CHAPTER NINE

Antisemitisms

MEDIEVAL AND MODERN

ANTISEMITISMS, OR FORMS of Jew hatred, existed before Wilhelm Marr coined the term in the 1870s.[1] Did medieval Christian Jew hatred contribute to its modern, racial expression in the Holocaust or Shoah?[2] This debate has been especially lively among historians as well as medieval literary scholars and art historians. As awareness of the Holocaust grew, medieval scholars were encouraged to look at premodern cases of anti-Jewish violence in new ways.[3] Sometimes, looking back from the Holocaust, scholars were tempted to redefine medieval antisemitism *as* anti-Jewish violence even though it includes much more.[4]

The discussion has usually adopted one of two basic approaches. The teleological view sees a causal connection between medieval and modern forms of Jew hatred. Proponents include Jules Isaac, James Parkes, Joshua Trachtenberg, Léon Poliakov, and more recently, Robert Chazan and Gavin Langmuir.[5] Modern historians sometimes argue that the term "antisemitism" is appropriate only for the modern era because it came into currency in the 1880s. But attempts to limit the term to modern racist ideologies, while technically justifiable, has the disadvantage of

suggesting a complete discontinuity between premodern and modern Jew hatred.

Resisting the teleological position, it has been argued that medieval episodes of antisemitism need to be looked at on a case-by-case basis and not necessarily with the assumption that they lead to a modern form. This is the "contextual" understanding of anti-Jewish behavior before modern times. The leading formulator is David Nirenberg, whose influential book *Communities of Violence* set out to upend the teleological trend while reinterpreting the possible cultural meaning of medieval violence.[6] But the cases he cites from southern France and Iberia of ritualized and symbolic violence as a potentially stabilizing rather than destructive force are not contrary evidence of a relationship between medieval and modern Jew hatred since it is the ongoing antagonism to the Jews in northern Europe, especially the German Empire, that might be the most likely candidate for medieval influences on modern German, lethal antisemitism.[7]

Then, in a remarkable volte-face and deft sleight of hand, Nirenberg adopted a modified teleological approach himself in his book *Anti-Judaism*, in which he proposed continuity from antiquity into modern times, not of Jew hatred but "anti-Judaism," which he redefined as the West's hostility to all victimized groups, whom he renamed "imaginary Jews." This move still leaves open the question, addressed here, of how medieval Christian anti-Jewish thinking and behavior is related to real Jews and modern antisemitism, if at all.[8]

Scholars like Hannah Arendt, who resisted using the term "antisemitism" for premodern Jew hatred, contended that the medieval centuries were thoroughly religious in assumptions and institutions, whereas modern antisemitism is grounded in assumptions that include secularism, nationalism, ideologies such

as socialism and liberalism, and the pseudoscience of racist scientific assumptions about Jews.

We see this neat, almost Pauline dichotomy in Arendt's confident distinction that

> anti-semitism, a secular nineteenth-century ideology—which in name, though not in argument, was unknown before the 1870s—and religious Jew-hatred, inspired by the mutually hostile antagonism of two conflicting creeds, are obviously not the same; and even the extent to which the former derives its argument and emotional appeal from the latter is open to question.[9]

But this raises the problem, Why did modern antisemitism target the Jews in the first place? And as we have seen, there are issues of race that are now being studied in medieval society as well as in modern times (chapter 8).

Those who want to insist on a basic difference between religious or premodern and modern racial Jew hatred have used the alternative term "anti-Judaism," not in the sense Nirenberg uses it about all criticized groups in general, but defined in various ways about Jews and Judaism in particular.[10] Gilbert Dahan, Jeremy Cohen, and Anna Abulafia, for example, have tended to use it in analysis of Christian theological traditions about Judaism and Jews.[11] That term focuses attention on the hatred of Jews in the Middle Ages based on Christianity derived from theological writings, and not race. This usage can also suggest a discontinuity between religious anti-Jewish thought and later lethal, racial antisemitism.

