Blood Libel

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The story begins with the discovery of a child’s body. Most commonly it is a boy, though occasionally it could be more than one child, or a girl. The body might be discovered in a sewer drainage ditch, perhaps in a wood. The setting is generally a medieval town. The child is a Christian and he is young. He could be two years old or twelve. He might have been missing for days, or just overnight. But the body’s discovery is only the beginning. What happens afterward hinges on religious hostility and the misunderstandings it has often fed between Christian and Jewish communities. The Jews are accused of murdering the boy for obscure ritual purposes, and what begins as dark rumor might end in anti-Jewish violence, or perhaps a judicial inquiry involving the possibility of torture and execution. The many endings of this story, and the precise details of its escalation, vary over the course of the European Middle Ages, but its beginning becomes stereotyped in a script that plays out many times, extending beyond the medieval period to be revived as needed through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Once taken up for propaganda purposes by Hitler’s Nazi regime, the notorious claim that Jews murder children has even now been reanimated in antisemitic discourse in the Muslim world.¹

The ritual murder story is a critical ingredient in a specific genre of malicious myths about Jews, generally described by the phrase blood libel. A
broad array of claims fall under this rubric, which describes the medieval belief that Jews needed Christian blood, for ritual purposes such as baking matzah for Passover, or else to satisfy some strange medicoreligious need, like healing the circumcision cut. The accusation of ritual murder is also tied to the fear that Jews engaged in acts of symbolic vengeance or spite against the Christian religion, often involving re-enactment of the crucifixion on the body of a child. Though untrue, these lurid stories were both a product and source of Christian hostility and suspicion toward Jews. But the tale of a murdered child holds a special place in this mythology. Though I sometimes use the more general term *blood libel* here, I rely on the language of the ritual murder accusation, legend, or libel, because it describes the specific element of the libel I am examining, and because the term directs attention to the vexed question of murder, and the claim that Jewish tradition in some way sanctions or encourages murderous behavior. It is the question of murder, and the historical status of such alleged crimes, that is often at stake in arguments about specific historical accusations. The blood libel has frequently been debunked by scholars as antithetical to the Jewish tradition, which abhors both blood and human sacrifice, yet there have nevertheless always been interpreters who preferred to believe it was true, generally for insidious political reasons.

This book is about recent scholars’ efforts to account for an explosive accusation and its implications for understanding the dynamics of persecution in Western history. I argue that some understandable ethical questions are central to this project, including concerns about responsibility, repetition, and the possibility of adequate explanation. The ritual murder legend occupies a tiny corner of historiography, yet it operates like an overloaded circuit, a high-friction relay point in efforts to account for the difficult course of Jewish-Christian history, the violence of the Holocaust, and even modern Israeli politics. If these sound like big stakes, that is because they are. This phenomenon of medieval history, in other words, reaches far beyond the Middle Ages. A curious legend has become a point of contact for intertwined questions of methodology and ethics that concern the discipline of history as a whole. It is the project of this book to articulate how ethics shapes methodological decisions in the study of the accusation, and how questions about methodology, in turn, pose ethical problems of interpretation and understanding. These intertwined considerations also resonate with continued ideological implications in the present.

Three of the four main chapters of this book discuss the famous case of William of Norwich and recent historians’ arguments about its origins and
place in the history of anti-Jewish libels. This boy’s untimely death and modest postmortem fame occupy a central place in scholarship on the legend of ritual murder, in part because the surviving Latin account represents one of the earliest and best-documented accusations in medieval Europe. Another exemplar in recent arguments is the much later case of Simon of Trent in 1475, discussed in the final chapter. The relative wealth of documentation produced in relation to these cases has made them sites of interest for scholars, even if the evidence is limited to a single text in William’s case, and involves testimony extracted via torture in Simon’s. Much of my interest in the Norwich story stems from its symbolic dimensions in scholarship, where its status as the possible first example of the accusation in Western history exists in relation to a largely unspoken “end” point of antisemitic persecution: the Holocaust of the mid-twentieth century, whose shadow looms over efforts to understand medieval Jewish-Christian history. It is in part a concern for ends, I suggest, that lends such urgency to arguments about the origin of this story of murder, conspiracy, and anti-Christian fanaticism directed against medieval Jewish communities.

I take up two historiographical problems where the ritual murder legend is concerned: the problem of assigning responsibility for the accusation and its consequences, and the related question of the proper limits of interpretation. Both are fundamentally ethical as well as methodological issues and are implicated in questions of ideology. Thanks to biased sources, competing religious views of reality, and a volatile history of appropriation of the story of ritual murder for political ends, determinations about “what actually happened” in a given case of the accusation are more than usually elusive. Though we may be confident, based on even a cursory knowledge of Jewish tradition, that Jewish communities did not engage in conspiracies to murder Christian children, this conclusion still does not answer the vexed question of what did happen in a particular instance. This indeterminacy, a basic inability to determine precisely how historical events that lay behind the accusations unfolded, has contributed to speculation and anxiety, as well as competing desires to exonerate historical Jewish communities, or declare them collectively guilty. The push and pull of polemical arguments about the historical status of the accusation is part of what I describe in the first chapter as the “juridical” or legalistic context in which discussion of the legend has traditionally taken place. One of my arguments is that scholars’ claims about how we should understand the lived reality in which such charges emerged are inextricably linked to their ethical evaluation of the relations between Jewish and Christian commu-
nities, and the forms of anti-Jewish violence that often marked those rela-
tions. These claims, in turn, exist in difficult dialogue with the cultural
concerns of the historian's own moment.

While arguments about the ritual murder accusation have always re-
volved around questions of guilt and innocence, I examine recent theories
that in one way or another revisit and disturb such questions. The histo-
rian Gavin Langmuir discerns a universal psychology of irrational anti-
semitism over the course of Western history that is rendered pointedly vis-
able in the legend of ritual murder. He confirms a common understanding
of Christian responsibility for Jewish suffering in the wake of historical ac-
cusations but also redefines the historical reality at stake in the process, in
terms that may carry their own challenging political implications. Israel
Yuval is one of a number of recent historians who open up the complex re-
alities of a shared Jewish and Christian social space in ways that demand a
reevaluation of the question of responsibility. Yuval imagines medieval
Jewish-Christian relations in general, and the emergence of the ritual mur-
der accusation in particular, in terms of a structure of mutual implication
in the historical dynamic he analyzes. Ariel Toaff has broken a long-stand-
ing taboo by appearing to suggest that at least a few accusations of ritual
murder might have had some basis in fact. Toaff’s suggestive and often eva-
sive claims about historical reality however highlight questions of ideo-
logical bias and psychological processes of transference that are perennial
features of discussion of the libel.

My goal in this book is not to provide a review of every important con-
tribution to scholarship on the ritual murder accusation, but to examine
some recent arguments in order to: (1) offer a window onto the intellectual
and ethical stakes of recent methodological shifts visible in medieval Jewish
studies; (2) write the story of recent historiography on the ritual murder ac-
cusation as an intellectual history that articulates how scholarship in this
field maintains an indirect but meaningful dialogue with cultural debates;
and (3) analyze how historians cope with the limit where historical knowl-
edge meets historical uncertainty in discussion of the blood libel. This is a
project of cultural criticism as well as historiographical analysis, and aims at
the reexamination of one of the most vexed questions in Jewish-Christian
history. At the same time, I want to emphasize that contemporary argu-
ments about the nature of historical reality exist on a continuum that in-
cludes medieval as well as modern texts: I open my discussion with an
analysis of Thomas of Monmouth’s account of the death and afterlife of
William of Norwich. This case haunts the scholars whose work I analyze
here, and has become a kind of fulcrum around which this book develops. Even when the death of little William is forced to cede its place as the first accusation to some earlier death, his case is a point of inevitable return for those who want to understand how the specter of child murder has become an enduring, dubious legacy of medieval Jewish-Christian relations.

