

Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2020), pp. xvi+540.

by *Kenneth Stow*

When Quest approached me and asked to do an extended review of the Teter book, I was in a quandary. I had already agreed to review the book for the *Journal of Modern History*. Nonetheless, because I was limited by JMH to 1,000 words, and the audience for Quest is likely different from that of JMH, after consultation with its editorial board, I accepted Quest's invitation. At the same time, I feel it appropriate to open this lengthy examination of Teter's signal contribution with a large section of what will appear in the JMH. I do so to ensure that it not be said that I reviewed the book with two voices. I have much to say that is positive. Where I would like to expand is in examining the mode of analysis of a most extraordinary cache of information, much of which, we did not previously know. Hence:

This book is unique, the product of exhaustive foraging in archives from Poland, to Rome, to Dublin that yielded documentation in Latin, Italian, German, Polish, Yiddish, and more. Few are the scholars who would, could, undertake a similar endeavor, whose result is a detective-like reconstruction of blood libel accusations. The list of manuscript and primary sources is so lengthy that secondary bibliography had to be held back for presentation separately online.

The book is structured as a series of intensively argued micro-histories, whose origins lie in early modern Poland, Italy, and the South Tyrol, this last being the most famous of all, that of Simonino of Trent in 1475. Published Latin texts of this episode, which ended in thirty Jewish men being executed, have been available for some time, including the trial-records. But never have we been led through them step by step. An introductory chapter examines medieval libels, from William of Norwich, to Robert of Pontoise, to the Good Werner. Subsequent chapters investigate novelly, and penetratingly, how literary responses to the Trent

affair shaped attitudes both North and South of the Alps. Christian Hebraists in Italy and elsewhere were skeptical, churchmen in Poland far more receptive. It was humanists, however, who were prime movers in the case of Simonino, a point that Teter joins others in emphasizing. Also discussed are the somewhat analytic responses of Yosef haCohen, Shlomo ibn Verga, and Menasseh ben Israel. Yiddish religious poetry, perhaps because it was rooted so far in the North and East (Poland), reinvigorated the medieval Crusade tales of martyrdom, urging the accused to accept death rather than yield under torture and convert.

In Poland, as much of the second half of the book reveals, multiple accusations almost by default ended in horrid executions. By contrast, in Italy, in 1705, proper legal investigation led, albeit after more than a year, to defendants being freed; this is one of the most illuminating portions of the book, at least with respect to my own direct interests. Amazingly, Teter ranged as far afield as the archive of Trinity College Dublin to obtain the material, and she notably emphasizes the role played by Christian lawyers in assisting the famed Tranquillo Corcos in pressing his case. At the same time, in 1755, Pope Benedict XIV reaffirmed the cult of Simonino, first approved by Sixtus V, and sanctioned that of Simonino's rough contemporary, Andreas of Rinn, creating a *fait accompli* that Cardinal Ganganelli, the future Clement XIV, had dutifully to acknowledge in his unpublished-in-its-day 1758 tract refuting libels, composed in response to a Polish Jewish request.

The interpretative theme of the book is that high medieval popes like Innocent IV, in 1247, spoke out forcefully against the libel. But from the time of Sixtus IV (Trent), matters deteriorated, especially in Poland, whose church hierarchy, mostly ignorant of Judaism and Jewish practice, freely accepted that Jews killed Christian children to use their blood in Passover rituals despite Innocent IV's insistence that Jews abhor blood absolutely. Even Sixtus IV, who, it is said, "remained firmly within the medieval tradition," (p. 84) eventually approved the legitimacy of the Trentine trial record, (p. 83) limiting himself to an oblique warning against

the accusation’s repetition, which, however, was indirectly dismissed in *Beatus Andreas*, of 1755, where Benedict XIV hints at abandoning physical protection. Thus, even in Rome, where Jews were protected by what Teter refers to as *buon governo*, “In the long run, the records would affirm the validity of the cult of Simon, undermining the centuries of protection of Jews” (p. 63).

