

Examining the Blood Libel: Interview with Magda Teter¹

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As 2015's pre-political season became centered on the arrival of Trump and the public emergence of the alt-right, some peculiarities started to show up at rallies and online. Accusations were abounding that a secretive "cabal" of elites was exploiting our country's youth for some type of blood ritual, crude theories about covert occult forces that crystallize into what became known as the Q-Anon conspiracy theory. On message boards like 4Chan these accusations moved from implicit to explicit: it was the Jews who were metaphorically (or sometimes literally) harvesting the lifeblood of "pure," working class whites.

This is a revival of perhaps the oldest conspiracy theory in the arsenal, what David Neiwart calls the "ur-conspiracy theory": the blood libel.³ This claim that Jews killed Christian children first emerged in the 12th century in England during an already fraught period of Jewish-Christian relations. In the 13th century, after the tale reached the continent, the charge against Jews added a new blood motif, suggesting that Jews were killing Christian children to use their blood in rituals.

The blood libel was used to accuse, prosecute, and often torture and murder Jews across Europe over hundreds of years, even into the 20th century, and runs underneath many of the modern conspiracy theories that have secularized the older Christian distrust of Jews. Today, the blood libel is still a factor across the far-right and in even in parts of the world far from its European origins, usually through coded references, such as the conspiracies that a "secretive elite" is harvesting "adrenochrome" from children or that Jewish Israelis are intentionally harvesting the organs of Palestinians.

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³ Author Interview with David Neiwart, November 17th, 2020.

Jewish Studies scholar and historian Magda Teter has written an ambitious work in which she tracks the origins and history and evolution of the blood libel, from its beginnings in the story of “William of Norwich,” a boy whose death was blamed on Jews as part of a local church’s effort to build a cult of martyrdom out of him. As Teter explains in *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth*, the theories transformed rumors into near “facts” in the mind of the public as the “new media” of print spread these ideas in books and images around the continent. The book looks especially at the story of Simon of Trent of 1475, as one of the most significant examples of the blood libel in European history, and explores the political forces behind such stories.

In this conversation with Teter, we discuss the origins of the blood libel, how and why the story mutated and grew over the years, and what this says about the continued relevance of antisemitism, conspiracy theories, and the legacies of Christian Supremacy.

SB: What factors led up to the Catholic Church's re-interpretation of the death of Simon of Trent? What did church leaders have to gain by manufacturing this claim Jewish ritual murder?

MT: The story is unlike most stories. Not all places in which children died in the Spring, around Easter and Passover, were turned into anti-Jewish accusations. So that's an important thing to remember. So, the question is why, in some places, this became an accusation against Jews.

The reason for this is the political utility of riling up anti-Jewish sentiments. You see some form of that in today's politics where hatred is being used for political gains, whether it is racism or antisemitism. In 1475 in Trento, the bishop wanted to make a political point, both in terms of the prestige of the town and his political competition with Rome to assert his own power and authority. And they also had an economic reason, because once there is a shrine, it attracts pilgrims. We would call it a tourist attraction, an economic, devotional attraction.

The church in and of itself is complicated. In the case of Simon of Trent, the Popes actually opposed the cult. Pope Sixtus IV banned the cult. He sent an investigator who discussed this as a fraudulent case. That led to what I call in the book a creation and propagation of a “rogue cult,” as the bishop ignored the Pope. What the story of Simon of Trent shows is that there is not one church, despite the church wanting to present itself as that, and that the Popes had limited influence and power in light of local dynamics and political needs. The cult of Simon was only sanctioned more than a century later and that was, again, in response to some political and

cultural changes: the Council of Trent, which met in Trent and which exposed a lot of high profile church officials to the cult, One has to credit the influence of a very important local bishop who eventually managed to convince the pope and the newly created Congregation of Saints to sanction the existing cult of Simon. What is fascinating about it is that both bishops, the one in 1475 and the one during the Council of Trent, were very conscious of this processand, in a way, a very sophisticated, modern utilizing new technology of print. Bishop Hinderbach in 1475 understood that creating both facts on the ground, investing in art in churches and towns, and sponsoring poetry and publications would essentially influence public opinion. And this would help him solidify his leadership. It would be very difficult for the church and the officials to oppose this cult because it would have popular support. He was right. Bishop Madruzzo, who represented Trent during the Council of Trent, was able to take advantage of that.