**Ethics**

I have been speaking of ethics, and the time has come to clarify what I mean by this term in the context of this study. Ethics is a notoriously slippery concept, one that runs the gamut from practical guidelines for behavior to principles of self-evaluation to questions of justice and judgment. Bearing in mind Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s wonderful axiom that “Ethics does not solve problems, it structures them,” I would like to articulate how the historian’s ethics works to structure complex problems of meaning, interpretation, and method. When speaking of ethics, I refer not to the scholar’s statements about his personal ethics, nor to his standing among a community of professionals, but to the principles that guide his praxis as a professional historian. I highlight assumptions and convictions about issues like the role of the historian in making judgments about the meaning of events. Historians’ working assumptions might be conscious or unconscious—certainly they are often unarticulated—but guiding ethical presuppositions are visible in the claims and arguments of historiography. Every historian, from this perspective, operates out of a specific ethics, but analyzing the historian’s work in these terms is not as simple as isolating a code of professional mores that all historians share, since there will be many variations on such themes, and a general code often cannot account for individual differences in practice, particularly if these concern controversial cases or new methods. My argument focuses on the role that a largely implicit ethical framework plays in the work of historians who study the ritual murder accusation, and the ways ethics might be said to shape the project of historical interpretation in this fraught sphere. Each of the historians whose work I examine here represents a different ethics at work, from the project of moralization visible in the writing of Gavin Langmuir, to the turn to contingency and implication visible in the work of Israel Yuval, to the ethical equivocations of the scholar Ariel Toaff.

Though in the following chapters I draw on the ethical theory of Judith Butler and Gillian Rose, here I would like to clarify the critical relation be-
tween morality and ethics that will guide my analysis throughout. I rely on Paul Ricoeur’s distinction between the ethical aim and the moral norm. By means of this division, he explains the differences between ethics and morality, as well as their complex interdependence: it is the difference, he writes, between “that which is considered to be good and that which imposes itself as obligatory. It is, therefore, by convention that I reserve the term ‘ethics’ for the aim of an accomplished life and the term ‘morality’ for the articulation of this aim in norms characterized at once by the claim to universality and by an effect of constraint.” Ethics is defined by an open-ended and affirmative effort to aim at the “good life,” which, for Ricoeur, is lived “with and for others, in just institutions” (Oneself as Another, 172). But if ethics is concerned with ultimate ends and larger goals, dwelling on issues like justice or reciprocity in relationships, it is in the realm of the moral norm that such concerns take on the force of prescriptions, prohibitions, and laws. If ethics concerns itself with defining the good, the moral norm is about preserving and policing its boundaries. This is because morality must contend with the reality of evil and violence in human relations. “In each case,” Ricoeur reminds us, “morality replies to violence. And if the commandment cannot do otherwise than to take the form of a prohibition, this is precisely because of evil: to all the figures of evil responds the no of morality” (Oneself as Another, 221). If ethics is the space of deliberation, we might say, then morality is the space of decision and judgment.

But this is not a matter of declaring that freewheeling ethics is “good” while the imperatives of morality are “bad,” as Ricoeur makes clear repeatedly. The ethical aim, he writes, must “pass through the sieve of the norm” in order to be articulated in practical action (Oneself as Another, 170). The process of deliberation must ultimately yield to a moment of decision. At the same time, moral imperatives sometimes lead to impasses, in which competing norms contradict one another. At this point only recourse to the ethical aim can resolve dilemmas. In this context, Ricoeur discusses the conflict between the claims of family and politics in Antigone, as a way of arguing for recourse to the ethical aim when the conflict of norms becomes unbearable. Such conflicts, he observes, “lead us back from morality to ethics, but to an ethics enriched by the passage through the norm and exercising moral judgment in a given situation” (Oneself as Another, 203). Where the moral norm attempts to universalize, the ethical sphere takes account of singular situations that resist or disrupt the universalizing impulse of morality. It is this tempered judgment that yields practical wisdom. Once again, however, Ricoeur emphasizes the dialectic between
ethics and morality, rather than an eclipse of the moral: “this manner of referring morality back to ethics is not to be taken to mean that the morality of obligation has been disavowed,” he writes (Oneself as Another, 240). Instead, the obligations of morality must be in continuous conversation with the aims of ethics.

Ricoeur’s distinctions help me articulate where scholars fall on a moral-ethical continuum, but I also argue that recent studies of the ritual murder libel offer a window onto a larger ethical paradigm shift within medieval Jewish studies that is best described in terms of what philosopher Gillian Rose has called “the broken middle” of philosophical and ethical thought. For Rose, as for Ricoeur, we are always negotiating the claims of norms and the claims of ideals, but she is resolute in critiquing thinkers who would give pride of place to the ideal in preference to the messy realm of the actual and of laws.10 Her vision is uncompromising, but not a counsel of despair. Rather than abandon our efforts to build a better and more just society because we may never attain a state of perfection, Rose insists we strive to acknowledge our own implication in the structures of violence that underpin the political order and still work toward a greater possibility for justice—not in the realm of the ideal, but in the space of this world. Furthermore, we must do so impersonally, without privileging ourselves as either victims or transcendent political actors. Pursuing this goal may also require revising cherished narratives of communal memory.

Rose’s pragmatic ethics calls to mind the real political stakes of apparently abstract ethical debates. Ethical theory offers us a helpful framework for analyzing the ideological stakes of historiographical arguments about the ritual murder accusation. I argue that the discourse of ethics mediates the claims of method and the claims of ideology in recent historiography. When we understand how ethical deliberation is bound up in the negotiation of methodological decisions and the ideological embeddedness of historiography, we can better analyze both the methodological and cultural consequences of the historian’s work. As I will argue throughout, no historian escapes the influence of ideology. However, the claims of the present must not dominate his work of interpretation, or his arguments become the tool of ideology, rather than existing in productive tension with it. This is a qualitative distinction, relying on an informed analysis of historiography that takes questions of methodology seriously while recognizing that historical arguments can have implications for the present.

In the context of debates about the meaning of the ritual murder accusation, the competing ethical priorities at stake revolve around the question
of historical responsibility, often described in terms of guilt or innocence, and what it means to determine and ascribe responsibility for historical actions. The major questions might be mapped this way: Is it part of the historian’s task to assign blame to historical actors or groups, particularly when assigning blame has potential political consequences in the present? If there are other languages than the language of blame for thinking about historical responsibility, then how would they address the concern for historical justice? These questions speak to the classical tension between the moral and ethical spheres. Blame only has meaning under a certain version of responsibility, and it concerns how answerable we are, as nations, cultures, or religious groups, for past sins committed in our name. Blame is only meaningful if we can be understood to make demands or reparations, as victims or aggressors, whether in the realm of public opinion or legal act. In the context of Jewish history, this issue comes home with particular force when it comes to the memory of the Holocaust, which has become a prominent fixture in a cultural work of reparation that features Jewish suffering at its center. ¹¹ In historiographical terms, to take a position on whether to assign blame is also to take a position on the extent and limits of corporate responsibility, and in some cases (as in Israel Yuval’s work), it is to ask whether this model of historical responsibility continues to makes sense. It may be that the limits of a historicism concerned with blame also precisely trace the limits of a politics of reparations and essential identity. It is in just this commingling of ethical concerns and ideological consequences that historiographical debates about the ritual murder accusation continue to unfold. And here ethical theory can inform the larger ideological context in which historiography is written, while still constituting an identifiable discourse of its own. Debates about responsibility continue to have larger consequences, without losing their particularity as ethical questions. While the scope of ethical debates might be delimited, however, the entanglement of ideological concerns in historiography is far more diffuse and difficult to pin down. This is an issue I approach by considering the idea of the limit event.

