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American Fundamentalisms and World Disorder

A Tomdispatch interview with James Carroll

He's a man who knows something about the dangers of mixing religious fervor, war, and the crusading spirit, a subject he dealt with eloquently in his book Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews. A former Catholic priest turned antiwar activist in the Vietnam era, James Carroll also wrote a moving memoir about his relationship to his father, the founding director of the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency.

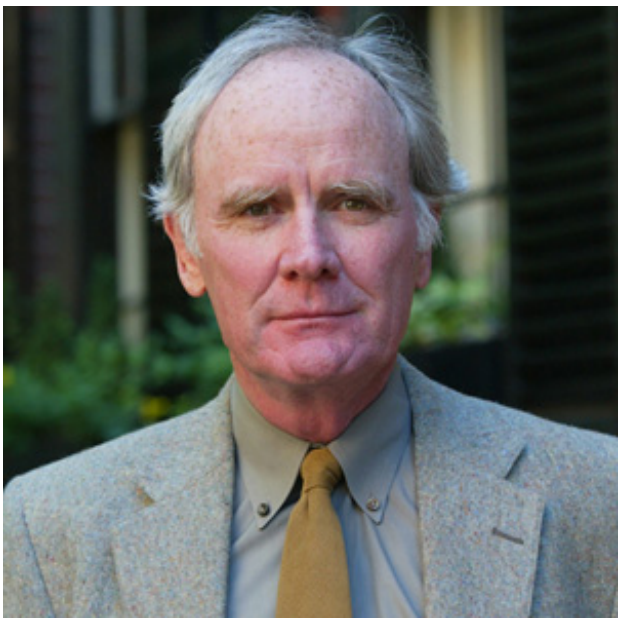
He submitted to a Tomdispatch interview back in August 2005 and when, this summer, I suggested that we meet again, he agreed to discuss "American fundamentalisms," a subject that receives remarkably less coverage and consideration than other fundamentalisms of our world. Tom Engelhardt.

Tomdispatch: I recently heard this joke: How many neocons does it take to screw in a light bulb? The answer: Neocons don't believe in light bulbs, they declare war on evil and set the house on fire.

(Carroll chuckles.)

TD: That's my introduction to a discussion of American fundamentalism. Any comments?

James Carroll: Well, embedded in that joke is a central idea: that what matters is not outcome, but purity of intent. A mark of a fundamentalist mindset is that one's own personal virtue is the ultimate value. The American fundamentalist ethos of the Cold War prepared us to destroy the world. In other words, a world absolutely devastated through nuclear war was acceptable as an outcome because it reflected the virtue of our opposition to the evil of communism. Better dead than red.



James Carroll

Better Red Than Dead

TD: A phrase I hadn't thought about in a long time...

Carroll: Better the world destroyed than taken over by communism. It's profoundly nihilistic, which is also one of the marks of the fundamentalist mindset. An irony, of course, is that so much, then and now, is done in the name of realism, but this is such a profoundly unrealistic way of thinking.

TD: It's in this sense, I suppose, that our President has been unable to learn. So, give me the basics on American fundamentalisms, as you see them.

Carroll: First of all, what is fundamentalism? The word itself was coined in the early twentieth century and applied to a particular brand of Protestantism. It comes from a determination to protect what were called, in foundational manifestos, the five fundamentals of Christian belief, particularly the inerrancy of scripture. Scripture can't make a mistake, right? It has to be read literally.

This was a counterattack against so-called liberal religion's embrace of the insights of the Enlightenment and the scientific age. Can you apply normal standards of historical criticism to religious belief? The fundamentalists said no, because normal standards might lead you to understand texts as having been composed in normal human circumstances, instead of inspired by God. So when you read the Gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus through the lens of historical critical method you may conclude that the three kings never actually traveled to Bethlehem, that it's a mythical story created to make a point -- a genre that the people who wrote it were comfortable with.

Fundamentalists reacted against any mitigating of the literal fact of the three kings. To read texts for their theological meaning rather than for their historical literalness would undercut the whole affirmation of the religion. The next thing, you'd be saying that Jesus didn't

rise from the dead on the third day. And if that didn't happen, where are you?

That was then. Today, fundamentalism remains a useful point of reference in understanding the human panic that can be engendered by the uncertainties attached to Enlightenment thinking -- when the worldview of science tells you that nothing is dependable, that everything has to be submitted to the test of experimentation, verification.

