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Jeffrey Freedman: A Poisoned Chalice

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INTRODUCTION

 HIS IS A BOOK ABOUT A CRIME. NOT just any crime, to be sure, but one of the worst, most heinous, most abominable crimes imaginable to Christians. On Thursday, 12 September 1776, according to the magistrate in the Swiss city of Zurich, somebody placed deadly poison in the communion wine of the main cathedral in the heart of the city. And to crown the infamy, this particular Thursday coincided with one of the most important dates of the liturgical calendar: the General Day of Prayer and Repentance. To poison the communion wine in a cathedral on such an occasion was nothing less than the consummate act of desecration, a sacrilege so monstrous that one contemporary pastor compared the poisoner to Judas and the poisoning to the Crucifixion.¹

Besides being a horrific act of desecration, such a crime was a serious threat to the cohesion of a tightknit community. Scarcely 10,000 inhabitants dwelled within the heavily fortified walls of eighteenth-century Zurich, and all of the citizens of the city

belonged to the reformed Protestant church, the only one tolerated since the Reformation, which had abolished the mass and transformed the sacrament of communion. In the reformed Protestant church, taking communion in both kinds was not a privilege reserved for the clergy (both clergy and laity drank the wine), nor was the sacrament handed down from on high, distributed from the altar by a priest who mediated between God and the faithful. The communion service was organized, as it were, along a horizontal rather than a vertical axis. The communion cup circulated throughout the congregation, passing from hand to hand and from mouth to mouth. As a result, the communion service took on a double role: it was not only a sacrament but also a civic rite—or rather a sacrament of citizenship. When Zurichers came together to celebrate communion, they were affirming not only their individual ties to their God but also their collective ties to one another, cementing their bonds of fellowship through the sharing of a common meal: literally, a “supper” [*Abendmahl*]. The poisoning of the communion wine threatened to dissolve those bonds, sowing seeds of suspicion and mistrust, turning citizen against citizen.²

And finally, of course, such a crime was an act of attempted murder. But against whom? The cathedral was not just any church. It was one of the four main parish churches within the walls of the city and the one where some of the most prominent citizens, such as the mayor, came to worship:³ a few drops of a lethal substance placed in the communion wine of the cathedral and virtually the entire ruling class of an Old Regime state could be dispatched in the twinkling of an eye. No wonder that the government took the affair so seriously, and that for months afterward it gave as much attention to this as to any other matter of state.⁴ But members of the ruling councils were not alone in treating the affair with such gravity. Pastors in Zurich devoted their sermons to it, thundering from their pulpits against this monstrous crime. Newspapers and journals throughout the German-speaking world discussed it. And so too did countless individuals in Germany and Switzerland, giving voice to all manner of rumors, the echoes of which can be detected in letters of the period.

For all of its importance to contemporaries, however, the affair of the poisoned communion wine has attracted virtually no attention from historians. The general histories devoted to Zurich in the eighteenth century pass it over in silence, and so too, for the most part, do more specialized studies, which mention it, if at all, in a footnote or a brief sentence.⁵ How to explain this silence?

The answer, presumably, is that Zurich historians have viewed the affair of the poisoned communion wine as an ephemeral event unconnected to the larger themes of eighteenth-century history. Such a view is wrong, as we shall see. But it is quite possible that some readers of this book may be harboring a similar prejudice. Before proceeding, therefore, we need to understand why the affair of the poisoned communion wine deserves to be rescued from oblivion and what is at stake in a book of this sort.