*Limit Events*

What I am calling a *limit case* or *limit event* is a point in historical thinking where questions of cultural meaning and scholarly method surface in tight relation to one another, challenging conceptual boundaries of historical thought. These events call for clarification even as they resist satisfactory
explanation. I have already indicated the entanglement of modern studies of the blood libel and cultural memory of the Holocaust. Both subjects operate as limit events in scholarly discourse, though it may seem strange or even disrespectful to bring these two examples into such close proximity to one another. After all, the Holocaust comprises a series of extreme, traumatic events that occurred on a massive scale. In such a context it may be difficult to see medieval accusations of ritual murder as anything but a series of minor oppressions. But what brings these two cases together is the sense that something fundamental eludes our understanding about each one. We might even express this as an inverse relation: the Holocaust is attended by a mass of documentation, yet its motivating mechanisms remain elusive. Ritual murder accusations are so sparsely documented that the most basic historical reconstruction becomes an epistemological challenge. Yet each historical phenomenon is a site where ethical concerns become entangled with interpretation, where historians’ psychological and political investments are rendered provocatively visible, and finally, where limits—of interpretation, representation, and meaning—are always being negotiated against a background of cultural debate.

Scholars who write about the blood libel are no less aware than their counterparts in Holocaust studies of shadow discourses of antisemitism that haunt their work. But this relation is culturally as well as conceptually overdetermined. The Holocaust represents the most prominent example of a limit case, one that is wedded to claims about the impossibility of representing such a massive moral violation. This widespread understanding of a paradigmatic example may predispose us to view earlier cases of anti-Jewish persecution in the same light, and even encourage the retroactive recruitment of earlier disasters to this narrative pattern. Yet the idea of the limit event demands that we recognize how conceptual and methodological questions are entangled with cultural memory in just this way. Shared cultural paradigms for making sense of historical events may be described as ideological in the broadest sense, but they cannot simply be expunged from historical writing. Instead I argue that this entanglement of cultural and interpretive concerns must be acknowledged and analyzed as part of the process of producing historical meaning.

These problems of interpretation, conceptualization, and meaning may also apply to cases outside the paradigm of Jewish history. Simone Gigliotti has recently discussed the applicability of the limit event to a new context: the forced removals of mixed-race children of Aboriginal descent from their families in Australia between 1910 and 1970. She summarizes
the state of conversation by referring to the Holocaust as the paradigm of
the limit case.

I use the phrase “limit event” based on my acquaintance with it in dis-
cussions of the Holocaust’s representation in post-war scholarly debates
as, variously: the manifestation of the potential barbarism of mod-
ernity, as an extreme event of such uniqueness and incomparability that
renders it incomprehensible to “those who were not there,” and of con-
tested representational possibility in historical discourse, literary and
visual culture, and in testimonial narratives.\textsuperscript{14}

Gigliotti highlights three specific characteristics of the limit event as it ap-
pears in academic debates about the Holocaust: the limit event surpasses or
challenges moral limits (evoking barbarism); it inhibits the historicist im-
pulse to draw comparisons by virtue of its unusual, even incomparable,
status; finally, the limit event is always contested at the level of representa-
tion. I would also emphasize the indissociability of ethical questions from
conceptual ones: understanding the enormity of a crime that entails the
murder of millions of victims taxes the imagination, but never in an ethi-
cally neutral way. Though far fewer victims are involved, these questions—
about moral limits, comparison, and representation—are also relevant to
the study of the blood libel. The specific ethical questions that attend dis-
cussion of this story turn on the issue of historical responsibility and are
framed in terms that have broader cultural and ideological implications as
well as ethical ones.

Saul Friedlander has discussed the limit event in terms of a surplus or
excess that frustrates understanding. In his introduction to Gerald Flem-
ing’s book \textit{Hitler and the Final Solution}, Friedlander remarks,

If one admits that the Jewish problem was at the center, was the very
essence of the system, many [studies of the Final Solution] lose their
coherence, and historiography is confronted with an anomaly that
defies the normal interpretive categories. . . . We know in detail what
occurred, we know the sequence of events and their probable interac-
tion, but the profound dynamics of the phenomenon escapes [\textit{sic}] us.\textsuperscript{15}

The antisemitism of the Nazi regime—characterized by an obsession with
“the Jewish question”—is a central category that defines the Holocaust, yet
it remains elusive. The subject as a whole defies normal interpretive cate-
gories, despite our knowledge of basic facts. I have already suggested how
the ritual murder accusation operates in these terms. The central category
of the “reality” surrounding the accusation remains an elusive—and inflammatory—central question for scholars who work on the topic. Normal interpretive categories that apply to historical events are compromised or transformed when the central “event” in question is a product of fantasy, community suspicion, and evanescent “social knowledge.”

Hayden White describes what I am calling the limit case as the “modernist event,” and the Holocaust is still for him the paradigmatic example. What Friedlander understands as an excess is for White a resistance: he points to “the anomalous nature of modernist events—their resistance to inherited categories and conventions for assigning meanings to events” and “the difficulty felt by present generations of arriving at some agreement as to their meaning.”

This sense of an excess or remainder, of an elusive center that defies and yet demands resolution, is central to the limit case.

This sense of irresolvability is complicated by the historian’s psychological relation to his material. Dominick LaCapra argues that as a traumatic limit point the Holocaust raises intractable problems of transference for historians. Transference, as LaCapra has defined the term over the course of his career, is a product of the historian’s deep relation to his subject. “By ‘transference,’” he writes,

I mean primarily one’s implication in the other or the object of study with the tendency to repeat in one’s own discourse or practice tendencies active in, or projected into, the other or object. For example, one may have a ritualistic, phobic response to ritual, may replicate a scapegoat mechanism in an analysis of scapegoating, may repeat Nazi terminology in an analysis of Nazism, or may manifest fanaticism in a critique of religion.

While transference may be a problem for historians working on any historical question, it is arguably easier to mask where less fraught subjects are concerned. A recognizable process of transference not only marks the limit case but is part of what defines it. “Transference,” LaCapra insists, “is inevitable to the extent that an issue is not dead, provokes an emotional and evaluative response, and entails the meeting of history with memory.”

These criteria—the “live” issue that provokes both emotion and analysis, and dovetails messily with the demands of history and memory—are further markers of the limit event as I am conceptualizing it here. Transference and the related concept of identification are visible in studies of the blood libel, where, until recently, many scholars engaged in a more or less explicit project of exonerating historical Jewish communities from false ac-
cusations, a project often understood to have real consequences in the historian’s own moment. If transference is fundamentally an act of displacement, then for historians who study the ritual murder accusation, this is a displacement between the cultural and political debates of the historian’s own moment and his views of the past, creating sometimes uncomfortable sites of exchange and reflection.

