

## **“Pasque di sangue” – Ariel Toaff and the Legend of Ritual Murder. A Comment**

The Italian historian Ariel Toaff has just published a book, and his colleague Elena Loewenthal has called it ‘a scandal’. This title is frequently bestowed in Italy, but in this case, it seems to have been earned (Ariel Toaff, *Pasque di sangue. Ebrei d'Europa e omicidi rituali*, Bologna: Il Mulino 2007). A quick look at the background will suffice. If there is such a thing as a timeless uber-narrative of Jew-hatred, it is the accusation of ‘ritual murder’. Pious chroniclers, merciless priests, fanatical social critics, anti-Semitic pamphleteers, murderous rulers and even recently afternoon soaps in the Arab world have illustrated all sorts of things with the legend of ritual murder: a negative version of mysticism of the Cross, blood-thirsty usury, the healing of Jewish physical infirmities, world-spanning lust for power, Zionist aggression.

The accusation of using blood for ritual purposes is compatible with anything, anywhere — a true skeleton key. Refuting this wandering, morphing legend is as easy as it is hopeless. It was always thus: anyone who wants to believe such tales is not going to be dissuaded easily, especially not by scholars. True believers do welcome imagined or real confirmations of what they ‘know’, especially from academics. So historical work on this topic, even if it deals with the distant past, can immediately become highly political. This was visible in the 1990s in the harsh and in fact often exaggerated reactions to Israel Yuval’s attempt at a reinterpretation of the appearance of ritual murder fables in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The well-established Israeli medievalist was not advocating a fundamentally revisionist approach; he only suggested that external characteristics such as the reddish colour of *charoset* and a few other elements of the Passover story might have led Christians, in their eager ignorance, to the idea that Jews used blood for ritual purposes. According to Yuval, such misinterpretations of seeming evidence had horrific consequences and laid the groundwork for the unstoppable further success of this grisly tale.

The real problem with Yuval’s work is his narrowly constructed argument, which aims for sensational results. The same is true of Magdalena Schultz’s equally one-sided (though methodologically much weaker) psychologising attempt to find the roots of the ritual murder fable in repressive processes on the side of the perpetrators — cases of abused and murdered children were, supposedly, blamed on Jews for the sake of convenience. One might be able to find evidence for this interpretation in individual cases, but as a general explanation it simply does not suffice. If we pass over such methodological ‘tunnel vision’ and look at the broader picture, we quickly see that these ‘Jewish’ motifs are all much older and come from inner-Christian contexts and needs, specifically from the peculiar dynamics of the rhetoric of incrimination directed against Christian dissidents (‘heretics’) from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Here we find all manner of disgustingly precise detail — as though the writer had himself attended the gatherings of misguided Christians—in tales of ritual murder as a Black Mass and so forth: Christians were accusing *each other* of exactly the same crimes long before the Englishman Thomas of Monmouth interpreted the death of young William of Norwich, in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as a case of ritual murder committed by Jews. This was the only way to bring about the veneration of the dead child, against canonical rules, because such honours were otherwise reserved only for witnesses of the faith in the full possession of their spiritual powers, who died a martyr’s death willingly and consciously.

The anger directed at Yuval, especially by the older generation in Israel, was at times out of all proportion, but also understandable because of the suggestion that Christians’ anti-Jewish ideas might have been based on Jewish rituals. It seems to have mattered not at all that Yuval

claimed such ideas were the result of dreadful *mis*interpretations. Such fine distinctions — and this was what drove critics like Breuer or Fleischer — simply do not matter in the global world of headlines, never mind among confirmed anti-Semites. The criticism of Yuval was, therefore, directed less at his work than at the misreadings that lazy or hostile readers might get out of it — or read into it.

If we follow the news headlines of the last few days, we see that this types of reading has been actively pursued in the case of “Pasque di sangue” – Bloody Easter in English – and it turns out to be highly ‘reliable’: the author of this ‘scandal’ is the son of Elio Toaff, former rabbi of the Jewish community at Rome, and a professor at Bar-Ilan University (Ramat Gan, Israel), an Orthodox Jewish institution the religious credentials of which are beyond all possible doubt. Studying the notorious (and thoroughly studied) ritual murder trial at Trent in 1475, Toaff claims to have found evidence that “a minority of fundamentalist Jews of Ashkenazi origin” actually performed such rituals. It’s not only the errors of fact – the ‘Inquisition’, which supposedly discovered all this, did not exist as such in that period – that justify scepticism about the supposed discoveries of this historian. He himself acknowledges that the documents of the investigators at Trent and elsewhere were obtained by force, and that the papal emissary sent to Trent at the time to investigate, dei Giudici, declared the entire trial to be devoid of any form of legal legitimacy. But from this point on, the Professor commits errors that one usually learns to avoid in undergraduate seminars. Even if Toaff, working in the wake of the thorough studies of Wolfgang Treue and Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, had discovered in Trent, Treviso or Portobuffolè a document that had not yet been turned over and over a thousand times already (and he did not), he would still have to answer the question how he construes his evidence from such one-sided documents, the contents of which were squeezed, in the most literal sense of the word, from the witnesses. But Toaff seems not to be someone to be impressed by such standard methods.

