

The Cathars: The struggles for a new Church



Philip Coppens, edited



Wars between nations or faiths are commonplace. Sometimes, powers that be turn against a minority resident within their own realm - on grounds of faith. The Albigensian Crusade is unique in history, as the Pope on March 10, 1208 proclaimed a crusade against a heresy that was present inside Catholic Europe itself. "These heretics are worse

than the Saracens!" he proclaimed. In retrospect, the crusade was one of the bloodiest episodes in European history. Indeed, the decades-long persecution of ordinary citizens has often been seen as the event that prepared the way for the birth of Protestantism, as it awakened the ordinary European citizen to the realisation that something was not "quite" right in the papal model of an appropriate Order.

Today, these heretics are most commonly known as the Cathars, but historically, they went under a number of guises. They have not formed as a uniform group. The origin of these heretics was connected to Bulgaria - from where the Bogomils - one branch of the heresy - came.



The main focus, however, has always been on the Cathars (from the Greek word meaning "pure"), a name that is normally reserved for the heretics that lived in what is nowadays the Southern France and Northern Spain; they were the ones targeted by the Crusade.

Catharism arrived in Southern Europe in the 11th century. It was present in Orléans as early as 1022, when thirteen Perfects - the name for the Cathar priests - were condemned to the stake. In those days the Languedoc (now in Southern France) was part of Occitania, an independent country with own language and an advanced culture. In the Languedoc, Catharism was endorsed by the local nobility and became a popular alternative to the Catholic Church. The likes of the Count of Toulouse - one of the most important rulers in Occitania - supported Catharism, and he and several other lords invited the Cathar Perfects to organise themselves properly, thus offering to help organise a parallel church to the Roman Catholic.

Hence, the first Cathar Synod was held between 1167 and 1176 at St. Felix-de-Caraman, near Toulouse. The event was attended by many local notables and presided over by the Bogomil papa Nicetas of the dualist church of Constantinople, assisted by the Cathar bishop of (Northern) France and a leader of the Cathars of Lombardy. The main item on the agenda was how to divide Southern France into bishoprics, appoint bishops, and guarantee that the area was properly looked after

by travelling Perfects, spreading the Cathar message. After the Balkan, Occitania is reported to have been most prepared to embrace the doctrines.

The Synod marked the start of the real struggle between the Church and Catharism, as the Church now had an organised body to fight. Of course, it meant “the enemy” now had a name, and could thus be more clearly targeted.

As early as 1178, Louis VII of France asked for a forceful intervention to stamp out the New Church and in 1179, Catharism was denounced. Actions were taken and by 1200, Roger Trencavel II, Viscount of Beziers and Carcassonne, was excommunicated, whereas both the Count of Foix and Toulouse continued to support the Cathar cause. In 1208, Pope Innocent III had repeatedly tried to use diplomacy to stop the spread of Catharism, but in that year, his papal legate Pierre de Castelnau was murdered (allegedly by an agent serving the Count of Toulouse). The event served as a convenient excuse to proceed from diplomacy into military action. Many considered the death of de Castelnau a false flag operation, engineered so that the crusade would be approved.

An estimated 200,000 to one million people died during the twenty year campaign, which began in earnest in Béziers in July 1209. After assembling the papal troops, these marched to Béziers, where they ordered that 222 people, suspected of being Cathars, were handed over to them by the citizens of the town. When this was refused, the papal troops decided to attack. One of the crusaders asked their leader, the Papal Legate Arnaud-Amaury, how to distinguish between the 222 heretics and the thousands of faithful Catholics that lived in the city. “Kill them all,” was the abbot’s alleged reply. “God will recognise his own!” The number of dead that day was between 7000 and 20,000, the latter figure being the one quoted when Arnaud-Amaury reported back to the Pope.

With such carnage, it was of little surprise that the other towns (e.g. Narbonne and Carcassonne) offered no resistance and soon, the Southern counts had lost their territories and powers to the King of France and his allies. For these Northern lords, attaining the lands of the Languedoc had always been paramount; their desires seemed to have fulfilled.

Though the crusade was over, only the powerbrokers that had supported the spread of Catharism had been removed from power, their lands confiscated. What about the people? It is a known fact that the more one hunts down a group, the more convinced it becomes in its ways and the more attention its actions will receive. Hence, at the end of the Albigensian Crusade, Catharism wasn’t by any means eradicated.



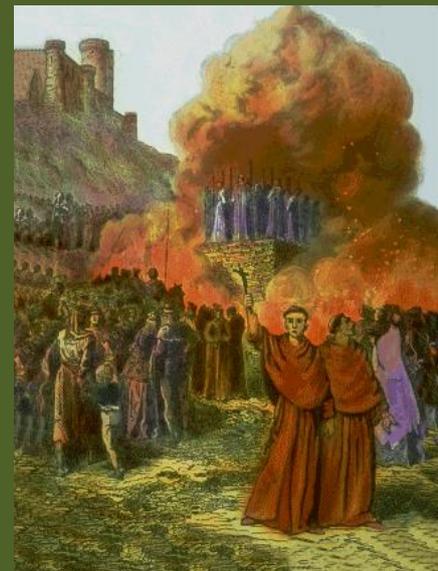
For this purpose, the Inquisition was established in Toulouse in 1229, to guarantee that any future resurgence of this heresy was nipped in the butt – literally – but also that a new phase of the campaign could commence: individual manhunts, to track down Perfects that were still hiding and preaching within the general population.



