

Zitierhinweis

Albrecht Classen: Rezension von: Paola Tartakoff: Conversion, Circumcision, and Ritual Murder in Medieval Europe, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press 2020, in sehepunkte 20 (2020), Nr. 5 [15.05.2020],
URL:<http://www.sehepunkte.de/2020/05/33985.html>



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Paola Tartakoff: Conversion, Circumcision, and Ritual Murder in Medieval Europe

Anti-Semitism continues to be a severe problem all over the world, but it has deep roots in late antiquity and then especially in the Middle Ages. Only recently (Feb. 4, 2020), a German court decided that the horrible anti-Semitic sculpture displaying the "Judensau" at the parish church of Wittenberg can stay because it has historical value mirroring this awful hatred and is properly accompanied by the necessary explanations. Many people, however, do not understand the subtleties of the arguments and either object to such a legal decision, or, what would be much worse, embrace the anti-Semitic message of the sculpture. On the extreme right of the political spectrum, many of the traditional comments about Jews, hence stereotypes of an egregious kind, resurface, and this today long after the Holocaust, such as the blood-libel and the host desecration. Once again, Jews are globally identified as the culprits of all evils in this world, and this not only by Christians. It was not simply an accident that the recent exhibition "Verschwörungstheorien - früher und heute" was organized at the Stiftung Kloster Dalheim, LWL-Landesmuseum für Klosterkultur, May 18, 2019 to March 13, 2020. [1]

These political reflections strongly underscore the need to probe as deeply as possible how this ancient hatred, first purely religiously motivated, later, since the early nineteenth century, racially, emerged and grew so tremendously, leading to pogroms, mass expulsions, and murder. What was the root issue especially for Christians to rally so vehemently, irrationally, and violently against their Jewish neighbors? Paola Tartakoff, Associate Professor at Rutgers University, here makes a valiant, highly thought-provoking, and insightful effort to address some of the critical aspects of this phenomenon. In essence, in her book she investigates the fundamental fear by the Christian communities about apostates who might or actually did leave the Christian Church and joined the Jewish faith, a phenomenon which seems to have occurred especially since the thirteenth century. At stake, hence, was the entire situation with apostasy, and this both ways.

Of course, in reality, the legal conditions made it highly unlikely that individuals actually apostatized, i.e., circumcised (as this process was then commonly called, irrespective of whether they were physically circumcised or not), but the records seem to present some concrete cases spread over the centuries. To what extent all this constituted nothing but religious propaganda, artificial fear stoked by religious fanatics who wanted to inflame the members of the Christian parishes and simply produced narratives that confirmed those 'fake news', remains a difficult question to answer, and yet it must be kept in mind when we follow Tartakoff's dense arguments throughout the book.

The starting point for her analysis is the odd claim by Master Benedict of Norwich in 1234 that a Jew named Seniore ben Josce had circumcised Edward four years ago. Even Edward, by then nine years old, confirmed that this had been done to him, but there remain many questions which Tartakoff tackles to some extent only in the fifth, the last, chapter, addressing the situation of children in this religious conflict. Why would the Jews have done that? Or did they rather try to retrieve one of their own children and re-integrated it into their community? Was this nothing but a false claim by Master Benedict, who perhaps launched a fake charge? We might never find out because the records only reflect the Christian side. Tartakoff returns to Master Benedict's charge repeatedly throughout the book, but the case does not become clearer thereby.

For Christians the alleged danger of apostasy was of critical concern, although the authorities threatened to punish the Jewish communities severely if this happened. The author cites quite a large number of such cases, but they were spread from the twelfth through the fourteenth

centuries, and this across Europe. Conversion of Jews to Christianity was much more common, of course, but Christian fear of the Jewish danger in theological terms was palpable especially since the thirteenth century, which has probably much to do with the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 after which the Eucharistic host was really to be regarded as Christ's actual body, combined with the requirement that every Christian go to confession at least once a year. This renewed spirituality obviously made the Jewish religion to a real threat, and numerous laws across Europe explicitly banned apostasy to Judaism.

Tartakoff poignantly talks of the "instability of Christian identity" (29), especially because there was also an increased number of Christian converts to Islam, but the fear was more commonly based on the realization that simple-minded Christians might not be strong enough in their faith and could be easily seduced to apostatize. Many canon laws and inquisitorial manuals were created to combat this phenomenon, but it remains rather unclear whether they addressed a real problem or only fantasized about those converts. How to differentiate between fact and fiction? Sometimes it seems as if the author takes the various statements at face value, at other times she clearly alerts us to their probably fictional nature (e.g., 58). Both the universal charges of ritual murder and blood libel certainly fell under the latter category, of course, as the second chapter demonstrates convincingly. As valid as the author's overall argument concerning Christian fear of apostasy proves to be, there always remains a sense of incertitude as to the validity of the cited sources. One effective strategy to address the central issue would have been to question more thoroughly why thirteenth-century Christians felt so insecure about their own faith and why they needed these horrible fictional charges against the Jews to stabilize their own community. Unfortunately, this is not done here, at least not enough.