Thus the review, whose brevity, nevertheless, did not afford me the needed space to delve into the book’s analytic direction. What, in its particulars, I would like to ask does it signify to point to a deteriorating papal defense? The concept of Jewish protection by the popes was not monolithic. To explain, Teter refers on many occasions to the idea that Jews were accused of acting in “*odium fidei*,” which is translated “hatred” of the faith. Elisheva Carlebach’s meticulous study of the accusations related to the death, in 1694, of Shimon Abeles, too, emphasizes that Abeles was killed “*in odium fidei*.”¹ Yet, more than as hatred, if at all, *odium* is properly translated as “in contempt of” or “to denigrate” the faith. *Oodium*, moreover, is regularly paired with a second term, “*favor fidei*,” meaning “to the glory, enhancement, or benefit of the faith.” Hence, attack (denigration) is invariably, whether explicit or by implication, countered by a hopes for triumph.

This pairing—as I have examined it in studies shared with our author—also goes back to at least the high Middle Ages.² Its use was anything but cavalier. To wit,

¹ Elisheva Carlebach, *The Death of Shimon Abeles: Jewish Christian Tension in Seventeenth Century Prague* (New York: Center for Jewish Studies, 2001).

² The acknowledgements to the books *Jewish Dogs* and *Anna and Tranquillo*, to be cited in full in this note, thank Magda for her good advice. In addition, I note a paper and a book that are devoted to the subject of *odium vs. favor fidei*, as well as my study of Sixtus IV at the time of the Simon of Trent blood libel. Leo XIII in the late nineteenth century also falls within my ken. These persons and issues are the fulcra of Teter’s analysis. I have written at length, too, about the letters that accompany the incident at Blois, which is central to her opening chapter, and, finally, on the Good Werner. See Kenneth Stow, “Favor et Odium Fidei: Conversion invitis parentibus in Historical Perspective,” *Archivio italiano per la storia della pietà*, ed. Gabriella Zarri, 25 (2012): 55-86; Id., *Jewish Dogs, An Image and Its Interpreters: Continuity in the Jewish-Catholic Encounter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Id., *Anna and Tranquillo: Catholic Anxiety and Jewish Protest in the Age of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Id., “The Cruel Jewish Father: From Miracle to Murder,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish Intellectual and Social History: Festschrift in Honor of Robert Chazan*, eds. David Engel, Lawrence H. Schiffman and

Gratian (1140): *Decretum, de poenitentia, Dist. 1, q. 18, d. p. c.*, speaking of penalties invoked *favore religionis et fidei*, and in *odio sicariorum*. Commonly, *favor fidei* was invoked to argue why potential clashes between ecclesiastical and state/lay law should be decided to the advantage of the former. *Favor fidei* features again in decisions of the most distinguished jurists over the centuries to tip the scales—to borrow a term from Benedict XIV—in favor of a problematic, not patently illegal, baptism; it is misleading to say *favor* was invoked “to justify situations that according to existing laws appeared illegal” (p. 341). In terms of establishing priorities for governance, therefore, the pairing was fundamental. It also highlighted the danger *odium* posed. Thus the Torinese jurist Giuseppe Sessa, who composed a full tract on Jews in law in 1716, resolved all questions he raised with respect to baptism and whether it should be administered, including by removing children from their parents, by asking whether refraining from removing the children generated contempt for the faith (*odium*), which, without fail, was opposed to the “favor of the faith” that would be baptism’s direct product.³

Nowhere, however, is the pairing of *odium* and *favor* clearer than in the case of the Good Werner. Werner, as a victim of *odium*, is said to suffer both *pro Christi* and *propter Christi*, as well as *loco Christi*, and, as such, he is transfigured, to replicate the glory of the Eucharist in its manifestations as both the *corpus verum* and the wider *Corpus Christi* that is the *societas fidei*. In short, *favor* wars against and vanquishes *odium*. This kind of Eucharistic transformation, which Robert Stacey, followed by Lisa Lampert, has also espied,⁴ is central to the surviving narrative of Werner (used by the Bollandists), which dates to 1427, and which was