My argument is that religious belief can mature, can be moved to a new level of sophistication by historical, critical, enlightened thinking, but a lot of people are completely threatened by it. Not to denigrate them. Human beings all over the world are dislocated -- all of us are -- by so many things we don't control, the various revolutions sweeping the globe, the degradation of the environment, the challenge to the very integrity of communities.

The City on a Hill

For our conversation, fundamentalist Christianity is a perfect paradigm within which to understand what's been happening in America, a profoundly Christian super-culture. America is also a secular nation, of course. The separation of church and state was a critical innovation, giving us this special standing as a people. The separation's purpose was to protect the conscientious freedom of every individual by making the state neutral on questions of religious conscience. An absolutely ingenious insight.

The City on a Hill

It's important, however, to understand the profoundly American origins of this insight. The argument began in the first generation. John Cotton, a Puritan preacher, embodied the first idea America had of itself, captured in the image his colleague John Winthrop used in defining the new settlement as "the city on a hill," a phrase that's fodder for political speeches every four years.

Americans don't generally like to think this way, but the United States of America is more descended from Massachusetts than Virginia -- an important distinction because the people who settled Virginia were adventurers and entrepreneurs. The people who settled Massachusetts were religious zealots who had left England as an act of dissent against the Church of England, which they considered too Popish. Their dissent was against a certain kind of religion, but not in favor of religious freedom. They came to America assuming the power of the state over the religious convictions of the civic body.

TD: They just wanted a different religion to do the coercing?

Carroll: Exactly. Of course, these folks thought of themselves as reenacting the journey of Exodus. What was the city on a hill? Jerusalem, of course -- a biblical reference. They had been brought out of the slave condition of a Popish church. They were now across the water -- think of "the Jordan River" as the Atlantic Ocean -- in the promised land, the land flowing with milk and honey. Hello, there are Canaanites here.

Finally, after 1,600 years, the true vision of Jesus Christ was going to be realized -- and there was no room for another way of looking at it, no room for what we would call dissent, and certainly no room for any tolerance of the "paganism" of the Native Americans. One of the first manifestations of the settlers' zealotry was the religious coercion that began to mark their relationships with the Native Americans they met right here in this very place where we're now talking. They felt empowered to offer the ancient choice of conversion or death to the people they called the Indians.

One of the members of this early party objected. His name was Roger Williams and he rejected the coercive violence he saw wielded against native peoples. He rejected the whole idea that the magistrate should be in charge of the religious impulse of the citizen. As a result, he was banished from Boston, exiled to Salem, then banished from Salem. Finally, he started his own foundation in what we call Rhode Island and organized a new kind of state in which the magistrate would have no power over the religious practice of the citizens. This is all within the first generation.

Roger Williams lost the argument in his own day, but he planted the seed of something. He was the first person to use the phrase, "wall of separation" between the magistrate and the religion. One hundred eighty years later, Thomas Jefferson picks up that phrase to describe the distinction between the church and the state.

The point here is that the initial city-on-a-hill impulse has never stopped being part of our self-understanding -- the idea of America as having a mission to the world or, in biblical terms, a mission to the gentiles. "Go forth and teach all nations," Jesus commands. This commission is implicit in George Bush's war to establish democracy -- or "freedom" -- everywhere. When Americans talk about freedom, it's our secular code word for salvation. There's no salvation outside the church; there's no freedom outside the American way of life. Notice how, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the Soviet system, there is still something called the "Free World." As opposed to what?

A Special Mission to Iraq -- and the World

This missionizing in the name of freedom is a basic American impulse. Lincoln was the high priest of this rhetoric, "the last best hope of mankind." The United States of America is justified by the virtue of its mission. The entire movement of American power across the continent of North America was a movement to fulfill the "manifest destiny" of a free people extending freedom. Because this is understood as a profoundly virtuous impulse, we've seldom criticized it. As a nation, we have begun to reckon with the crime of slavery, but we haven't begun to reckon with the crime of genocide against the Native-American peoples. That's because we haven't really acknowledged what was wrong with it.

