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Abstract – In the first part, the paper briefly analyzes the linguistic root of anti-Semitism and shows how Jews were regarded as the «inside other» by Christianity and Islam. For this reason, they have been marginalized, persecuted, deprived of their culture, forced into a state of abjection. In the second part, we consider a group of texts by the Church Fathers from which 17 recurring semiotic figures of this condition are extracted. These figures or motifs are studied as simple elements of a constant narrative structure (the history of salvation), in which Jews occupy the place of antsubjects or adversaries. Finally, the blood libel that accuses Jews of killing Christian children is considered and three cases are briefly analyzed.

1. Some premise

The literature on anti-Semitism is extremely vast. To cite just a clue, one of the best known and most popular inventories of scientific articles and books (Google Scholar, last accessed May 2022) includes under this heading about two hundred thousand publications, most of which are historical or political in nature. Semiotic papers on that matter are much rarer, although it is evident that anti-Semitism includes a rhetorical and communicative apparatus that can be usefully analyzed by semiotics. In this paper, I will therefore not discuss some stories and documents of anti-Semitism and will limit myself to a semiotic approach for analyzing them.

Before suggesting some methodological lines for this analysis, it is necessary to specify the scope of the discussion in order to avoid relying uncritically on improper assumptions. First of all, there is a strong tendency to speak today of anti-Semitism as a «form of racism», precisely that which takes Jews as object of discrimination. For instance, the Wikipedia entry dedicated to anti-Semitism begins with this sentence:

«Anti-Semitism [...] is hostility to, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews. A person who holds such positions is called an antisemite. *Antisemitism* is generally considered to be a form of racism¹.»

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antisemitism>.

In the Thesaurus of Cambridge dictionary (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/anti-semitism>), anti-Semitism, although correctly and generally defined as «the strong dislike or cruel and unfair treatment of Jewish people», is included in a cluster of «racial issues»². In a resolution approved by the General Assembly of the United Nations on March 1, 1999, under the title *Measures to combat contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance*, one reads, among many other things, that the Assembly

«[...] 17. Urges all Governments to cooperate fully with the Special Rapporteur with a view to enabling him to fulfill his mandate, including the examination of incidents of contemporary forms of racism and racial discrimination, inter alia, against blacks, Arabs and Muslims, xenophobia, Negrophobia, anti-Semitism and related intolerance»³

However, the inclusion of anti-Semitism in racism is not found in other definitions, such as that of the Anti-Defamation League⁴.

The belief or behavior hostile toward Jews just because they are Jewish. It may take the form of religious teachings that proclaim the inferiority of Jews, for instance, or political efforts to isolate, oppress, or otherwise injure them. It may also include prejudiced or stereotyped views about Jews.

Above all, it is not present in the definition, widely employed internationally, which was adopted by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA), as «working definition» of anti-Semitism:

«Anti-Semitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities»⁵.

The problem, however, is wider than the simple inclusion of anti-Semitism in racism and also concerns the first term. As noted by the Encyclopedia Britannica *sub voce*:

«The term 'anti-Semitism' was coined in 1879 by the German agitator Wilhelm Marr to designate the anti-Jewish campaigns under way in central Europe at that time. Although the term now has wide currency, it is a misnomer, since it implies a discrimination against all Semites. Arabs and other peoples are also Semites, and yet they are not the targets of anti-Semitism as it is usually understood. The term is especially inappropriate as a

² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/topics/society/racial-issues/>.

³ https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/53/133.

⁴ <https://www.adl.org/anti-semitism>.

⁵ This is just the beginning; the whole text, with its important 'examples', can be found at <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/156684.pdf>

label for the anti-Jewish prejudices, statements, or actions of Arabs or other Semites. Nazi anti-Semitism, which culminated in the Holocaust, had a racist dimension in that it targeted Jews because of their supposed biological characteristics – even those who had themselves converted to other religions or whose parents were converts. This variety of anti-Jewish racism dates only to the emergence of so-called ‘scientific racism’ in the 19th century and is different in nature from earlier anti-Jewish prejudices»⁶.

Both of these terms, «racism» and «anti-Semitism», then, are ill-suited to understanding the hatred of Jews that we find in history and also today. The word «anti-Semitism» was actually launched by Wilhelm Marr in a book entitled *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum* (Victory of Judaism over Germanism)⁷. However, Marr did not have the intention of opposing all the «Semites», but rather the admitted purpose of creating a new *euphemism* for making the old *Judenhass* (hatred for Jews) presentable in a liberal society by at least verbally hiding the Jews behind a generic «Semitic Race». The word «semitic» is clearly derived from the «Table of Nations» of the generations of Noah (*Origines gentium*) in the tenth chapter of Book of Genesis, where seventy peoples are listed. «Shem» is named as one of the children of Noah, forefather of Abraham, who is the ancestor of both Jews and Arabs. Leaving aside the biblical genealogies (where the word or concept of «Semite» itself never occurs) the fact remains that this word was proposed in the eighteenth century by members of the Göttingen School of History for defining just a family of languages:

«The term ‘Semitic’ is borrowed from the Bible (Gen.10:21 and 11:10-26). It was first used by the Orientalist A. L. Schlözer in 1781 to designate the languages spoken by the Aramæans, Hebrews, Arabs, and other peoples of the Near East»⁸.

The scientific inadequacy of the biblical derivation of this name was clear immediately after its creation, so much so that Johann Gottfried Eichhorn, one of its promoters and, among other things, an important defender of the «documentary hypothesis» about the structure of the Hebrew Bible, had to defend it with an article, *Semitische Sprachen* (Semitic languages)⁹, in which he justified the terminology, *inter alia* against criticism that Hebrew and Canaanite were the same language

⁶ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anti-Semitism>.

⁷ W. Marr, *Der Sieg des Judenthums über das Germanenthum – Vom nichtconfessionellen Standpunkt aus betrachtet*, Bern, Rudolph Costenoble, 1879.

⁸ S. Moscati, *An Introduction to the Comparative Grammar of the Semitic Languages: Phonology and Morphology*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, p. 25

⁹ J. G. Eichorn, *Semitische Sprachen*, in J. G. Eichorn (ed.), *Allgemeine Bibliothek der biblischen Literatur*, Leipzig, Weidmanns Erben und Reich, 1787-1801, 10 vols, 6, pp. 772-776, available online at: [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Semitic_Languages_\(Eichhorn\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Semitic_Languages_(Eichhorn)).

despite Canaan being labeled as «Hamitic» in the Table of Nations. What matters most here is that, from a scientific point of view, there is absolutely no Semitic 'race' or some Semitic genetically related population, but only a Semitic linguistic group. In fact, it is considered today that this group includes not only Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, but also some languages of Ethiopia. Linguists today consider it to be only a branch of a big Camitic-Semitic linguistic family, which groups together languages spoken by (among others) Egyptians, Berbers, Somalis, inhabitants of Chad, etc.¹⁰. Even to the most hardened racist should admit that populations speaking all these languages cannot be considered a single people, let alone a «race». The responsible for the dangerous and unsustainable shift from the language to populations or «races» was probably the French religious essayist Ernest Renan, specifically in the passage between his book *Histoire Générale et Systèmes Comparés des Langues Sémitiques* (General History and Comparative system of Semitic Languages)¹¹ and the article *Nouvelles considérations sur le caractère général des peuples sémitiques, et en particulier sur leur tendance au monothéisme* (New Considerations on the General Character of the Semitic Peoples, and in Particular Their Tendency to Monotheism)¹²: in those four years the Semitic linguistic family became for Renan the effect of the existence of a Semitic «people» with a specific mentality, religious attitude, etc. The same happened in that period with other linguistic constructions such as the «Indo-European» or «Aryan» language, from which the existence of an Aryan «race» was deduced, with well-known consequences¹³.

It is certainly no coincidence that the word (and the very idea of) «racism» has established itself in that same period. The word «race» appears for the first time in Italian in the fourteenth century, probably deriving from the French «haraz» (horse breeding). From Italy it has spread to other European languages. But until the nineteenth century, probably until

¹⁰ R. Hetzron, *Afroasiatic Languages*, in B. Comrie (ed.), *The World's Major Languages*, London, Routledge, 2009, pp. 545-550.

¹¹ E. Renan, *Histoire Générale et Systèmes Comparés des Langues Sémitiques*, Paris, Imprimerie impériale, 1855.

¹² E. Renan, *Nouvelles considérations sur le caractère général des peuples sémitiques, et en particulier sur leur tendance au monothéisme*, in «Journal asiatique ou Recueil de Mémoires, d'extraits et de notices relatifs à l'histoire, à la philosophie, aux langues et à la littérature des peuples orientaux», février-mars 1859, pp. 214-282 et avril-mai 1859, pp. 417-450.