Using "anti-Judaism" when one refers to anti-Jewish hatred is at best misleading. The problem of "anti-Judaism" is that Christianity is not opposed to Judaism so much as to *Jews* who practice it, and Christians need Judaism and the Old Testament to tell the truth of

the coming of Jesus. So, for example, Michael Jones discusses anti-Jewish motifs in literary works and can refer to Marlowe's Barabas as "anti-Judaic."[12] What can that mean? Or in an otherwise excellent study of demography in the German Empire, medieval historian Michael Toch refers to "popular anti-Judaism" apparently because he is unwilling to use the word "antisemitism" before the nineteenth century.[13] He is in good company since Salo Baron resisted doing so as well and referred to Trachtenberg's *The Devil and the Jews* as illustrating irrational "anti-Judaism."[14] In such cases, medieval or early modern antisemitism would be better.

Among medievalists who have used "anti-Judaism," the most controversial is Langmuir, whose work defined the term in a way that has not been widely accepted. Langmuir used "anti-Judaism" to refer to Christian religious criticism of Judaism as it was practiced, based on what Jews actually did as Jews. In contrast, he defined "antisemitism" not necessarily as a modern movement but instead as any attack on what he called irrational or chimerical anti-Jewish behavior that Jews never actually did. After making this distinction, he then posited continuity between twelfth-century "antisemitism" and what came later. Langmuir tried to square the circle by arguing first for contexts regarding the cases before the twelfth century and a teleological approach from the twelfth century on.[15]

Langmuir's view is not only fundamentally anachronistic but also potentially apologetic because his "anti-Judaism" relieves the church of any responsibility for his "antisemitism."[16] His approach was also colored by social psychological arguments that medieval Christians had doubts about such doctrines as transubstantiation and "projected" those doubts onto Jews as attackers of the consecrated host, for example.[17] In actuality, assertive Jews' criticism of Christianity led some Christians to have doubts in the

first place and then react defensively, as Richard Southern noted (see chapter 4). This is the opposite of Langmuir's psychosocial model, which pictures Jews as passive victims of Christian doubt projected onto Jews as imagined aggressors. Moreover, Langmuir's use of social psychological explanations and other scholars' reference to Christian "anxiety" or "social anxiety" as an explanation for anti-Jewish behavior impose unempirical theoretical constructs on the data and are usually unverifiable.[18]

Other scholars have also offered explanations for the terms they use. In his study that argues for continuity between medieval and modern forms of Jew hatred, largely through stereotypes and folklore, Chazan discusses briefly the terms "anti-Judaism," which he correctly sees as obscuring the object of Judaism or Jews, and "antisemitism," which he unfortunately reserves only for modern racist forms. Yet in 2016, he returned to the subject and decided to use the term "anti-Judaism" despite its potentially exculpatory implications.[19] This still left him without a term to refer to premodern anti-Jewish hatred.[20] Chazan discounted the use of "antisemitism" for medieval Jew hatred, and this has influenced others to do so as well.[21]

In a cogent critique of Langmuir, Chazan correctly points to the methodological difficulty "in assessing the psychological motivations of past individuals or groups" but then inconsistently refers to "the level of anxiety aroused by these anti-Jewish motifs," which he thinks can be deciphered.[22] For his part, Robert Stacey challenged the psychosocial criteria that Langmuir invoked to distinguish between "anti-Judaism" and "antisemitism."[23] What was considered irrational *in the twelfth century*? As Abulafia has argued, the revival of rationalism in the cathedral schools in the renaissance of the twelfth century understood Jews as lacking reason and in some cases being no different from animals. For that

reason, some Christians thought that Jews were capable of doing anything.[24]