Think of that phrase -- "manifest destiny." A key doctrine in what I am calling American fundamentalism. It remains an inch below the surface of the American belief system. What's interesting is that this sense of special mission cuts across the spectrum -- right wing/left wing, liberals/conservatives -- because generally the liberal argument against government policies since World War II is that our wars -- Vietnam then, Iraq now -- represent an egregious failure to live up to America's true calling. We're better than this. Even antiwar critics, who begin to bang the drum, do it by appealing to an exceptional American missionizing impulse. You don't get the sense, even from most liberals, that -- no, America is a nation like other nations and we're going to screw things up the way other nations do.

TD: That kind of realism is in short supply here.

Carroll: It hardly exists even now.

Let me make one final point about that missionizing impulse, and the way it transcends right and left. One reason we're in Iraq today is because, in the 1990s, the left was split on the question of American violence, the proper use of American power. It was split over the issue of what was called "humanitarian intervention." There are times, it was argued, when the forceful exercise of American power is necessary for the sake of humanitarian causes. Human rights, beginning in Jimmy Carter's day, became a new form of American religion. If conservatives go abroad speaking the language of freedom; liberals go abroad speaking the language of human rights. And if we have to destroy a nation so that it can exercise human rights, so be it. That's why, in the early days of the Iraq war, so many surprising people supported it.

The liberal embrace of humanitarian intervention is part of what set loose this new phenomenon of the Bush moment -- an explicit appeal to religious motivation in the exercise of American power. Since George W. Bush came to power, the religious right has been set free to use overt religious language, missionizing language that actually moves from "freedom" to "salvation," as a justification for American power. We cast ourselves against Saddam Hussein entirely in terms of a binary evil-versus-good contest. Bush's appeals to evil were a staple of his speechmaking from the earliest days of this war. The purpose of his war was, he told us, not just to spread democracy, but to end evil. You see what's happening. We've moved into specifically religious categories and that was all right in America.

Tom, here's the thing that's important to acknowledge: If Americans are upset with the war in Iraq today, it's mainly because it failed. If we could have "ended evil" with this war, it would have been a good thing. It goes back to the joke you began with: If we have to destroy the world in order to purify it of evil, that's all right. It's the key to the apocalyptic mindset that Robert J. Lifton has written about so eloquently, in which the destruction of the Earth can be an act of purification. The destruction of Iraq was an act of purification. Even today, look at the rhetoric that's unfolding as we begin to talk about ending the war in Iraq. It's the Iraqis who have failed. They wouldn't yield on their "sectarian" agendas. These people won't get together and form a cohesive government. Now, we're going to let them stew in their own mess. We're going to withdraw from this war because they're not worthy of us.

That's the mainstream Democratic antiwar position! America is a city on a hill, exceptional; so, if we do it, by definition it must be virtuous. If we've gone to Iraq and all hell's broken loose, it may be a fiasco, but in origin it can't be our fault because we were motivated by good intentions.

Now, put all of that in the context of this astounding religious resurgence…

TD: It's the surge…

Carroll (laughs): Yes, the surge of overt religious claims within the United States government, people who understand themselves as fulfilling their sworn oaths to uphold the United States Constitution in the name of religion. I interviewed the chief chaplain of the U.S. Air Force who said to me: "I have two commissions. One commission is to uphold the U.S. Constitution and the other is to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and they go hand in hand with each other."

I grew up in the Air Force. I gotta tell ya, there was no chaplain in the Air Force in my day who would have said that. In fact, the chaplains I knew didn't see themselves as having a commission to preach the Gospel at all. You bent over backward not to do that when you were dealing with soldiers outside of the chapel.

A Christian Defense of the Nation

TD: You have a new film, based on your book, Constantine's Sword, in which you explore this change at, among other places, the Air Force Academy, right?

Carroll: Yes, what happened there was striking. Take just this example: A couple of years ago, Mel Gibson's film, The Passion of the Christ rendered in profoundly fundamentalist ways, most terribly, the death of Jesus as caused by "the Jews," not the Romans. In that movie, Pilate is a good guy; the Jewish high priest the villain. Gibson justified this by saying it was how the Gospels tell the story, which is literally true. A fundamentalist reading of the Gospel story ignores what we know from history and from scientific inquiry and analysis of the Gospels. It wasn't "the Jews" who murdered Jesus, it was the Romans, pure and simple. There were complicated reasons why the Gospels were written that way, but a fundamentalist reading of those texts is dangerous. Gibson demonized the Jews, while celebrating grotesque violence as a mode of salvation, as willed by God.

