

The Papacy and Crusading in Europe, 1198-1245

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In March 1208 Pope Innocent III proclaimed a crusade against Raimon VI, count of Toulouse, and the 'Provençal heretics' supposedly infesting the comital lands between the Garonne and Rhône Rivers. All those 'signed with the cross' were offered the same rights and privileges as crusaders journeying to the Holy Land. If they 'rooted out perfidious heresy, purifying the land,' the pope promised remission of sins. 'Attack the followers of heresy more fearlessly than even the Saracens,' he exhorted, 'since heretics are more evil!' This holy war lasted 21 years. After 1211 it was known to northern Europeans (especially the French) as the crusade into the 'lands of the Albigensians'. The Albigensian Crusade was the first of what Rebecca Rist classifies as 'internal' crusades within Latin Christendom as opposed to 'external' expeditions to the Levant. Innocent III died in 1216 and the crusade against the *Provinciales heretici* was continued by two other popes, Honorius III and Gregory IX. Indeed, after becoming pope in 1227, Gregory IX promulgated crusades and sanctioned wars against other heretics and papal enemies. He supported campaigns against the 'pagan' Cumans in 1228; a crusade against the 'Stedinger heretics' of Bremen in 1233; an expedition against the Frisian 'Drenther' preached by the bishop of Utrecht; a crusade against heretics in Bosnia in 1237; and a crusade against John Ashen, king of the Vlachs and Bulgars, in 1238. Rist studies the 'idea' of these 'internal' crusades, 'in other words what the popes *believed* they were doing when they called for people to take up arms against heretics and enemies of the papacy' (p. 2). She examines papal letters ('a unique and valuable source of evidence for understanding papal thought'), arguing this is a 'fresh approach' (p. 2). She is at once level-headed (focusing on texts) and naïve (papal letters have always been read for ways of understanding papal thought). Rist's emphasis upon papal letters is worthy and valuable, yet her unquestioning acceptance of the traditional historiography of heresy and crusading, almost all of which is deeply flawed, constantly stifles her analysis, diminishing much of what she has to say.

Rist's interpretation of what Innocent III believed he was doing when he called upon all Christians to take up arms in a crusade against Raimon VI and the 'Provençal heretics' is misguided. She mistakenly assumes the heretics to be cleansed from the lands of the count of Toulouse were 'Cathars.' She accepts without a second thought the traditional and fallacious narrative of 'Catharism.' She is not alone in this error. Regrettably, far too many scholars defer to the shopworn story of an organized 'Cathar Church' of dualist heretics from the Rhine to the Garonne to the Po Rivers.(1) It is a tale perpetually justifying (in the sense that scholars need not trouble themselves by looking too closely at the contingent social and metaphoric facts of heresy) the erasure of a verifiable past through an unverifiable narrative that seemingly says everything that need be said. It closes avenues of research, never opening them. So much historical analysis into heresy is little more than exegesis on this fanciful storyline. Rist's deference to this narrative means that, for all intents and purposes, she already knows what she will find in the letters of Innocent III. This is a shame as nothing in the pope's letters, whether on the crusade against Raimon VI or not, supports the modern scholarly notion of Catharism, whereas reading them without this liability to learning (or simply with a vaguely skeptical eye) would indeed have been a 'fresh approach' to the Albigensian Crusade.

Innocent III never referred to the heretics in the lands of the count of Toulouse as 'Cathars.' This is more than just semantics.(2) As most research into medieval heresy (and religion) largely adopts an intellectual-historical approach, then the meaning and use of particular words is (or should be) vitally important. It certainly was to preachers, polemicists, and historians in the 12th and 13th centuries. Somewhat bizarrely, such attention to linguistic detail disappears for many modern scholars when it comes to heresy before 1300, so that no matter what terms were used by popes and other Latin Christian intellectuals (Manichaeans, Paterenes, Arians, 'the heretics'), what everyone in the past was really writing and talking about were the Cathars. Admittedly, some preachers named a handful of individuals accused of heresy as 'Cathars'.(3) Or a few polemicists tagged stylized opponents in dialogic treatises on proper Catholic behaviour and thought as 'Cathars'.(4) Even Innocent III in letters to the archbishop of Split described a group of schismatic Catholics in Bosnia as 'Cathars'. Crucially, his letters about the heretics to be expunged by holy war did not. Instead, these heretics when not just 'the heretics' were quite specifically 'the Provençal heretics'. This term derived from *Provincia* – meaning 'province' rather than 'Provence' – and was the papal name for the region between the Garonne and Rhône Rivers. Rist never mentions *Provincia* or the *Provinciales heretici*, seemingly unaware of the meaning attached to them. By contrast, she lists with exemplary precision when the pope likened heretics to little foxes, tares in the field, serpents in the streets, the black horse of the Apocalypse, and the suffocating roots and shoots of a fetid tree (pp. 55–6). She is especially good at emphasizing the metaphors of disease and sickness that Innocent III used more and more feverishly in his letters before 1208 (pp. 56–7). Unfortunately, Rist assumes these analogies and metaphors denote Catharism, which obviates any analytic depth.