Other scholars have tried to follow Langmuir's periodization without his theoretical distinctions. Guy Stroumsa uses "anti-Judaism" and "anti-Semitism" to distinguish medieval from modern, based on Langmuir.[25] Andrew Gow compares anti-Judaism, or "opposition to Jewish religious tenets and doctrines," and "antisemitic" as not predicated on a specific aversion to the Jewish faith, of which most medieval Christians had little or no knowledge, but he does not limit the latter to the twelfth or any century.[26] David Berger reviewed the long history of anti-Jewish sentiments in the West and uses "medieval anti-Semitism," which makes good sense.[27]

Recently, medievalists in literary studies as well as art and material culture have taken up racial studies and explored ways in which the attribution of physical characteristics to different groups in medieval societies is present.[28] This nuancing of race before modern "racism" also casts doubt on the salient distinction between religious premodern and racist modern forms of Jew hatred regardless of what it is called. And so the remarkable increase of interest in anti-Jewish sentiment by scholars of medieval literature, especially English, and art historians has loosened the barriers to terminological precision that historians have tended to be troubled by so as to distinguish between anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Louise O. Fradenburg's study of *The Prioress's Tale* is one of dozens of examples that use "anti-semitism," however spelled, as the most useful term to refer to Jew hatred.[29] Once we broaden the definition of antisemitism to go beyond violence and refer to any kind of anti-Jewish sentiment, and get over the technical issue of when the term was coined, we open up new possibilities for a more

nuanced understanding of different kinds of anti-Jewish cultures and can reconsider how they are related to one another.[30]

From this brief review it is clear that there is no consensus about terms, and instead a variety of usages that either distinguish between some anti-Jewish writings and acts as "anti-Judaism" versus others that are referred to as "antisemitism," or modified forms of "antisemitism" such as ancient, medieval, and modern, or religious versus racist or some other distinction to privilege the modern racist form associated in particular with the Nazi regime and Holocaust.

Stereotypes: Medieval and Modern Differences?

In exploring the possible diachronic or continuous aspects of anti-Jewish motifs and politics from medieval into modern times, some scholars have pointed to images or "stereotypes"—a term taken from the study of prejudice.[31] A vivid example of this approach was seen in 1995 in an exhibition in the Vienna City Hall of visualizations of medieval Jews compared to Nazi uses of those images in the publication *Der Stürmer* and the volume *Die Macht der Bilder*.[32]

As Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Hess have observed, there is an archive of antisemitic tropes that can be drawn on in different periods.[33] Some motifs and images from the medieval stereotypes persist, adding to the modern ones a religious and venerable Christian pedigree. Alex Novikoff points to medieval sources of modern stereotypes in modern antisemitism: Jews are antiquated and stubborn, blind and irrational, the enemy of Christians and cannibalistic, greedy moneylenders, physically deficient, less than human, and a menace to society. But this is misleading since, as Richard S. Levy notes, modern antisemitism is concerned above all

with “the rise of the Jews,” their power real and imagined, and this was not a major concern in the Middle Ages.[34]

The appeal to stereotypes can provide a useful approach to relating medieval and modern antisemitisms, but there are pitfalls to be avoided. For example, Chazan’s claim that Shylock was “unthinkable before the mid-twelfth century” implies that there is a close resemblance between the medieval Jewish moneylender and Shakespeare’s imagined Jew.[35] But Barabas and Shylock are portrayed as great Jewish haters of Christians. Medieval Jews hate Christianity as “foreign worship” (‘avodah zarah) because Jews thought it was paganism. They tried to get along with Christians, do business, follow the laws, pay taxes, and mind their own business, even though Jews thought of Christians as benighted followers of an ancient, biblically proscribed pagan cult that was worthy of contempt.

So Marlowe and Shakespeare got it wrong. Or better, they created their own version of the medieval imagined Jew as inner enemy who hates Christians, and in the case of Barabas goes around poisoning them. Modern scholars like Chazan have read these Renaissance Jews back into the Middle Ages and assumed that imagined medieval Jews created Barabas and Shylock. In some ways, it is the other way around. Like the ghetto that was invented in the sixteenth century in Venice (1516) and then Rome (1555) but retrojected back into the Middle Ages when there were voluntary Jewish quarters, not ghettos, Shylock has been so powerful as an imagined Jew that he has been read back into the Middle Ages and assumed to be the moneylender then. In fact, those Jews who engaged in credit were often small-time pawnbrokers compared to the large Christian merchant banking houses of the “Lombards” (chapter 8).

