
THE cATHAR gENOCIDE

From an original article by James McDonald

Such are the heights of wickedness to which men are driven in the name of religion.

*Lucretius (99-55 BC),
De Rerum Natura*



A thousand years or so after its birth, mainstream Christianity was still in competition with other religions in Europe and the Middle East. Often these religions were so intermixed with Christianity, or Christianity was so intermixed with them, that it was not easy for the Roman Church to decide whether they should be persecuted as infidels, heretics or schismatics. The Cathars were a case in point. They were in some ways spiritual successors to the Manichæans. The Manichæans had been followers of Mani (c AD 216 - 276) who claimed to be the Holy Ghost incarnate. His beliefs were based upon Zoroastrianism and Gnosticism, and had a profound effect upon the early Christian Church. (St Augustine, remember, had been a Manichæan for ten years). The religion was declared heretical when the Christian Church achieved power within the Roman Empire, but it flourished elsewhere.

Manichæism survived in China up to the eleventh century and in Turkestan up to the thirteenth. In Europe their ideas also survived, despite persecution. The Bogomils ("Friends of God") or Bulgars were a Gnostic Christian sect that flourished in Thrace and Bulgaria in the 10th Century. Their beliefs spread throughout Europe: to Italy, Northern Spain, the Languedoc, France, Germany, and Flanders. Bulgars rejected the Trinity and the sacraments, denied the Catholic Church's teachings on images, infant baptism, saints, and the virgin birth, and held that matter is inherently evil. A derivative sect which came to be known as Cathari flourished in the Languedoc (now Southern France) and Northern Italy. They followed a life of severe asceticism and found little difficulty in attracting the bulk of the population who were, according to Church records, sated with the corruption of the local clergy.

Little is known about Cathars. Most of the information about them has been destroyed, and what we do know has mostly been adduced from Catholic records. This is rather like reconstructing Jewish theology from Nazi records of the holocaust. Records are biased and incomplete. What we do know is that the

Cathars were ascetics. Their ministers and teachers, called parfaits or perfected ones, were vegetarians. They generally adopted a life of extreme devotion and simplicity. Both men and women could become parfaits. They lived in poverty, the men travelling and preaching. They earned their livings by cloth making, shepherding, and other trades. Followers were not expected to adhere to the same ascetic standards as the parfaits, and were permitted to eat meat and engage in sex. They had a low opinion of the institution of marriage and are thought to have practiced birth control and abortion. They disagreed with the Roman Church on many points. They took the view that if sex was agreeable to both partners then it could not be disagreeable to God. They declined to take oaths. They denied the validity of clerical hierarchies and of ordained intercessors between man and God. They believed in reincarnation. They had no problems with the practice of charging interest on loans. They did not build churches. They criticised the accumulation of land, and the forcible extraction of tithes, by the Roman clergy. One of the things that most outraged the Catholic authorities was that they read the bible. Another was that women could be regarded as men's equals. A third was their sincere conviction that the Roman Church was inspired by Satan.

Cathars regarded themselves as Christians. They used the New Testament, especially the John Gospel, and repeated the Lord's Prayer with the addition of the words "For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever" (which the Roman Church regarded as evidence of heresy before it also adopted this ending). Believers were generally called "Good-men" and "Good-women", or "Good-Christians". The name Cathar had been adopted by the Church originally as an insult, but people tended to assume that the name was derived from the Greek word for "pure", so it stuck.

When Saint Bernard visited the Languedoc in 1145 his main impression seems to have been the shameless corruption in his own Church. Of the Cathars he noted that their morals were pure and that no sermons were more Christian than theirs. In 1205 the churchman Dominic Guzmán had planned, with the help of God, to convert Cathars to the Roman faith by preaching to them. His preaching proved a spectacular and embarrassing failure. When this line failed, the Church tried open debates. These debates were permitted because the Roman clergy thought that they could humiliate the opposition intellectually and so facilitate mass defections to the Roman Church. This did not happen, and the Roman Church seems to have succeeded only in confirming the extent of the gulf between themselves and the general population. When a great noblewoman, the Lady Esclarmonde of Foix, a parfaite, tried to speak at a formal debate between Roman clergy and Cathar representatives, she was admonished by a representative of the Roman Church: "Go to your spinning madam. It is not proper for you to speak in a debate of this sort". The churchman's treatment of such a prestigious figure as Esclarmonde could only have had the opposite effect to that intended. In any case, the Roman Church once again failed to secure mass conversions, or indeed any conversions at all. More vigorous action was

called for. Speaking on behalf of Christ a little later, Guzmán promised the Cathars slavery and death.

Partly because of the attraction of Cathar teaching, and partially because of the widespread corruption of the Catholic Church, more and more people in Southern France defected to the Cathars. The Roman Church hierarchy became increasingly worried. Pope Innocent III found a convenient excuse in 1208, and ordered a crusade against them. Crusaders enjoyed the same privileges as those who fought the Moslems. Killing Cathars, like killing Moslems, assured the killer of the highest place in Heaven. An army was mustered under the command of the Cistercian Abbot of Cîteaux. Tens of thousands of Crusaders were enlisted. They were mainly Northern French, keen for plunder, the remission of their sins, and an assured place in Heaven. They were crusaders in every sense, wearing the crusaders cross and enjoying all of their privileges (protection of goods, suspension of debts, and so on).

