

From Enemy to Brother

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 6, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I knew the second I saw the title of John Connelly's book "From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965" that this was a book I must read. But, why? I was told, and told by someone whose opinion I respect, that this was an important book. But, the issue of Catholic-Jewish relations has always had a special interest for me. In part, this is because I have been blest with the friendship of many Jews who have profoundly impacted my life, from my Latin teacher in high school, to the person who first invited me to publish an essay, to my boss at the restaurant where I worked for many years. I am also half Polish and am acutely aware of the historic and residual anti-Semitism of the Polish culture, so there is a special obligation to study its roots with a view towards eliminating the cancer. Finally, I suppose, I am alarmed by the rise of anti-Semitism on the Left in American politics, sometimes appearing in anti-Israeli drag, sometimes not, but all too willing to traffic in historically anti-Semitic tropes of the kind that should revolt thinking and learned people. Such personal concerns, it turns out, are central to the story Connelly has to tell because the people who led the struggle to rid the Church of anti-Semitism were, in the main, not just people who had been exposed to Jews and other non-Catholics, they were converts, and converts who tended to come from borderlands like Austria, Sudetenland, Poland, Alsace-Lorraine and, of course, America where you bump into someone who is racially and ethnically different just by walking down the street.

This book is also important for anyone interested in the way the Catholic Church moves through time. Connelly makes a few errors in his understanding of the Church, but very few. And, what he is demonstrating is one of the most significant developments of doctrine in the twentieth century. He catalogues the ways our Church discovered in its own traditions, and indeed in its own Scriptures, a different way of speaking about Jews and Jewish-Catholic relations, how those who were advocating for change were very careful to move in step with Catholic officialdom, and, finally, how the dreadful impact of the Shoah on the consciousness of Catholics and the world exposed the fact that the ways Christians had spoken about Jews for centuries was, in fact, indecent and unchristian.

The problem to be overcome is clearly stated by Connelly early in the book:

It was pointless to argue that not God but Gentiles had punished Jews through history, because the ideology of anti-Judaism was not amenable to evidence and observation; even with the best of will, before or after the Holocaust, no one could "disprove" the charge of deicide. It would not disappear through good intentions or any ethical impulse, including the Christian teaching of love of one's neighbor. This age-old belief continued to give sustenance to modern, "secular" hatred. Even the most determined Christian opponents of Nazism — including Dietrich Bonhoeffer — shared with the antisemites the basic belief that Jews lived under a curse for killing Christ. That robbed them of the language with which to speak unequivocally in favor of the Jews during the Holocaust. Nothing in the Christian tradition permitted them to understand Jewish suffering as other than divinely willed.

The charge of deicide rings in modern ears as something definitely pre-modern, a superstition, the kind of thing that gave the Middle Ages and religious belief a bad name. It is difficult to imagine how widely held such a belief was, well into modernity. It is difficult, too, to reflect on how for so long, Christians could overlook that

their own Scriptures catalogued the tales and writings of Jews, not just the Hebrew Scriptures, but the New Testament as well. Jesus, His mother, His disciples, all were Jews. Yet, through the centuries, ?Jews? had become ?enemies.?

Connelly explains, beautifully, the importance of the historian?s craft. It is not to make excuses for the Church, nor to offer an indictment. He writes in his introduction:

*Rather than force linear elegance upon a crooked historical path, the narrative that follows occasionally pauses to wonder about ideas that led nowhere or roads that were not taken. Most instructive and disturbing is how the way to the future of tolerance often emerged from a lengthy way station of intolerance. Historians looking for the origins of tolerance have no choice but to seek it in environments full of hatred, contempt and suspicion. It is here that one sees the inadequacy of books that pluck either disturbing or exonerating phrases out of the church?s murky past: they tell us nothing about how people lived in a past that exists beyond our mental horizons, nor do they tell us how ideas that we take for granted ? like every line of *Nostra Aetate*, chapter four ? first became thinkable.*

Clio has rarely enjoyed such a well-stated defense of her art.

The ?lengthy way station of intolerance? was multi-faceted. Racism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Judaism fed off each other but they were distinct, although all three found manifestations within the thinking of important Christian and Catholic writers. The Jesuit scientist Hermann Muckermann was not a Nazi. Indeed, he helped those threatened by the rise of the Nazi regime to power to flee from Germany and he actively supported anti-Nazi groups. He was fired from his professorship by the Nazis because he was insufficiently radical in his beliefs. But, he believed that ?race acted as an incubator for things of real value? such as the family and the nation. Thus, he was able to write these words which shock:

Our first concern is to maintain the untouched, hereditary, elemental nature of the German people?The present age, which desires the renewal of the German people from its deepest biological sources, causes us to direct particular attention to this goal. One cause for concern is without doubt the swelling numbers of persons of Jewish origin in essential branches of our cultural life.