Elliot R. Wolfson (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 245-278; Id., *Levi’s Vindication: The 1007 Anonymous Revisited*, Revised version of the original 1984 book (Cincinnati-Pittsburgh: Hebrew Union College Press, 2017); Id., “Papal Mendicants or Mendicant Popes: Continuity and Change in Papal policies toward the Jews at the end of the Fifteenth Century,” in *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Steven McMichael (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 255-273.

³ Giuseppe Sessa, *Tractatus de Judaeis* (Turin: Typis Ioannis Francisci Mairese & Ioannis Radix, 1716).

⁴ Robert Stacey, “From Ritual Crucifixion to Host Desecration: Jews and the Body of Christ,” *Jewish History* 12, no. 1 (1998): 11-28; Lisa Lampert, “The Once and Future Jews: The Croxton Play of the Sacrament. Little Robert of Bury and Jewish Memory,” *Jewish History* 15, no. 3 (2001): 235-255.

created to bolster pleas to have Werner beatified. It predates by more than a half century the early reports about Simon of Trent and any to follow, such as that by Michelangelo Mariani, whose *Il glorioso infant S. Simone* (1668), studied illuminatingly by Teter, equates Simonino with Christ. The identification of ritual murder victims with the Eucharist had become dominant.

When we read again and again that the Jews murdered a child *in odium fidei*, we must imagine recipients of this news, without further prompting, seeing the event as a Eucharistic assault. Eucharistic identification also suggests that blood and host libels had merged, which is illustrated by the claim of the late twelfth century Guillaume Le Breton, who wrote that “every year the Jews communed, *communicabant*, with heart of a Christian lad.” This description, moreover, was not confined to Le Breton.⁵ It was widely diffused. It appears verbatim in *Lachrymabilem*, the 1247 bull of Innocent IV, which denies this claim, and which Teter recalls many times. I should add that the Eucharistic character of the ritual murder victim is stressed by Miri Rubin in her important *Gentile Tales*.⁶

Ritual murder (whether as murder alone or enhanced with the use of blood in Jewish ritual) is also central to the events at Blois in 1171, in particular, in the letters attached to the accounts of this fearful episode. Teter recognizes this, but she treats these letters positivistically, viewing them as a declaration that Jews should seek refuge in the king. A full semester spent painstakingly analyzing every syllable of these letters with advanced graduate students, which total but a few hundred words—the first one of which has nothing to do with Blois, but with Loche, which was ruled by the English, not the French King—led to the conclusion that they are an intentional parody which depicts a king saying he wishes to honor the Jews, when, to the contrary (the text’s likely model is the nefarious Philip II Augustus), he is spitting in their face, as kings habitually did. This conclusion also applies to King Joao III of Portugal, who figures in ibn Verga’s report of the Lisbon Massacre of 1506. Beginning with Yerushalmi’s analysis, Jaime, as ibn Verga portrays him, has been considered to exemplify the legend of the good king in whom Jews might

⁵ Stow, *Jewish Dogs*.

⁶ Miri Rubin, *Gentile Tales: The Narrative Assault on Late Medieval Jews* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

trust. Surely, ibn Verga himself knew better—he certainly should have—so that it might be a good idea to view ibn Verga less as a modern historian or, alternately, as a narrator of fictions and more as a writer of burlesques. In the same vein, it is perhaps wishful on Teter's part (p. 365) to suggest that Jews in Poland who confessed to ritual murder and then converted under torture were following the advice of Yiddish poems that praised martyrdom, when, more likely, at least as I see it, these poems were holding up what even their authors knew to be an exalted ideal.

