

James Carroll

2005

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Memorial Lecture

"God, Memory, and Peace:
Honoring Rabbi Tanenbaum"

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James Carroll:

If I could begin by quoting the Anna Crusis singers, "This is my song, a song of peace." The music of time is memory. I confess -- I am a man at the mercy of memory tonight. I remember Nader Darehshori, your distinguished honoree. For more than a decade, I had the privilege of being published by Nader at Houghton Mifflin. And I discovered him in those years as a dear friend. Of the many things I could single him out for, joining my words to yours in honoring him, it could be his tremendous public service in the city of Boston.

Public Library Foundation. Very personally, Nader, in publishing my book, *Constantine's Sword*, just referred to, stood firmly with that book when it drew fire, not surprisingly, from those who did not welcome a hard and direct look at the history of Christian anti-Semitism. And Nader, in the great tradition of courageous publishers, stood by his book and by his author, which in this case happened to be me.

And I know that my experience was typical of the authors that Nader has published down through the years and, Georgette, those of us he's sold as well. So, I am deeply, deeply grateful to be able to join you this evening in honoring this fine man. Like you, I am in his debt. Memory is the music of time, I say. My memories as a person found their harmonies in the year 1961, the year of John Kennedy, for many of us, for us Catholics, the year of Pope John XXIII, the year, for me, of my youthful decision to embrace the vocation of the Catholic priesthood. I remember on the day I took my first promise as a young seminarian, the preacher said -- I don't remember his name, but I remember what he said.

He said, "Today, you will give yourself to God with your whole heart, your whole soul, your whole mind, your whole being. And you will spend the rest of your life taking it back a bit at a time," which has turned out to be true. 1961 was also the year that Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum became director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

I never met Rabbi Tanenbaum, although I, like many of you, feel his presence in the powerful commitment to his noble legacy embodied so wonderfully in Georgette Bennett and in the entire Tanenbaum Center community. And I am privileged to be with you. 1961 was the beginning of a new era in many ways and for many peoples, none more so than in my own Catholic Church.

Rabbi Tanenbaum was a key part of my own transformation and the trans-

formation, I would say, of my generation, a courageous Jewish leader who dared, at a time when it was almost unthinkable, to reach across borders that until then had been armed borders. Nothing changed the Catholic Church more profoundly than its post-Holocaust encounter with the Jewish people, which for the church was an encounter with its own betrayal of everything Jesus taught. But it was a betrayal, first, of the Jewish people, simply of our human brothers and sisters. Confronting that history, the Roman Catholic transformation began, of course, at the Second Vatican Council. The Council's most important act was influenced by Rabbi Tanenbaum, and one must note with great delight because she's here, influenced also by his colleague, Judith Banki, who did so much in her work to help us Catholics confront the deeply anti-Semitic aspects of our own texts and traditions. Rabbi Tanenbaum's call to conscience, with Judith Banki, was joined to the calls of others. And those calls were heard.

I refer, of course, to *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration of the Second Vatican Council declaring forever that the slander of the Jews having killed Jesus was not to be repeated. It was a lie. And *Nostra Aetate* having affirmed forever that the covenant God has made with the people Israel is full and complete, never to be replaced.

When *Nostra Aetate* was promulgated at the Council, almost exactly 40 years ago, Marc Tanenbaum was there in Rome. And it's proper that the Tanenbaum Center is commemorating that event with its own program soon. Even at the time,

I knew its significance. I knew it. As a young seminarian, I was challenged and moved and finally empowered by the courageous witness of the already legendary Rabbi Tanenbaum. Because of him, and I would add because of his beloved friend Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, my attitude and the attitudes of countless people like me toward Jews and Judaism was entirely changed, which meant, of course, that my faith as a Christian itself was entirely changed.

I heard from Rabbi Tanenbaum a call, as he put it, "to abandon our Western monopolies and hegemonies and to accommodate ourselves to a genuine global pluralism, which is another way of speaking of the interdependent human family." In this prophet, I heard the invitation to join that family, his family, as I thought of it, a call that I hear still. And Rabbi Tanenbaum's call is more desperately needed than ever, as you know better than I do.

So how, then, can I tell you what this honor means to me, that you have invited me to give the Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Memorial Lecture tonight? Memory is the music of time. Two days from now, on November 11th, people of Europe, America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia will remember the end of World War I, a war that cost Europe almost an entire generation of young men. November 11th, the memory of a war that ended, but the music is a requiem.

Tonight, this very night, we must recall an event that marked the beginning of a war, Hitler's war against the Jews.

Kristallnacht, which is what the Nazis called it, perhaps we should call it by its more blatant name, the November program, an overt declaration of the Nazi purpose, which leaders of the world, including our beloved Franklin Roosevelt, refused to hear. The music in this case, after the sound of broken glass, was silence. And silence -- and silence.