¹³ M. Ollender, *Les langues du Paradis: Aryens et Sémites, un couple providentiel*, Paris, Gallimard et Éditions du Seuil, 1989.

the publication of de Gobineau's book *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*¹⁴, it was used only for referring to types of animals, objects and seldom to single persons (with pejorative meaning) but it did not at all indicate large families of human peoples; this use only spread in the mid-nineteenth century, mainly in conjunction with the so-called «social Darwinism», becoming a very pervasive commonplace even in progressive movements between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Words such as «racism», «racist», etc. arose only in the early decades of the twentieth century and took hold when far-right movements seized power in much of Europe between the 1920s and 1930s¹⁵.

It is important to specify these facts of linguistic and cultural history to emphasize that hatred, discrimination, persecution of Jews precede these linguistic and conceptual inventions by at least fifteen centuries. Leaving aside the anti-Jewish hatred on the part of Egyptian characters such as Manetho (fourth century)¹⁶ and the snobbish contempt showed by Tacitus and other Roman authors, because they had no direct heirs and historical effectiveness, there is instead an impressive consistency between the hate-filled sermons of some among the most important Church Fathers and the bloody waves of persecution of Jews that have followed one another in European society since the eleventh century.

2. Roots of anti-Semitism

These are well known facts, that I recall here very quickly in order to try to analyze their functioning with an innovative methodology. Firstly, it is important to note that the long-lasting hatred for Jews always depended on their dispersion among other peoples and on the fact that, even remaining in the condition of a small minority for a long time, they managed not to give up their culture and identity, unlike other defeated and exiled peoples. This attitude and its consequences are already exemplified in two well-known biblical passages, the choice of Pharaoh to persecute the Jews at the beginning of the book of Exodus and then the genocidal suggestion of Minister Haman to the Persian Emperor in the Book of Esther:

¹⁴ J. A. de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, Paris, Librairie Firmin Didot Frères, 1853.

¹⁵ R. Williams, *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 248-250.

¹⁶ W. J. Waddel (ed.), *Manetho*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1940.

«A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground'» (Ex 1, 8-10).

«Haman said to King Ahasuerus, 'There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction'» (Est 3, 6-9).

These speeches indicate what a nightmare (from the point of view of the large majority and the sovereign who governs it) is represented by this permanence of a minority that does not allow itself to be assimilated: it is the «other» within «us», who does not want to give up its own «difference» (its own «laws», that is, his own way of life, its «number», namely its own life), even if it is perhaps «dispersed» among *us* and in fact is similar to us. On the contrary, resemblance and mixing make the «essential» but hidden difference appear more dangerous. In the examples just mentioned the difference concerns peoples, it is perceived at an ethnic and political level, it is not about faith. Later on, when the affirmation of universal religions claiming to abolish differences between nations (as for instance St. Paul stated in Col. 3, 11) breaks the link between ethnicity and religion, the injunction to renounce the otherness (perceived as a difference of faith) becomes more pressing and often violent. Since the establishment of Christianity as an autonomous religion, the request arises more and more insistently for «conversion», which implies, for the Jewish people, the abandonment of its «particularism» (or national identity, along with its specific culture and form of life, which essentially includes what we call today the «religious dimension»). Both in Christianity and Islam, conversion requests initially consist in a religious appeal to recognize that the new religion is the true realization and completion of the old one, hence in the paradoxical imposition to change faith in order to keep having the same one – but for real. However, as these claims are not accepted, the new religion establish itself as a separate body which necessarily involves the cancellation of that from which it comes, because the latter has been superseded and therefore is no longer valid, indeed it has become an obstacle and a sin. This brings to forms of polemic discourse¹⁷, persecution and confinement often very hard and harsh.

¹⁷ P.-A. Taguieff, *Criminaliser les Juifs. Le mythe du «meurtre rituel» et ses avatars (antijudaïsme, antisémitisme, antisionisme)*, Paris, Éditions Hermann, 2000.

In a much later time, now in full modernity, the request, from religious that it was, becomes ideological. The beginning of this new phase can be placed at least from the famous pronouncement of Count Stanislas de Clermont-Tonnerre to the National Assembly:

«We must deny everything to Jews as a nation and give everything to Jews as individuals. They must not form a political body or create an order in the state. They must be individual citizens»¹⁸.

The liberalism that derives from the French Revolution, as well as socialism and communism, and liberal progressivism, thereafter repeat in a more or less violent way the same project to transform the Jews from subjects determined by a specific culture and form of life into universal (abstract) individuals, *tabula rasa*, members only of a certain state; or a certain class; if they really want it, of a certain variant of faith, little different from all the others. In short, they must understand themselves only as defined by random and easily interchangeable individual conditions, and not for the fact of participating in a collective identity. Actually, this pretension foreshadows a form of cultural, if not physical, genocide. It may seem paradoxical, but, in reality, it is not strange because the purpose of this reduction to the individual is precisely the weakening of cultural differences and in particular the end of the long cultural resistance to the assimilation of Judaism. But it is worth nothing that in fact this request for cultural dissolution is often combined with the tacit attribution of a permanent character, of a unitary will, often of a «secret conspiracy», which is developed by the Jews against the whole world. This point is sometimes symptomatically expressed by using the singular form, «the Jew»: «the Jew» is an enemy of Christianity, «the Jew» starves the people, «the Jew» destroys the collectivity, «the Jew» dominates the economy, and so on.

Semiotics can usefully intervene on the discourse that leads to hatred against the Jews, because it has the tools to understand in depth these constructions and dissolutions of identity, which constitute its foundation. In fact, these processes always have a narrative character, even when they take on a visual image or are condensed into epithets and slogans. From a semiotic point of view, «the Jew» must be considered a precise thematic role that has been built in history. Sometimes he is accused of theological crimes («deicide», «murder of the Prophet»), sometimes of bloody crimes against others; sometimes of «usury», of exploiting people, of spreading disease, of alliance with enemies, etc. It is worth

¹⁸ S.- M. - A. de Clermont-Tonnerre, *Speech on Religious Minorities and Questionable Professions* (23 December 1789), <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/284> (accessed May 27, 2022).

noting that this «Jew» is always represented in the male gender. Jewish women are defamed for other reasons, they are quite «seducing», act as «prostitutes», etc. Which of course does not prevent their fate from being the same. The Jew is blamed for religious, economic, «racial», social pretexts. All these accusations are expressed in different stories, in which, however, always every specific character appears as specimen of the *one* «Jew», what anti-Jewish literature called «der ewige Jude», «the eternal [or rather 'permanent'] Jew». It is in fact his permanence, his resilience in the face of all his persecutions, his bare life¹⁹ that constitutes the first sin he is blamed for. His fault is «being still there», simply existing, refusing to let himself be thrown into the dustbin of history, where it should lie for a long time. The solution proposed even by progressive and enlightened intellectuals as Kant, Voltaire or Marx (not to mention the most violent and primitive enemies) is simply his disposal, as a cultural, economic and religious reality if not also in his body. This permanence is materialized in sub-roles and «figures» (in the semiotic sense that will be clarified later), which constantly identify him over the centuries. The reconstruction of some of these sub-roles and their figures is the task of this paper.

3. Thematic roles, figures, motifs

For understanding the following analysis is important to consider the semiotic definitions of these concepts. The expression «Thematic role» is not understood here in the sense of the linguistic semantics, mainly of verbs, as in Fillmore²⁰ or in Jackendoff²¹, but in the semiotic sense proposed by Greimas and his school. The most specific elaboration is in Greimas²² the topic is widely discussed in many entries of the *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* by Greimas and Courtés²³. In order to give a short explanation of this concept and of the correlative notions, I quote here some didactic notes by Wanda Rulewicz:

¹⁹ G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer (1995-2015)*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2018.

²⁰ C. J. Fillmore, *Types of Lexical Information*, in D. Steinberg - L. Jacobovitz (eds.), *Semantics. An Interdisciplinary Reader in Philosophy, Linguistics and Psychology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

²¹ R. S. Jackendoff, *Semantic Structures*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1990.

²² A. J. Greimas, *Les actants, les acteurs et les figures*, in C. Chabrol - J. C. Coquet (eds.) *Sémiotique narrative et textuelle*, Paris, Larousse, 1974, pp. 161-176.

²³ A. J. Greimas - J. Courtés, *Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*, Paris, Hachette, 1994.