These questions come together in a specific debate over Hayden White’s work that is useful for articulating how historiography on the ritual murder accusation unfolds within larger ideological and disciplinary contexts. White is associated with postmodern critiques of historiography that address questions such as the transparency of historical reality, the elusiveness of objectivity, and particularly how the historian’s work of shaping a narrative affects our perception of evidence by introducing it into a new, narrative context. In debates about historiography that took place in the United States between the late 1970s and early 1990s, White was portrayed as either the prime representative of an unwelcome assault on the discipline of history or a key figure in a necessary reevaluation of disciplinary assumptions, depending on the author’s perspective. He is particularly well known for his theory of emplotment, which underlines the structural similarity between historiographical narratives and certain literary genres, such as tragedy, comedy, farce, or satire. White argued that historians narrativize history according to such generic modes depending on their interpretation of evidence, and rival interpretations might be narrativized in different ways, without necessarily being untrue to the evidence in question.

While White’s claims have often shocked historians, however, serious controversy erupted when his arguments came up against the Holocaust as limit case. After he addressed the historiographical status of the Holocaust directly in “The Politics of Historical Interpretation,” this essay became a flashpoint in a major volume on the difficulties of representing the Holocaust, Saul Friedlander’s Probing the Limits of Representation. I return to this debate now for two reasons: (1) White’s career is representative of the problems of negotiating historical relativism and ideology in scholarship, and (2) this particular debate over his work gestures toward a conceptual middle ground that historiography is still struggling to navigate. In the original essay, some of White’s rhetorical questions capture the challenge (and the danger) his views were understood to represent for traditional historiography. Channeling the voices of his critics, White paraphrases some of their concerns:
Do you mean to say that the occurrence and nature of the Holocaust is only a matter of opinion and that one can write its history in whatever way one pleases? Do you imply that any account of that event is as valid as any other account so long as it meets certain formal requirements of discursive practices and that one has no responsibility to the victims to tell the truth about the indignities and cruelties they suffered? Are there not certain historical events that tolerate none of that mere cleverness that allows criminals or their admirers to feign accounts of their crimes that effectively relieve them of their guilt or responsibility or even, in the worst instances, allows them to maintain that the crimes they committed never happened?22

In his follow-up essay, White’s answers to these questions appear to be no, no, and yes.23 For White and his critics, what is at stake is the problem of adjudicating among competing narrativizations of historical events. All parties to the debate understand that some historical accounts are motivated by ideological concerns, and that authors with extremist political objectives can and do capitalize on historical uncertainties to make radical claims. The problem remains how to determine protocols for distinguishing between competing accounts in an ideologically inflected world.

White’s name is often taken to be synonymous with a thoroughgoing relativism in historical interpretation. Critics have suggested that his analysis reduces history to “mere interpretation” rather than knowledge. Dominick LaCapra has argued that White’s work sometimes moves toward a “radical constructivism” that reduces historical reconstruction to an act of imagination on the part of the historian, who may do with evidence what he will.24 White himself has repeatedly acknowledged his relativism, while denying that it extends as far as critics claim. Of his position, he writes,

Historical relativism, as I understand it, has to do only with the idea that, in historical research at least, the truth-value and authoritativeness of a given representation of a given domain of the past must be assessed in terms of its relation to the cultural context and social conditions obtaining at the time of its production and with respect to the perspective from which the inquiry was launched. . . . The relation between facts and events is always open to negotiation and reconceptualization, not because the events change with time, but because we change our ways of conceptualizing them.25
He stresses that historical knowledge is always knowledge produced within a specific historical moment, a situated context that includes ideological influences. Yet while historical understanding is always a process of approximation that is conceptually changing, knowledge remains possible. Writing of his own work, he insists,

This characterization of historical discourse does not imply that past events, persons, institutions, and processes never really existed. It does not imply that we cannot have more or less precise information about these past entities. And it does not imply that we cannot transform this information into knowledge by the application of various methods developed by the different disciplines comprising the “science” of an age or culture. (Figural Realism, 2)

There are such things as historical realities, in other words, and they may be indirectly accessed via surviving historical evidence. But knowledge about such realities, in addition to being mediated by documents, monuments, and other survivals from the past, only becomes knowledge once it has become part of a specific kind of discourse. This discourse is created and shaped by the historian in his capacity as interpreter. Like other complex texts that advance claims about the world, including literature, the historian’s discourse “always means more than it literally says, says something other than what it seems to mean, and reveals something about the world only at the cost of concealing something else” (Figural Realism, 7). One consequence of this claim is the recognition that analyzing the historian’s conclusions requires examining his unspoken assumptions and situatedness in a specific historical context, as well as his arguments.26

While the historian’s account is inevitably shaped by the act of narrativization, however, White argues that the historian must always be responsible to the evidence, or he is not a historian. In fact, the refusal to be responsible to evidence and a determination to ignore the demands of rational argumentation in debates with other interpreters are the chief characteristics of fascist views of history as White defines them early in his career. In Metahistory, he writes that authoritarian ideological perspectives like those of the Apocalypticist, Reactionary, or Fascist are not “cognitively responsible,” because they “are not regarded as being responsible to criticism launched from other positions, to ‘data’ in general, or to control by the logical criteria of consistency and coherence” (23). When a particular set of ideological concerns dominate a historical account to the detriment of the claims of evidence, responsibility to criticism, or consistency, then a
historical account has lost its legitimacy. Debates about White’s work have revolved around the dangers of relativism, yet White condemns the kind of arbitrary reading that would allow ideologues to distort or falsify the historical record, even as his larger concern is with analyzing how many different non-arbitrary accounts are possible in the historian’s encounter with evidence. Between evidence (which White often takes as a given) and meaning lies the interpretive work of the historian, and here, White argues, it is possible to emplot the same events in a few equally plausible ways that are faithful (that is, responsible) to the evidence. A particular piece of the historical record might be em plotted as comedy, tragedy, farce, or satire, depending on the historian’s interpretation of the meaning of such events. However, for White the Holocaust—and presumably other “modernist events”—constitute exceptions to this rule.

White’s claims have often caused consternation among his fellow historians, I would argue, not only because he draws attention to structures of narrativization they might prefer to discount but also because he refuses the consolation of a positivist directive for adjudicating among competing interpretations of events. Though he believes in the possibility of distinguishing between better and worse accounts, or between responsible and irresponsible ones, these exist on a continuum rather than being separated by an unbridgeable gulf between history and nonhistory. This is perhaps most clear when he writes about the role of ideology in historiography. In the essay that excited so much controversy, White seems to be suggesting that, since historical events might be em plotted in several ways, and since any emplotment has an inexpungeable ideological component, then one way to assess competing narratives might be by considering their “effectiveness”—their direct effect on community memory and contemporary politics. Because White directly compared Holocaust denial, Zionist historiography, and Palestinian narratives about the past as examples of such effective histories, he appeared to many readers to level any distinction between them. In his critique of White, Carlo Ginzburg is unequivocal about what he sees as the poisonous implications of this series of comparisons: “We can conclude that if Faurisson’s narrative [of Holocaust denial] were ever to prove effective, it would be regarded by White as true as well.”