Is there a God of history? Perhaps tonight offers an answer. What could be an answer to *Kristallnacht*, the abyss of political evil, if not November 9th, 1989 when the tyranny begun by Josef Stalin was brought down with the Berlin Wall, the very place where the glass had broken? Out of the very abyss of evil, a century's worth of evil, came a staggering sign of hope, the non-violent overthrow of Communism against the prediction of every expert, the end of the Cold War ending peacefully against the prediction of every expert. No, more than that, the end truly of the east-west war that began in the year 1914.

History will surely see World War I and World War II as one war. And it ended 16 years ago tonight. "This is my song, a song of peace."

But then, on September 11th, 2001, we looked again into the mystery of evil, or thought we did. Evil is a wily enemy because it's most damning work is to convince the human heart that it itself is free of evil.

Evil tempts each one of us, that is, to think evil belongs to someone else, not to us. Hitler was evil in 1938. But what was Roosevelt in deciding then and later

that the fate of the Jews was not an American concern; the Church, of course, the same. Stalin was evil. But what were Truman and his successors in constructing a nuclear horror that set the pace for an arms race that has not ended yet, even if America by now is racing against itself? On 9/11 Al Qaeda showed itself to be evil, but since then, America, for all its good intentions, has shown itself to be anything but wise and prudent and virtuous.

Torture, ladies and gentlemen, our nation, torture? The contest in which we find ourselves, even this night, has been cast again and again as a clash between civilizations, the West, as they say, against the rest, Islam as the world's problem. But on many fronts, we found that religion itself has been mobilized as the engine of political power; we see it among Muslims, whether in Palestine where a once-secular movement of national liberation has become increasingly Islamist; among Jews in Israel where secular children of David Ben-Gurion find themselves accused of disloyalty by fellow Jews because they do not adhere to tenants of Orthodox belief. Religion mobilized as an engine of political power among devout Christians in the United States who identify rebirth in Jesus, Jesus as my personal savior, as a qualification for the United States Supreme Court, or even as a condition of "unit cohesion" at the United States Air Force Academy.

Religion is mobilized as an engine of political power among famously indifferent Christians in Europe who suddenly find the legacy of the Church

that they never enter to be central to the new European constitution. What is going on here?

Marc Tanenbaum no doubt met the Catholic theologian Hans Kung at the Vatican Council. I don't know that they met, but I assume it.

Hans Kung wrote a kind of motto for the Tanenbaum Center. I'm sure you have it. "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions, no peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions, no dialogue between the religions without investigations of the foundations of religious belief within each religion." There is the point - within.

The trouble with the idea of the clash between civilizations, us against them; between religions, Islam against Christians and Jews, or, as the insurgents in Iraq say of their American enemy, "Crusaders and Jews:" the trouble with this bipolar us-against-them analysis is that it misses the far more fate-laden conflict that is going on today. And that is not a conflict between. It is a conflict within, within Judaism, within Islam, within Christianity, within America, within each of these powerful communities.

So, as Mahmoud Abbas attempts to achieve a political consensus, the fate-laden conflict is within the Palestinian community, Hamas versus Fattah, Young Turks versus the Old Guard, suicide bombers versus those who love all children. As Israel anticipates the next step after Gaza withdrawal, conflict

within will involve those for whom all of the land is God-given and those for whom land-for-peace is a proper key to the future of Israel. Israel against itself is part of this story, too.

As my own Catholic Church observes this anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the conflict within - between those who say, "Nothing much really changed with that declaration; nothing much really changed with the Jews, who after all, still must sooner or later honor Jesus as the one way to God," conflict between them and those who say, "No, no. *Nostra Aetate* means Jews and by extension others come to God in ways determined by God, not by the Church."

Among Muslims more broadly, the conflict within involves extremist reactions to colonialism and modernity, say the Wahhabists in Saudi Arabia, and those who want to protect the truly humane heart of the Islamic tradition. And how can it be, anyway, "the West" against Islam when so many Muslims are here with us, of "the West?" In America, the conflict within involves those who think God uniquely blesses this nation and its adventures and those who tremble when, as Jefferson said, they recall that God is just.

To see conflict within groups, and not just between them means that we perceive with subtlety, and also with humility because conflict within involves us all. Conflict within begins within each one of us, which is the condition of human brokenness, the human condition, what keeps us from ever, ever attributing absolute evil to our enemy, absolute

virtue to ourselves. In that sense, our brokenness, which we admit in secret, is our hope.

But in truth, it is easier, much easier, to see things in a radically bi-polar way, "us against them" with "them" defined univocally as evil. We Americans did that with Communism and with the Soviets, the evil empire, which is why we were so taken by surprise by the Velvet Revolution that brought down the Soviet empire 16 years ago tonight, non-violently. We couldn't imagine it ahead of time.