On 22 July 1209 they arrived at Béziers, on the periphery of the area in the Languedoc where Cathars flourished. There were believed to be around 200 Cathars amongst a much greater population of sympathetic Catholics. The crusading army sacked and looted the town indiscriminately, while townspeople retreated to the sanctuary of the churches. The Cistercian abbot-commander is said to have been asked how to tell Cathar from Catholic. His reply, recorded later by a fellow Cistercian, demonstrated his faith: "Kill them all - the Lord will recognise His own". The doors of the church of St Mary Magdalene were broken down and the occupants slaughtered. 7,000 people died in the church including women, children, clerics and old men. Elsewhere many more thousands were mutilated and killed. Prisoners were blinded, dragged behind horses, and used for target practice. The town was razed. Arnaud, the abbot-commander, wrote to his master, the Pope: "Today your Holiness, twenty thousand citizens were put to the sword, regardless of rank, age, or sex". Other towns followed. The Crusaders refined their methods. At Carcassonne they expelled the inhabitants with a day's safe conduct, so that they could loot at leisure. Arnaud wrote to the pope to explain why on this occasion no-one had been killed.

Simon de Montfort, the new military leader, had another technique. When the castle at Bram fell in 1210 he had the noses of 100 prisoners cropped, their lips cut off and their eyes gauged out. One man was left with one eye so that he could guide the others away. With a hand on the shoulder of the one in front, and the one-eyed man at their head, a file of blind prisoners wound its way to the next town to demonstrate the ineffable mercy of God's Army. At other towns Simon favoured mass burnings. The Pope, who was kept informed, gave thanks to God.

For their part, the Cathar perfecti behaved like the early martyrs of Christian legend. At Minerve the Cistercian Vaux de Cernay noted that it was not

necessary to throw them to the flames, for they went voluntarily. They claimed that "Neither death nor life can separate us from the faith to which we are joined". Their behaviour seems to have impressed some of their persecutors, but not enough to raise qualms about killing them. At Lavaur, 400 were burned by the crusaders, "with great joy" as de Cernay noted. (The crusaders generally burned people alive with great joy - cum ingenti gaudio). One perfecti allegedly renounced his faith. The rest died in silence.

Like the Abbot of Cîteaux, other churchmen were keen participants in the extirpation of a rival faith. A major participant was Folquet of Marseilles, bishop of Toulouse, who is now numbered among the saints. Dominic Guzmán was another. Still smarting from his conspicuous failure to convert by persuasion, he made good his promise to bring slavery and death. He is now venerated as St Dominic, and is regarded by many Christians as one of the most holy men ever to have lived.

The Crusade was intensified under the next pope, Honorius III. Here is a contemporary account of a massacre carried out by Crusaders in 1219 at Marmonde, a town of some 7000 people. It shocked even the crusaders own allies:

...terror and massacre began. Noblemen, ladies and their little children, men and women stripped naked, all were slashed and cut to ribbons by keen edged swords. Flesh, blood, brains, torsos, limbs and faces hacked in two; lungs, livers and guts torn out and thrown away - laying on the open ground as if they had rained down from the heavens. Marshland and firm ground, all was red with blood. Not a man or woman was left alive, neither young nor old, no living creature, except perhaps some well-hidden infant. Marmond was razed and set alight...

Ordinances were passed which imposed new penalties for heresy. Honorius sanctioned Dominic Guzmán's new religious order, popularly called Dominicans after him. The Dominicans in turn spawned the Inquisition. In 1233 the next pope, Gregory IX, charged the Dominican Inquisition with the final solution: the absolute extirpation of the Cathars. Soon the Franciscans would join in too. By the end of the fourteenth century Catharism had been virtually extirpated.

Before the crusade the Languedoc had been the most civilised land in Europe. Learning had been highly valued. Literacy had been widespread, and a vernacular literature had developed earlier than anywhere else in Europe. Religious tolerance had been widely practised. Jews enjoyed ordinary civil rights. This was the home of courtly love, poetry, romance, chivalry and the troubadours. With the notable exception of most of the Catholic priesthood, people had preferred simple asceticism to venality and corruption. Even some

Roman priests are known to have been Cathars.

All in all some 500,000 men women and children were massacred in the Church's campaign. The holocaust was so severe that, apparently by accident, it extinguished the high culture of the Troubadours. Educated and tolerant rulers were killed, and replaced by relative barbarians from Northern France, who were prepared to toe the Church's line. At the end of the extirpation of the Cathars, the Church had convincing proof that a sustained campaign of genocide can work. It also had the precedent of an internal Crusade within Christendom, the machinery of an inquisition, and two bodies of dedicated men, Dominican and Franciscans, prepared to man it.

Cathars were exterminated elsewhere. There were mass burnings at Montwimer in Champagne in 1239, at Plaisance in Lombardy in 1268 (28 cart-loads), and at Verona in 1278. From a secular point of view there was no harm in the Cathars. Their fate is still mourned in the Languedoc to this day.

Roman Catholic offices in some quarters still seek to justify the Church's genocide and make out that it acted for the best. A contemporary dictionary on heresies approved by a Roman Catholic Censor and bearing the Imprimatur of the Vicar General at Westminster, refers to Guzmán's "heroic exercise of fraternal charity". His failure as a preacher is not mentioned, nor the fact that even using trickery and torture almost no parfaits (if any at all) could be induced to abandon their faith. The thousands of Cathar deaths are not referred to - except in the most oblique terms: "The long and arduous task was at length successful, and by the end of the fourteenth century Albigensianism, with all other forms of Catharism, was practically extinct." And the opportunity is taken to condemn Cathar beliefs once again: "This anti-human heresy, by destroying the sanctity of the family, would reduce mankind to a horde of unclean beasts...".

Unlike the Jewish persecution by Nazis, little remorse or regret for the Cathar genocide can be found in literature of any kind, and film or theatre depict these events rather invisibly. Yet they shaped the fate of Europe, and wars based on greed, but blamed on so called religious intolerance, continue to date.

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