It is again the king, together with a Duke (much like the Jews' nemesis at Blois, the Count of Champagne), who is the villain in *The Terrible Events of the Year 1007*, a text composed most likely between 1236 and 1242. By then, patterns of royal behavior, especially in England and France, were evident to all, and as put by Meir ben Simeon's *Milhemet Mitzvah*, it was unquestionably to the pope that Jews had to turn for redress.⁷ Teter herself rightly stresses papal protection. Yet even that protection must be contextualized within the bounds of theology, and, even more, canon law. Thus the 1007 author notes the need to bow before papal claims to censure and censor Jewish (rabbinic) writings in exchange for protection. Jews, wrote Pope Innocent III, in a codicil to his issue of the bull *Sicut iudaeis non*, a piece of which bull the 1007 cites, will enjoy protection as long as they do not machinate against Christianity.⁸ This codicil, when read literally, was perhaps potentially threatening enough to persuade the Dominican Raymond of Peñaforte to eliminate it from the final text of the bull that entered the binding *Decretales*. Yet where did this codicil originate? For years, I thought it was taken from the so-called Pact of Omar, similar to *Sicut iudaeis* in many ways, which regulated Jewish life under Islam (in theory). In fact, both the Pact and *Sicut iudaeis* likely are drawing on the same source, *Lex nullus* in the Justinianic Code, which its two inheritors so closely emulate, stating:

No Jew who is innocent shall be oppressed, nor shall any person of any creed cause him to be exposed to insult; nor shall their synagogues or

⁷ Stow, *Levi's Vindication*.

⁸ It is not clear why Teter writes *Decretalium* two times on p. 203, although otherwise correctly *Decretales*, pp. 24 and 101.

habitations be burned; nor shall they be maliciously injured without reason; for when any one of them is implicated in crime, the authority of the judges and the protection afforded by the public law has been established to preclude anyone from taking vengeance for himself. But, as We desire that provision be made for the personal safety of the Jews, so We think that notice ought to be given to prevent them from becoming arrogant, and, elated by their security, rashly commit some act against the Christian religion, by way of revenge (*Code* 1,9,13).

Both texts, *Sicut iudaeis* and the Pact of Omar (as we have it), thus fit like a hand in *lex nullus*'s glove; the only clause missing is that of *Sicut iudaeis* which inveighs against forced baptism, although the word “oppressed” in *nullus* may be understood in that sense. Why Innocent made the addition, I am not sure; he was, after all, the first pope (the first ecclesiastical authority, in fact) directly to cite Augustine on Psalm 59:12, which he did, I believe, because he saw the Jews of his day needed extra protection, as the canons and theology obligated him to afford (not an obligation imposed by any so-called, and, to be blunt, inexistent Augustinian theory).⁹ Read positively, and in the light of *lex nullus*, rather than threateningly, as Peñaforte may have feared, the clause reminds readers or hearers that repressing Jews requires a justification, for example, Jewish “arrogance.”

Protection, in other words, came embedded within a shell, whose two halves were adherence to canonical regulation in exchange for papal defense, two halves, moreover, that were subject to constant modification, yet, and this is critical, with neither one crushing the other. It was no accident that in 1758, a moment, as we shall see, when harboring Jews even in Rome was questioned, the Judge of the Roman Rota Lucio Ferraris justified the prohibition on expelling Jews by pointing to the bull *Etsi iudaeos*. This was the harshest among many letters Innocent III issued, censuring Jewish behavior, yet which still indicated that the Church accepts Jews out of “*Caritas*,” a term that in the medieval lexicon meant not “charity,” but

⁹ I have challenged the existence of such a theory elsewhere, and in the works cited above, but suffice it to say that if it really existed in Augustine, nobody seems to have paid attention to it until Innocent III; nobody. It was theology and its realization in the canons that determined the Church's stance always.

fundamental justice. Nor was Lucio Ferrari alone in citing this bull for just this reason. “Protection,” therefore, was a protean concept, whose dimensions might be revised on the slightest pretext.

