

BOOK REVIEW

From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching in the Jews, 1933-1965. By John Connelly. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 384 pp. \$35. ISBN: 978-0-674-05782-1.

It is received wisdom that the wheels that run the Catholic Church grind slowly, extremely slowly. In the case of a sea-going vessel, it takes tremendous effort to change the course of a large ship, for it needs to be done at a slow rate and not in haste, lest the vessel capsize. John Connelly, who is an associate professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, has in his book *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching in the Jews, 1933-1965* presented in exquisite (some might say exhausting) detail how the otherwise slow-moving Church was able to recast its position towards the Jews in a remarkably short period of time, while at that same time it sought to redefine herself during the Second Vatican Council. One of prominent successes of the Second Vatican Council was the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965.

Speaking in 2006, fifty years after the Declaration, Father Thomas Stransky, C.S.P., one of those who drafted *Nostra Aetate* as an advisor at Vatican II, said the Declaration signaled “a 180 degree turnabout” for the Church. Connelly, referencing Edward H. Flannery’s best-seller, *The Anguish of the Jews* (1965), said that *Nostra Aetate* had revised

all that the church had taught about Jews since its early days, a time when teachings about Christ’s divinity or the Trinity had yet to be formulated. From the third century at the latest, church authorities taught that the Jews’ destiny was to wander the earth suffering retribution from God for rejecting Christ, seeing in their destitution as the most direct evidence that the church’s claims to God’s favor were correct. By acts of discrimination passed by councils through the centuries, the church then created conditions calculated to keep the Jews destitute. This situation was supposed to endure until the end of time, when the Jews finally turned to Christ. (2)

While the Connelly book’s subtitle indicates 1933 as the *terminus ante quem*, the rise of the officially sanctioned racism of Nazi Germany, he does not shrink from recounting the quasi-official attitudes and teachings that had infiltrated the Church long before the rise of Hitler. In brief, a theologically indefensible racist doctrine pervaded Christianity (both Catholic and Protestant) in the German-speaking lands, a doctrine by which Jews were perceived as having a “second original sin” that baptism could not eliminate or mitigate. Jews

were seen as genetically incapable of become genuine, sincere Christians. Thus, Jews who converted to Christianity were considered “less Christian” than Gentile Christians and therefore not to be trusted. (Indeed, Father John Oesterreicher, a Jew who converted to Catholicism and became a priest, was bitter that there were people who refused to receive Communion from him.) Connelly further demonstrates, chapter and verse, where such absurdity was even to be found in the writings of such beloved theologians as Karl Adam and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

It must also be remembered that while in the German-speaking lands (and elsewhere), notions of race, blood, and nation were at odds with official teachings of the Church, there were men high-placed within the Church who were able to twist the Church’s teachings to fit the new racist nationalism. Add to this the rise of Communism in Russia and the significant presence of Jews in the early Bolshevik leadership. Many Church leaders believed the spurious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the anti-Semitic hoax that outlined a Jewish plot for world domination, and conflated it with Communism. Theological anti-Semitism and political anti-Semitism became intertwined, with disastrous consequences for both Jews and the Church.

Late in his papacy, Pope Pius XI, deeply troubled by Hitler’s impact on Europe and the neo-paganism of Nazism, drafted an encyclical which would have forbade German National Socialism as the Church had already forbidden atheist Communism. Although Pope Pius XI died before this encyclical could be published, his view was already known to many at the Vatican, but was (unfortunately) only implicit policy.

With the defeat of the Nazis and the revelations of industrialized murder on an unprecedented scale, a few brave individuals dared to question the notion that the Nazis had been agents of God in punishing the Jews, and that the slaughter of some one million innocent children was theologically justifiable. Sadly, those asking the questions were not especially high in the Church and they struggled to make their voices heard. Indeed, in a survey taken around 1950, the death of the Jews seemed not at all to trouble the vast majority of German Christians.

Already before the war, however, there were men and women who had challenged the racism implicit in the Church. But they were few in number, often Jewish and Protestant converts to Catholicism, and only talking to one another. After the war, a group of such like-minded individuals coalesced around Gertrud Luckner (1900-1995) and her publication, *Freiburger Rundbrief*. In active discussions, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish writers debated and thrashed out many arguments, at first to an audience of only a handful, but within a decade to thousands.

Pope John XXIII, the visionary architect of Vatican II, was acutely aware of the need to correct the attitude of the faithful and, to set the Church on a new path, guided by love, charity and humility. He selected Cardinal Augustin Bea, a biblical scholar, to draft a document outlining how the Church disavowed and repudiated anti-Semitism.

It would hardly be possible to summarize briefly or do justice to Connelly's work over several chapters to describe the interactions of just two major players in this drama, Karl Thieme (1902-1963) and John Oesterreicher (1904-1992), and how their often opposing views and attitudes developed and changed over time. Citing both published articles and letters, Connelly demonstrates how Thieme (a Protestant convert to Catholicism) moderated his views from the "traditional" theological anti-Semitism to an acceptance that God's covenant with Israel was never abrogated. In the case of Oesterreicher, he went from being a priest of Jewish birth who sought to convert Jews to being a Catholic priest who also openly identified himself as a Jew.

Connelly's book, with its vast scholarly apparatus and complex theological details, might deter an interested layman, which would be a pity. Nonetheless, those of a more scholarly bent will immediately recognize how painstaking and formidable the scholarship is, and a delight that enlightens.

Connelly does not have an axe to grind, nor is his intention to whitewash or demonize the Church. To the contrary, he, as a dispassionate scholar, has amassed and analyzed an impressive corpus of data from ore mined from rich veins. It is this reviewer's sincere belief that *From Enemy to Brother* will become the gold standard for future scholars researching this subject.

To play on Matthew 13:16: *Beati oculi qui hunc librum lecturi.*

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