Some of that resistance to the cult and defense of Jews by popes was grounded in medieval papal policies then to defend Jews against similar accusations, and until 1540 the Popes had indeed consistently defended the Jews against accusations (including in Trento), but after Simon's cult was recognized in the 1580s as a legitimate cult, the church embraced a pragmatic silence on this issue and no longer publicly defended Jews because there was now too much at stake, both politically and doctrinally. In the era of Protestant attacks on churches and places of worship in the Catholic Church, condemning an existing cult that had been formally recognized by Rome as illegitimate could open up questions about what else might be wrong, what other cults were wrongly approved or sanctioned. So it was something the Church officials wouldn't want to touch at this point. But although they weren't publicly defending Jews, they were certainly privately intervening on their behalf and working behind the scenes. We have historical evidence for that. But never would there be a public statement in defense of Jews issued, really until the 20th or 21st century.

SB: What kinds of ideas were prominent in these European regions during this time period that would allow an idea like the "Blood Libel" to take root? What beliefs persisted about Jews that normalized this type of conspiracy theory?

MT: The accusation that Jews kill Christian children emerges in the 12th Century (at first, not as accusations of killing children specifically for blood) amidst a renewed focus on the crucifixion of Jesus, the suffering of

Jesus, and a liturgical focus on the Passion of Christ during Easter. So the story of Jesus's crucifixion, especially because the version of story amplified was from the Gospel of John, which is one of the most virulently anti-Jewish gospels, was one of the reasons for increasing anti-Jewish animosity. Once Christians began to focus on the suffering of Christ, then Jews inevitably entered the picture.

That focus on the enmity of Jews to Jesus and the misinterpretation of Jews as those responsible for Jesus' death (it was Roman authorities, and Romans were initially represented as tormentors of Christ in early Christian iconography).⁴ By the 12th and 13th Century, Jews became a fixture of the story of crucifixion. What is in that story? Judas betraying Jesus. Jewish crowds, as reported in the Gospels, saying "may his blood be on us and our sons." These became powerful tropes that were amplified in the medieval period through liturgy that cast Jews much more publicly as killers. This is not a new trope, it emerged in late antiquity. St. Augustine and others begin to talk about Jews as killers of Christ and enemies. It was not something new, but it emerged in liturgy and devotional focus much more starkly in the Middle Ages, exactly at the point when Jews began to be accused of killing Christian children in a reenactment of the Passion of Christ. That is how the first story emerges: William of Norwich.

It is only later, in the 13th Century, the blood motif was added, that the accusation turned into a blood libel accusing Jews of desiring the blood of a Christian child. That, in turn, I believe is related to the newly sanctioned doctrine (but not a new belief) of transubstantiation and the power of the blood and presence of blood of Christ in the Eucharist, the consecrated communion wafer. The blood and the healing power of Jesus's blood in the Eucharist began to play a very important role in the Christian doctrine and narrative. That belief gets combined with the accusation that Jews were reenacting Jesus's crucifixion and killing Christian children. With the two beliefs combined now Jews were falsely accused of seeking to obtain Christian blood believing that this blood had healing power.

SB: Was the notion that Jews were sorcerers or heavily involved in the occult a regular part of theories at the time?

MT: In the sources I've examined, this never comes up. Some scholars have connected that with a sort of mysticism, occultism and witchcraft and

⁴ See Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014.)

argued that once this belief disappears in the 16th Century, so too do anti-Jewish accusations. In that case, they focused mostly on German lands from which the accusations disappeared then. But in my book I argue that the disappearance of these blood libels against Jews from German lands happened for different reasons.