White’s critics are concerned about the specter of fascism and the fear that White’s vision of history may be insufficiently condemnatory in relation to it. However, most seem to overlook or minimize one of White’s larger claims. While he suggests that both fascism and Zionism are points on a continuum of what he calls a “visionary politics,” he also distinguishes
between them in terms that emphasize a critical qualitative difference. Zionism represents an interpretation of history that leaves the substance of events intact, by maintaining a sense of what he previously called cognitive responsibility to historical evidence. However, the fascist orientation of Holocaust denial maintains no such sense of obligation to the evidence: Holocaust denial is a lie.\(^{28}\) In other words, while ideology is inescapable for both modes of historical writing, one mode maintains a meaningful relationship with the evidence, even if its conclusions might be critiqued, while the purely ideological reading is disingenuous in its handling of evidence. This is more than a distinction of the moment generated by White’s fears of political fallout: as we have seen, he consistently defends responsibility to evidence as an ethicomethodological imperative. Without fidelity to the evidence, we do not have history. What is instructive about this debate for thinking about scholarship on the ritual murder accusation is that the set of distinctions at work—between cognitive responsibility and falsehood, on the one hand, and questions of evidence and meaning on the other—are the same categories operative in debates about the medieval libel.

However, the role of interpretation is further complicated by the slippery status of facts and events themselves in relation to the ritual murder accusation. As Martin Jay points out in his response, White’s model presumes that certain basic facts or data are stable, and that it is our interpretations of them that change.\(^{29}\) Yet when it comes to accusations of blood libel, stable facts are thin on the ground. The sources are limited, and biased. The “reality” of the event itself is at the heart of discussion. In this complex historiographical scene, determining what “responsibility to the evidence” should look like is part of the very problem at stake. This has been nowhere more clearly illustrated than in recent debates about Ariel Toaff’s controversial book on the Trent trial for ritual murder in 1475, *Pasque di sangue*, discussed here in the final chapter. In the fierce debates that followed the book’s release, major questions concerned the status of the evidence itself, and what one might legitimately deduce from testimony extracted by torture.

While I cannot hope, in the space of a few brief pages, to resolve the crisis over relativism that has bedeviled modern historiography, I would like to suggest that even in relation to such a difficult case as the legend of ritual murder, it is possible to make determinations about what it means to be cognitively responsible in White’s terms. This involves relying on historiographical standards of reasonable inference, cautious use of hostile sources, and a judicious distinction between probability and possibility,
fact and hypothesis. In his response to White, Martin Jay has recourse to a Habermasian notion of communicative rationality, by which arguments are secured and claims validated within a community prepared to evaluate them. In this context, he writes,

by raising discursive claims for truth and rightness, anyone who enters a critical discussion tacitly presupposes the power of the better argument rather than coercion or authority as the ground for conviction. The criterion of effectiveness is thus not merely winning assent by any means possible, but rather winning it by redeeming validity claims through procedures that satisfy conditions of rationality. (“Of Plots,” 106)

Furthermore, while such rational standards may vary between communities, they simply do not vary enough to make fair-minded negotiations over meaning impossible. Even if we reject the appeal to a specieswide notion of rationality, Jay writes, the idea of communicative rationality suggests that “there exist discursive communities, sharing standards and procedures of communicative rationality, that are more inclusive than the communities from which their members come” (106). Robert Eaglestone offers a helpful distillation of these ideas when he writes that a “reasonable historian” is one who may be “reasoned with,” and insists that those who fail to meet this requirement, along with disciplinary norms—particularly norms concerning the use of evidence—are not practicing history.30

Certainly there are those who reject such criteria—and the standards of cognitive responsibility that go with them. The specter of Holocaust denial has made this more than usually apparent in recent decades.31 Yet that does not mean that reasonable debates about the historical meaning of events cannot take place. This may not amount to a method, if method is taken to mean having a clear rule to decide every ambiguous case—but it is a consistent and coherent praxis, one that negotiates the limitations of a positivism that does not pause to consider what is taken for granted in the formation of knowledge on the one hand, and a mode of arbitrary, even nihilistic reading exemplified by fascist historiography on the other. What Martin Jay underscores is a basic faith in the power of the better argument to win the day. Certainly this may be compromised in situations where censorship or authoritarian politics are operative, but no one can entirely guard against such eventualities, including professional historians.

Rather than continue to revisit the extreme poles of positivism and radical relativism in debates about historical interpretation, it is more productive to embrace the praxis Jay describes, recognizing that while facts may
not be any more transparent than historical reality in the consideration of a limit event like the ritual murder accusation, these questions can nevertheless be negotiated under the rubric of responsibility or fidelity to evidence, carefully grounded interpretation, and the negotiation of meaning among a community of professionals trained in thinking through such questions. This is surely what it means to be cognitively responsible, and we must learn to stand this middle ground, however difficult of definition it may be, if we are not to be bullied by the specter of authoritarian exploitations of history. This is true at the general level of historiographical method, but it is also necessary for negotiating the cultural politics that haunt the study of the ritual murder accusation. If the history of debate about White’s work has been instructive at all, it has alerted us to the ways cultural politics impact determinations of meaning. White suggests that while ideology may be inescapable, it must also be held in productive tension with evidence and the claims of methodology. I argue that the maintenance of this balance of interests is part of the work that the discourse of ethics does in recent historiography on the ritual murder accusation. And when a historian fails to maintain this balance between method and ideology, it is in the sphere of the ethical that this becomes most readily apparent, as my argument about Ariel Toaff’s controversial work suggests.

**Jews and Christians Together**

Recent work in medieval Jewish-Christian history is engaged in a reevaluation of older historical models that recognizes another difficult middle space—the space delineated and shared by two religious cultures in conflict. The curious complementarity, often negative, of the Jewish and Christian cultures of medieval Europe has emerged as a major preoccupation in scholarship and constitutes what I have referred to as an *ethicomethodological paradigm shift*. This transdisciplinary project concerns specialists in medieval literature as well as history and points to a symbiosis between specialists that is particularly relevant for this project. While historians are interested in the effects of cultural discourses on medieval mentalities, social formations, and politics, literary scholars historicize particular representations within their cultural contexts and specific circumstances of production. These shared investments speak to the complexity of the cultural framework under discussion. The challenge, for both historians and literature specialists, is how to think seriously about the relations between communities when any such thinking has to be done through ex-
tremely problematic screens of textual representation and symbolism. This goes beyond arguments about how any historical document refracts the assumptions of its historical moment, to address the effects of systematic cultural bias, violent stereotypes, and direct or indirect responses to the challenges represented by a rival religious group. This book is situated at this juncture, where the interests of historians and literary specialists meet, and asks questions about methodological issues of concern for both in understanding the dynamics of Jewish-Christian relations.

In *The Spectral Jew*, Steven Kruger reminds us that “the Jews we encounter in medieval Christian texts . . . are constructions that do not correspond in any easy way to the lived experiences of Jews, or even of the Christians who elaborated and made use of these constructions.” Kruger thus enters into a long-standing conversation about the complex representations of the Jew in medieval Christian culture. Scholars have emphasized the difficult status of anti-Jewish stereotypes and hostile stories, which respond to an identifiable historical group yet cannot be taken as straightforward representations of actual Jews or Judaism. The rich vein of terminology used to discuss this interpretive problem, ranging from Jeremy Cohen’s “hermeneutical Jew” to “virtual” or “paper” Jews (not to mention Kruger’s own category of spectrality) conveys the persistent association of the Jew with fantasy and symbol. However, Kruger captures something of the special difficulty these symbols represent when he writes that “the lack of a clear correspondence between fantasy constructions of Jews and lived experience does not mean that these constructions do not themselves constitute a crucial part of lived experience,” since these images “‘were living realities for the medieval Christian’ . . . experienced as much and as importantly through the constructions of fantasy and ideology as in any more purely experiential realm” (*Spectral Jew*, xx–xxi). I understand Kruger to mean that because such images played a complex role in mediating Christian perceptions of contemporary Jews, and led to demonstrable effects in the social and political realms, even fantasy images impinge upon historical reality in meaningful ways.