IN ZURICH, THE POISONING OF THE COMMUNION wine quickly escalated into a political affair. It led to a trial that opponents of the government denounced as a farce, and it culminated the following year in a major constitutional crisis, the most serious crisis faced by the government in the last decades of the Old Regime. Almost from the very beginning, however, the affair was also unfolding in an arena much broader than that of Zurich. Within weeks of the General Day of Prayer and Repentance, news of the crime had spread all across the German-speaking world, transmitted by scores of newspapers, which blanketed the territories of the old Reich. Even Germans who cared little about Swiss politics now found their attention riveted upon the spectacle unfolding in Switzerland, as if Zurich had suddenly become the stage for a drama of universal significance. And in a sense, the poisoning of the communion wine *was* a drama of universal significance, a drama that enacted one of the most fundamental problems confronted by intellectuals in the age of Enlightenment: the problem of evil. If the various currents of Enlightenment thought converged at any one point, it was their common rejection of the Christian doctrine of original sin, the quasi-biological notion of hereditary fault, which traced the origin of evil to the disobedience of Adam

and Eve in the Garden of Eden. To Enlightenment thinkers, this doctrine defied rational comprehension and offended the dignity of man. But the poisoning of the communion wine was no less a challenge to rational comprehension and no less offensive to the moral dignity of humanity than the notion of a corrupt and enslaved will passed on like an ancestral curse from generation to generation. Not even a political motive (assuming there was one) could adequately account for the deliberate, premeditated attempt to massacre hundreds upon hundreds of worshipers, most of whom were simple artisans with little or no connection to the small circle of governing magistrates. Such a crime seemed to expose the very limits of rational understanding and to point beyond reason toward a moral depravity so terrifying that it could only be described as diabolic. “How does [this affair] concern us?” a Hamburg newspaper asked rhetorically in 1779, long after the criminal investigation and the ensuing trial had come to an end in Zurich. “In fact, it concerns us a great deal, for besides the Swiss, did not the entire public of the civilized world [*das ganze gesittete Publikum*] shudder at the wickedness of such a deed?”⁶

Because the crime posed a problem of such fundamental importance, it captured the interest of some of the leading figures in the German republic of letters: Friedrich Nicolai, Johann Caspar Lavater, Johann Gottfried Herder, Christoph Martin Wieland, Isaac Iselin, Johann Zimmermann, Johann Eberhard, and Johann Joachim Spalding. In sermons, journal articles, pamphlets and personal letters, German and Swiss intellectuals debated the implications of the crime, advancing interpretations and counter-interpretations in a sequence of passionate exchanges. Not all of the contributors to the debate identified themselves with the Enlightenment. Indeed, one of its two main participants, the Protestant pastor Johann Caspar Lavater, was an outspoken critic of the Enlightenment, and he used the poisoning of the communion wine to illustrate his criticisms, claiming that attacks on traditional Christian faith had undermined the foundations of morality and were thus responsible for the commission of the crime. In its form, however, if not its content, the debate was very much in the spirit of

the Enlightenment. Even Lavater advanced grounds for his claims; he appealed to evidence; and, most importantly, he took his stand in public, in printed texts, which were themselves subject to further critique. Conducted in this fashion, the critique of Enlightenment was part of the Enlightenment; it belonged to a process of self-clarification by which the Enlightenment came to examine its own prejudices and assumptions. By following that process as it unfolded in response to the crime in Zurich, this book brings to life an important episode in the intellectual history of the late eighteenth century, an episode in which the Enlightenment was forced to interrogate the very limits of reason itself.⁷

NOW, THE SELF-CLARIFICATION OF ENLIGHTENMENT may sound like a rather abstract intellectual enterprise, and in some cases it was (most notably in the philosophy of Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason*, published five years after the poisoning, sought to expose the limits of the understanding from the lofty perspective of a transcendental critique). But the debate about the poisoning of the communion wine was nothing if not concrete. Grounded in a single, empirical event, it never strayed so far from the event as to lose itself in airy speculation. The problem was that the ground itself was unstable, more like the shifting sands of a desert than the hard rock of an Alpine mountain. Nobody had actually witnessed the poisoning, which was presumed to have taken place under cover of darkness, so the reconstruction of the crime rested on secondary evidence—physical traces left by the criminal, the results of scientific investigations, and circumstantial evidence culled from the testimony of witnesses. To draw inferences from such evidence was anything other than straightforward. What had actually happened in the cathedral, no less than what it might mean, was open to interpretation, and the two questions were inextricably connected (bound together, so to speak, in the same hermeneutic circle) because every attempt to establish the meaning of the event rested on a particular reconstruction of the facts and every attempt to reconstruct the facts rested on a particular view of their meaning. Lavater, for example, who regarded the crime as a sign of diabolic