In the trial records I've examined, there is not much about sorcery or witchcraft, except that the claim is that Jews believed that Christian blood will help them cure whether it is blindness or any kind of curse or the stench that Christians believed Jews had because of their rejection of Christ. But this was part of the Christian beliefs that Jews suffered or were singled out physically and somatically due to their rejection of Christ, that therefore Jews were allegedly trying to rid themselves of that curse.

These beliefs owe more to the Christian belief about the power of blood, especially Jesus's blood, than it is about Jewish beliefs about blood. Obviously blood is a big issue in Judaism. Jews are not allowed to consume any blood, let alone human blood. This is forbidden in the Torah in the book of Leviticus. There are also all kinds of purity laws related to blood, including menstruation, the slaughtering of animals and removal of blood from meat. So, certainly Christians were aware of the centrality of blood or the rejection of blood in Jewish practices. At the same time, Christians were promoting a belief that they were consuming the blood and body of Christ in Eucharist. And these Christian ideas may have melded with what Christians witnessed in Jewish practices of removing blood from the animals that were slaughtered, and with images of crucifixion and with Christian beliefs about the presence and power of Christ's blood in the Eucharist. Drinking and consuming of blood, even though it's not real blood, was a part of Christian liturgy. "This is my body, this is my blood," is said during the consecration of the communion wafer.

So, for Christians to imagine drinking and eating blood in that way was not unusual. There was, of course, in the medieval and early modern periods the belief that dried blood could be used for healing purposes. Perhaps some Jews did use dried blood in such a way, just as Christians did—though some substances used in medicine simply looked like blood, Armenian clay and the so-called "dragon blood." But this is not clear in trial records. Moreover, it is interesting that Jews were not cast as sorcerers or witches in the same way that women were accused of witchcraft during the same period. The closest to accusations of sorcery Jews faced were those based much more on the Christian claims that Jews were seeking to get rid of the curse that was cast on them for their rejection of Christ. Or that they did such things because they were enemies of Christians and hated Christians. The Jews' accusers claimed that Jews engaged in such

acts, out of cruelty and enmity, which, again, goes back to the crucifixion and the perception of Jews as enemies of Christ that had emerged already in early Christian texts, including the Gospels.

SB: Why did the Blood Libel story take off so quickly and spread so widely?

MT: We think about blood libel as a medieval story and accusation, and it does emerge in the medieval period. But when it really takes off is in the early modern period thanks to the printing press. When we decided to make the website associated with the *Blood Libel* book, mapping the Blood Libel stories, it was interesting to see that of the two dozen or so stories in the medieval period, most come to us only as mentions of tales and rumors in medieval chronicles.⁵ A sentence or two here and there. There are no hard pieces of evidence documenting that something actually happened. It's just that someone said something had happened somewhere. It's only a dozen or so cases that we have evidence that something happened—court records, imperial or papal letters, or evidence that someone tried to create a cult around an allegedly murdered child. But even then, Jews may not have suffered as a result. This was the case in Norwich, which is the first instance of a story accusing Jews of killing a Christian boy for ritual purposes. That story emerged in the middle of the 12th century, years, if not decades after the body of William was found in the forest.

These medieval stories did spread through monastic chronicles and by travelers and perhaps pilgrims visiting local cult sites. But the libel stories really took off in the early modern period with the new technology of print, which allowed these stories, until then told locally, to enter printed chronicles documenting important events in world history—from the creation of the world. Book publishers started to print chronicles and scour earlier medieval manuscripts for facts, Hartmann Schedel, who prepared the Nuremberg Chronicle or, later, Sebastian Münster, who prepared his monumental *Cosmographia*, description of the world. He collected information by writing to towns and asking them to send him information about their town if they wanted to be included in his book. Then the locals would turn to local chronicles and mention that in their town Jews killed someone or that there was a shrine in town. So these anti-Jewish stories end up in these incredibly important and influential printed histories of the world covering events from creation of the world to the time when they

⁵ View the maps at thebloodlibeltrail.org/maps/.

were published: biblical stories, histories about popes, kings, famous Christians saints. Among all those stories are a number of those anti-Jewish tales. So, therefore, what used to be a rumor or tale buried in some monastic chronicle with these major published works became a historical *fact* that is transmitted in a book that people could find more easily and read. Thus, contrary to the popular belief that it was common people who believed in this stuff, these anti-Jewish tales and libels were really disseminated and known by those who could read.

