion and death. The latter's amplification of the deicidal charge against the Jews should be clear; the more emphasis placed on the death in the creed, the worse for the Jews.

Carroll goes on to document the many historical manifestations of anti-Judaism in Christianity including Augustine's (425 CE) supposed benign directive to "Let them survive, but not thrive!" Let them live to witness and be witnessed for the consequences of their rejection of the "obvious" fulfillment of the prophecies; including the butchery of the Crusades, the first of which (1096 CE) resulted in the murder or suicide of approximately one-third of the Jews of Northern Europe, including the blood libel first proposed by St. Bernard in England in 1144 CE, the scapegoating for the Black Plague (1348 CE) with its accusations of well-poisoning, Iberian conversionism and subsequent expulsion (1492 CE), and the Inquisition (because, how can you trust a conversion if it was coerced?).

In the face of this arc of overwhelming persecution, what evidence does Carroll marshal to support his claim that it could have gone another way? He mentions a few Christian clerics and philosophers that presented alternative viewpoints, like Abelard with his pluralistic bent. He cites the Iberian *convivencia* when Jews, Christians and Muslims created a Golden Age of civility and creativity. Mostly, he proposes an agenda for Vatican III, a "New Reformation," that includes reading the Gospels as invented rather than divine, decentralization of the powers of the Church, renouncing Jesus as the only way to God, and finally, repentance.

The premature request for forgiveness, made by a Christian to a Jew, may constitute presumption at best, a further oppression at worst ... there is no recovery from the past without a commitment for the future. ... Forgiveness for the sin of antisemitism presumes a promise to dismantle all that makes it possible (p. 623).

Carroll has written a remarkable book about Christian anti-Judaism and he is to be commended for including both the sordid past and his optimistic hopes for a redemptive future. I, however, tend to favour Catholic theologian Rosemary Ruether's more pessimistic view: "Possibly anti-Judaism is too deeply embedded in the foundations of Christianity to be rooted out entirely without destroying the whole structure." (Ruether 1997, 228).

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## References

Ruether, Rosemary Radford. Faith and fratricide: the theological roots of anti-Semitism. 1997.