The Passion of Christ

And then that film was featured at the United States Air Force Academy. Its commanders made it clear that every one of the cadets, over 4,000 of them, was supposed to see that movie. Repeatedly over a week, every time cadets went into H. H. Arnold mess hall, they found fliers on their dinner plates announcing that this movie was being shown. I saw posters that said: "See the Passion of the Christ" and "This is an official Air Force Academy event, do not remove this poster."

As a result of that film, there was an outbreak of pressure, practically coercion, by born-again evangelical Christians aimed at non-Christian cadets and, in a special way, at Jews. This went on for months and when the whistle was blown by a Jewish cadet and his father, the Air Force denied it, tried to cover it up. Yale University sent a team from the Yale Divinity School to investigate. They issued a devastating report. The commander at the academy was finally removed; the Air Force was forced to acknowledge that there was a problem.

In fact, the Academy had allowed itself to become a proselytizing outpost for evangelical Christian mega-churches in the Colorado Springs area. Chief among them were Ted Haggard's and James Dobson's, both men then in the inner circle of the Bush White House, involved in the sort of faith-based initiatives that marked the Bush administration.

In the Pentagon today, there is active proselytizing by Christian groups that is allowed by the chain of command. When your superior expects you to show up at his prayer breakfast, you may not feel free to say no. It's not at all clear what will happen to your career. He writes your efficiency report. And the next thing you know, you have, in the culture of the Pentagon, more and more active religious outreach.

Imagine, then, a military motivated by an explicit Christian, missionizing impulse at the worst possible moment in our history, because we're confronting an enemy -- and yes, we do have an enemy: fringe, fascist, nihilist extremists coming out of the Islamic world -- who define the conflict entirely in religious terms. They, too, want to see this as a new "crusade." That's the language that Osama bin Laden uses. For the United States of America at this moment to allow its military to begin to wear the badges of a religious movement is a disaster!

TD: What does this point to, when it comes to the future?

Carroll: Well, the best thing that's happened, when it comes to all of this, has been the near complete political and moral collapse of the Bush administration, but that doesn't mean this movement is going away. Bush was a sponsor of it. But look how it took off! Bush sponsored it, to take another example, in the Justice Department under Attorney General Gonzales -- all those born-again Christian lawyers coming from fundamentalist Christian law schools that have no history of excellence.

We must be aware that there's something much deeper than the Bush administration and a particular wing of the Republican Party at work here, however. This isn't just Karl Rove, though he was ingenious at exploiting it.

Let's go back to what kind of a nation the United States is. Here is something I read recently: Though we are officially a secular people, there are more self-identified Christians in this country than self-identified Jews in Israel in percentage terms. We commonly think of Israel as a Jewish state. Something like seventy-five percent of Israelis would identify themselves as Jewish. Eighty percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian! And we're not a Christian nation? We have to be wary of our Christian roots and of the city-on-a-hill impulse that still lives just an inch below the surface.

Our war against the Soviet Union was a religious war. [Secretary of State] John Foster Dulles [under President Eisenhower] was practically explicit about this in his speeches, which were like sermons. Not just "communism," but "atheistic communism." Dwight D. Eisenhower was baptized while he was president -- part of a Cold War feeling that we were involved in a Christian defense of the nation against an atheistic enemy.

Huddling for Team Jesus

TD: And, of course, he entitled his memoir Crusade in Europe.

Carroll: Christian points of reference came very easily in those years, but what's made the Bush era especially dangerous is that a political party has explicitly, overtly embraced a religious movement for the political power it generates. Fundamentalists have their rights, their place, in America, but there's no place for a political movement that aims to take control of the levers of state power in the name of religion. That's a violation of the "wall of separation." You can't have military commanders giving orders down the chain of command that have religious content to them. You can't, on the eve of battle, require your soldiers to gather in a huddle the way a coach might, and say the Lord's Prayer.

TD: And yet it's happening…

Carroll: It's happening all the time! At the Air Force Academy, "Team Jesus" was one of the nicknames for the football team and one of the most vociferous evangelical Christian proselytizers was the football coach. Look at it from his point of view. What happens when he can get his huddle together and they're all saying the Lord's Prayer? A chief military virtue is "unit cohesion." It can be created in any number of ways, but one shortcut is if you can get everybody into a kind of Pentecostal religious fervor. If you can get your young men and women feeling the presence of the Lord, they're going to fight better, possibly more selflessly. That's what's in it for the military. Let's think cynically. There may be some military commanders who don't give much of a damn about God, but who see what God can do for fighting spirit. It works.