This becomes a self-replicating process. Once one chronicle included a story, then another writer using that work to write their own chronicle, included some of these “facts” in their work. And this becomes a sort of self-perpetuating replication. What is fascinating about these chronicles is that it created what I call a “vocabulary of hate.” A very limited vocabulary. The stories about Jews that are included in these histories only use the vocabulary telling readers that Jews kill and then are killed, expelled, or punished in some way for what they have allegedly done. That they desecrate Christian sacred objects. These are the types of stories that may have been included in the chronicles. They didn’t include stories about Jews doing regular everyday things, like selling fish in markets or living their lives. Nobody records mundane things, in general, and certainly not in major chronicles about Jews. It is the *unusual* that is recorded, and the unusual is what was then included in these chronicles, even if mentioned only in one sentence.

Another thing that happened in the early modern period is that print technology also allowed for the dissemination of images.⁶ This is what Bishop Hinderbach of Trent tried to weaponize in 1475. He realized that images were very powerful. He sponsored the development of imagery around Simon of Trent, he helped develop the iconographic vocabulary of blood libels: portraying Jews killing Christian children. These were then disseminated and bought by pilgrims who may have come to Trent when they were going to Rome, such images were also included in chronicles as illustrations around these mentions and stories. For the first time, these stories are made visible for people to see and imagine as possible. It really becomes this sort of modern technology that allowed for the dissemination of those stories that made them ubiquitously known. Then, as seen in these maps on our website, you can see that there were relatively few anti-Jewish libels in the medieval period. The majority of accusations happened in the

⁶ See Debra Higgs Strickland, “Antisemitism in Medieval Art,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Antisemitism*, Ed. Steven Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 248-269.

early modern period—after the Simon of Trent affair and after the development of the printing press.

But it is not only quantitative change from the medieval to the early modern period, but also qualitative. In the early modern period, there are court records, actual “cases” with Jews accused and persecuted when a dead child was found, and when such deaths could be weaponized against Jews. Here too print became crucial because it allowed for the dissemination of these stories about trials of Jews. Print was also important in the creation of what I call “epistemic communities.” This means that people believed what they read in what they consider authoritative sources, and if their sources of knowledge presented them with a set of information or facts, then they believed that. If you only have one source of knowledge and you only believe in one thing, no matter what other evidence facts somebody else might point out to you, you won't believe it because all of your authoritative sources are telling you something different. This is now known as “confirmation bias.”

What is fascinating is that the map of the disappearance in the Early Modern period of the blood libels against Jews from Western Europe, German lands and, largely, Italy, and the shift to Eastern Europe, is not just because there were more Jews in eastern Europe, but it's also because of the quality of books about Jews that readers in these different regions had access to. . In German lands and Italy, there was other knowledge available about Jews beyond the anti-Jewish stories found in chronicles that allowed the readers to disbelieve the accusations. These were works by Christian scholars about Jewish practices based on Christian knowledge of Jewish sources. These scholars questioned the validity of such anti-Jewish accusations. In Eastern Europe, Poland in particular, there was no literature about Jews and Judaism accessible to readers, except for books replicating the anti-Jewish stories found in those European chronicles. And those books and those European chronicles then became part of the evidentiary source material used in court accusations against Jews, including in my father's hometown, in Sandomierz, Poland.⁷

SB: How did this story, the Blood Libel, raise the stakes of hostility of Christians towards Jews? What effect did it have on the lethality of that hostility?

⁷ For more reading on this story see Magda Teter, "HOW ONE TOWN OVERCAME ITS PAST: INTERVIEW WITH MAGDA TETER," *Yivo Institute for Jewish Research*, May 30th, 2014, <https://summerprogram.yivo.org/how-one-town-overcame-its-past-interview-with-magda-teter>.