Paradoxically, stereotypes about a marginal group inhabiting a Christian-dominated culture are also central to the construction of Christian identity. Lisa Lampert criticizes what she calls the “restricted economy of particularism” that encourages us to see Christian representations of Jewish identity as complex depictions of otherness, while taking Christian identity for granted. “Christian identity,” she writes, “is neither static nor fixed. Christian authors created complex and sometimes contradictory no-
tions of Christian identity through strategic use of, opposition to, and identification with representations of Jews that are shaped through Christian self-definition.”

Lampert also highlights how images of Jews work in tandem with representations of women, offering one example of how a culture’s different categories of otherness depend on one another as well as definitions of the hegemonic culture. Anthony Bale also underscores how definitions of Christian identity are fundamentally shaped by Christian ideas about Jews when he writes that in the texts he examines, “the Jew is often a crucial, sometimes fundamental, reference point for the doctrine and interpretation of the greater (‘non-Jewish’) text.”

The centrality of an apparently marginal image, he writes, suggests that we should “no longer consider artefacts which discuss Judaism as separate from the Christian Middle Ages, but as integral to our understanding of this religious and cultural milieu” (Jew in the Medieval Book, 5).

The recognition that representations of Jews and Judaism are in some sense central to Christian culture has been accompanied by a renewed interest in the interactions between religious groups, and the open and covert ways they responded to one another. This has involved resituating Judaism’s relationship to Christianity, and also recognizing Jewish culture as permeable to outside influence. In Blood and Belief, historian David Biale examines how “Jews and Christians engaged in a common discourse around blood, even as they disagreed, often violently, about it.” He argues that in considering the blood libel, for instance,

it is not sufficient to look only at how Christians imagined the Jewish consumption of Christian blood; we must also consider how Jews may have projected their own fears and desires upon the host culture. The Jewish polemical response to the blood libel will tell us a great deal about how a minority protects its identity by sanctifying its own blood rituals. (Blood and Belief, 3)

Biale situates his argument within a particular model of culture. He writes that “Jews’ ideas about blood developed in creative interaction with their cultural surroundings. As a minority people, the Jews have always defined their culture in a complex process of accommodation with and resistance to the majority cultures among which they lived” (Blood and Belief, 7). He thus neatly summarizes the historical picture outlined in a number of recent works by both historians and literary critics who attempt to stage what he calls a “dialogue” between Jewish and Christian cultural artifacts that illuminates the process of cultural influence and exchange. Jonathan
Elukin, David Malkiel, Anthony Bale, and Miri Rubin are just a few scholars who have pursued some of the different threads of this story. The historian Norman Golb extends this argument from the cultural sphere to the realm of lived experience with his work on patterns of Jewish life and settlement in medieval Normandy. Drawing on a combination of archaeological evidence and documents, he argues that Jews were much more broadly dispersed among the Christian population, and had settled in Normandy much earlier, than previous scholars assumed. These Jews lived in small towns as well as cities, surrounded by Christian neighbors, and were “long-established settlers—part of the warp and woof, that is, of the province’s social and demographic reality.” The picture that emerges is of a Jewish culture at home in a Christian-dominated world—not strangers, but neighbors. This does not imply that Jews and Christians in medieval Normandy lived without conflict, but does require that we reexamine well-worn assumptions about medieval Jewish life among Christians.

These studies also work to uncover the specificity of medieval Jewish cultural experience. Implicitly and explicitly, recent scholars have resisted the transhistorical, “longest hatred” perspective that privileges the broad trajectory of a generic antisemitism and an equally monolithic community of victims over the contingencies and particularities of experience in different periods and locales. David Nirenberg’s *Communities of Violence* is often cited as a watershed moment in this conversation. Nirenberg insists on attending to the specific contexts in which violent rhetoric against out-groups is exploited, and asks how the instrumental use of this rhetoric can change with contingent circumstances, even if the symbols and expressions remain stable over time.

We need no longer insist on continuities of meaning in claims about minorities wherever we find continuities in form, since we can see how the meanings of existing forms are altered by the work that they are asked to do, and by the uses to which they are put. This means that we can be more critical than we have previously been about attempts to link medieval and modern mentalities, medieval ritual murder accusations and modern genocide.

Scholars such as Elliott Horowitz and Christoph Cluse have responded to this call by reexamining specific moments of conflict between Jews and Christians for which accounts from both communities survive in an effort to work backward from local legends to isolate the limited conflicts between individuals or groups that stand behind particular stories. In *Sanct-
tifying the Name of God: Jewish Martyrs and Jewish Memories of the First Crusade, Jeremy Cohen tackles questions of local meaning and contingency from a different perspective, emphasizing how Jews who survived the crusader attacks on Jewish communities along the Rhine in 1096 struggled with the aftermath of those events and produced accounts of Jewish martyrdom that reflected survivors’ feelings of guilt as well as their grief. Though his work has sometimes met with controversy, he insists on recognizing that the Hebrew accounts of those events are products of a specific cultural moment and are shaped by the felt need to memorialize victims as well as narrate their deaths.

Art historian Marc Michael Epstein takes a polemical position in relation to scholarship in his field, writing that earlier studies analyzed medieval Jewish art primarily in terms of its relationship to earlier Jewish traditions of iconography or its allegedly derivative position relative to Christian art.

These two directions in contemporary research . . . have worked in concert to negate the category of medieval Jewish art. . . . We are forced to imagine these patrons and their artists either as ignorant transcribers of an ancient iconographic tradition, or as slavish imitators of their contemporaries with nothing new, nothing uniquely medieval, and certainly nothing distinctively Jewish to contribute. The phrase “medieval Jewish art” becomes an oxymoron: neither particularly medieval nor particularly Jewish.

Like many of his counterparts in the discipline of history, Epstein seeks to recover the distinctive qualities of medieval Jewish life in Europe, distinguishing this era from a monolithic picture of the Jewish cultural tradition. But he also emphasizes the context of constant interaction between Jews and their Christian neighbors. In their relations with the Christian majority, Epstein argues, medieval Jews were capable of subversively adapting, as well as adopting, Christian strategies of representation. Epstein’s work is thus part of a broad reexamination of medieval Jewish-Christian relations that emphasizes cultural exchange and influence as well as structures of power and victimization.

This far from comprehensive overview of recent work on medieval Jewish-Christian relations highlights the interdependence of historical and literary critical approaches. We might once have assumed that the analysis of textual representations was largely the province of the literary critic, while historical changes and continuities were the province of the historian. But
where medieval Jewish-Christian relations are concerned, this neat distinction between separate spheres is troubled again and again. Literary critics must be attentive to the historical “facts on the ground,” while historians must account for the influence of stereotypes, literary traditions, and cultural habits of mind. Both are notably concerned with the realm of culture and the study of mentalities, which encourages continuity and collaboration between fields often perceived to be separated by a methodological gulf. If I have particularly emphasized the continuities, this is in part a response to that perceived divide, and the divisiveness it has sometimes generated between literature specialists trained in English departments, like myself, and colleagues in history.