However, as also explained by Lucio Ferrari, revision had a limit, about which, Sixtus IV was certainly aware when he revived Innocent’s novel clause in his decisive bull of 1478, containing his final opinion about the trial of Simon of Trent (it is inexplicable why the bull attributes the clause to the “General [Fourth Lateran] Council”). This bull, writes Teter, confirms the validity of the trial. Yet the wording is subtle. As pointed out already by the early twentieth century Jesuit and Bollandist Francois van Ortroy, and as I myself have observed, the bull states clearly that the trial was approved by a commission of cardinals, pointedly *not* by the pope himself.¹⁰ That the notary of the papal chancery chose—was instructed—to make this careful distinction speaks loudly. What Sixtus surely meant was that if Jews misbehave, they may be punished. But, by implication, since he, Sixtus, harbored doubts, his cardinals approval of the trial record violated his trust. Moreover, although it was too late to do anything to help the Jews of Trent, judicially murdered three years earlier, the pope was announcing that he would not suffer a repetition of events. Not because Sixtus IV was being “benevolent.” On other occasions, this same Sixtus had no compunction about berating what he called Jewish blasphemy.¹¹ What must guide us, then, in analyzing papal actions is not a yes-or-no question of papal protection, but how individual popes interpreted their legal (canonical) obligations. Unlike his cardinals who saw in the Simon affair the epitome of Jewish threats to the well-being of Christian society, to Eucharistic integrity, and to the overall *favor* of the Church—Jewish *odium*, in technical terms—Sixtus saw a miscarriage of justice.

Indicative of limits on papal action is the murky charge of ritual murder made in Rome in the early 1550s, which never got traction, especially when it outed that the

¹⁰ See again Stow, “Papal Mendicants or Mendicant Popes,” and Id. *Jewish Dogs* on van Ortroy. Teter cites in her notes a preliminary version of “Papal Mendicants or Mendicant Popes,” presented at a meeting of the Early Modern Workshop she founded and has continued to shepherd.

¹¹ Ibid.

culprit was the victim's father (or stepfather). Nor during the critical late sixteenth century papacies of Paul IV and Sixtus V do we again hear of a ritual murder accusation. The latter of these two popes did agree to what Sixtus IV rejected in 1475, namely, to beatify Simon of Trent. Nonetheless, for all that the Jews—in particular, the ones under direct papal rule, especially, in Rome—were now placed in a ghetto, the purpose was not to “harass” Jews to convert, as Teter suggests (p. 299). It was, rather, to harness strict legal enforcement and to employ it as a tool to achieve what Gregory the Great called “pious lashes,” a term the Camaldulense monks Quirini and Giustiniani had reframed in 1513, discussing the means of seeking out Jewish conversion.¹² Toward this end, in 1558, Marquardus de Susannis composed his systematic legal tract the *De Iudaeis et Aliis Infidelibus*, whose constant refrain is that meticulous application of the law, not wanton violation, will persuade the Jews that they have rightly been consigned to “perpetual servitude” (meaning to submission to canonical restriction, not to real servitude) and lead them to convert. This, at least, was the intention, even if, truth be told, the greatest number of conversions occurred when the law became a cudgel: for instance, following the closing of Jewish banks in 1682 and, apparently, again in 1731, when Jewish books were once more sequestered and there was a threat to convert Rome's *Cinque scuole* into one. The rules, however, required restraint. One could devise means to make Jewish life uncomfortable, even extremely so, but the use of outright force for whatever reason—which the canons prohibited—was out of the question.

