

The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages

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In recent years, it has become very much easier to teach medieval heresy at undergraduate level. In addition to a long-established and outstanding collection of sources (Wakefield and Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*) we have been blessed, in the last five years, with two textbooks and a collection of essays on the Waldensians, three monographs on inquisition, two popular books, two textbooks and a monograph on the Cathars, full translations of two major sources related to the Albigensian Crusade, and a collection of translated sources relating to heresy in the East.⁽¹⁾ The most recent entrant into this thriving arena is Malcolm Barber's *The Cathars*, a long-awaited textbook by an historian familiar for his past work on the Knights Templar, and for his editorship (sadly just relinquished) of the excellent *Journal of Medieval History*.

Certain topics fall in and out of favour with both the general public and academia; in the case of the Cathars, it is probably the shadow of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's seminal *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village* (1978) that has until recently kept writers somewhat at bay from attempting to present accessible, alternative versions of this major medieval heresy. In fact, of course, Ladurie's book talked very little about heresy itself, and was concerned only with the early fourteenth century, when bishop Jacques Fournier launched an inquisition against the Pyrenean peasants of Languedoc (a more clear example of sledgehammer and nut could hardly be found). Until the recent flurry of titles, pretty much the only attempt to set Catharism in perspective, for a student audience, was the central chapters in Malcolm Lambert's excellent *Medieval Heresy* (first published in 1977 and now approaching its third edition). As things now stand, Barber's *The Cathars* has three main competitors or confrères: the aforementioned *Medieval Heresy*, Lambert's *The Cathars*, and Michael Costen's *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade*. Happily, there is space for all three in the field. Costen's text is more focussed on the crusade than anything else, and

Lambert's is concerned with Cathars (and other dualists) throughout Christendom, whereas Barber has stuck to one region: Languedoc.

As with Barber's earlier textbook *The Two Cities* (dealing with medieval Europe 1000-1300), *The Cathars* is written extremely clearly and accessibly - the *sine qua non* for a student audience, although achieved less frequently by historians than one might wish. The style is relaxed, the structure of the book and its component parts is clear, and above all else the author does not make any unwarranted assumptions about what students will already know: when a new topic, area, or theme appears, its context and relevance are spelt out clearly and succinctly. Over seven chapters, Barber takes us from the origins of the Cathars, through the support enjoyed by the Cathar elite - the *perfecti* or 'perfects' - in southern France, examining the structure and practices of the Cathar church and its social context, to the Roman Catholic church's reaction (preaching, followed by crusade, followed by inquisition) and its eventual suppression of the Cathars. Finally, we are shown the last murmurs of the heresy as it briefly reappeared in the Pyrenean villages persecuted by bishop Fournier, and the strange and resonant 'afterlife' that Catharism has enjoyed for Occitaniste patriots, Simone Weil, and the modern southern French tourist trade.

The Cathars arose in southern France in the twelfth century, propounding a faith that posited the existence of two gods: one good, who created the spirit, and one bad, who created all corporeal matter. In Italy, the theology was more complicated, as certain Cathars adopted 'mitigated' dualism: that is, that the bad god as the creation of the good god. Languedoc, however, seems to have retained absolute dualism; this geographical distinction is not made completely clear in Barber's text, as he relies more on the narrative Italian materials for his section on Cathar theology, rather than excavating the fragments of theology contained in inquisitorial depositions. The Cathar rejection of corporeality provided one foundation for their faith, leading to the ritual of *consolamentum* that transformed a believer into one of the 'perfect', the perfects' abstention from meat and sex, and their belief that marriage was innately sinful (because it pretended to sanctify bodily relations). The second foundation was the Cathar belief that they were the true inheritors of the early, apostolic church; from this sprang the need for the perfects to minister to their flock, to preach and to practice poverty (their mendicancy provided the example from whence sprang the Dominican order). At their apogee, the Languedocian Cathars created a church structure, including bishops, deacons and other officials for different areas, and enjoyed the support (either passive or active) of much of the southern French nobility.

