

Presenter: Steven K Baum, Journal for the Study of Antisemitism

Title: “**Blood Libel Beliefs: Then and Now**”

Panel: Psychology

For Jews, the blood libel accusation is one of the more bizarre and lethal indictments. With origins in Antiquity, it was not until the 12th century that a missing child in Norwich England viz., William triggered mass hysteria linking Jews to undermining acts of ritual murder aka blood libel (BL). England's newly arrived Jews were most vulnerable to the charge --a charge based solely on questionable documentation provided by a local Benedictine monk. It was Thomas of Monmouth's hagiography *The Life and Passion of St. William of Norwich* that provided the first Church endorsement of ritual murder. Subsequent variations were to occur but the basic theme invariably included: *Each Passover/Easter, Jews recited the Exodus at their holiday dinner (sedar). They eat unleavened bread (matza) at their meal and must kidnap a Christian child --its pure innocent blood used for baking all the unleavened bread. Reenacting the deicide, they martyr an innocent (sometimes the Host) and discard the body and consume the pure blood matza at the Jewish meal.*

The BL accusation was particularly potent. Not only was Jewish culpability in the deicide affirmed, but perceptions of Jews conspiring to repeat their criminal ways on innocents was reaffirmed. For the next several centuries, children would go missing with several declared saints. Thousands of Jews were held to be responsible, wrongfully imprisoned, tortured or killed even when the child would later be found or a parent admitted to infanticide. So powerful was the BL fantasy, that some historians believe Europe's major Jewish expulsions viz. Spain, England; forced conversions and several state sanctioned killings were retaliatory, based on BL fears.

Though considerably reduced in number over the past century, the incendiary antisemitic indictment never quite faded into obscurity and includes current endorsements from Russian Parliamentarians and the Office of the Archbishop of Madrid. While some investigators have focused on its contemporary derivations, others have examined the shift from Christian to current Muslim culture--where the belief enjoys a revitalization appearing

in film, literature and mainstream news reports. It begs a larger question -- who then and who now are vulnerable to antisemitic beliefs viz., blood libel.

To that end, a number of respondents were examined as to the nature and extent of their currently held blood libel beliefs. A non-random, purposive sample of those attending blood libel shrines at Norwich and Lincoln, UK; and LaGuardia and Zaragoza, Spain was derived. Frequency distribution were created and non-parametric statistics yielded a number of preliminary findings. Two distinct grouping appeared--those who had known and those who had not known of the Jewish ritual murder charge. The findings will be discussed in the context of trait, state and social support of antisemitic and religious beliefs.