The role played in establishing policy toward the Jews by their long Roman sojourn, beginning in Antiquity, must also be considered. Paradoxically, Jews were among the most permanent fixtures of the Roman population. Their banishment after such a “*longue durée*” had to have been inconceivable. The route to achieving religious and social uniformity in the city, therefore, followed not the path of banishment, as in England, France, and Spain. Rather, as I have written

¹² Kenneth Stow, *Catholic Thought and Papal Jewry Policy, 1555-1593* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1977), 217-220, deals with this tract extensively.

elsewhere, it chose the way of “expulsion *into* the ghetto” where conversionary pressure could efficiently be brought to bear.¹³

Poland was different, unique. There, in the 1550s, uncovering the truth would have been irrelevant. Teter’s incredibly detailed reconstructions demonstrate forcefully that the fomenters were the clergy, whose anxiety over approaching modernity was enormous. The Polish clergy was also sufficiently powerful to constrain the papal curia to tread gingerly, the best testimony being the shelving (the non-publication) of Cardinal Ganganeli’s (Clement XIV) tract, which challenged the blood accusation itself. In Poland, moreover, legally, Jews depended for their existence on charters and special privileges. In Rome, the Jews’ social presence was rooted—even more than in theology and, as just suggested, demographic inertia—in their status as *cives* within *ius commune*, the regnant system of law. Teter prefers to describe Roman Jews as living under what Irene Fosi calls *buon governo*. But Fosi herself is careful to suggest that *buon governo* (even though there was a Congregation of *Buon Governo*) was more a broad concept of governing than subject to rigorous definition. Rigorous definition was *ius commune*’s most outstanding characteristic, violations of which, moreover—for those there certainly were—could be identified and corrected. More particularly, about the Jews’ status as *cives* living under *ius commune*, the overwhelming majority of jurists concurred, including, notably, G. B. de Luca, perhaps the most prominent of his ilk.

By law and by right, Jews enjoyed all civic privileges and were unchallenged Roman residents. Their presence in the city was neither contingent on special dispensations nor subject to instant cancellation, as it was in places like Poland, which seems to have sunk deep into the worst of governmental medievalism just as, elsewhere, modernity marched forward. If, in Rome, the popes mostly honored legal obligations, by contrast, Polish Jewry’s perilously opaque legal status (alongside their demographic, economic, and even political expansion) was bound to facilitate unrestrained zealotry. Marring Rome’s “civil paradise,” however, was

¹³ See Kenneth Stow, *Theater of Acculturation: The Roman Ghetto in the Sixteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001). Italian trans.: Id., *Il ghetto di Roma nel Cinquecento. Storia di una acculturazione*, ed. Stefania Sottile (Rome: Viella, 2014).

the regime of heavy canonical restriction. As de Luca himself, and so many others, specified: in matters governed by religion, Jews were distinct, subject to restraints that were enormous and to rules that stayed in force as long as the papal confessional state existed. At the same time, and despite their steady increase, canonical limitation never deteriorated into the judicial mayhem that sanctioned the enormities committed in Poland.

What did change was a growing conviction, among even the popes themselves, that the Jews committed ritual murder. As Teter observes, this movement is strikingly exemplified by Benedict XIV. Yet even Benedict had to hold back, aware that he could not wantonly flout the law. Benedict was not, as he has been accused, a trickster, guilty of resort to *escamotages*.¹⁴ His bull *Postremo mense* of 1751 is a classic of cementing together bits of the old in order to create the new.¹⁵ Just as Innocent III based his enhancement of *Sicut iudaeis* on the Roman law *lex nullus*, so the scholarly Benedict XIV knew that in establishing a policy allowing relatives other than parents, including cognates (in-laws), to “offer” children to the Church for baptism, he had license to violate neither the canons nor *ius commune*. He could legitimately go no further than to create his strategy by assembling into one whole centuries of evolving canonical interpretations. When he stretched a point by likening the abovementioned *favor fidei* to “placing a weight on the scales” in moments when civil and canonical privilege metaphorically squared off, the jurist Carlo Luti, who more than once represented Jews in court, called this papal “arrogance.”¹⁶

At the same time, Benedict never considered proposing the seizure of any and all Jewish children for baptism on the grounds like those suggested by the jurist G. B. Riganti that Jews were “the real slaves” of the pope or at least draftable like soldiers, with whom a sovereign might do as he pleased.¹⁷ There was also context. *Postremo mense*’s direct stimulus was a request for clarification by the Jewish Community

¹⁴ See the review of Marina Caffiero, *Forced Baptisms*, by Kenneth Stow, *Journal of Religion* 93, no.2 (2013): 239-242.