My work emerges from a broad tradition of cultural criticism and intellectual history that is the province of literary critics as well as historians, but studies of historiography tend to make historians nervous, perhaps particularly when theoretical models are invoked. It is safe to say that historians trust method more than theory. But I hope historians will recognize that this project is just as concerned with method as it is with analyzing the cultural currents that impact historiography. I also see method itself as a form of theory, since methodological guidelines operate as a framework for making sense of evidence, and form another metacritical apparatus for thinking about the work historians do. Close attention to methodological conventions and norms is vital for evaluating recent arguments about the ritual murder libel. My focus on three historians who have made a major impact on recent historiography is revealing in this regard. The works of Gavin Langmir, Israel Yuval, and Ariel Toaff are instructive, not only because of their claims about an explosive medieval legend but also because their works have important ramifications for the wider field of medieval studies. All three offer theories that have the potential to reshape our understanding of medieval Jewish-Christian relations and speak to the framework for historical thinking itself. Two of them in particular, Gavin Langmuir and Israel Yuval, are explicitly engaged in projects that aim to reevaluate a very long history of intergroup conflict. These are high stakes for all scholars interested in Jewish-Christian life in medieval Europe.

Ethics, ideology, and deliberations about evidence and method come together in the juridical discourse that has traditionally framed discussion of the ritual murder accusation. My analysis of recent historiography begins by returning to a pivotal early example of the story in Thomas of Monmouth’s *Life and Miracles of William of Norwich*. Thanks to Thomas’s pre-
occupation with refuting skeptics in his twelfth-century monastery, his unusually detailed narrative offers a vital perspective from which to observe the push and pull of polemical arguments about guilt and innocence in relation to an early accusation of ritual murder. I resurrect the voices of doubters from the margins of Thomas’s account in order to demonstrate how long-standing debates about historical responsibility, standards of evidence, and the evaluation of testimony have been part of the historiography of the ritual murder accusation from its earliest appearance in the high Middle Ages. I also show that the problem of indeterminacy is so fundamental to the charge of ritual murder that even an advocate of Jewish guilt as determined as Thomas of Monmouth was unable to evade it.

The juridical structures of argument and strident claims of guilt visible in medieval accounts have also shaped the terms of debate up to the present, and form the deep history of the cultural discourse about ritual murder. One noteworthy moment in this trajectory is the period just before World War II, when the blood libel took on renewed political significance. During these decades, questions of Jewish guilt and innocence became public debates, and trials for both ritual murder (presumed to be a real crime) and libel suits for false accusations of ritual murder dictated the terms of discussion for a broad audience. I highlight how this legalistic framing of the conversation not only reifies ideological divisions but also operates as a coded conversation about the status of Jews and Judaism in Western culture. Contemporary culture is more explicitly preoccupied with the historical status of the Holocaust and Jewish suffering than with the questions of Christian identity that so preoccupied Thomas of Monmouth. Nevertheless, discussions about the ritual murder accusation have continued to employ juridical distinctions that became fully formulated in the Middle Ages.

Between Thomas of Monmouth’s account of a twelfth-century ritual murder accusation and the work of the late twentieth-century historian of antisemitism Gavin Langmuir, there is a cultural as well as historical divide. While part of Langmuir’s historiographical task is to rebut the very claims Thomas did so much to canonize, the modern historian nevertheless shares with his medieval counterpart a preoccupation with assigning blame and determining guilt. For Langmuir, this guilt lies with the historical forces of persecution, and his moralization of history is also an explicit project of judgment. In some respects, Langmuir may seem like an improbable choice for such a discussion—because he hails from a background of Christian religious skepticism rather than the Jewish tradition,
it might seem as if his investment in a communal memory of Jewish his-
torical suffering would be minimal. Yet I read Langmuir’s work as a culmi-
nation of a moralizing narrative that has exceeded the bounds of a specific 
communal tradition to become part of the common patrimony of the 
post-Holocaust West. Certainly his work—represented by a mammoth ef-
fort of historiographical analysis in *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* and 
*History, Religion, and Antisemitism*—was preceded by notable exemplars of 
the “lachrymose” tradition of Jewish history famously criticized by Salo 
Baron. But Langmuir articulates what is surely the most fully developed 
version of a historiography of moralization in relation to the ritual murder 
accusation. His project is a distillation of a scholarly tradition, on the one 
hand, and a highly specific articulation of its moral stakes, on the other. 

In Langmuir’s work, there is a sharp division, not only between Jewish 
victims and their Christian oppressors but between rational readers of his-
tory and the “irrational” minds of historical persecutors. The preservation 
of this moral division is itself an imperative, informed by the scholar’s mor-
alizing ethics, and has substantial methodological consequences. Drawing 
on Judith Butler’s recent work in ethical theory, particularly her critique of 
Emmanuel Levinas in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, I emphasize the pitfalls 
of such a comforting moralization of history, which preserves the opera-
tion of binaristic modes of thinking and insulates us from any sense of 
complicity with the historical forces of antisemitism. Langmuir’s well-in-
tended effort to pinpoint what he calls the irrational cultural forces behind 
antisemitism (best represented for him by the accusation of ritual murder itself) may ultimately suggest a politics of inversion and revenge.

If Gavin Langmuir is an exemplar of a moralizing imperative in the his-
toriography of the ritual murder libel, Israel Yuval is probably the best-
known representative of an ethical turn toward considerations of contin-
gency and the deep mutuality of hostile relations between medieval 
Christians and Jews.47 In *Two Nations in Your Womb*, Yuval opens up new 
questions about the mutually antagonistic relations between religious 
communities, and how concrete local situations—including mispercep-
tions of actual Jewish practices—might lead to accusations like ritual mur-
der. This ethics of implication emphasizes that perceptions of reality can be 
shaped by concrete acts that are understood differently between commu-
nities. A gesture of defiance on the part of a Jew faced with the demand to 
convert might be heroic among fellow Jews but could just as easily be 
viewed as sinister by his Christian neighbors. It in this light that Yuval un-
derstands the Jewish self-martyrdoms of 1096, in which many Jews chose
to kill themselves and their families rather than submit to marauding crusaders. Such real acts, Yuval argues, were not the stuff of fantasy but could very well have contributed to the production of a legend that Jews would kill Christian as well as Jewish children if given a chance. Yuval and other historians associated with the turn to contingency and implication (such as Elliott Horowitz) draw attention to medieval Jewish assertiveness, responses to Christian influence, and even anti-Christian hostility. In the process, these scholars contest the old binaries of antisemite and apologist that have long dictated the terms of what one could and could not say about (medieval) Jewish-Christian relations.

Yuval is part of a broader paradigm shift in medieval Jewish studies, and his specific ethical aims are tied to a deep concern with deadlocks in historical relations between communities that can become self-perpetuating dysfunctions. If Langmuir’s ethics runs the risk of merely inverting and perpetuating ancient binaries of persecutor and victim, Yuval’s retiring ethics of implication takes its own risk—the risk of appearing to take an indefinite position on the question of historical responsibility, or, worse, excusing persecutors for acts of violence. I argue that Yuval is not interested in either excusing persecutors or blaming victims, and that this critique misses something fundamental about the ethical project of his historiography. Reading Yuval in tandem with the philosopher and ethicist Gillian Rose, I point to the ways he refrains from judgment in pursuit of a more broadly defined ethical aim. Yuval’s work highlights the necessity of a difficult acknowledgment of our implication even in the systems that constrain and victimize us, an implication that demands a painful responsibility of victims as well as persecutors. His work may be read as an exemplum or midrash with contemporary political implications in his home country of Israel, but it offers cold comfort to those who hope for an easy resolution of entangled intergroup conflicts.