The third chapter looks at the ca. forty cases of European Christians who had converted to Judaism during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (at least reported about in written sources). Some might have been former slaves, or Christians who feared persecutions and punishments by their co-religionists, but we always would have to keep in mind that those converts would have faced severe criticism by the Christians and also considerable skepticism by the Jews, so they would have ended up in an almost hopeless situation. Then I wonder why Tartakoff suddenly discusses conversions to Judaism in the early Middle Ages, especially of individuals who belonged to the intellectual elite (75). Each case would require extensive analysis and questioning, especially with regard to the sources and their intentions, but there is no room for that here. Was it all propaganda, polemics, fear-mongering? We can only welcome the mass of sources brought together, but this also leads to challenges as to their validity. The author mentions, for instance, the case of a Franciscan who had apostatized and was later forcefully taken back by his Franciscan brothers. But once they did not watch him, he committed suicide in front of the people on the street watching his act (85). Would that have been a case of insanity? Or do we have to question the source itself?

Following, we learn more about the material and spiritual advantages that awaited some of the converts to Judaism, but Tartakoff also adds serious words of warning about taking these accounts at face value because even the Jewish community was rather apprehensive of converts and warned about them as a danger for them as a whole (94-98). Instead, Christian authors probably developed this kind of narrative about apostasy as a way of warning their audiences and thereby hoped to strengthen their sense of Christian identity. Some of the converted Jews, however, gained great influence and contributed strongly to the Christian struggle against Judaism, such as Petrus Alfonsi, who is virtually ignored here.

Chapter Four considers the fairly large number of Jewish apostates who converted back to Judaism, with economic and political reasons often being the dominant factor, but for the Christians those apostates were persecuted with the full force of the law (Inquisition). But there were apostates on both sides, and this might explain further why Christians were so insecure about their own religious identity. Here it might have been helpful if the author had

at least tried to offer some tentative psychological readings into this whole issue because the extreme form of hatred of Jews demands further historical and religious investigations. The last chapter returns to the case of little Edward and his forced circumcision and probes further the case of children on both sides of the religious divide, but it remains uncertain whether the author has really reached the bottom of the entire phenomenon. She can indeed draw from a fairly large number of cases, but those were scattered throughout across all of the European landscape during two centuries, not counting here the cases from the eighth and ninth centuries. Whether we can trust those sources remains an unanswered question, and we would have really profited from a much more in-depth analysis of the claims made by the various medieval narrators.

In fact, this unearths one problem throughout the entire study, namely the superficial treatment of the sources. For instance, Tartakoff refers to a narrative in the *Golden Legend* by Jacobus de Voragine involving a challenge raised by learned Jews to Pope Sylvester that could have led to the latter's conversion (42). What was the outcome, however? The author does not inform us about it. When we check the legend, it turns out that the entire set-up of the debate involves twelve Jewish masters (not just a group), and although the last one of them can indeed make a ferocious ox fall down dead when it hears the word of God whispered into its ear, the pope is more powerful and can bring the ox back to life, whereupon all Jews convert. Nothing of this is considered here. Once we start looking closely at the material brought forth as evidence by Tartakoff, we realize that the critical analysis is often not sufficient, either because the original is not provided, or because the context is missing.

Technically, the reader faces a real problem by tracking down where the author might have drawn her material from (this is all the publisher's responsibilities). The note number takes us first to the apparatus, where the data is given only in abbreviated fashion. The notes are divided according to chapters and to the page where they appear in the text. Then one must trace that further down in the bibliography, but if a reference is given only in an acronym, one needs to search extensively for that list, which is oddly placed before the notes. This all proves to be rather cumbersome and time consuming. What really troubles me, however, is that all quotes are provided in English translation only, and many times it is unclear who has done these translations. Moreover, where is the relevant research published in languages other than English (e.g., Heinz Schreckenberger)?

The volume concludes with the bibliography and an index, along with almost two pages of acknowledgments. This is a complex and provocative study which sheds much light on the Christian-Jewish relationship during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, it remains unclear why the author limited herself to that period and left out, for instance, the fifteenth century. Many of the sources would deserve a much closer examination than is offered here, but Tartakoff already signals clearly that much of medieval anti-Judaism must have been closely linked to Christian insecurity or lack of religious identity. I suspect that most of those accounts about Jewish or Christian apostates were, if not fictional, at least manipulated so as to serve specific ideological purposes, whereas Tartakoff tends to read them as factual (14). As she herself later demonstrates, however, the documents pertaining to little Edward and the curious figure of Master Benedict reveal numerous problems with the entire case since the boy seems to have been born by a Jewish mother (139-41) and had been neglected by his father. Whatever the situation might have been, the consequences for the wealthy members of the Jewish community were dire, revealing, once again, that the Christians used the charge of apostasy for monetary purposes.

Note :

[1] For a review of the catalog, see [https://www.hsozkult.de/exhibitionreview/id/rezausstellungen-354?](https://www.hsozkult.de/exhibitionreview/id/rezausstellungen-354?utm_source=hshtml&utm_medium=email&utm_term=2020-3&utm_campaign=htmlldiges)

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