In an interview with the Israeli daily *Haaretz* on 12 February, he claimed to have found in the investigative records of the Trent trial details that “did not come from the Christian culture of the judges” and thus had to be of Jewish origin. This shows that he understands both societies as strictly separate entities that did not communicate with each other and in which no knowledge or rather half-knowledge about the other side existed. If we follow this logic, then everything that has ever been said about Jews and about the many other ‘others’ would also have to be true. The investigative records of the judiciary, especially in the time of the pogroms during the Black Death, with their accusations of well-poisoning, are full of such half-knowledge, paired with eager and peculiar interpretations. Sometimes it seems as though the future accusers had sat down to eat at the same table and then, when it suited them, concocted their own coherent if utterly faulty version of all the things they had seen and misunderstood. Torture did the rest to bring out further ‘details’. But Toaff takes the things recorded under these circumstances at face value. Had he looked just a bit beyond the edge of his writing-table, he might have noticed that the activities of the circle around the ‘humanist’ Tridentine bishop Johannes Hinderbach had connections to the witch-hunting campaign of the Dominican Heinrich Kramer (‘Institoris’), famous for the *Malleus maleficarum* or ‘Witches’ Hammer’. The bishop of Innsbruck thought the latter was a psychopath and had him expelled from his bishopric. Toaff seems never to have heard of any of this. His version of events suggests that the Jews had nothing better to do than to take on and act out the (fictitious) roles that had been assigned to them, but that had been developed a thousand years earlier by Christians to be used against their own Christian enemies in internal doctrinal squabbles [The *literary* nature and antiquity of these accusations alone, as in the case of witchcraft accusations, demonstrates that they were traditional smears, not based on real activities — AG].

Toaff has already been attacked heavily, and seems to think he has been misunderstood. In an interview for *Mabat*, the main Israeli news station, on 11 February, he wanted to smooth ruffled feathers and claimed that he was talking not about Christian children having been murdered by Jews, but about blood used for medicinal purposes. This does not improve Toaff's situation, and given the sensational title of the book, it hardly sounds convincing. That he said the next day in his interview for *Haaretz* that "the whole world will crucify him for this book", is hardly evidence of talent in the high art of carefully thinking through what one is going to say before opening one's mouth.

The result is appalling: either the book is a result of the utter naïveté of a historian who has hardly ever looked beyond the narrow confines of his academic speciality, the social history of Italian Jewry [and who has never read the controversial literature of early Christianity, medieval witchcraft treatises, or the scholarship on either one – AG] or it is a deliberate, deeply cynical attempt to get a hearing for his ideas beyond the narrow circle of specialists. Anyone who knows how such sensitive topics work in the conditions of the mass media knows that Toaff can look forward to invitations to talk shows here and there – if so, I suggest you keep on channel surfing. The script is well known and in its fifth remake not in the least amusing: the prophets of cultural entertainment will announce a new 'Historikerstreit' [a very public battle among German historians in the 1980s over how Germany ended up where it was in 1945, and over who was to blame – AG]. The audience will listen intently to 'the Jew', "who should know, after all." Historians' and other news venues are already racing to present new aspects of this 'scandal' and in one anti-Israeli blog, Toaff is advised to hire bodyguards ("...you know, Mossad...").

Scholars will hardly have anything to add to all this. This recurring myth has been refuted, many, many times over. All the current rabbi of the Jewish community at Rome could do, in his reply to Toaff, was to repeat something that had already been published in an earlier investigative report: that Jews are not allowed, anywhere and at any time in the past, present or future, to eat or otherwise make use of blood. That was some time ago. The investigation was initiated by Emperor Frederick II in 1236 to look into a ritual murder accusation in the German town of Fulda, and its results were confirmed in Innocent IV's bull of 1247, designed precisely to protect Jews against such accusations. It is not unreasonable to expect that the historian Toaff might have heard of it.

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