

REVIEW

Kenneth Stow

*Jewish Dogs: An Image and Its Interpreters:
Continuity in the Catholic-Jewish Encounter*

(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), xx + 316 pp.

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Kenneth Stow's *Jewish Dogs* contains a cluster of interlocking arguments about Christian perceptions of Judaism both past and present. As Stow himself states, this book is a work of "historiography within historiography" (ix) that tackles both the question of the persistence of Christian application of canine imagery to Jews and the connection between medieval ritual murder charges and the modernist controversy in Roman Catholicism. The end result is a work that evades chronological categorization while raising unsettling questions about contemporary Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism despite the conciliatory actions taken over the past half-century.

At its most basic level, Stow's book provides a stimulating examination of the history of the enduring image of Jews as dogs in Christian thought from the New Testament to modernity. This image originates in Matthew 15:26 where Jesus declares to a Canaanite woman that the bread of his message ought not to be thrown to Gentile dogs. Stow documents how a Pauline concern with Eucharistic integrity and the purity of the collective body of Christ inverted this saying so that it referred to "Christian children hungering for the Eucharist, which 'Jewish dogs' incessantly plot to steal, savage, or pollute." (xv) Tracing the trajectory of this image through millennia of Christian discourse, Stow argues that conceptions of Jewish-Christian difference should not be located within a Pauline dialectic between carnal Israel and spiritual Christianity. Christian supersessionism hinged not only on asserting Christianity's spiritual superiority over Judaism, but also on establishing boundaries that preserved the purity of the body of Christ from Jewish contact.

Stow contends that the image of the Jewish dog lies at the heart of the ritual murder and host desecration libels. The examples of supposed ritual murder victims Werner of Oberwesel and Richard of Pontoise reveals the complex interchange between medieval, early modern and modern Christian views on the perceived threat of Jews to Christendom. Stow notes that the seventeenth century Jesuit Bollandist fathers paradoxically secured principles for verifying the veracity of historical documents in their monumental *Acta Sanctorum*, yet at the same time accepted as factual the false and discredited accusations of ritual murder and host desecration directed at Jews. In other words, Bollandist scholarship was historically reliable except for its credulity towards libels against Jews. Stow shows that the image of Jewish dogs threatening Christendom was an essential piece of Catholic rhetoric both for Bollandists in the early modern period and for anti-modernists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In both periods, certain groups sought to ensure Catholic stability by equating Eucharistic integrity with the integrity of the collective body of Christ found in the Catholic Church. These self-styled defenders employed the image of the ritual murder victim, whose martyrdom at the hands of Jews was increasingly associated with host desecration, as a symbol of the triumph of Christ and his church over all enemies. The Jews and canine images associated with them served as a

synecdoche for these mortal enemies. Anti-modernists, notably Italian Jesuits, resurrected ritual murder charges against Jews and led campaigns for the canonization of ritual murder victims as martyrs for the faith. Modern Bollandists opposed these efforts and worked to disprove anti-Jewish libels preserved in the *Acta Sanctorum* compiled by their forbearers. The question of Jewish guilt over these supposed crimes served as a proxy by which Catholic modernists and anti-modernists waged their battles. The triumph of anti-modernist forces meant that the image of the polluting and destructive power with which Jews threatened the church was preserved at the same time that the tide of political and racial anti-Semitism rose in the twentieth century. By unraveling the power of the image of the Jewish dog and its central place in anti-modernist rhetoric, Stow allows the reader to have deeper insights into the troubling inaction on the part of Rome during the *Shoah*.

Stow concludes by considering whether contemporary Catholicism can reject negative and destructive views of Jews, as documented in *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent documents, while retaining the theological structure of supersessionism. Although lauding the effects of the Vatican's teaching to weed out widespread attitudes of anti-Judaism, especially during the pontificate of John Paul II, Stow contends that Christian self-identity depends upon a Pauline understanding of Eucharistic solidarity of the body of Christ which, if unchecked, can instill a need to defend the boundaries of the community from incursion and pollution. Following Kurt Hruby, Stow asks whether Catholic Christianity is really able to formulate doctrine in terms that do not implicitly undermine the theological and spiritually legitimacy of Judaism. Commenting on both "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" and *Dominus Iesus* Stow argues that the full implementation of the ideals of *Nostra Aetate* remains to be tested. Benedict XVI's hostility to religious relativism, as documented in *Dominus Iesus* and elsewhere, leaves open the question of whether Jews will ever be free from Christian desires to either enfold them within the church or lash out at them when they resist assimilation.

Stow begins his book with the claim that his book is a failure because rather than being "dispassionate" and "judgmentally neutral," *Jewish Dogs* features "[e]ngagement and emotion . . . on every page." (ix) The extraordinary analysis of the persistence of the image of the Jew as dog and Stow's illustration of its importance for supersessionist thought and anti-Jewish policies raises an important question. Given the history of Christian treatment of Jews, is it defensible to take an objective and neutral stance and should such a view be expected of historians? Stow shows that anti-Jewish thought is a latent potentiality as long as supersessionist theological structures exist. This fact means the historian of Jewish-Christian relations is not a neutral scholar of the past alone but also becomes an engaged commentator on the present as well. To claim otherwise is to ignore the influence of the past upon the present and the ethical responsibilities of historical knowledge.