When Innocent III used leprous, cancerous, and pestilential metaphors regarding heretics in *Provincia*, they were more than just artful turns of phrase for use by preachers (which seems to be Rist's assumption; for example, p. 143), they were quite exact and methodical ways of thinking about the heretical threat to Christians and Christendom. These metaphors simultaneously evoked the spatial specificity of heresy growing within the lands of the count of Toulouse, the temporal continuity of heresy within the Church, and the insidious way in which heresy secretly poisoned careless Christians, so that they (and their neighbours) were unaware of their own pestilence. Intertwined with these metaphors (quite literally) were the subterranean roots of a growing poisonous plant originating in Toulouse. These metaphors were not about dualism, an institutional heretical 'Church', or influences from far and away (as in Byzantine Bogomils). A millennial shrillness infused this imagery, stressing over and over again that heresy was the great and imminent threat to Christendom. What made this threat so apocalyptic was that all Christians (including popes) would eventually be corrupted by heresy unless it was exterminated. A crusade was the only way of cleansing Christendom (and so the world) of this plague. Unquestionably, Innocent III believed the crusade against the heretics in the lands of the count of Toulouse would be over quickly and that heresy would be eradicated once and for all. As with all millennial visions in practice, the world was not remade anew, and the pope's realization that heresy was still thriving despite the great summer expedition of 1209, necessitated

rethinking and reevaluation of the meaning and purpose of the crusade against the *Provinciales heretici*. Rist astutely detects this shift and change in the letters of Innocent III, yet she constantly undermines her acumen because of two inhibiting historiographic conventions.

Rist's misreading of R. I. Moore's famous *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* is revealing. According to her summary of his argument, already existing heretics and other minority groups (Jews, lepers, homosexuals) were persecuted from the 12th century onwards, so 'that majority society, and in particular a literate and therefore elite social group, could assert and consolidate its own power by defining itself against the "Other"' (p. 3). What this interpretation fails to grasp, she argues, was 'the papacy's genuine fear about the effect the spread of heresy in Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would have on Christianity' (p. 3). Moore's argument does nothing of the sort (even in Rist's slightly parodic précis). Many things are debatable in his theory, but this is not one of them. At a basic level all Moore is saying is that Latin Christian intellectuals shaped the 'reality' of what they so genuinely feared. At an even more fundamental level all he is saying is that medieval society at a particular time and place, and the individuals who constituted that specific society, played some role in the formation of their own identities and in the identities of other individuals. This neither suggests falsehood, fantasy, or Machiavellian deviousness on the part of Latin Christian intellectuals (as if they were engaging in some sort of nudge-nudge-wink-wink conspiracy in the scriptorium). There were no pre-existing heretics in the twelfth century until the thinking of Latin Christian intellectuals made them exist. Neither does it deny the 'reality' of the men, women, and children accused of heresy, even if there is little or no correspondence between what they experienced in their day-to-day existence and what they were accused of thinking and doing. A number of historians (often inspired by Moore) have recently elaborated upon these two 'realities.' The implication for Rist is that when Moore and other scholars argue for contingency, specificity, and the social construction (however defined) of religious beliefs and identities, they deny the authenticity and legitimacy of those beliefs and identities (p. 222).⁽⁵⁾ (Such assumptions, for instance, are quite pervasive in religious studies, Afro-American Studies, and Gender Studies.) Paradoxically, it is the modern fabrication of Catharism that constitutes 'what really happened' for Rist – and yet this is to confuse the 'realism' of good fiction for the truth of good history.