MT: It definitely had an impact. The limited ideas and vocabulary disseminated by these books made the people who read those books see Jews in a very limited light. There's this wonderful source I found from Poland in which one of the writers says that he went to study in the West and was exposed to these chronicles, and said [paraphrase] "I read about all these things that Jews do to Christians, and I was amazed I was still alive because as a young man I used to drink in their taverns and I used to go there everyday and interact with them. It's a miracle that they didn't kill me, that I'm still alive." He used to interact with and see Jews as a normal part of the social fabric of his world, and then he goes and is exposed to these reading materials and says "oh God, they do all this stuff," and he begins to see Jews only through that lens of danger.

Then in the modern period, because these early modern books became sources that modern historians used in their research, and because those sources had a very limited, hostile vocabulary and hostile imagery of Jews, that same hostile and limited vocabulary was replicated works by modern scholars. Moreover, when in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a new wave of blood accusations erupted in Europe, it activated the most visceral antisemitism of eliminationist and genocidal power.⁸

So the stories of blood libel definitely raised the stakes of hostility. It is worth reiterating that it was the intellectuals who wrote books and created works replicating that kind of language and stories. And what do historians turn to? They turn to those books, they turn to those writings as historical sources, and then they replicate that language. What I found when reading the works of many modern historians is that even those who mean well and who want to include Jews in their works on medieval Europe, they end up writing about Jews were persecuted for these alleged crimes and killed and expelled. Historians, then, inevitably replicate that hostile language and limited vocabulary of medieval and early modern chronicles, even when they wanted to acknowledge Christian anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe because that's all in books about European history about Jews. Therefore, even well meaning people reading such accounts of history can only think about Jews as being persecuted: killed, accused of this and that. Such accounts then limit the imagination about the presence and life of Jews in society, which was much more textured and interesting than that.

The larger lesson is, and this came up also during the pandemic when some of this limited vocabulary returned in the popular press, that when we deal with oppressed minorities, it is very important to discuss the much

⁸ Kieval, Hillel J.. *Blood Inscriptions: Science, Modernity, and Ritual Murder at Europe's Fin de Siècle*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022.

more complex and textured way they were part of a society, not just talk about their persecution and oppression. Because then that's all you can imagine about their lives.. This is exactly what the 1619 Project was trying to do. Trying to talk about both the oppression, but also the many ways in which African Americans have been part of American history, so that broader American society stops thinking in such a limited way about how Black Americans fit in American society.

This dynamic is also true with Jews. If you limit Jewish history to these kinds of tales and to accounts of persecution then it's inevitable that people think that is just what happens to Jews: you normalize attacks against them. This inculcates people in the belief that there must be something wrong with Jews, rather than in the daily reality Jews actually experienced. If such perception of the place of Jews in society is focused predominantly on these hostile stories then it is impossible to know that it was only in *certain* moments in time when these accusations happened. Normalizing unusual stories, prevents us from asking why such libels happen in particular moments and not in others, and how these stories are being disseminated.

I had this eureka moment when I was sitting in the New York Public Library in the Rare Book Room and I was going through these early modern publications from the 15th to the 17th century, year by year, book by book, methodically going through them and looking at what the early modern reader could have learned about Jews from authoritative sources. It struck me how limited the palate of stories and vocabulary was. The eureka moment was that I realized that we had been asking the wrong question. We've been asking why people believed that Jews killed Christian children. But in perusing the body of knowledge available to early modern readers I understood that we shouldn't be surprised they believed it because it was all they could read about. There was nothing else that they could learn about Jews from available books. Even if these readers knew nothing about anti-Jewish accusations, in these renowned books it's all they could see. The books and the knowledge they disseminated became an echo chamber.

This is something we are aware of today. We see people watching Fox News or following certain groups on Reddit, Twitter, or Facebook, becoming part of enclosed, epistemic groups, and it doesn't matter if you tell them a claim they read about in multiple places they follow is incorrect or that there are other ways of looking at it. As one of the 18th-century authors I read asked, [paraphrase] "Who should I believe? The church fathers or the rabbis?" You believe what you find authoritative. So once

those stories became facts in authoritative books, it was difficult to dislodge it.