And now, we Americans again tend to see Islam that way as one thing, or terrorists that way as one thing, as if the Algerian teenagers in the streets of France tonight or the pirates on the coast of Somalia or the insurgents in Iraq, the suicide bombers, including today's in Jordan, the fighters in Chechnya, the anti-Semitic demagogues in charge of Iran and Syria -- as if they were all one thing. We are ill equipped in this country to see such phenomena in their full complexity, in part because we are a religiously illiterate people, which goes to the heart of the Tanenbaum Center's mission. Speaking generally, otherwise sophisticated people are incapable of the level of critical thought about religion that they bring to everything else in their lives.

Non-religious Americans have a cartoonish idea of what religion is and does, as if we believers worship at the feet of an old man with a beard. But we religious people, too, are at the mercy

not only of our ignorance about each other's traditions. (What Christian knows what Talmud is, for example?) Ignorance of our own. How many of us misread Genesis as if it is a scientific textbook?

The media is complicit in keeping us illiterate when it comes to dealing with religion. When Mel Gibson told his news interviewers that his film, "The Passion of the Christ," was only showing what actually happened in history, which is of course entirely false, the news interviewers could only say, as I heard one -- one of them do, "Oh, right."

Politicians use religion to advance agendas or to obfuscate. When President Bush said that Jesus was his favorite political philosopher, one sensed it was because he couldn't think of another political philosopher. No disrespect to President Bush, but he was using religion to push a question away. And the really compelling indictment here is that it worked. You may remember this. It was a presidential debate. Most of the nation watched. It worked because when he said that, the press had no follow-up question to ask.

Ironically, this state of affairs on the American scene, religious ignorance which allows religion to be hijacked for intolerance, is partly a result of one of our best traditions, which is the separation of the church and state, a tradition we must all work to protect.

But the separation of church and state keeps the church, synagogue, temple, mosque "apart." There are good reasons

for that. But one bad consequence is that, "being apart," critical thought that's applied to economy, culture, lifestyle, life and death -- such critical thought is not applied to religion. Indeed, criticism of and within religion is often considered irreverent, even blasphemous. My critics regard me as a Catholic-basher. But I believe with Thomas Paine that one's love for one's institution is in direct proportion to one's readiness to criticize it.

Criticism of the other is not what is needed now. Rather, self-criticism is required, Jews, Muslims, Christians, people of all faiths and of no faith, all engaging in the hard work of confronting what in our own traditions or in our own repudiation of tradition, leads to intolerance or even to violence, and then working to correct it.

A new modesty must inform religion, modesty rooted in the primal fact of every faith in God, which is that God is the "wholly other." And the only thing we can really know about God is that God is unknowable. A new modesty must inform secular culture, too, modesty of science rooted in the awareness that life itself is a mystery, that every answer opens to another question. If such modesty informed religious and secular people alike; if such modesty informed America; if such modesty informed each one of us, our common hopes for peace would not be so elusive. Elusive, yes, but not impossible.

The witness of the life of Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum shows us that progress toward a new harmony between and within groups can be made. *Nostra*

Aetate shows that. The entire purpose and achievement of the Tanenbaum Center shows that. There was *Kristallnacht*, yes. But also there was – and is - the survival of the Jewish people.

There was the carnage of the 20th century, yes, but there was the new structure of international hope, which is embodied in this very United Nations building, where we assemble tonight. There was -- never forget it -- the non-violent overthrow of the Berlin Wall, the end of the war at last, the single most important event, I would argue, of our lifetimes, a victory for peace that we have not fully honored and not properly imitated.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are a people at war tonight. Let us pause to hold silently in our hearts the young men and women of our armed services; the people of Iraq; and today, the people of Jordan; and all who are afraid of being hurt or killed.

The music of memory. We have them in mind, as we have all people in mind who suffer from intolerance and hatred and bigotry. The Tanenbaum Center for Interreligious Understanding keeps them all in mind, which is why we love it. I began with memory, with my own memory of Rabbi Tanenbaum in the early 1960's. I conclude with the music of one man's words, capturing as they did the best spirit of those times.

And I would say, of the Tanenbaum project, then and now.

President Kennedy said at American University only months before he died,

"So let us not be blind to our differences, but also let us direct our attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity, for in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

Biography

James Carroll was born in Chicago in 1943, and raised in Washington where his father, an Air Force general, served as the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Carroll attended Georgetown University before entering the seminary to train for the Catholic priesthood. He received BA and MA degrees from St. Paul's College, the Paulist Fathers' seminary in Washington, and was ordained to the Catholic priesthood in 1969. Carroll served as Catholic Chaplain at Boston University from 1969 to 1974 and then left the priesthood to become a writer.

Carroll is the author of several New York Times bestsellers and Notable Books of the Year. His writings have probed the religious dimensions of post-9/11 politics, Catholic-Jewish relations, and the Catholic Church. Carroll has been a Shorenstein Fellow at the Kennedy School of Government and a Fellow at the Center for the Study of Public Values in Public Life at Harvard University. He is also a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the Academy's Committee on International Security Studies. A regular participant in ongoing Jewish-Christian-Muslim encounters, Carroll is a past recipient of the James Parks Morton Interfaith Award.