Let's all gather around the Humvee before we head into this village. Let us pray. You can bet that's going on in Iraq right now. Here's the question: What happens to the kid who doesn't want to get around that Humvee or, more to the point, to the Muslim bystanders who see American soldiers invoking God on their way into battle?

TD: Or when you loose well-armed, even nuclear-armed people eager to purify the world...

Christian Fundamentalism and American Exceptionalism

Carroll: If I have a point to make, it's this: The religious tradition of Christian fundamentalism is one thing; the tradition of American exceptionalism another. They both have their roots in the same experience. They were separated. Under George Bush they've been brought together.

TD: When it comes to the Bush administration, complete collapse or not, we know that this man, without the possibility of changing his mind, and his vice president, without the possibility of changing his mind, with whomever they can still control in their own government and military, are there until January 2009. What does it mean to have people in a fundamentalist mindset, but thoroughly embattled and on the downward slide? I wouldn't like to write off the next year and a half. It's a potential nightmare.

Carroll: It could indeed be. But this issue involves more than the temperament of George Bush. It involves the structure of the fundamentalist mind. One pillar is bipolarity -- the understanding of reality as divided between good and evil; you're on the side of good and they're on the side of evil. However, they can begin by being Osama bin Laden's band, which then becomes the Taliban, which becomes Afghanistan, which becomes all the Muslims who ever talked about the Great Satan, which becomes Iraq, and now maybe Iran, and even critics in the U.S. "They," "they," "they." We see that progression in Bush. A second pillar is an absolute allergy to doubt. The fundamentalist mindset doesn't survive once you admit doubt or self-criticism. When asked for an example of a mistake he had made, Bush surprised people two years ago by claiming he couldn't think of one. The tragedy of Bush is, if you ask that question of him today, I'm sure he would answer the same way.

A World Religiously Aflame

Let's just step back a minute, though. How different are the Democratic presidential candidates really? What I hear from them, too, is a world divided between the good and the bad. I also hear -- this is the meaning of the new rhetoric about the failure of Iraq being the failure of Iraqis -- that we Americans are not to criticize what we've done in any basic way. "I wouldn't renounce my vote." "The president lied to me, that's why I voted the way I did." No capacity for self-criticism, for doubt.

You know, the genius of the American system -- why the Constitution is worth defending -- is that our Constitution comes from Roger Williams, not John Winthrop and John Cotton. It assumes a world not divided between good and evil, but one where everybody participates in the whole mess.

What are checks and balances? The Constitution's authors understood that even people motivated by good intentions are going to screw up. So everybody, every institution, needs to be checked. This system assumes not bipolarity but unipolarity, in the sense that we're all capable of mistakes, that we all have to be constantly criticized. The Constitution is an ingenious structure for living in the real world.

TD: And yet, in recent years, the presidency and the Pentagon, in particular, as you've written in your history of the Pentagon, House of War, have seemingly grown beyond institutional checks and balances.

Carroll: The question today is whether the Constitution continues to exist as anything beyond a kind of totem, a vestige? Recent history certainly suggests that the Pentagon is now "unchecked." And if we can end our present war by blaming the Iraqis, then the Pentagon will be immune from criticism and prepared for the next foray of American power. That's why we must challenge this laying the blame on the Iraqi people, as if their "sectarianism" weighs more than our hubris. As of now, I fear, we'll be getting out of this war with what brought us into it intact. . . .

We've been talking only America here, in part because I think people are attuned to the threat from what's called "Islamic fundamentalism." My own conviction is that a crucial twenty-first century problem is going to be Christian fundamentalism. Its global growth is an unnoticed story in the United States. Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia are now absolutely on fire with zealous belief in the saving power of Jesus, in the most intolerant of ways. A religious ideology that affirms the salvific power of violence is taking hold. It denigrates people who are not part of the saved community, permitting discrimination, and ultimately violence. Hundreds of millions of people are embracing this kind of Christianity.