SB: What did these Blood Libel accusations and subsequent persecutions have on Jewish self-understanding? How did Jewish communities respond, and what do you think the legacy of this history has on internal conceptions of antisemitism and the Jewish story in Jewish communities today?

MT: The Jews who were most affected by these accusations were Ashkenazi Jews. Their first responses were practical: what do you do? How do you defend yourself at a local level? So their primary responses were: community organizing, raising funds either to get those who were accused released or to influence local officials (or even hire officials) to intervene. That included things like covering the costs of sending delegations of Jews to Kings, Dukes, or Popes, to plead with them to intervene in the wrongful accusations.

In terms of public literary response, Ashkenazi Jews didn't really engage much in public pushback, but they did create commemorative songs and tales. They obviously denied the libelous false accusations, but what is fascinating is they didn't deny the validity of the use of torture. Use of torture in blood libel accusations became a big issue in defending Jews, especially in modern times. It was argued that if Jews confessed to committing crimes under torture that was because people say anything under torture. One can't trust those confessions. And that was an argument against anti-Jewish libels that the Sephardic Jews made. Sephardic Jews, who experienced the Inquisition were saying that a person will say anything under torture. So the fact that some Jews may have confessed to crimes they did not commit under torture doesn't prove anything. Moreover, the Sephardic Jews engaged in a polemical response about this and often published books in languages that could have been read by non-Jews. Ashkenazi Jews, in contrast, did not deny the effectiveness of torture rather, in none of the Ashkenazi stories (except for one) does anybody confess to the crime they did not commit. The Ashkenazi stories served an internal purpose to teach Jewish communities how to respond to anti-Jewish libels in practice. If you are accused, *do not confess*. Do not say or implicate anybody. And if you die, you will be considered a holy martyr.

The self-perception is interesting because obviously these anti-Jewish stories then become part of the narrative of Jewish suffering. The lachrymose story of Jewish history, and as the proof of the existence of antisemitism in society and the depths of it in Christian society, in

particular. This is where it goes back to the influential Jewish historian Salo Baron, who challenged us to really rethink this lachrymose conception of Jewish history as a history of suffering. He didn't deny the existence of suffering or anti-Jewish accusations (his family died in the Holocaust), but by focusing on Jewish life and the way Jews were part of society and history, I believe, he sought to push back not only on the lachrymose history but also against antisemitism by varying the vocabulary: by focusing on how Jews *lived* in a society, not just how they were persecuted and killed.

SB: Do you think there is an element in modern Jewish thought that has been unable to escape this “eternalist” framing of antisemitism, or has yet to really reach the perspective that Baron offered? Does the “lachrymose story of Jewish history” still dominate?

MT: I think the recent rise of antisemitism and since 2015, and amplified during the COVID era with some violent attacks, lent itself to automatic reactions of seeing the “longest hatred” before our eyes and resurrecting the belief that we are suddenly “back” in medieval times. These reactions show that we are in the prison of the limited vocabulary and the limited image of how Jews lived in the medieval and pre-modern era. There is this erroneous belief that it was just in the modern period that Jews were more integrated into society, because our image of the pre-modern times is so dominated by the lachrymose story of persecution, complete with anti-Jewish libels. That is where we are prisoners to those pre-modern stories.

That includes all of us, both people who may not be antisemitic, as well as antisemites. Neo-Nazis and antisemites today use those same historical sources to prove that Jews were horrible, cruel, and dangerous people all along in history. These premodern stories of anti-Jewish libels were weaponized by the Nazis who understood the power of historical, pre-modern sources, which the Nazis actually as historical proof of how horrible Jews have always been.