The same problem of anachronism that makes Shylock a weak case for arguing for the influence of medieval Jewish stereotypes on modern forms of antisemitism also weakens part of Chazan's contention that Jewish power and danger are found in common in medieval stereotypes and modern antisemitic accusations. Chazan points out that from the mid-twelfth century on, new Jewish stereotypes emerge of the Jew causing harm from financial dealings, expressing blasphemy to Christian symbols, and posing danger by killing Christians. These stereotypes share an understanding of the Jew as *powerful and harmful* to Christianity, and that shared feature contributed to modern forms of antisemitism: "All these new elements [of modern antisemitism] were, however, absorbed into the broad ideational framework of the hostile and powerful Jew that emerged in the mid-twelfth century in northern Europe."[36]

This argument has the advantage of recognizing that despite the differences between medieval and modern stereotypes of the Jews, there was influence of the former on the latter. It is true that the Jew as harmful and dangerous did emerge in medieval Europe and became part of the imagined Jew that persisted into modern times, yet that began, as we have seen in chapter 3, not in the mid-twelfth century but rather at the end of the eleventh with the disaster of the First Crusade riots, when Jews became the inner enemy.[37]

Less relevant, though, is the claim about power, a major component of modern antisemitism. The idea of the modern "rise of the Jews" along with issues of Jewish power and a quest for world domination is qualitatively different from any of the images of the imagined Jew that resonated in medieval Christian society. In Thomas of Monmouth's narrative about the alleged ritual murder of William of Norwich, he imagined an annual meeting of Jewish leaders at Narbonne, not to take over the world, but to pick a victim

of ritual murder to end the exile of the Jews. It is hardly equivalent to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.[38]

Given the variety of accusations in the medieval record, reducing them to Jewish power as well as hatred is a retrojection into the medieval period of modern antisemitism. And so the argument will seem valid that the medieval version contributed to the modern because, in fact, it is the modern definition that was used to selectively define anachronistically the medieval forms. Without the religious competition for chosenness, modern antisemitism is qualitatively discontinuous from its medieval predecessors. Something other than shared stereotypes enabled medieval Christian antisemitism to develop into its modern form.

From Medieval to Modern Antisemitisms

A focus on stereotypes risks anachronism. Instead, we should consider a different approach that will help us understand how medieval Jewish antisemitism is both different from its modern form and contributed to it. This is the three-part structure that medieval and modern antisemitism share, even though the former has religious content and the latter is defined in modern terms. Christian culture created this structure as the scaffolding of its imagined Jew. Each of the three parts could be transformed into modern equivalents that would become modern antisemitism.

The first part of the structure was the idea of the binary of inverted hierarchy in Christian society—an extension of the rivalry between Jews and Christians over divine chosenness. It meant that Christians, like Jews, thought that they should be above the other, and the other should serve them. Neither wanted to be subordinated to the other. But each side needed the other to mirror its own identity in an inverted form.

The cultural binary of two inverted hierarchies is found already in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles between Israel and the Canaanite and other idolatrous peoples as well as in the writings of Paul about Israel of the flesh and spirit. This meant that Christian power was an important theme of difference from the Middle Ages on. Christian domination and Jewish resistance were the result when power was one-sided in favor of the Christian culture. But resistance is misleading. Jews were also assertive, and Christians could be defensive as well. The agency derived from both sides. Each fed the other even when Jews were no longer permitted to live legally in a territory.

The structure of inverted hierarchy based on chosenness was sharpened after the First Crusade and at each subsequent one, when Jews were seen as inner enemies of Christians. This was an intermittent emergency view rather than a continuous one like the factor of chosenness or hierarchy. This too was a medieval addition to antisemitism that continued and changed. The Jews as internal enemy is largely a product of the First Crusade and succeeding Crusades, even if the New Testament and church leaders provide literary support.