Yuval and Ariel Toaff are sometimes described as intellectual fellow travelers—I have heard more than one scholar say that they are guilty of the same sin, namely, blaming historical victims. However, I resist this characterization, which overlooks the very different ethical stakes of both scholars’ arguments. Toaff’s controversial 2007 book *Pasque di sangue* (*Bloody Passovers*) presents serious difficulties for scholars in the field and has been roundly criticized in both academic and public arenas such as newspapers and websites. I examine the reception of *Pasque di sangue* as a repetition of the traditional juridical discourse that shadows discussion of the ritual murder accusation. The all-or-nothing structures dictating the
conceptual terms of the conversation reduce historiographical argument to determinations of guilt and innocence that in this case extend to the historian himself. But if Toaff’s critics speak in a juridical idiom, they have at least one very good reason for doing so: Toaff himself paradoxically exploits the ambiguities of his source material in a way that ultimately re-vivifies this juridical language of interpretation.

Focusing on the 1475 case of Simon of Trent, Toaff highlights the complex cultural evidence speaking to Jewish (as well as Christian) superstitions and quasi-medicinal beliefs about blood, and exploits traditional religious symbols associated with sacrifice, redemption, and blood. However, particularly in the first edition of his book, the net effect of such readings appears to be an insinuation of Jewish “fundamentalist” guilt in some limited cases of ritual murder. I argue that Toaff’s recent work is motivated by a renewed discourse of moralization that holds what he calls “extremist” nationalist-religious Jews responsible for many of the sufferings of Jews past and present. His work is a historical account held hostage to political goals, and it crosses from the realm of standard historiography (where questions of method, ethics, and ideology are intertwined but held in balanced tension) to a problematic realm of innuendo, suggestion, and ideological reading. It is in these terms that Pasque di sangue slips past Yuval’s ethics of mutual implication into a realm of structural complicity with the historical forces of antisemitism. While each of the chapters represented here attempts to articulate the deep entanglement of ethical, ideological, and methodological concerns, it is in the Toaff case, where cultural politics meet historical indeterminacy, that such questions represent the greatest difficulties for historiography.

In the Middle

Recent scholars have wrestled with a tradition of public polemic that burdens each new argument about the ritual murder story and exacts its own emotional demands. Earlier I described the ritual murder accusation as a high-friction relay point, and I have been suggesting that the historian is ethically invested in his work, and that this work represents a difficult dialogue between the past he studies and the concerns of his moment. This is one way of understanding Dominick LaCapra’s argument that historians are always engaged in a transferential relation with their subject, one they must become aware of in order to work through it. As I have worked on this book, I have been asked many times, in many ways, about my own im-
lication in this topic. Occasionally this question has meant, more or less, are you Jewish? More often my interlocutors wondered where I place myself in relation to this material in intellectual, cultural, and religious terms. To paraphrase LaCapra, What is my own transferential relation to these issues of historical interpretation? My work on this project has emphasized the importance of such questions, and it would be disingenuous of me to evade them.

This came home to me with particular force when my work brought me into contact with a member of the local Pittsburgh Jewish community in 2008 and early 2009. Because of a series of unusual scheduling difficulties, “Miri” and I had arranged to meet on a Sunday. It happened to be Easter Sunday, though neither of us registered the relevance of the date as we made our arrangements. Miri reminded me of the day’s significance when we met, and apologized for interrupting “my” holiday. For a moment I was taken aback: my holiday? I shook my head. “No,” I said. “It’s fine. I’m not a Christian.” We had had variations on this conversation before, and I always imagined I saw a look of mild perplexity on her face. Sometimes we lingered over tea and cookies, talking about life in Israel or American politics. I told her that I had explored conversion to Judaism, attending a Conservative movement minyan (prayer group quorum) off and on for a few years as a graduate student. I was not a Jew, but I was also certain I was not a Christian.

On this Easter Sunday, Miri said, “In Judaism you could never say you weren’t a Jew. Even if you were accepted by another religion, you would still be a Jew.” I realized that by this logic I would always in some sense be a Christian. It also occurred to me that we were speaking in terms of two very different systems of evaluation. Christianity, as I understand it, is about embracing and endorsing particular beliefs. To refuse the beliefs is to refuse the religion, if not the community. My experience taught me that Judaism takes the question of heritage much more seriously. Self-identification and observance are important, but refusing to be a Jew is not quite the same thing as refusing to be a Christian. In my case, I had considered my personal beliefs carefully, recognized that they were incompatible with the religion in which I was raised, and refused to participate in the sacrament of confirmation as a Catholic teenager. This decision has not been without consequences or hurt family feelings. But I could see that from Miri’s perspective, this did not make my past a settled affair and my future an open book—if anything, the claim that I was not a Christian risked making nonsense of my personal history, perhaps erasing it. On that
day, she shrugged philosophically and said in response to this riddle, “Maybe this is why you have the openness to explore other religions.”

As the Jewish tradition implicitly recognizes by tracing Jewish ancestry matrilineally, we never quite forget the religion of our mothers. For my own mother, Catholicism has been a comfort in dark times. Nonbelievers often say such things as a sop to sentimentality, but I am grateful to the clergymen who guided my mother through her civil divorce and encouraged her to accept my interest in Judaism as something good for an unsettled spirit. My relation to Judaism is also complex. I am sentimental about the Jewish tradition. I see its greatest qualities and I downplay aspects of the tradition that do not agree with me, such as the time-honored restrictions on the full participation of women in religious ceremonies. I was able to answer the needs of my conscience by attending an egalitarian minyan, in which women participated alongside men, while traditional Hebrew prayers and melodies were preserved. However, I have still not converted. I am not a Christian or a Jew, but a hybrid inhabiting the uneasy space between religions. Like the historians whose work I study, my subject position and attention to cultural currents—including those surrounding religious identity and conversion—will inevitably have personal implications. My views of both Judaism and Christianity are cathected, in LaCapra’s terms, in ways that may escape my full awareness.

To take one example, even I am bemused by the apparently serendipitous way my interest in ethical theory has come to focus on the contributions of two women, Judith Butler and Gillian Rose, whose relationships to their own Jewish tradition are marked by ambivalence. They are also critics of Emmanuel Levinas, preeminent philosopher of both Judaism and otherness, and a potent symbol for a post-Holocaust ethics. Though there are many differences between my experience and theirs, it may be that I share with them a certain liminal subject position, as well as an interest in asking what may seem like impertinent questions. In debates about the ritual murder accusation, participants’ confessional identities have often been understood as critical to their understanding (or lack of understanding, as the case may be) of the issues at stake. In this context, my position is anomalous. I occupy a place in the middle that is similar to the ethical space I describe as emergent in recent historiography on Jewish-Christian relations. In ethical terms, we always begin in the middle—in the midst of social life, historical processes, and evolving identities. Negotiating this middle space requires generosity and pragmatism. I hope I have managed to offer some measure of both.