«Between the abstract syntactic actantial and its concrete surface realization in a narrative, Greimas introduces the intermediate notion of actor (*acteur*) and role [...] The starting point [is the] observation that one *actant* may be represented by many characters and that one character may take on several actantial roles. The simple notion of character (*personnage*) proved insufficient to analyze this phenomenon and involved the necessity of introducing the notion of actor. [...] Actants are abstract elements of the syntactic deep structure which may serve as base for a number of different texts. Actors are abstract elements too, but of a semantic character; they are semantic concepts to be deduced from an individual story [...] The last of the factors on the semantic level [...] are Figures. Figures are the organizing principle of the sense of a discourse. The narrative program is deliberately chosen from the frame of narrative grammar; the discourse program is related to the discursive dictionary of which the figures are minimal units as 'forms of content' [...]. For instance, the figure 'sun' is the point of departure for a net of relationships which allow it to be placed in various contexts and to appear in various configurations in discourses which may use only part of its virtual meanings, such as rays, light, heat, air, transparency, opacity, clouds, or even gods. The figure 'sacred' may be represented, for instance, in a folk-tale by priest, sacristan, or beadle. These configurations organize the text on the discursive plane, just as actantial roles organize the narrative plane [...]. Thematic roles are semantic elements; in turn, they are taken charge of by the syntax of narrative grammar – the actantial system – and they assume actantial roles [...]. The figures of the thematic roles become equal then to actors. On the syntactic level the actor possesses at least one actantial role (a role in the structure of forces acting in the narrative); on the semantic level the actor possesses on thematic role (the role of carrying meanings in the structure of content of the narrative). Actantial roles and thematic roles converge in the actor»²⁴.

The treatment of actors, themes, thematic roles and figures is one of the potentially more stimulating points in semiotics, but actually it is more uncertain and less developed than most of the topics of Greimassian semiotics, which has taken from Chomsky a theoretical approach more linked to syntax than to semantics and has never really studied genre conventions nor worked at the level of the «textual surface» (or «manifestation») where figures, thematic roles, themes, and actors are visible and are indispensable for the inferential processes that lead the reader to understand the text. To face the problems that arise at this level it is necessary to integrate the Greimassian approach with the theoretical tools of Lotman's semiotics of culture («semiosphere») and of Eco's semantics («Encyclopedia») and some narratological device, as the notion of «motif», coming from Russian formalism²⁵.

²⁴ The text is available at: <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/critical/aboutus/resources/stella/projects/glasgowreview/issue3-rulewicz/>.

²⁵ I. MacKenzie, *Narratology and Thematics*, in «Modern Fiction Studies» 33, 1987, 3 (available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26282392>).

To apply this abstract grid to our case: as in every narration, we will find also in the anti-Jew stories a number of actantial roles: a subject who undertakes the action, an object of value that he tries to get, and then helpers and opponents, sender and receiver, etc., according to the constant grammar of narrative texts. These abstract actants are not to be confused with concrete actors (or characters), for example the great priest Caiaphas, Jesus, Pontius Pilate, or, if one thinks of a certain configuration typical of anti-Jewish narrations, the Jews of a certain community, a child who dies, monks, mothers, soldiers, etc. In the stories that speak of them, these actors can occupy different actantial roles from time to time (for instance they can be helpers one time and then opponents another time) but above all they actualize thematic roles. The most relevant of these roles here is that of the Jew (but they can also be defined as also by sub-roles such as prophet, banker, merchant, murderer, etc.; even characters who are factually non-Jews can be invested by some narration of the thematic role of Jew: there are images where Pontius Pilate wears a Jewish hat. «The Jew» is characterized by figures, for example physiognomic figures such as beard, pointed nose and often ugliness; or figures of clothing such as the yellow wheel or the pointed cap²⁶; or contextual figures such as certain environments or certain intertextual references to other stories; or finally moral figures such as hatred for people or for Jesus. These semantic characteristics are deposited in the collective semantic memory (the «Encyclopedia», in the definition given by Umberto Eco)²⁷ and are activated by images and stories causing hatred against the Jews.

4. The external Other

We have already mentioned the first semantic trait or figure of this thematic role, that of being an «internal Other», also clearly testified in the biblical quotations above. A short reflection is required on this point. When looking at different cultures and societies often one can oppose two types of images of the «Other»:

1. An external «Other» (strangers, living beyond the political or social borders of the society, who can easily turn into the classic «Figure of the Enemy»)

²⁶ H. Blumenkranz, *Il cappello a punta* [1966], Roma - Bari, Laterza, 2003.

²⁷ U. Eco, *Semiotica e filosofia del linguaggio*, Torino, Einaudi, p. 109.

2. An «internal Other» (people living in our midst, similar to us, but perceived as different in culture, identity, goals). I will refer to this narrative characterization which can be attributed to social actors as figure 1²⁸.

Paradoxically, the «internal Other», who is usually well established in society and lives peacefully «among us», is often considered and treated as more dangerous than the outsider. This happens because he impersonates the feared thematic role of the unfair traitor who «could hit us from behind», whom people «are not able to fight back», because it is very difficult to recognize him: this is a very widespread figure in the literature and imagination of many societies.

The role of main internal «Other» inside Christian (but also Islamic) religious culture is attributed to the Jew. Israel (the people, the Law, the history) is «the past» both for Christianity and Islam. Both religions start from its stories (the 'Ancient' Testament), from Jewish fundamental religious intuition (monotheism, creation, ethics rules, etc.), but they claim to be the only true realization of these values, removing every legitimacy from the survival of that «past». Their founders (Jesus, the evangelists, in the theological sense certainly above all Paul, Muhammad) tried to be recognized by it as the authentic realization of Israel's vocation, but their claim was not accepted by the Jewish people. That refusal was taken as an unforgivable sin, but the religious kinship and the consequent role of involuntary witness to the truth of Christianity, theorized in the clearest way by Augustine of Hippo, made it not convenient to completely eliminate Judaism, as it happened instead to polytheism, Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, and other foreign religious forms. Judaism was therefore left in a condition of somehow tolerated religion, but was subjected to severe constraints and humiliations to discount its «guilt» of «perfidy» (i.e. lack of faith) and also in order to convince its adherents that it was convenient for them to convert. A similar strategy, though lacking «testimony» was applied by Islam to both Judaism and Christianity. However, the Jewish people refused to convert, to enter in the «new Truth» but also to disappear and be superseded. They stayed as «internal Other» among the new believers.

From a semiotic point of view, we find here a collective actantial position of opponent, which often the hatred for Jews attributes to them as an

²⁸ Throughout this paper, I use the term «figure» in the semiotic sense mentioned before, without any necessity for it to appear in the format of an image, although this process of iconization is often present.

essential and permanent feature of the thematic role of the Jew, although it is not easily attributable to every individual Jew. This thematic role is therefore always characterized by secrecy (in semiotic terms, according to Greimas' square of «veridiction», that means «do not show what you are»). Perhaps the single Jew may appear to be a good person, the single community may appear as a constructive social group. But who knows what they really think, what they want and do in the secrecy of their intimacy? They are always dangerous even if they seem harmless, because each of them embodies this thematic role of «The Jew» who is always an opponent, a hidden enemy, the «Other among us». Essence counts more than existence, although it can be difficult to perceive.

Among other things, this perception of «secret» is one of the reasons why the persecutions of the Jews, from the Christian to the Islamic Middle Ages, up to Nazism, did very often impose to the Jews discriminatory signs of recognition (yellow wheel or star, pointed cap, etc.), mandatory closed neighborhoods of residence (ghettos), prohibitions to have friendly relations with «regular» people, to live together with them, etc., lest to get confused with them. And this also explains why an explicit and recurrent identification of individual people as Jews appears so often in anti-Semitic texts (the Jew Tom, the Jew Dick, the Jew Harry) and why in modern societies there is sometimes more resentment for assimilated or converted Jews (not recognizable because they are not carrying the signs or maintaining physical separation from the rest of the population) than for those who dress, behave and live in a traditional way and therefore are easily distinguishable.

But digging deeper, we can assume that this happens also because people are afraid of what they could be: strangers to themselves, doubtful of their own principles. It has often been noted that beneath hostility one must read a need for security and distinction. Beyond the individual, this bond and its perceived «dangers» concern Christianity as such, because it makes its own and considers divinely inspired – therefore true – a story that is clearly written from the point of view of the Jewish people and tells its theological but also historic-political events. But this is the nation that Christianity believes to have superseded and that it must eliminate, at least culturally. This ambivalence is especially noticeable in the case of converted Jews: if they do not secretly maintain affection for the rites of their past membership, as it has often been bloodily reproached to the *maranos*, they strive to brand their new identity by displaying hatred for their old brothers. In fact, the need to stand out and distinguish themselves from their past often caused in converted Jews such a deep

hostility for their former brothers, as to put them among the most active part of the repressive apparatus, starting from medieval disputes²⁹.