Muckermann even went further, evidencing sympathy with certain strains in eugenic thought. He went further still, arguing against inter-marriage between Catholics and Jews even if the Jew had been baptized. ?Let no one defend themselves on the grounds of baptism making a Jew a Christian. Baptism makes a person a child of God, but never changes his basic hereditary structure.? There is an irony here, a dreadful one to be sure, that Catholic thinkers such as Muckermann desperately wanted their views to be informed by science. They were not fundamentalists. But, the science was bad and not just bad, but evil.

Even so illustrious a Catholic theologian as Karl Adam was not immune from the stain of anti-Semitism. Adam was a theologian at Tübingen and a forerunner of certain ideas about ecclesiology and ecumenism that would come to prominence at the Second Vatican Council. Pope Benedict XVI, in his first book on Jesus, mentions Adam within the first few sentences. As Connelly notes, ?Adam?s notion of Christ as vitally human impressed readers as diverse as Edward Schillebeeckx, Barnard Haring, Yves Congar, George Orwell, Dorothy Day, Flannery O?Connor, Karl Rahner, and Karl Barth. Liberals like Alec Vidler, Thomas Merton, Hans Kung, or James Carroll have recalled the profit and enjoyment of reading Adam in their formative years.?

Unlike Muckermann, Adam?s anti-Semitism was rooted in theology. Adam believed that because grace builds on nature, the natural endowments of any given race were divinely ordered, and he built upon that theological ?fact? to essentially make a hash of Christian morality. Connelly writes, ?According to Adam, discrimination against Jews did not contradict Christ?s basic command to love one?s neighbor as oneself. After all, love of the

other assumed love of the self, and the self was German and Christian. He therefore portrayed Nazi orchestrated boycotts of Jewish businesses as the fulfillment of Christian charity, acts of "Christian-German self-assertion" aimed at stemming the "Jewish deluge." To quote Adam directly, "Therefore German self-assertion demands that we protect the purity and the freshness of this blood, and secure this through the force of law. This demand springs from our well-ordered love of self: the love of self that for Christian morality is the natural prerequisite for love of neighbor." The "force of law" was soon supplied by the Nuremberg laws.

Rome's position was more complicated. In 1892, Pope Leo XIII gave an interview to a French journalist in which he stated, "all are children of Adam, created by God". All people "all" do you understand? "are creatures of God! There are those who live in the blessed state of faith, and those to whom we are obligated to bring the faith. That is all that there is. They are all the same before the Lord, because their life is the work of his divine will." If only such words had found their way into the mouths of German prelates and thinkers in the 1930s! But, as we shall see, the distinction Leo draws between those who have the faith and those to whom it must be brought would prove problematic at Vatican II.

Pope Pius XI is a hero and, in a sense, a forerunner of subsequent developments. He was fiercely opposed to racism. "Catholic means universal, not racist, nationalistic, separatist," he told a group of Catholic Action pilgrims in 1938. "This spirit of separatism, of exaggerated nationalism" precisely because it is not Christian, not religious, ends by being not even human." Pius met with the American Jesuit John LaFarge, another pioneer in Catholic-Jewish relations, and asked him to draft an encyclical denouncing racism, an encyclical that was sitting on Pius's desk, yet unsigned, when he died in February 1939.

Pius also was responsible for the Church becoming a bulwark "the sole bulwark" against eugenics with his 1930 encyclical *Casti conubii*. How easily we on the left forget our sad history of defending eugenics, most famously in the Supreme Court decision *Buck v. Bell*, in which that great jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. wrote that the Commonwealth of Virginia was justified in sterilizing a mentally disabled woman against her will because "three generations of imbeciles are enough." Pius reminded the Catholic world that governments that tried to keep some people from marrying for fear of "defective offspring" had forgotten that "the family is more sacred than the State and that men are begotten not for the earth and for time, but for Heaven and eternity." Msgr. John A. Ryan, the great champion of Catholic social teaching, was also withering in his condemnation of eugenics, calling it a "pseudoscience," and arguing that "to subordinate the weaker groups to the welfare of society means simply that some human beings are to be made instruments to other human beings". One who does not identify right with might can produce no cogent reason for treating the weak as of less intrinsic worth than the strong, even though the former may be in the minority." Blessings, a million blessings, on John A. Ryan, for this, as for other reasons!

In the 1930s, another group of Christian thinkers emerged who were fiercely opposed to racism and Nazism and eugenics. Connelly writes:

"Enemies" was a word used by many Christians, starting with St. Paul, to describe Jews. Albert Fuchs, Maximilian Beck, Johannes Oesterreicher, Hans Zacharias, Walter Berger, Rudolf Lammel, and Dietrich von Hildebrand: all had come to Christianity from families that were Jewish in origin. Several, like St. Paul, never ceased seeing themselves as Jewish. The great majority of Catholics who wrote on the race question were Jewish converts, and virtually every figure of note in the Catholic battle against anti-Semitism was a convert.

Here is a fascinating tale, and we will pick it up Monday when I complete this review.

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