So what am I doing? I'm a Christian. I'm raising this alarm from within the community. That's why I believe, as a Roman Catholic, that my own tradition must be rescued from its current temptation to fundamentalism. There are a billion Catholics in the world. For all its problems, Roman Catholicism has reckoned with the Enlightenment, has accepted the scientific worldview, has no argument with evolution, has learned to read the Bible in metaphoric ways, as opposed to literal ones. Today we have a fundamentalist Pope, but he rules from the margin. It's hugely important that the Catholic tradition not go fundamentalist.

You ask me what I would do. I think, for one thing, that believing people, whether Jews, Muslims, or Christians, need to affirm the importance of pluralism, respect for the other, and modesty about religious claims. I could be a Jew sitting in Jerusalem and offer exactly the same argument about the Jewish zealots making claims on land in the name of God. So Jewish zealotry, Muslim zealotry, Christian zealotry, all three empowered lately, all three armed to the teeth. That's what's really terrifying -- and, in the world of weapons of mass destruction, it's not that hard to get armed to the teeth.

So here's a message addressed to the participants in the Tomdispatch community who may have a religious interest: Embrace it. Fight for it. Fight for a post-Enlightenment, post-modern, intelligent approach to religion. Don't surrender religion to the wackos.

If the wackos take over religion, they're going to take over state power and the world won't survive the twenty-first century. And the United States of America has been at the center of this. When George W. Bush launched his war in the name of God… even more, when this nation took the 9/11 assaults as a religious war, Muslims attacking us good, virtuous -- we didn't call ourselves Christians, but we were an inch away from it -- that's when we began to make our part of this mistake.

TD: And we should have taken it as…?

Carroll: A savage crime. Think of al-Qaeda as the Mafia. When the Mafia blows up a distillery and kills 18 people in the neighborhood as part of a turf war, or goes after a hardware dealer who doesn't pay protection money and paralyzes the neighborhood with fear, or when the Mafia takes over a whole region of a nation, as it did in Italy for most of the twentieth century, fight back; but fight back against the criminal network with a massive act of law enforcement the way the Italian government did.

It took the Italian government 50 years to break the Mafia's hold over Sicily and they still have to keep fighting. But they never declared war on Sicily. They never went in and bombed Sicily. They gave their judges and police inspectors and detectives body armor and they went after the Mafia hit men with highly armed SWAT teams. I'm not talking about pacifism here. But keep religious ideology out of this. And keep the language of war out, too.

You know, only in going to war do humans feel the need to appeal to God. There's no "God with us" on the belt buckles of cops. God gets invoked in war, because it's a much more extreme state of the human condition. War always brings you very quickly to the point of "us or them."

When somebody comes at you with a savage act of violence, go back at them with your best, most heavily armed cops. Don't go to war against them. It's a very basic idea. It can't be emphasized enough. We're going to have another terrorist attack in this country. It's crucially important that, however horrendous, it be treated as a crime -- not an act of war.

TD: Last words?

Carroll: (Pauses.) Well, the last word in this conversation is: Religion and politics, religion and military power, are a deadly mix in an age of weapons of mass destruction; and, if the United States of America gets this wrong, there's no reason to think anybody else is going to get it right. Casting an eye across the century to come, this is the issue.

As a weekly columnist for the Boston Globe, James Carroll was perhaps the first media figure to notice -- and warn against -- a presidential "slip of the tongue" just after the assaults of 9/11, when George W. Bush referred briefly to his new Global War on Terror as a "crusade." He was possibly the first mainstream columnist in the country to warn against the consequences of launching a war against Afghanistan in response to those attacks -- now just another of the President's missions unaccomplished; and, in September 2003, he was possibly the first to pronounce the Iraq War "lost" in print. ("The war in Iraq is lost. What will it take to face that truth this time?") His stirring columns on the early years of our President's attempt to bring "freedom" to the world at the point of a cruise missile were collected in Crusade: Chronicles of an Unjust War. In those years, Carroll was a powerful, moral voice from -- to use a very American phrase -- the (media) wilderness until much of our American world finally caught up with him.

He has most recently completed, with director Oren Jacoby, a stirring documentary film, also entitled Constantine's Sword, in which he explores the roots of religiously inspired violence in our present world.

James Carroll's website is here.

This interview, conducted by Tom Engelhardt, is excerpted from TomDispatch, a project of The Nation Institute and a regular antidote to the mainstream media, where it was published on September 17, 2007. Tomdispatch is for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of our post-9/11 world and a clear sense of how our imperial globe actually works. Tom Engelhardt's The End of Victory Culture, has just become available in a new edition.

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