The same phenomenon occurred massively in the period of anti-Semitism between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with authors such as Karl Marx, Karl Kraus and above all Otto Weininger³⁰. As Jean Luc Nancy summed up such hatred for this interior Other: «The Jew is neither another group nor a member of a group. He is part of the group as a pathogen can be part of a body that it infects or at least threatens to infect»³¹. This can also be analyzed as an important case of what Sigmund Freud calls the «uncanny» (*unheimlich*), which, by irresistibly repeating itself, introduces a mixture of charm and horror³². The thematic role of the Jew, from this point of view is similar to other characters such as the Fatal Woman³³ or the Vampire³⁴ who attract and destroy by contagion. Moreover, the character of «the Jew» shares with the Vampire and also with some Fatal Women an ambiguous relationship with death: he is seen as a survivor, a «living dead» (Ranke)³⁵, or, as it has often been written, a «fossil» (Toynbee)³⁶, an identity or a people which no longer has the right to exist because it has been overcome or superseded (by Christianity, Islam, Marxism, liberal ideology of human rights) but who insists on not disappearing, which is its fault. Not only Christian and Muslim theologians used to think like that, but also great intellectuals of modernity, from Voltaire to Kant to Hegel, Schleiermacher, Toynbee.

There is something horrible and repugnant in this perception of a mummy who, against reason and religion, insists on living. Hence comes the

²⁹ The most remarkable example of these «disputes» is that between Pablo Christiani and Nachmanides, Barcelona July 20-24, 1263. The report of Nachmanides can be read here: http://israel613.com/books/RAMBAN_DISPUTE_E.pdf. For a broader analysis, see V. Robiati Bendaud - U. Volli, *Discutere in nome del cielo*, Milano, Guerini, 2021.

³⁰ R. Calimani, *La grande Vienna ebraica*, Torino, Bollati - Boringhieri, 2020.

³¹ J. L. Nancy, *Exclu le Juif en nous*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2018, p. 25 (my translation).

³² S. Freud, *Das Unheimliche* (1919), in S. Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, 18 vols, Frankfurt a. M., Fischer Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1999, XII. English translation available at: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.

³³ G. Scaraffia, *La donna fatale*, Palermo, Sellerio, 1987.

³⁴ K. Gelder, *Reading the Vampire*, London - New York, Routledge, 1994.

³⁵ H. A. Butowsky, *Leopold von Ranke and the Jewish Question*, Tarentum PA, Word Association Publishers, 2022.

³⁶ N. Rotenstreich, *The Revival of the Fossil Remnant. Or Toynbee and Jewish Nationalism*, in «Jewish Social Studies», 24, 1962, 3, pp. 131-143.

permanent push to make the Jews «abject»³⁷, to seclude them as outcast, excluded, repressed actors, to deny their existence and autonomy. We must seize, in all the different methods and episodes of hatred for Jews recorded by history, a powerful push towards abjection, which is accomplished both with physical means (the impoverishment and forced crowding of the ghettos, the horrible survival of the extermination camps, the *pogroms*), as well as on the cultural level, for example with the burning of books, which was done well before Nazism. In particular the Talmud was burnt on the public square for the first time in Paris in 1242 and then this form of cultural abjection was generalized with decrees such as those of popes Benedict XIII in 1415 and Pope Julius II in 1533. The abjection is also a perceived and narrated state including for instance insulting physical characterizations, such as the hooked nose; «foetor judaicus»³⁸, the disgusting smell transmitted by the body of Jews; traditional contemptuous idioms; humiliating representations, as the *Judensau* (German for «Jews' sow»: images of Jews in obscene contact with a large sow, which in Judaism is an unclean animal, spread during the thirteenth century and still present today on the facades of many ancient churches); «criminalization»³⁹, etc. The abjection is evidently a consequence of the reaction to otherness, a result of persecution. However, through its duration and continuity, it has become another figure of the Jew (I will call it «figure 2»).

The uncanny is often assigned the metaphorical role of the father, who existed before us and from whom we inherited or, better said, whom we dispossessed: of his name (Lacan), his house (Dostoevskij), his law and identity (Paul), his life (Oedipus). He should be dead, but obscenely, stubbornly he persists in living. The explicit, and yet disguised expression of this paternal or ancient figure, which continuously reappears from the mists of time despite its killing, can be found for instance in Freud's Moses⁴⁰. In a presumedly unaware way, it is even alluded to (as well as to the sad fate of the first-born in the Bible) by new benevolent expression of the Catholic Church speaking of Jews as the «older brothers» of Christianity.

³⁷ J. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1980.

³⁸ J. Geller, *The Other Jewish Question. Identifying the Jew and Making Sense of Modernity*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2011.

³⁹ P.-A. Taguieff, *Criminaliser les Juifs*.

⁴⁰ S. Freud, *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion*, Amsterdam, De Lange, 1939.

5. Figures of the Jews

In addition to our figures 1 and 2 (the «Other» and the «abjection»), a number of other figures were invented and then continually proposed again over the centuries in the big discourse against «the Jew»⁴¹. There are two most active moments in this «building of abjection», at least as far as the Christian West is concerned. One is in the first centuries (mainly between the second and fifth) of our era, in which the Christian identity was fully constituted by opposition with the Jewish one, much more than with the Pagan one. A second span of time is in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, in which the persecution of the Jews became very bloody (and it will never cease to be so until the twentieth century) and new stories are invented to justify and encourage such persecution. Moreover, this is the moment when the figures of hatred for Jews become also iconic, producing a considerable quantity of images corresponding to them.

To identify these figures, it is useful to consider some texts taken from these two periods, without any claim of statistical accuracy or historical completeness. We are not concerned here with the fact that the opinions we will examine were not shared by everyone, or that there have also been other attitudes from the same authors or others. Our aim is to extract from these texts the testimony of some figures of hatred against Jews, that continued to be widespread in texts and images up to the contemporary world.

Let us begin with two little and very well - known Gospel sentences against the Jews which served as a fundamental basis for the later constructions of hateful figures⁴².

Matthew 27,25: «All the people answered, His **blood** [fig 3, blood, murder; fig 4 decide] upon ourselves, and our children».

John 8,44: *You* belong to your **father**, the **devil** [fig 5 demonization], and you want to carry out your **father's** desires. He was a **murderer** [fig 3, blood, murder] from the beginning, not holding to the **truth**, for there is no **truth** in him [fig. 6 lie].

These figures appear enlarged in some famous passages of the letters of St. Paul. For instance, in 1 Thessalonians 14-16:

⁴¹ P.-A. Taguieff, *Criminaliser les Juifs*.

⁴² I write here in bold font the textual expression of the figures.

«You [Christian people] suffered from your own people the same things those churches **suffered from the Jews** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians] who **killed the Lord Jesus** [fig. 4 decide] and the prophets and also drove us out. They **displease** God [fig. 8 divine hostility] and are **hostile to everyone** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians] in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way **they** always heap up their **sins** [fig. 8 divine hostility] to the limit. The **wrath of God** [fig. 8 divine hostility] has come upon them at last.»

The same figures are found also in the *Acts of the Apostles*:

«Paul was occupied with preaching, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they **opposed and reviled him** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians], he shook out his garments and said to them, ‘Your **blood** [fig. 3, blood, murder] be upon your heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’» (Acts 18, 5-6)

Between the second and third centuries we find a consolidation of the controversial figures, for example with Hippolytus of Rome (170-235): *Demonstratio Adversus Judaeos*, 7⁴³:

«Why was the temple made **desolate** [fig. 2 abjection]? Was it on account of the **ancient fabrication of the calf** [fig. 11 self-betrayal]? Or was it on account of the **idolatry of the people** [fig. 8 divine hostility]? Was it for the **blood** of the prophets [fig. 3, blood, murder]? Was it for the **adultery and fornication** of Israel [fig. 14 lust]? By no means, for all these transgressions they always found pardon open to them. But it was because they **killed the Son** of their Benefactor, for he is co-eternal with the Father [fig. 4 decide]».