Today, neo-Nazis, whether the shooter in 2019 at Poway or others, don't go read early modern sources and say "in 1283 the Jews were accused of killing this boy." Instead, they read Nazi publications that are now available online in English translations, and use those examples Nazis selected to “historicize” their claims about “adrenochrome consumption” or other such stories. . Nazi sources are for them authoritative sources of knowledge, and their authority is bolstered by the fact that the Nazis cited those historical sources. The shooter in San Diego referred specifically to

Simon of Trent as a justification for his shooting.⁹ The legacy of the media and the weaponization in the fifteenth century of “new media,” to use a 21st-century term, to amplify these stories and to include them in these really important printed books that had nothing over all to do with Jews, is still palpable in today's world.

SB: There is an interesting process where Christian antisemitism sort of secularized into modern antisemitism, with its pseudoscientific, *volkisch*, and "anti-modern" predilections. How did the Blood Libel story itself secularize, moving from an almost mystical or occult Christian story to something that had a more expansive affect?

MT: Antisemitism never fully secularized. There is a latent Christian subtext in it. You can see it in the Early Modern period, with Jews depicted as enemies of Christianity. In Poland, in the Early Modern period, although the explicitly religious aspect of it is mostly gone, the sources emphasize how Jews were cruel against Christians in order to discourage Jewish-Christian relations, to expel Jews or other goals, like discouraging business between them. So although religious language is gradually disappearing, the framework of thinking about Jews as “enemies of Christians” is never gone.

In the modern period, and Hillel Kieval's new book discusses this in more detail¹⁰, the belief in Jewish enmity allows for this story to be adapted to new political and cultural moments. In the modern period, we see women, not young boys or toddlers, depicted as reported victims of Jews. This shift happened just as young women were starting to have more voice and enter society and, perhaps, encounter Jews in new ways. When you focus on the idea that Jews are cruel and that they simply want to hurt you, then it is easy for these stories to become politically malleable—they can be adapted to social and political needs. And that is what we are seeing today as well.

In the Middle East, the imagery of the Blood Libel is echoed in anti-Israel cartoons, which present Jews as killers of children or Israeli Prime Ministers drinking blood from a chalice. That is an evocative way of adapting that imagery and those stories to this new framing.

⁹ Tal Lavin, "The San Diego shooter's manifesto is a modern form of an old lie about Jews," *Washington Post*, April 29th, 2019, [washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/29/san-diego-shooters-manifesto-is-modern-form-an-old-lie-about-jews/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2019/04/29/san-diego-shooters-manifesto-is-modern-form-an-old-lie-about-jews/).

¹⁰ Hillel Kieval, *Blood Inscriptions: Science, Modernity, and Ritual Murder at Europe's Fin de Siècle* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022).

How did the story enter the region? It entered through Europe and it entered through Nazi publications that have filtered into the Middle East. So it becomes very much a vehicle for anger and enmity. Until COVID we thought of the accusations of Jews poisoning wells or Jews desecrating hosts as a thing of the past, but they have returned as new COVID-era conspiracies. This is a trope that emerged in the Gospels and is used and reinterpreted by Christian writers later. It is a potent vessel that can be adapted to whatever context you want and the political need. The supposed victims change, but the Jews remain the villain in this trope.

SB: Where do you think the most important corollaries are today? Do you see the Blood Libel as being an important source for the development of modern occult conspiracy theories like Q-Anon? What lessons do we have from earlier generations of people fighting against Blood Libel accusations that can be applicable today?

MT: The bigger lesson I've gotten from researching the long history of blood libel is, again, the power of media and understanding how these epistemic communities function. When something enters them, it's very difficult to uproot it. I finished the book during the Trump era and watched some of this, explicit or implicit, anti-Jewish rhetoric increase, whether it's Q-Anon or whether it's the public resurgence of antisemitism that used to be relegated to the Dark Web. The only lesson I received that gave me a little more hope is the importance of a varied diet of readings and sources of knowledge.

As I referred to earlier, the map we created helps to explain why the Blood Libel accusations continued in Poland while disappearing in Western Europe. These differences between the regions are explainable precisely by the different kinds of sources of knowledge and different ideas that were being read and produced: only one limited way of thinking about Jews that continued in Poland versus a diverse set of sources, including works by Christian scholars grounded in Hebrew works. But it is very difficult to uproot deeply embedded, even on a subconscious level, ideas about Jews as schemers (which goes back to the Gospels depicting Jerusalem priests as scheming to kill Jesus).