The other historiographic convention constraining Rist is the way in which modern historians of the crusades classify and codify crusading. She clearly approaches the study of the crusades against heretics from a 'pluralist' perspective (deriving from Giles Constable's well-known taxonomy of the four ways in which historians have studied the crusades). This view is not concerned with where a crusade was going, unlike 'traditionalists' who argue that what makes a crusade is a Levantine destination, rather it focuses upon how it was initiated and organized, so extending the history of the crusades not only geographically but also chronologically. Most Anglo-American historians of the crusades define themselves as pluralists (when they feel the need for such self-definition). This is so obviously the only way to study the crusades, it is hard to imagine anyone opposing it (but a long German tradition does). The only trouble with the pluralist approach (and so the pluralist paradox) is that crusading to the eastern Mediterranean remains the paradigm, so that a holy war like the Albigensian Crusade is implicitly treated as a lesser version (or even a perversion) of the real thing. Of course, whether a historian is a pluralist, traditionalist, fish, or fowl, he or she takes it for granted that the Albigensian Crusade was a war against the Cathars. Yet if the Albigensian Crusade is fundamentally misunderstood, then Latin Christianity is fundamentally misunderstood, then what it meant to be 'signed with the cross' and to go on crusading is fundamentally misunderstood. It is an irony that crusader studies, so popular with readers and students, so important to our understanding of the past, has almost no impact on the broader research of medieval historians. And vice versa. In many ways it is the popularity of studying the crusades, and the misguided notion that they now have some relevance for explaining religious violence in the 21st century, that has lulled scholars who write about them into intellectual complacency.⁽⁶⁾

What is so important about Rist's work is her desire to reinvigorate the field. She smartly emphasizes that when Innocent III proclaimed a crusade against the heretics in the lands of the count of Toulouse he unquestionably believed that heresy was the greatest threat to Christendom and that a holy war was the only way to eradicate this danger. Almost immediately she regrets being so emphatic. 'It is ... unclear from his

correspondence as a whole whether Innocent believed heretics were more or less dangerous to the Church than 'external' Muslim enemies, whether he considered a crusade against heretics as important as against non-believers and indeed whether he held a considered position on the issue at all' (p. 57). This ambivalence is unnecessary. While it is true that Innocent III partially suspended the crusading privileges of the Albigensian Crusade in 1213 so as not to distract from the preaching of the Fifth Crusade, or that he informed the dean of Speyer around the same time that crusading to Jerusalem was of 'greater merit' than crusading against heretics, this neither lessens the pope's conviction that heresy was the most serious threat to Christendom nor does it suggest equivocation on what was and was not the proper function (and foe) of crusading (cf. p. 69). The truly significant lesson to be drawn from Rist (even if she is reticent to vividly draw it herself) is that the Albigensian Crusade was the decisive summation and transformation of a movement that began with the First Crusade in 1095. All crusades after the Albigensian Crusade, no matter where they went or who they were against, were linked to the problem of heresy, just as Latin Christian understanding of Islam came to be shaped (even when it was insightful) by mendicant polemics and inquisitions into heresy.

The war on 'pestilential heretics' and the war on 'idolatrous Saracens' were intimately entwined for Innocent III. As the Holy Land would never be recovered if heresy were allowed to destroy Christendom, so Jerusalem must be reclaimed for Christ if Christians were ever to be strong enough to finally defeat the heretics. The failure or success of one campaign was related to the failure or success of the other. Rist's discussion of the Albigensian Crusade and Honorius III even comes close to explicitly making this point, although, as before, she steps back from the implications of her analysis (pp. 81–117, esp. pp. 97–104). This is why Rist's binary schema of defining crusades as either 'internal' or 'external' is anachronistic and contradicts much of what she seemingly wants to argue. It is merely another way of categorizing what was a 'real' crusade and what was not. When popes and preachers can proclaim that crusaders 'walked where Christ walked' when these warriors marched along the Garonne River, when crusaders through imitating Christ no longer needed to set foot in the Holy Land to be in the Holy Land, then calling the Albigensian Crusade an 'internal' crusade is to excise historical nuance for sake of pigeonholing order.