Similar accusations are spread in Justin Martyr (100-165), *Dialogue with Thrypho*, for instance 16; *PG* 6, 509-512:

«For the circumcision according to the flesh was given to you from Abraham as a sign so that you might be distinguished from other nations and from us, and so that you alone might suffer what you **now rightly suffer** [fig. 2 abjection]; so that your land might become desolate, and your cities burned, and strangers eat the fruits of your land before you, and not one of you set foot in Jerusalem [fig. 10 wandering, exile] [...] Therefore these **things have rightly and justly come upon you** [fig. 2 abjection], for you **put the just one to death** [fig. 4 decide], and before him his prophets and now you deal **treacherously** [fig. 7 misanthropy], [enmity for others, especially Christians] with those who hope in him, and with him who sent him, Almighty God, the Creator of all things [fig. 8 divine hostility]».

The moment in which this diffusion of negative figures on the Jews develops very much is the passage between the fourth and fifth centuries, in which Christianity first becomes an admitted cult (Edict of Milan, 313 A.D.) and then a state religion (Edict of Thessalonica, 380 A.D.). This is also the time for the full development of the theology of the Church Fathers.

⁴³ Transl. in J. H. MacMahon *Hippolytus*, in A. Roberts - J. Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, Buffalo NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.

Let's read some of their passages on the Jews, chosen among the many. The first is Commodian (third-fourth centuries):

«What! Art thou half a Jew? Then wilt thou be half **profane**? Whence thou shalt not, when dead, escape **the judgment of Christ**. [fig. 8 divine hostility] Thou thyself **blindly** [fig.9 blindness] **wanderest** [fig. 10 wandering, exile], and foolishly goest in among the **blind**. And thus, the **blind** leadeth the **blind** into the ditch [fig. 9 blindness] («On the Fanatics who Judaize», *Instructiones*).»

St. Gregory, bishop of Nyssa (c. 335 - c. 395); *Testimonies Against the Jews*, often quoted as «homilies about Resurrection», 6, is a 4th or 5th - century text, traditionally attributed to St. Gregory, but today mainly considered pseudo-epigraphical, although it is dated in the same period:

«Jews are **slayers of the Lord** [fig. 3, blood, murder; fig. 4 decide], **murderers of the prophets** [fig. 3, blood, murder, fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians] **enemies and haters of God** [fig. 8 divine hostility], **adversaries of grace** [fig. 8 divine hostility], **enemies of their fathers' faith** [fig. 11 self-betrayal], **advocates of the devil** [fig. 5 demonization], **a brood of vipers** [fig. 12 dehumanization], **slanderers, scoffers, men of darkened minds**, [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians], the leaven of **Pharisees** [fig. 8 divine hostility], a **congregation of demons** [fig. 5 demonization], **sinner, wicked men, haters of goodness** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians]!».

John Chrysostom (349-407) was the most outspoken and glib (this is the meaning of his nickname «golden mouth») Father in the anti-Jews polemic. Here I quote some passage in his *Adversus Judaeos*⁴⁴:

«The Jewish people were driven by their **drunkenness and plumpness** [fig. 13 wealth, avarice] to the ultimate evil; they **kicked about, they failed to accept the yoke of Christ**, nor did they **pull the plow of his teaching** [fig. 8 divine hostility, fig. 11 self-betrayal]. Another prophet hinted at this when he said: 'Israel is as obstinate as a **stubborn heifer**. [fig. 12 dehumanization]» [...] Although such **beasts** [fig. 12 dehumanization] are unfit for work, they are **fit for killing** [fig.13 genocide]. And this is what happened to the Jews: while they were **making themselves unfit for work** [fig. 11 self-betrayal], they grew **fit for slaughter** [fig. 13 genocide]. This is why Christ said: 'But as for these **my enemies** [fig. 8 divine hostility], who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and **slay them** [fig. 13 genocide]'» (*Adversus Judaeos, Homily 1*).

«Are they not **inveterate murderers** [fig. 3, blood, murder], **destroyers** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians], **men possessed by the devil** [fig. 5 demonization?], Jews are **impure** [fig. 14 disgust] and **impious** [fig. 8 divine hostility], and their synagogue is a **house of prostitution** [fig 15 lust], a **lair of beasts** [fig. 12 dehumanization], a place of **shame and ridicule** [fig. 14 disgust], the domicile of the **devil** [fig. 5 demonization], as is the soul of the Jew[...] As a matter of fact, Jews worship the **devil** [fig 5 demonization]; their

⁴⁴ John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians*, Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 1979

rites are **criminal** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians] and **unchaste** [fig 15 lust]; their religion a **disease** [fig. 14 disgust, fig 12 dehumanization]; their synagogue an assembly of **crooks**, a den of **thieves** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians], a cavern of **devils** [fig. 5 demonization], an abyss of perdition!» (*Homily 4,1*).

St. Jerome (347-420) is best known for translating the Bible from Hebrew, thereby going to Judea and attending Jews. But this knowledge did not in any way moderate his anti-Jewish controversy.

«A **fornicatress** is a woman who has had intercourse with several men. An **adulteress**, one who, deserting her true spouse, joins herself to another. The Synagogue is both of these, and if she continues in **fornication and adultery** [fig 15 lust], **God will strip off her clothes** [fig 2 abjection], and **remove** the ornaments which He gave her» (Commentary on Hosea I, II, 2)⁴⁵.

St. Augustine (354-430) is the most important Christian philosopher of the first millennium and one of the most authoritative fathers of the Church. As for the «Jewish problem», he is known for his «witness doctrine» the idea that Jews should be allowed to live among Christians only as witness to the truth and antiquity of the Christian faith. Augustine wanted Jewish scripture and practices to be preserved because «by the evidence of their own scriptures they bear witness for us that we have not fabricated the prophecies of Christ» But, of course, they had to be punished for their refusal to convert. Usually, this position is summarized with a meaningful sentence, often repeated as his, however it actually does not appear in his writings: Jews «must be allowed to survive, but never to thrive». This is the position mostly assumed by the Church for centuries, although often the commitment not to kill was not respected. To support his thesis, Augustine utilized Psalms 59, 12 warning «slay them not, lest my people forget your law».

«Why of the Jews, ‘Slay not them, lest sometime the people forget Your law’? Those very **enemies of mine** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians], that have **slain me** [fig. 3, blood, murder], do not Thou slay [fig. 13 genocide]. Let the nation of the Jews remain: certes conquered it has been by the Romans, certes **effaced is the city of them**, Jews are **not admitted into their city** [fig. 10 wandering, exile], and yet Jews there are [...] These are therefore Jews, they have not been slain, they are necessary to believing nations. [...] ‘Scatter them abroad in Your virtue’. Now this thing has been done: throughout all nations there **have been scattered abroad** [fig. 10 wandering, exile] the Jews, witnesses of **their own iniquity** [fig. 11 self-betrayal] and our truth. Scatter them abroad in Your virtue: take **away from them virtue**, take **away from them their strength** [fig. 2 abjection]. And **bring them down**, my protector, O Lord» (*Exposition on Psalm 59*)⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ T. P. Scheck (ed.), *Commentaries on the Twelve Prophets, 2: Ancient Christian Text*, Downers Grove IL, InterVarsity Press, 2017.

⁴⁶ Translated in P. Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 8., Buffalo NY, Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888.

The Jews still prove useful to the Church **in a particular condition of servitude** [fig. 2 abjection], either in bearing witness or in otherwise constituting proofs (*Contra Faustum*, 12,24

Therefore, these people [the Jews] have also become **vagabonds** [fig. 2 abjection, fig. 10 wandering, exile] since they **crucified God and our Lord** [fig. 4 deicide]. For they are not in their former abodes, but are **spread over the whole earth** [fig. 10 wandering, exile]. For they have neither prophets, nor law, nor priesthood, nor sacrifice, but in truth **they are made beggars** [fig. 2 abjection] (*Enarratio in Psalmum XL*, 14; PL, XXXVI, 463).

If you [Jews] are his people, then admit **you led Him to death** [fig. 4 deicide]. You are so **blind** [fig. 9 blindness] that you claim to be spoken of when you are not, and **you do not recognize yourselves where you are** [fig. 11 self-betrayal] [...] Come, then, Jews unto Him. For **the light is not in you** [fig. 9 blindness] Jews, but in Christ. (*Tractatus adversus Iudaeos*; PL, XLII, 51-64).

How **hateful to me** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians], are the **enemies of your Scripture** [fig. 8 divine hostility]! How I wish that you would **slay them** with **your two-edged sword** [fig. 13 genocide], so that there should be none to **oppose your word!** [fig. 8 divine hostility]» (*Confessions*, 12,14)

We could go on and on with similar quotations, because the intensity and quantity of propaganda against the Jews by the church fathers is truly remarkable⁴⁷. However, from the point of view of this research it is not necessary to do so, because I have shown that these topics are shared by numerous significant authors and that they are recurrent. They will then be taken up over the centuries until today and we will see some traces of them later; but in this regard, as well as in other more praiseworthy aspects of Christian doctrine, the times of Church Fathers are definitely the most creative.