evil, interpreted the evidence in such a way that the facts of the crime appeared correspondingly sinister. Others, who rejected as irrational the very existence of the devil, did precisely the opposite, and their reconstruction of the facts made the event seem relatively benign. The two versions of the facts differed so profoundly as to be irreconcilable. Both of them could not be right, and yet it was difficult, if not impossible, to find a neutral and objective standpoint from which to adjudicate between them. On the face of it, every attempt to pin down what had happened in the cathedral seemed doomed to validate its own interpretative prejudice.

At the center of this book, therefore, lies not an event so much as a problem. What counts as valid evidence? How can one interpret it? To what extent can one obtain objective knowledge about events in the past? The problem of evidence is, of course, an eminently historical one inasmuch as standards of evidence have changed over time.⁸ But it is equally a problem of historical method, confronted, at least implicitly, by all historians, who struggle in the manner of Leopold von Ranke to reconstruct the past “as it actually was” [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*]. I say “implicitly” because most historians confront the problem without “problematizing” it. They go about their business without bothering to spell out their methodological presuppositions, and if they do spell them out, they consign them to a separate publication or a separate chapter within a larger book, distinguishing clearly between the writing of history on the one hand and reflections on the writing of history on the other. What sets this book apart is that it collapses the historical and methodological levels: it is bound to confront the problem of evidence explicitly because that problem lies at the center of the story it seeks to reconstruct.

SO THE AFFAIR OF THE POISONED COMMUNION wine opens onto some very large topics indeed—from the political crisis of an Old Regime state, to the self-critique of Enlightenment and the problem of evil, to the interpretation of evidence and the nature of historical knowledge.

But enough of such large and weighty matters! As it is, this introduction may already have gone on too long and frightened off some potential readers with all of its highfalutin talk about the limits of reason and the hermeneutic circle. Rather than crushing the affair under the weight of philosophy and theory, therefore, I would like to end by emphasizing another of its aspects: it is a good story. It contains a kind of formal symmetry, framed as it is by two dramatic acts of bloodletting: the spilling of the blood of Christ in the cathedral and the spilling of the blood of a condemned man on the scaffold. It features a colorful cast of characters, including an anti-clerical, oath-swearing gravedigger, a desperate, hard-drinking drifter, and a defrocked minister. It offers plenty of suspense. And it may even point to a moral, although on that score, to be sure, readers will have to make up their own minds. Such a story calls to mind various literary genres, but none fits it so well as that of detective fiction, which always begins with a mystery—a crime shrouded in darkness—and which derives its dramatic power from the efforts of the detective to solve the crime. As I sat down to write this book, therefore, nothing seemed so natural to me as to cast myself in the role of the detective and to give the story of the poisoned communion wine a narrative treatment—modeled loosely on the genre of detective fiction—rather than chopping it up according to the analytic mode of the social sciences. The larger issues raised in this introduction are not set apart and treated in isolation but woven into the fabric of the narrative.⁹

It has often been remarked that the historian works in the manner of a detective, building inferences based on clues—“fingerprints,” as it were—left by those whose lives he seeks to reconstruct.¹⁰ How much more does he resemble the detective when the object of his investigation is itself a criminal case—and not just any criminal case, but one so full of twists and turns that it reads as if it came from the pen of Arthur Conan Doyle. “The Case of the Poisoned Communion Wine” would be a worthy match for the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes. If only one were allowed to smoke a pipe in the archives. . . .