The imagined Jew as the nearby enemy was extended to include poisonous usury, threatened murder, conspiracy to commit an annual ritual murder on an innocent Christian boy, ingesting Christian blood, blaspheming Christian sancta in latrines and harming the consecrated host, and poisoning the wells of Europe to kill off the Christians of Europe. The imagined Jew is motivated by hatred and revenge toward Christians—Barabas and Shylock combined. These images of the imagined Jew persisted after Jews were expelled and the Jew remained in Christian societies as the imagined other.

The third factor was that Jewish identity is a permanent condition, regardless of conversion or other factors, especially of

adult Jewish men. Late medieval efforts to convert Jews in northern Europe, not just Iberia's purity of blood laws, raised issues of "racial" permanence, especially the ability of Jewish men to resist conversion either by force or voluntarily. The permanence of Jewish men as Jews becomes clear as conversion efforts accelerated from the thirteenth century on.

These three interlocking structural factors contributed to Christian antisemitic assumptions about Jews more than any stereotypes, and they persisted into modern times, when binary right order, inner danger, and unchangeability were translated into modern and racial terms.

The asymmetry observed throughout this book that Jews hated Christianity, not Christians, and Christians hated Jews, not Judaism, enabled the three-part structure of medieval antisemitism to become modern antisemitism. Both are expressions of Christian hatred of Jews, not of Judaism. This made it possible to hate Jews first for religious reasons and eventually for racial ones.

Christians hated Jews because they were supposed to be religiously subordinate but often were assertive and not servile; Christians thought that Jews were the inner enemy; and Christians believed that male Jews were unable to convert. This three-part structure of Christian antisemitism is about Jews, not Judaism.

And it is because Jews are the subject of the three-part structure of medieval antisemitism that modern antisemitism is about Jews too; the change from an age of religion to a modern secular age did not interrupt the force of the structure of antisemitism. Had Christian antisemitism been about Judaism, and not Jews, modern secularization might have ended it. Instead, it got worse.

Implications for Today

The three-part structure of antisemitism also accounts for contemporary antisemitism toward Jews in the United States. The binary of inverted hierarchy means that Jews are hated when they are not properly subordinate to a group that thinks it is superior. Jews are successful and "white," and are assimilating into the white Christian majority.[39] That is exactly when groups of white supremacists resist Jews as their equals since they are supposed to be below the self-perceived waning white majority. Jews were stigmatized with racial antisemitism after 1871, when German Jews were fully emancipated legally and became like Christian Germans.[40] So American Jews would be among those groups attacked precisely when they became socially indistinguishable from the white nativist communities.

Secondly, Jews are read as the enemy within and therefore dangerous, and need to be contained or eliminated.

And third, nativist groups adopt racial antisemitism and assume that being Jewish is a permanent condition and cannot change. Because of increased intermarriage, Jews become even more threatening since a racial essentialism is attached to their Jewishness.

For these reasons, there is little hope that diaspora Jews will cease to be victims of some forms of antisemitism so long as they threaten the binary of inverted hierarchical expectations of groups that refuse to accept a liberal political egalitarian inclusiveness as the social norm. There is every reason to be concerned that postmodern forms of nationalism and nativism recycle the medieval structure of antisemitism that developed for the first time in Christian Europe.

Unfortunately, just as Europe has proven again and again that it is a resilient culture that can survive devastating world wars in the twentieth century, its antisemitic culture has also proven resilient

and transportable to other cultures, such as American nativism, which adapted the European antisemitic model for its own purposes. Awareness of the deep structure of antisemitism, derived from medieval Christian Europe, does not mean that it is coterminous with the West, but it does mean that not recognizing it will prevent any measure taken against it from succeeding. Put positively, if the West is to overcome color racism or antisemitism, it has to be aware of the history of each.