I have identified in these texts, in a rather empirical way, fourteen figures⁴⁸, which could also be characterized, using the narratological terminology of Boris Tomashevsky⁴⁹ as recurring *Motifs*. Every one of them reminds the reader a narration. For instance, fig. 4 (deicide) recalls the story that Jews (and not Romans) killed Jesus; fig. 2 (abjection), fig. 10 (wandering, exile) and fig. 13 (genocide) teach that because of their sins the Jews have been or will be justly punished in the most heinous way; fig. 7 (misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians) and above all fig. 3 (blood, murder) spread stories in which Jews cause harm to death to all other peoples, especially Christians, but also to their own

⁴⁷ P.-A. Taguieff, *Criminaliser les Juifs*.

⁴⁸ In a semiotic sense, it is useful to emphasize that, when I talk about figures in this paper, I always refer to the semiotic definition summarized above.

⁴⁹ B. Tomashevsky, *Russian Formalist Criticism*, Lincoln NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1965 [orig ed. 1925]

prophets. Like all narrations, also these implicit stories always convey value judgments or – following the semiotic terminology – «axiologies». Jews can fill different thematic or actantial roles in them, but they are generally proposed there as «opponents» or even «anti-subjects».

All these narrations look like episodes belonging to a greater narrative, what can be identified with what is often called «salvation history» in Christian theological authors. Let us delve into this «salvation history» using at least some semiotic analysis in standard Greimasian terms. Of course, we should consider Jesus as the Subject (the «hero» of the story) who, on the mandate of the supreme sender (God), looks for the salvation (object of value) of humanity (receiver) from the abyss in which it itself rushed because of its «original sin». Of course, the real *anti-subject* in this story is the Devil, but the Jews are presented as his main helpers (therefore as opponents of the subject Jesus), even more guilty than Pagans, because they were chosen as helpers of the sender, but they have betrayed this contract, thus changing their original actantial role and their axiology. This betrayal led them to numerous vices, including lust, avarice, hatred for others, infidelity, blindness, namely inability to understand that tradition that had been entrusted to them by the Prophets, who are the real helpers of the sender. But it is also said sometimes that this betrayal was due to their innate vices.

For easily understandable political reasons, the historical role of the Roman occupation army and in particular that of Pontius Pilate as legal responsible of Jesus' capital execution (and therefore his narrative opponent) was very soon underestimated and he was presented as a weak opponent to the Jews in their deicide. How the Roman governor of a province of the Empire could be subjected to the foreigners he ruled with absolute power is never explained. This general pattern of discourse regarding omnipotent and dangerous Jews rather than those who oppress them is continuously repeated⁵⁰ and varied in many episodes in which they, even when they become a discriminated and persecuted small minority in exile, appear as perennial «persecutors» of Christians, spread epidemics, poison the wells and often kill directly their children, thus reproducing the «Jewish exclusive guilt» reading of the history of the Passion.

Despite this intense propaganda campaign, continuously repeated also after the Fathers of the Church, in the Christian world up to the eleventh

⁵⁰ P.-A. Taguieff, *Criminaliser les Juifs*.

century there were certainly legal discrimination and persecutions of the Jews, but generally no mass murder (which instead took place in the Islamic countries since the time of Muhammad). It is worth adding that up to the same historical moment, although the figure of Jews was strongly (and very negatively) present in Christian verbal and written communication, it did not have any specific visual trait, neither in physiognomy, nor in clothing, nor by means of special signs added. Maybe the first image (1015) where Jews are identified through their «Jews' hat» is Saint John the Baptist preaching to Judean Elders⁵¹. Soon marks on the clothes and negative physiognomic traits, such as the long, curved nose or ugliness in general, will be added.

The subsequent iconology of the Jews will invariably bring back these features, which were previously absent. These traits, be they attributed as natural or imposed by laws, are identification devices, which obviously are made necessary by a perceived difficulty in distinguishing the «Jewish Other» from the «Christian We». With the growth of the economy and the rebirth of the cities, and together with the collective conflict with the «external Other» (Islam, Mongols, Vikings), the presence of the «internal Other» becomes more relevant and the fear it arouses suggests increasingly harsh discrimination. This need for distinction becomes clear from a few decades before the massacres of the Jews in the First Crusade (1096, especially but not only in the Rhine cities such as Worms, Speyer, Mainz). The timing can hardly be considered an accident. In the same centuries, moreover, the iconological motif of the comparison between the triumphant Church and the humiliated Synagogue, prisoner and above all blind, spreads in the statuary of many cathedrals (such as Strasbourg, Freiburg, Notre Dame): it is the iconization of the semiotic figure of blindness (our fig. 9). Europe begins its rebirth by proclaiming itself Christian and victorious over the Other, be it external or internal.

6. Blood libel: Norwich 1144, San Cristoforo della Guardia 1487, Trento 1475

It is not possible to analyze here in detail the subsequent developments of these figures, due to their number and complexity. I will therefore limit myself to mentioning some new figure, invented in the twelfth century which takes up and puts together some previous figures: fig. 3 (blood, murder), fig. 7 (misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians),

⁵¹ Second Gospel Book of Bernward, Hildesheim, ca. 1015, Dommuseum Hildesheim, ms. 18, fol. 75).

and in the background always too fig. 4 (deicide). It is our fig. 15: the blood libel. In it Jews are shown as:

1. **Enemies and persecutors** of Christ
2. Responsible of his death, his **murders**
3. Reproducing his death, by **killing** with the same modalities **innocent people** (as Jesus was), i.e. **children**
4. Using their **blood** for same magical or religious use (especially mixing it in the unleavened bread of Passover, but also using it, for instance, to heal the **wounds of circumcision** or the **male menstruation** from which they are said suffering)
5. Reproducing the **same bloody crime** on the consecrated host, whom they steal or buy to profane it and literally **wound** it, making it **bleed**
6. Be **punished** harshly for these crimes

It is worth noting here already that points from 3 to 5 assume that Jews time believe in the truth of the Christian narrative, because they are presented as trying to reproduce the Passion on the body of Christian children, but at the same time that they of course **do not believe**, because they want to desecrate it. They are seen as stating what they deny: a pragmatic paradox that appears unsustainable if attributed to real people – but on a mythical level this is not an obstacle. This paradoxical (or rather paranoid) interpretation, is of course very different from the real position of the Jews, who simply do not believe in the Christian narrative and therefore do not think its symbols have any value, as the Jews tried for these «crimes» continued to repeat in vain. It derives from the equally paradoxical or paranoid prejudice of considering them the internal enemy of Christianity: being here, they must believe the Christian narrative, simply because everyone here knows it is the Truth, but they do not understand it [fig. 9 blindness] or rather viciously persist in not wanting to accept it out of obstinacy and hatred for Jesus [fig. 8 divine hostility], and therefore they profane it.

This slander was advanced hundreds of times from the twelfth century until Nazism and beyond. Each of these cases led to persecutions, torture, trials and in the vast majority of cases the physical destruction of entire communities, with the atrocious execution of all its members⁵². The first well documented case happened in Norwich (England) in the year 1144.

⁵² M. Introvigne, *Cattolici, antisemitismo e sangue*, Milano, Sugarco, 2004; R. Taradel, *L'accusa del sangue*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 2002.

The first trace of this story is found in an *Anglo - Saxon Chronicle* written in ancient English by the monks of Peterborough Abbey before 1155. This is the modern version of the relevant passage, which contains all the figures I just mentioned:

«In his [King Stephen's] time, the Jews of Norwich bought a **Christian child before Easter and tortured him** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians; fig. 3 blood, murder], with all the tortures that **our Lord was tortured with** [fig. 4 deicide] and on Good Friday **hanged him on a cross on account of our Lord** [fig. 4 deicide], and then buried him [fig 15 the blood libel]» (*Anglo - Saxon Chronicle* 1155 Petersborough)⁵³.

What is new, in this short passage, is the link with Easter and the idea of reproducing/simulating the Passion (fig. 16 Deconsecration of Easter). This link with the Christian Easter will soon extend to the violent opposition with the Jewish Passover (which is historically the matrix of the Christian feast) and will become the narrative motif according to which the Jews need Christian blood to knead the unleavened bread with which they celebrate, according to a very ancient tradition, their liberation from slavery in Egypt.