¹⁵ Stow, “*Favor et Odium*.”

¹⁶ Stow, *Anna and Tranquillo*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 151-152 on Ulrich Zasius and G. B. Riganti.

itself, fed up with Christians, especially neophytes, who entered the ghetto and clandestinely baptized Jewish infants and small children. It was no accident that however bitter was the result—and despite the many times they had been forced to present wives and children of converts who had been “offered” to the *Catecumeni*—Rome’s Jewish leaders did not sense that they had been thrown into freefall. To the contrary, they themselves appealed more than once to this bull to protest ostensible violations.

Why, then, in *A quo primum* of 1751, did Benedict verge on crossing even his own red lines? It was not because of a specific charge of ritual murder. Rather, he saw (always sinful) Jewish lending corrupting Polish clergy; it matters little that the original lenders were the clergy themselves, whose money the Jews lent out in return, and on which they eventually paid the bishops interest. The Jews were threatening the Church—and in this terrible mid-eighteenth century moment, when the Church was reeling from assaults by secular powers on time honored ecclesiastical prerogatives, most particular, the power over marriage, the danger was potentially far more lethal than the theological one once posed of Luther. And, here, Benedict broke down, invoking the name of the monk Rudolph, whom St. Bernard had dressed down in 1146; indeed, Teter agrees with what I have written previously that this was a moment of true rupture with the past. To be sure, Benedict went no further than to intimate: what, he said, would Rudolph (who had preached attacking Jews) think now. Still, one gets the feeling the flood gates were about to break, to be further unhinged by Pius VI, in 1776, who virtually threatened to bring a plague of sickness on the ghetto by placing restrictions on the Jews’ water supply, their access to wet nurses, laundrywomen, and the collection of refuse. He also allowed an unprecedented “offering” by an uncle. It was in this deteriorating atmosphere that responding to a petition, Benedict confirmed—note: he did not initiate—the cults of both Simonino and Andreas of Rinn.

In one matter, however, Benedict may have truly violated the law, by allowing pregnant women whose fetuses had been offered to the Church to be seized and held in the *Casa dei catecumeni* until they gave birth, whence the newborn was immediately baptized. The pope was reacting to the not uncommon belief that a

prospective Jewish mother whose fetus had been “offered” would abort, or she would kill her newborn; solace was taken from dipping once more into legend and considering the child, like Herod’s Innocents, to have been “baptized in utero by blood.” The image of the ritual murder victim as Eucharistic had again come to the fore; Benedict’s motivation extended well beyond “hatred.” He was also clearly conjuring up a transposed reenactment of the story of the Jew of Bourges, the very drama of a father who throws his son into a furnace rather than see him become a Christian, to be saved and transfigured by the Virgin, that undergirds the story of Shimon Abeles. The protection of Jews, more, the safeguarding of their legal rights had truly been made subservient to fears about ritual murder. Moreover, as in 1478, here, too, we must look for additional protagonists. Pope Benedict was not alone. Also promoting ritual murder fantasies at about this time was Francesco Rovira-Bonet, head of the *Casa dei catecumeni* from 1760-1798 and the author of, yes, a life of Simon of Trent, one so persuasively written, for that matter, that Ariel Toaff was able to coopt and present it as the fruits of his, Ariel’s, own research in the closing chapter of the scurrilous¹⁸ *Passover of Blood*.¹⁹