Rist mostly uses her notion of 'internal' crusading when she discusses the crusades against heretics promulgated by Gregory IX. Unfortunately, the depth of thought she gives to the Albigensian Crusade recedes when she writes about the Cumans, the Stedinger heretics, the Drenther, the Bosnian heretics, or John Ashen. The lack of sources and papal letters concerning these crusades and campaigns does not help (as she honestly admits). Nevertheless, these pages seem more like an appendix to the longer discussion of the Albigensian Crusade. She adroitly examines the metaphors of disease, purging, and cleansing utilized by Gregory IX (pp. 142–3), although she does not appreciate that while this imagery was similar to that used by Innocent III (and sometimes even word for word) what it now signified about heresy was quite different. Around 1230 these metaphors, for instance, suggest that heretics were now thought to possess institutional structures, to be in communication with heretics from far and away, and that 'purging this heretical filth' needed to be accomplished through forms of sacred violence other than crusading – quite specifically, inquisitions into heretical depravity. Rist is good on highlighting the relationship between crusading and inquisition for Gregory IX (pp. 136–7). Her final chapter on the popes and 'political crusades' reads rather like an addendum as well. This arises because she initially returns to the papacy of Innocent III and his crusade against Markward of Anweiler in 1198. These pages are fascinating and should have been incorporated into the earlier chapters on the Albigensian Crusade as they reveal subtlety in Rist's ideas on the relationship of politics and religion (esp. 171–8).

The cursory thought of these final chapters, together with too many blemishes of style and errors of editing, also demonstrate a disturbing phenomenon that is markedly unfair to smart and promising historians like Rist. Many European scholars politely disdain the 'publish or perish' imperative dictating the existence of scholars in the academic system of United States before tenure. However, there is at least within the system an acceptance that first books should be published by good presses and that some institutional effort and support will be made so that junior scholars will have the opportunity to revise and rewrite their dissertations. There is much that is wrong in the American system but rushing the dissertation into print

without revision has at least in the last decade or so finally been widely acknowledged as the hindrance to scholarship and careers it always clearly was. Ironically, the British system seems to have picked up the worst aspect of the American model. Quantity seems to be overwhelming quality; hasty publication more a sign of (bureaucratic) merit than slightly slower but more reflective and better edited prose. (As to the question of whether there is such a thing as a ‘publishing crisis’ – more truthfully, there is a ‘dissertation crisis’. Too many dissertations are written in such an unreadable way, according to a mythical model that has only existed since the 1970s, that rewriting them takes almost as long writing them in the first place. A more sensible response is to take seriously the idea that the dissertation is really the first draft of a book and so write it accordingly.)

Overall, though, the focus and strength of this book is Rist’s examination of papal letters related to the Albigensian Crusade. She knows these letters intimately, how they were composed, copied, distributed, and read. She interprets them with great skill and proficiency. She has written a history of ideas that will surely provoke debate and reflection on the meaning and definition of crusading and heresy. This is no small achievement.

Notes

1. See, for example, Peter Biller, ‘Christians and heretics’, in *Christianity in Western Europe, c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Miri Rubin (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 170–86, and Caterina Bruschi, *The Wandering Heretics of Languedoc* (Cambridge, 2009). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Cf. Carol Lansing, ‘Popular belief and heresy’. in *A Companion to the Medieval World*, ed. Carol Lansing and Edward D. English (Oxford, 2009), p. 287, where she makes the confusing assertion that while ‘Cathar’ was rarely used in the 12th and 13th centuries, scholars should keep using the historically inappropriate term as it is ‘less value-laden’ (with truth?) than historically specific terminology. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Uwe Brunn’s superb, *Des contestataires aux «cathares». Discours de réforme et propagande antihérétique dans les pays du Rhin et de la Meuse avant l’Inquisition* (Paris, 2006). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Hilbert Chiu’s dazzling, *The Intellectual Origins of Medieval Dualism* (MA Thesis, University of Sydney, 2009). This thesis is one of the most important studies of medieval heresy written in the last decade. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Biller, ‘Christians and heretics’, pp. 184–6, and Bruschi, *The Wandering Heretics of Languedoc*, pp. 65–6, 193–4, take a similar view (albeit more thoughtful and nuanced) to Rist regarding the essential ‘authenticity’ of medieval heretics. This essentialism about heresy (and so religion) is widespread. See, for example, Thomas Bisson, *The Crisis of Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton, NJ, 2009), p. 422, where he perplexingly writes, ‘And causes like heresy could not arise from partisan agreements, could not be invented; they could only be captured as their social logic took hold in provincial consensus and social change’. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. On this intellectual complacency in crusader studies, see R. I. Moore, ‘Letters’, *TLS*, July 10 2009, p. 6, and Bernard Hamilton’s reply, ‘Letters’, *TLS*, July 17 2009, p. 6. [Back to \(6\)](#)

The author does not wish to comment further.

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