All the details of the blood libel were the special contribution of a monk, Thomas of Manmouth, who invented this figure and he propagated it tirelessly throughout his life. When a child named William was found dead in the fields around Norwich, Thomas prevented his regular burial, claimed his death as «martyrdom» carried out by the Jews and declared hence him a saint. He spent the rest of his life in an incessant work of consolidation of the cult of William of Norwich, *inter alia* writing a book (Thomas of Manmouth 1177) to tell his story.

There we find that:

«Theobald [a converted Jew, whom he said met in Cambridge, about which we know nothing else] told him that the **Jews of Spain assembled every year** [fig. 17 world Jewish conspiracy] in Narbonne, in order to arrange 'the annual sacrifice prescribed' because 'in the ancient writings of our Fathers is written that the Jews, without the **shedding of human blood** [fig. 3 blood, murder] could neither obtain their freedom, nor could they ever return to their fatherland'. Hence it was laid down in ancient times that every year they must **sacrifice a Christian** [fig. 15 the blood libel] in some part of the world' [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians] in order 'to **show contempt for Christ** [fig. 8 divine hostility], to revenge them because **Christ's death had made them slaves in exile** [fig. 10 wandering, exile] [...] Each year, the Jews of Narbonne cast lots to determine the country in which the sacrifice would take place»⁵⁴.

⁵³ <http://mcllibrary.org/Anglo/part7.html>

⁵⁴ A. Dundes (ed.), *The Blood Libel Legend*, Madison WI, Winsconsin University Press.

The most important and poisonous contribution of Thomas was the idea of a «world Jewish conspiracy», namely that all the Jewish of the world are the executors of a secret plot, managed by distant and invisible leaders [fig. 17 world Jewish conspiracy]. The most prominent expression of this conspiracy theory has been *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (1903), the falsity of which has been demonstrated immediately after their publication and the manufacture by the Russian secret service reconstructed in detail, but which still have a large audience all over the world, as polls keep showing. However, Thomas was able to get a more immediate result of his work:

«During the excavation of a site in the center of Norwich in 2004, researchers discovered the bodies of 17 people thrown head-first into a Norwich well. Later study by a team from the University of Dundee identified them as Jewish. Eleven of the 17 skeletons were those of children aged between two and 15. The remaining six were adult men and women. There is evidence the children were thrown down the well after the adults. The positions in which they were found indicated many of them had been dropped into the well from their ankles. Seven skeletons were successfully tested and five of them had a DNA sequence suggesting they were likely to be members of a single Jewish family. No cause of death other than being dropped into well was apparent in any of the skeletons. The bodies are most likely those of Jewish victims of a Christian Pogrom. Likely dates for the massacre are 1144 and the 1230's both following outbreaks of the Christian blood libel against Jews»⁵⁵.

The connection with Easter and the metaphoric identification between a child and Jesus (on the ground of their same innocence) is systematically used in almost all cases of blood libel after Norwich. In the following example (San Cristoforo della Guardia 1487), very significant because it was propagated just before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and was one of the arguments for their persecution, there is also a further metaphorical step: an extension of the blood libel to the consecrated host (based on the theology of the Eucharist that transforms it into the body itself of Jesus). This figure appears very often, also in famous paintings such as the *Il miracolo dell'ostia sconosciuta* (The miracle of the desecrated host), painted in 1467-1468 by Paolo Uccello in Urbino.

What follows is the mythical narration of this episode, as it were matter of fact, one can read today in an Italian Catholic hagiographic site⁵⁶. It may seem incredible, but similar versions can be found in a number of contemporary fundamentalist Catholic publications, for instance in *I guidei*

⁵⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-13855238>

⁵⁶ <http://www.santiebeati.it/dettaglio/90681> [my translation].

e l'accusa del sangue by Edoardo Longo⁵⁷. But it is not just delusions of a few reactionary fanatics. Basically, the same version can still be read today, in 2020, on the official website of the Archdiocese of Madrid <https://oracionyliturgia.archimadrid.org/2015/09/25/el-santo-nino-de-la-guardia-martir-%E2%80%A0-1489-3-3-2-2/> :

«Cristoforo della Guardia martyr is one of the many children told **killed** by the Jews [fig. 3 blood, murder]. [...] At the age of four he was **kidnapped** [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians] by some Jews who, according to their **superstitious** ideas, believed they could be **freed from all evil** by sprinkling the sources of Christians with a powder obtained from the heart of a baptized child [fig. 3 blood, murder] and a **consecrated Host**. [fig. 15: the blood libel, fig. 18 Host] Before being killed, Christopher was subjected to torments similar to those endured by **Jesus** [fig. 4 deicide], and finally the nefarious sacrilege was performed during the **Holy Week** of 1491 [fig. 16 Easter]».

In fact, on November 16, 1491, an *auto-da-fé* was held outside of Ávila that ended in the public execution of several Jews and *conversos*. The suspects had confessed under torture to having murdered a child. Among the executed were Benito García, the converso who initially confessed to the murder. However, no body was ever found and there is no evidence that a child disappeared or was killed; because of contradictory confessions, the court had trouble coherently depicting how events possibly took place. The child's very existence is also disputed. The *Holy Child* has been called Spain's «most infamous case of blood libel» (Irene Silverblatt)⁵⁸.

The third case, among so many, I consider here, is that of Simon of Trent (1475). This is a 'traditional' reconstruction of the «crime»⁵⁹.

«Little Simon [...] was slayed on the 21st March, 1475 A.D., [...] during Holy Week. The Jews of this town wanted to celebrate **their Passover** [fig. 16 Easter] in their own way; so, they secretly abducted the small boy and carried him to the house of the Jew Samuel. During the **Holy Week**, [...] the day before **Good Friday**, on the day before the outlawed '**Perfidious Passover**' [fig. 16 Easter] [...] the Jew Tobias approached the child, who was not quite 30 months old, and [...], picked him up [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others,

⁵⁷ E. Longo (ed.), *I giudei e l'accusa del sangue*, Pordenone, Lanterna, 2013.

⁵⁸ For historical details and bibliography, I refer to J. E. Longhurst, *The Age of Torquemada*, Lawrence KS, Coronado Press, 1962, Ch. XI (<https://libro.uca.edu/torquemada/torquemada11.html> and to <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/la-guardia-holy-child-of>)

⁵⁹ <http://www.stsimonoftrent.com/>; for a similar very recent view, see: <https://www.agerecontra.it/2018/03/la-vera-storia-del-beato-simonino-da-trento-innocente-e-martire-e-del-suo-culto/> <https://www.agerecontra.it/2018/03/la-vera-storia-del-beato-simonino-da-trento-innocente-e-martire-e-del-suo-culto/> (my translation; for analysis cf. S. Lippon, *Dark Mirror*, New York, Holt, 2014; R. Taradel, *L'accusa del sangue*).

especially Christians] and carried him at once to the house of the Jew Samuel. When night fell, [the Jews] undressed the little boy and unmercifully **butchered him** [fig. 3 blood, murder]. While Moses **strangled him with a handkerchief** as he lay across Samuel's knee, **pieces of flesh from his neck were cut with a knife and the blood collected in a bowl** [fig. 3 blood, murder]. At the same time, they **punctured the naked** offering with needles and murmured Hebrew curses [fig. 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians]. They then **cut pieces of flesh** from the boy's arm and legs and **collected the blood** in pots. Finally, the torturers **imitated the crucifixion** by holding the **twitching body upside down and the arms outstretched** and during this horrible act they spoke the following: 'Take this, **crucified Jesus**. Just as our forefathers did once [fig. 4 decide], so **may all Christians by land and sea perish**, [fig. 17 world Jewish conspiracy].

In this story it is interesting the initial refusal by the Papacy and the Empire (under whose civil and religious authority the city of Trento fell) to recognize the «crime», because the trial was clearly unfair, even for the criteria of that time⁶⁰.

About thirty people were imprisoned, all belonging to the three families of Jews then residing in Trento, those of the usurers Samuele and Angelo and the doctor Tobia; by order of the Prince-Bishop Giovanni Hinderbach they were subjected to trial, which made extensive use of torture, so they eventually ended up confessing guilty. Despite the interventions of Pope Sixtus IV and Archduke Sigismund of Tyrol, not at all favorable to the action of the Prince-Bishop of Trentino, the process continued with extreme harshness, until the death sentence and relative execution of 15 of the alleged offenders and confiscation of their goods. The *Proceedings* of the trial in Rome, Trento and Vienna are preserved and are very relevant because they testify the efforts made to ascribe the ritual murder to the Jews with the opinion that similar rites also took place in other cities and with a certain frequency.