For those of us interested in the Cathars, certain key areas of debate tend to demand attention. One is the question of origins: from whence the heresy arose. A second is the matter of continuation: what allowed the heresy such success (particularly in southern France)? A third is decline: when and how did the orthodox church succeed in putting down this competitor? For all three, Barber provides sensible responses. On the question of origins, he summarises clearly and succinctly the main arguments of the key historians, provides a brief overview of the pros and cons of interpreting instances of heresy prior to the mid-twelfth century as dualist, and argues (I think correctly) that heretical theologians from the East - perhaps specifically from Constantinople - must have played an influential role in evangelising dualism in the west.

The second question - the continuation and success of Catharism - is also handled well. Previous arguments have suggested that Catharism essentially filled a void left by an ill-educated and lax orthodox clergy in Languedoc, and that the social changes wrought by urban expansion formed a seedbed for new and unorthodox ideas. Barber takes both points on board, but sounds welcome notes of caution: orthodox piety was also strong in Languedoc (Cistercian, Hospitaller and Templar institutions were all founded in the area, attracting strong support) and the area was far from being heavily urbanised. As the author comments, 'poor clergy and urban growth made a contribution, but the interaction between heresy and society is much more complex than such simple formulae will allow. The relationship between Catharism and social structure is not, indeed, subject to a single, monolithic explanation' [69]. Indeed, one of the particular strengths of *The Cathars* is Barber's handling of the social context for the heresy. There is very little written in English on southern French society in general, and what is provided here is extremely welcome. Particularly persuasive is Barber's agreement with historians such as Andrew Roach, Jean Duvernoy and Mark Pegg that 'the example set by the lifestyle of the *perfecti* was more important [to their sympathisers] than dualistic

belief as such' [96].

If I am slightly less impressed by Barber's response to the third area - suppression/decline - this is perhaps only because it is the area in which I have greatest interest. *The Cathars* certainly provides a clear account of church reactions in the thirteenth century, narrates the events of the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229), and examines the beginnings of inquisition in Languedoc in a sensibly nuanced fashion. Most importantly, Barber's section on 'decline' concludes with a smart analysis of the socio-economic change wrought by the longer term effects of the Crusade and the extension of French administration into the region: this, he suggests, is the final blow to Catharism - 'In fifty years the environment had been transformed, changing the Cathars first from reformers to *maquisards*, and then from *maquisards* to fugitives' [175].

However, the efforts of the church (both before and after the Crusade) are presented a little too neatly. In the Introduction, noting the fundamental theological challenge that Catharism presented to Catholicism, Barber writes:

For Catholics therefore, there could be no compromise with the Cathars, manifestly working to subvert the faithful at the behest of the Devil; it was the responsibility of all Catholic leaders, ecclesiastical and lay, to strive to overcome this heresy with all the strength at their command. This [...] was particularly pertinent to the reformed papacy which, since the 1050s, had been working to reassert its leadership of the universal Church. [...] Repression of Catharism was not therefore a question of choice, nor was there any option of toleration, for it was a positive obligation upon those charged by God to lead His Church on earth. [2]

One may demur over whether there was a choice to repress: not from an ahistorical desire to condemn Catholicism for its excesses (it's been guilty of worse), but because the image painted here is too univocal and coherent. Although heresy, from c. 1000 onwards, certainly caused ecclesiastical authorities great concern, the main feature of orthodox reactions up to the thirteenth century were their undirected and uncentralised nature; and even in the thirteenth century (the period when that imaginary monolith '*the Church*' was arguably closest to actual achievement) both crusade and inquisition were conducted under confused and altering conditions. It is not clear, for example, *how* the Crusade was supposed to succeed: that is, the nature of the supposed enemy (a clear band of heretical outlaws to be suppressed, or a region that was endemically problematic and in want of governance) changed over the course of its twenty years. So too with inquisition: begun (as Barber makes clear) more as a physical search for heretics, it mutated into something more extraordinary - a system for interrogating individual lay people about their innermost thoughts and beliefs. These changes are of interest, and affect our story.