Jews though a tiny minority play an oversized role in the Western, Christian imagination and then, increasingly, also in the Muslim world. Antisemitic theories are always used to fill a void in an explanation of a troubling phenomenon, thus we have tropes of Wall Street bankers or the Israel lobby. So even people who may not be thinking explicitly antisemitic thoughts are affected by those deep roots of antisemitism.

This is an idea that I am looking at in my new book called *Christian Supremacy*¹¹, where I argue that one of the key ideas is the Christian trope of Jewish servitude that emerges in early Christian theology. It leads to a resistance to Jewish equality and to a perception of Jewish power, influence, or authority as undeserved and a result of scheming. This thinking is part of the legacy that people may not even be conscious of because it is simply part of the Western cultural texture.

SB: When we are talking about historic and contemporary hatred, bigotry, or suspicion directed at Jews, are we talking about one, contiguous phenomenon, or do you think that we are talking about radically different instances of animosity towards Jews? Is this all part of one, unified history or do we need to think of this animosity as having different conditions, manifestations, and causes? I'm thinking specifically about the work of people like David Engel who argue that we can no longer use one singular definition of antisemitism to encompass all the very different historic dispossessions of Jews across time and geography.¹²

MT: I think there is not one antisemitism. In my new book *Christian Supremacy*, I tell this history as one story, so maybe I'm inconsistent in that way. But I think that society creates a certain self-perception against an "Other." Some legal scholars have called it a "contrast figure." Legal scholars within Critical Race Theory who are talking about Black and white society in which Black people are "contrast figures" necessary for white identity. Jews were such "contrast figures" for Christians from the very beginning.

Christian identity is shaped and predicated on the existence of Jews, otherwise there's no Christianity. Christians claim the verity of their beliefs grounded in Jewish scriptures, Jews are shown to reject this truth. That is a powerful mental structure that you can not get rid of easily. Is it antisemitism? No, I don't think so. But it is a certain mental perception whereby Christians believe they know the truth and see Jews as rejecting that truth. But what do we do if this "contrast figure" doesn't exist? We invent them in some ways, we invent that enemy.

¹¹ Magda Teter, *Christian Supremacy: Reckoning with the Roots of Antisemitism and Racism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

¹² David Engel, "Away from a Definition of Antisemitism: An Essay in the Semantics of Historical Description", in Jeremy Cohen, and Moshe Rosman (eds), *Rethinking European Jewish History* (Liverpool, 2008; online edn, Liverpool Scholarship Online, 25 Feb. 2021).

Antisemitism has nothing to do with Jews as real people. When you begin to think about antisemitism not necessarily in terms of Jews but in terms of those who espouse antisemitic ideas, you might be able to see the ways in which it changes and evolves over time. And the only constant thing is that the Jews are the subject of that change. The danger of the Robert Wistrich school of "eternal hatred" is that if there is eternal hatred, then it sort of suggests that there is a question "what is wrong with the Jews to inspire this eternal hatred."¹³ The question should not be what's wrong with Jews, but why is the other side harboring those feelings and why and how do those feelings change. And those feelings *do* change and evolve over time depending on the political and cultural moment. It's just that the framework is a power framework. Any hatred is related to power dynamics, and the rejection of some kind of equity. It is about domination and dominance. James Baldwin addressed this question from the perspective of Black Americans: "It is the American Republic...which created something which they call a 'n*****r.' They created it out of necessities of their own. The nature of the crisis is that I am not a 'n*****r'—I never was. I am a man. The question with which the country is confronted is this: Why do you need a 'n*****r' in the first place?"¹⁴ The same question can be asked of Christian society about Jews.

¹³ See Shane Burley, "There's Something Dangerous in Antisemitism Studies," *Full Stop*, May 10th, <https://www.full-stop.net/2022/05/10/features/essays/shane-burley/theres-something-dangerous-in-antisemitism-studies/>.

¹⁴ James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), p. 60.