But soon the Church changed its attitude: in the decree of June 20, 1478 *Facit nos pietas*, Sixtus IV, declared the proceedings against the Jews in Trent to be «rite et recte factum»⁶¹ and supported the cult of Simon until the sixties of the last century:

«In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Trento trial acts ended within a highly political debate [...] Giuseppe Oreglia, wrote in «La Civiltà Cattolica» (1881-1882) that 'even presently observant Jews are obliged in their false conscience to use Christian blood in the rites and ways hitherto revealed by the Jews of Trento'. In 1902 the parish priest of San Pietro, Giuseppe Divina, published a *Storia del beato Simone da Trento*, reaffirming the full historical credibility of the trial reconstruction [...], the solemn procession that carried

⁶⁰ <http://santiebeati.it/dettaglio/91019> (my translation).

⁶¹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13752-simon-simedl-simoncino-of-trent>.

the body of the child and the alleged instruments of martyrdom through the city was held until 1955. In 1961 Gemma Volli, engaged in the study of the historical events of the Jewish communities in Italy and intent on ensuring that the Simonino case was no longer the basis for anti-Jewish prejudices, came to Trento to meet Iginio Rogger, professor of Church history in the diocesan seminary. [...] Those were the years in which the Catholic Church began a broad reflection on its relations with the modern world and, within this, a reinterpretation of the relations between Christianity and Judaism. In 1963 Rogger was therefore able to present the case to the new bishop Alessandro Maria Gottardi. An expertise was commissioned to the German Dominican Willehad Eckert, who worked on it during 1964 [...]. He refuted the procedure adopted in the trial ('torture managed to tear the desired confessions') and the seriousness of the prejudices that had conditioned it; he remembered the doubts of contemporaries; he finally expressed a judgment 'in the light of history': 'confessions begin to become problematic and false only when the pre-established accusation scheme becomes the same. Despite this pattern, which was to be supported by confessions extracted through torture, there remains a series of internal contradictions that show how the Trento trial led to a judicial assassination'. Eckert's study was submitted to the Congregation of Rites, which on May 4, 1965 clarified how the approvals of the cult of 1584 and 1588 could not be considered equivalent to a canonization [...] The cult was therefore officially abrogated on November 28, 1965».

This reconstruction⁶² is very significant, because it comes from the catalog of an exhibition officially set up in 2020 by the Diocese of Trento –the one that for five centuries had curated and perpetuated the cult of the «martyr» in its diocesan museum and entitled *L'invenzione del colpevole. Il 'caso' di Simonino da Trento, dalla propaganda alla storia* (The invention of the guilty. The 'case' of Simonino da Trento, from propaganda to history): an important moment of recognition of historical reality, which goes beyond the controversies provoked on the subject by a very controversial and «criticized» book by a Jewish historian⁶³.

7. Some conclusions

1. Obviously there is also a history of these figures and of the corresponding images, which are very frequent from the eleventh century onwards and still continue to be diffused today especially in the Islamic world, well after the end of Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda factory. There are times when the production of these images becomes thicker and moments when it thins out. There are first uses, inventions of new figures and new accusations. All these changes obviously respond to specific historical circumstances.

⁶² <https://www.museodiocesanotridentino.it/pagine/simonino-da-trento> [my translation].

⁶³ A. Toaff, *Pasque di sangue*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007.

But here I am interested in its extraordinary historical continuity and in its structural constants. Therefore, I did not order them in precise historical series nor have I tried to hypothesize specific causal mechanisms for the various manifestations of anti-Jewish hatred. This study based on a semiotic methodology sought to identify the basic narrative elements (figures, motifs) and to show their textual combination. Here is the list of identified figures. It must be recognized that it is still a provisional, partial, and rather disordered list. To organize it better and complete it, more work is needed.

1. The internal Other; 2. abjection 3; blood, murder; 4 decide; 5 demonization; 6 lie; 7 misanthropy, enmity for others, especially Christians; 8 divine hostility; 9 blindness; 10 wandering, exile; 11 self-betrayal; 12 dehumanization; 13 genocide; 14 lust and disgust; 15 blood libel 16 Easter; 17 world Jewish conspiracy; 18 host

2. The religious «internal other» of Christianity (and also of Islam, and finally, in some respects, of the secular tradition that goes from the Enlightenment to Marxism to the present liberalism) is «the Jew». Unlike for the other «others» there have been only rare – but dramatically relevant – attempts to his complete physical destruction. According to a Christian tradition whose main exponent is Augustine of Hippo, the Jews indeed must survive to be doubly used by Christianity as witnesses:

a) They must show with their sacred texts that the «Ancient» Testament, used by Christian theology as a «prophecy» of the New, is true, not a Christian invention

b) Undergoing persecution, exile and humiliation they must be examples of the punishment that comes to those who deny the true religion.

3. This ideological operation takes away their history and identity, reducing them to abjection.

a) Their history is divided into two incompatible and non-communicating parts. One part is true and glorious but not theirs: it is the «Ancient» Testament, literally their «heritage» that the ruling ideological power claims they do not understand. And the other and subsequent part, from the time of Jesus onward, in which for them there is only error, misery and corruption. Both of them are not a real history, but only a premise or a (failed) promise and a decadence / punishment that will end only with the final self-negation, in eschatological times.

b) Their autonomous religious and cultural identity is abolished, because the authors of the blood libel believe that they basically believe in the Christian proclamation, so much so that they are accused of using the model of the Crucifixion for their criminal practices, they profane the Host, etc.; but, at the same time, they do not believe in it, out of pure obstinacy blindness and wickedness. The Jew is an intern other not only because he lives in Christian territories, but because his identity is seized in the Christian narrative. Their persecutors did not know and did not mind that in the same time there was in Europe a great autonomous Jewish culture (Rashi, Maimonides, the Zohar, Abulafia, the Maharal, chassidism, and so on) that dealt very little with Christianity, developing completely different content, from Kabbalah to Jewish Aristotelianism, from ritual codification to the method of commentary.

c) The price for Jewish surviving in Christianity is «social abjection»⁶⁴, where political but also ideological power is constituted through forms of «inclusive exclusion»: «a founding exclusion which constitutes a part of the population as moral outcasts» «represented from the outside with disgust as the dregs of the people, populace and gutter»⁶⁵ to the degree that they are «disinherited [from] the possibility of being human»⁶⁶, reduced to «the scum of the earth»⁶⁷.

4. This triple operation on Jews as intern Other (appropriation of history, denial of identity, abjection as the price of survival) is found everywhere in Christian society: in theological treatises, in great poetry (Dante, Shakespeare), in stories, in practices of the Inquisition, in the architecture of the city (the ghettos). But one of the most important places are images, because these last speak to everyone with great immediacy (they are «Biblia pauperum»). While the theoretical and narrative polemics know no rest but only variations between the second and the twenty-first century, the propaganda of the images, mass slaughters (the Crusades) and blood libel processes (Norwich) were born together about a thousand years ago. Why all that happened more or less in the same years an interesting problem. But this timing is certainly meaningful.

⁶⁴ J. Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*; I. Tyler, *Revolted Subjects*, London, ZED, 2013.

⁶⁵ I. Tyler, *Revolted Subjects*.

⁶⁶ G. Bataille, *Abjection and Miserable Forms* [1934], in S. Lotringer (ed.), *More & Less*, Pasadena CA, MIT Press, 1993

⁶⁷ H. Arendt, *The Origin of Totalitarianism* [1951], New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973.

5. The images summarize traits and figures of abjection: the present and past «crimes» that were attributed to the Jews; awful physiognomies and bestial gestures; danger and horror. Because of its immediate emotional impact and the illusion of reality that it generates so easily, images are the best propaganda vehicle for abjection. Some new details are invented or old ones forsaken; styles and techniques change; supports change from miniatures on parchment and from Gothic windows to mass print and Internet. But the fundamental content and its pertinent features remain the same for a millennium: an extraordinary case of (negative) persistence of the image of the other.

6. What the Jews are reproached for is their survival: the obstinacy to remain present when they are «overcome» and «superseded» (by Christianity, by Islam, by the Enlightenment, by Socialism). This survival condemns them to abjection, that is, to always appear physically and morally inferior. The abjection is not only sincerely perceived by the surrounding society, but it is also represented in the images and caused by imprisonment, torture, executions, imposed miseries, mandatory signs. There is only one way to forgive abjection: mercy for the victims. But if the Jews refuse to accept the role of victims and claim to lead a normal life, individual or collective, they embody the return of the repressed and can only be hated. One of the reasons for the current widespread hatred against the state of Israel is that it represents the Jew among the states and, along with that, it allows real Jews, for the first time in two millennia, to live a completely normal life, being masters in their own house.