An important element leads on from this last point: the nature of the evidence upon which Barber (and any historian dealing with the topic) relies. Almost everything we know about Catharism comes from hostile sources, whether polemics written against heretical doctrine, chronicles narrating the successes of orthodoxy, or the complex and problematic records of inquisitors. Although Barber makes effective use of particular sets of inquisitorial depositions, he also relies fairly heavily upon narrative accounts (chronicles and polemics). This makes for a clear exposition; but it would be nice to have greater discussion of the problems with these sources. For example, Barber chooses to base his section on the 'moral and ethical teaching' of the perfects on the polemics addressed against them by writers such as Peter of Vaux-les-Cernay, Rainier Sacconi and James Capelli. What he draws out from these sources is perfectly sound, but it is a shame firstly that the details one can pick out from the less directly hostile inquisitorial depositions are not used to supplement these overviews; and secondly that the sources themselves are not brought more closely under question. That is, one might like to draw students' attention more clearly not only to the fact that these are polemics (something that Barber does note in passing), but that the way in which they think about (and hence present) Catharism - as a sect, with rules, with a hierarchy, something with boundaries and structure - is implicit in their accounts. One can contrast this image with the more fluid and heterogeneous picture of the heretical faith drawn from inquisitorial depositions - a picture that Barber also provides in part - but it would be good to have the differences of viewpoint pointed out more clearly. None of this is to suggest that Barber uses his sources naively; only that the process of evaluating and questioning source materials (many of which are readily available in English) might also be displayed to good pedagogic effect.

Overall, however, this is an excellent starting point for teaching the Cathars to a student audience. It does not provide quite the density of information, or as wide a synthesis of secondary material, as its main competitor (Lambert's *The Cathars*); but in some ways it is all the better for that, as it provides a clearer and more accessible text for new readers. It also handles the shadow of *Montaillou* well, by ignoring most of the characters who so charmed Le Roy Ladurie in favour of a few more pertinent witnesses from the Fournier register who provide key details about Catharism (as opposed to sex and society) in the early fourteenth century. Also worthy of note are the helpful tables, maps and 'Further Reading' sections that bring the book to its conclusion. The newest entrant to the Cathar arena is a most welcome combatant.

Notes

1. General collection of sources: Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*, 2nd edition (Columbia University Press, 1993). Waldensians: Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival, c. 1170-c. 1570* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), Euan L. Cameron, *Waldenses: Rejections of Holy Church in Medieval Europe* (Blackwell, 2000), Peter Biller, *The Waldenses, 1170-1530* (Variorum, 2001). Inquisition: James B. Given, *Inquisition and Medieval Society: Power, Discipline and Resistance in Languedoc* (Cornell University Press, 1997), Alan Friedlander, *The Hammer of the Inquisitors: Brother Bernard Délicieux and the Struggle against the Inquisition in Fourteenth-Century France* (Brill, 2000), John H. Arnold, *Inquisition and Power: Catharism and the Confessing Subject in Medieval Languedoc* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001). Cathars: René Weiss, *The Yellow Cross: The Story of the Last Cathars, 1290-1329* (Viking, 2000), Stephen O'Shea, *The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Death of the Medieval Cathars* (Walker & Co., 2000), Michael Costen, *The Cathars and the Albigensian Crusade* (Manchester University Press, 1997), Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars* (Oxford University Press, 1998), Mark Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246* (Princeton University Press, 2001). Albigensian Crusade: Janet Shirley, trans., *The Song of the Cathar Wars* (Ashgate, 1996), W. A. Sibly and M. D. Sibly, trans., *Peter of Vaux-de-Cernay: The History of the Albigensian Crusade* (Boydell and Brewer, 1998). Eastern sources: Janet and Bernard Hamilton, ed. and trans., *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World c. 650-c.1450* (Manchester University Press, 1998). [Back to \(1\)](#)

I am grateful to John Arnold for his thoughtful and empathetic review of my book which I am pleased to

accept.

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