The early modern deterioration in papal willingness to maintain the balance of privilege and limitation with respect to Jews, alongside the ever greater heed being paid to ritual murder libels, was progressing hand in hand with mounting anxiety about the future of the Church. We should not be surprised that the height of ecclesiastical acceptance of the libel came in the wake of the sudden abolition of the Papal State in 1870. Nor should there be surprise that the beat of the accusatory drum sounded loudest in the “integralist”—and papally supervised—Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*. The orchestrator was Cardinal Merry del Val, who led the successful struggle blocking Pope Leo XIII from republishing Innocent IV’s *Lachrymabilem* in 1899. A few years later, the same del Val demanded that the review of G. Divina’s 1902 *Storia del beato Simone* composed by the “modernist” Francois van Ortroj, the very Jesuit and Bollandist who correctly distinguished papal reservation from the cardinals’ assertiveness in approving the trial in Trent, be censored. Van Ortroj had denounced the book as “inanity.” In

¹⁸ Stow, *Anna and Tranquillo*, 125-127.

¹⁹ Kenneth Stow, “A Book full of Sound and Fury,” *Storicamente* 3, no. 22 (2007). Accessed May 16, 2021. doi: 10.12977/stor547.

the same vein, in 1913, del Val had to admit the authenticity of both Innocent IV's *Lachrymabilem* and the tract of Cardinal Ganganelli (Clement XIV), trapped, as del Val was, by the publication, in 1900, of both texts by that pioneer student of papal Jewish relations Moritz Stern, in a book which, as Teter intimates, Rothschild himself may have possessed.²⁰ Disingenuously, however, del Val—about whose response Teter remarks that “though not an explicit letter defending the Jews, Cardinal del Val’s short response was more than what Polish Jews ever obtained” (p. 382)—refused to go further. He shirked to reaffirm the denunciations these works contained, which is surely what Rothschild desired.

The matter of papal dealings with the Jews must, therefore, be approached as one of enormous shading. Deterioration there was, but the path downward was flush with deviations and sharp turns. If we neglect this topography, we must remain mystified as to why Jews were always certain that when they turned to the pope and asked for help, an answer would be forthcoming, as two-sided as that answer might be. We saw this with regard to even Benedict XIV. By start of the twentieth century, this expectation had been reduced to almost nil. With Pius XII, who refused to speak out at the moment of greatest trial, the papacy finally gave way. One suspects that the enormous rancor with this pope has its origins in knowing he turned his back on centuries-old Jewish expectations. Yet, and this is my main hesitation with respect to Teter’s marvelous book, we would struggle to fathom this pope’s decision, and perhaps fail to do so, were we to see the papal-Jewish past only in terms of reactions based purely on *odium* understood as “hatred” and on protection viewed as essentially one-dimensional.

We are better served by creating a perspective that focuses on fears of denigration as they led to steps to preserve Eucharistic—*read: the Church’s*—integrity and that of the “body of the faithful,” the *societas fidei*. Regardless of how many Jews Pius XII physically saved, especially in Rome (even here there has been debate), surely it was his fear for the Church—his no doubt misplaced anxiety, encouraged by some of those in his closest circles, to shield a vulnerable ecclesiastical body—that prompted him to hold his tongue when his word would have brought hope, and

²⁰ Moritz Stern, *Die Päpstlichen Bullen Über Die Blutbeschuldigung* (Munich: August Schupp, 1900).

perhaps more. Yet if we consider papal policies toward Jews as unarticulated, varying only in the angle of their descent, we shall not perceive this sequence. What, instead, we should be measuring is the papal ability—or (un)willingness—to navigate within a resilient theological and legal-canonical framework—as that framework, when it came to the Jews, increasingly succumbed to a burgeoningly vicious attack.

Kenneth Stow, University of Haifa Emeritus

How to quote this article:

Kenneth Stow, Discussion of *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth*, by Magda Teter, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 19 (June 2021), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/12762