The Saint Dominic,
Founder of the Inquisition

In 1233, a campaign began to burn all those Cathars that had relapsed; some dead bodies were even exhumed for burning. One fine example is that of Pierre de Fenouillet, who was dispossessed of his goods as a heretic and then withdrew to the Templar commandery of Mas Deu in the Roussillon. The Knights Templar, many of whom came from Cathar families, tried, as much as possible, to remain neutral in this crusade. De Fenouillet was buried at Mas Deu around 1242, but his death did not prevent the Inquisitors from exhuming, re-judging and condemning him once more, posthumously, in 1262. The same fate befell fellow Cathar Pons III de Vernet, who had also withdrawn to Mas Deu. The Dominican Inquisitors exhumed and burned his remains too. It is, of course, obvious that capturing dead men is far easier than living beings; the latter run faster.

Still, from 1233 onwards, hunting down Catharism was no longer done via wide-sweeping crusades, but on an individual basis. This meant that any Cathars caught, were ferociously interrogated about the terrorist network they were part of, their secret hideouts, their clandestine financiers and supporters, etc. Faced with the incredible pains subjected to their bodies, and the Cathar oath not to lie, the Inquisition believed to have learned important secrets about the underground network. But René Weis, author of "The Yellow Cross", states that "The Cathar movement in the late-thirteenth-century Sabartès was an underground organization, and the Inquisition of Geoffroy d'Ablis never penetrated to its core in spite of the fact that it executed most of their leaders."



Many Cathar priests realised the lethal dangers they faced and began to take refuge in the fortresses at Fenouillèdes and Montségur, while others were able to incite uprisings, which forced the Inquisition out of Albi, Narbonne and Toulouse. Count Raymond-Roger de Trencavel even led a military campaign in 1240, but was defeated at Carcassonne, surrendered and was exiled to Aragon.

The Church felt that victory was near and that only those Cathars hiding in the castles remained to be eradicated. A siege began of the castle of Montségur, where 300 soldiers and 200 Perfects stood off an army of 10,000. Amongst the Cathars inside Montségur were the Cathar bishop of Toulouse Bertrand Marty and the Cathar bishop of the Razès, Raymond Aguilher, who were considered leading members of the "heresy".



After a ten month siege, in March 1244, the castle surrendered. Though their life would be spared if they repented, the Cathars preferred to be burnt, rather than reject their tenets – a true sign of their conviction, which is one of the key reasons why Catharism today has such a wide appeal with the local Southern French

population, who largely see Catharism as the stand of those with democratic principles and with moral values.

However beautiful Montségur is, the “real” Cathar heartland were the somewhat gentler slopes, where now desolate villages once thrived. One such village is Arques, near Rennes-le-Château, where the Perfect Pierre Authié preached and found refuge.



The fall of a small, isolated but very idyllic fort, that of Quéribus, in August 1255, is often seen as the final demise of Catharism, but that is not quite the case. In fact, in the following decades, there was something of a Cathar revival. The much hunted Cathar Perfect Pierre Authié even consoled the Count of Foix, Roger-Bernard III, in March 1302 in the hall of Tarascon castle, even though he was later buried by the Bishop of Carcassonne. It shows how many local lords still remained loyal to the Cathar cause.

The underground survival of Catharism has become symbolised by the events that occurred in and to the small village of Montailou, near Montségur, as it was the subject of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s pioneering book of the same name. From 1294 to 1324, the daily routines of Montailou’s 250 inhabitants are known, as they survived in the records of Jacques Fournier, later to be Pope Benedict XII. It was Fournier, then the local bishop, who unleashed the Inquisition at Pamiers against the villagers, even resulting in the arrest of the entire village in 1308. One should, perhaps, be happy they weren’t all killed...



It was Fournier who also caught the last Cathar Perfect to be burnt at the stake: Guillaume Bélibaste, in 1321. Bélibaste’s bailiwick was the area between Rennes-le-Château – known for the mysterious 19th century priest Bérenger Saunière, who is at the core of the mystery of the so-called Priory of Sion – and the coastal city of Perpignan.

Bélibaste was the son of a rich farmer from Cubières. He became a shepherd and a Perfect, the pupil of the Perfects Pierre and Jacques Authié, who had stayed with Bélibaste’s family in Cubières. As the Inquisition’s stranglehold tightened, Bélibaste settled across the border, in Catalonia, where the political regime did not persecute Cathars, and he was able to make baskets and carding combs, as well as becoming the mentor to a community of local Cathars. Lured by Fournier, he decided to return to his homeland, but was caught, tried, and burnt at Villerouge-Termenès.



It is known that Bélibaste, in captivity, proposed to Arnaud Sicre, the man who had engineered his capture, that he would give Sicre the consolamentum, and to then jointly commit suicide. [Suicide was an acceptable means to cut short one’s suffering, if his/her situation became hopeless. Corascendea.]

Villerouge-Termenès, the town where Bélibaste was burnt

Bélibaste's death did signal the end of the official Occitan Cathar Church, which blossomed in the 11th century, got organised in 1167, and died in 1321. But though officially defeated in France, elsewhere, e.g. in Bosnia, Catharism continued to exist into the 15th century, when its adherents converted to Islam. Some, however, argue that Catharism in France may have died as an organised Church in 1321, but that as a persuasion and as a philosophy... it survived.

Though it was the Inquisition – the accusers – that wrote down the life of Authié and Bélibaste, there is general consensus that the insights the accounts provide into their lives are credible. [Nevertheless, what precisely the Cathars believed, remained in the best case an enigma and at worst a compilation of distortions – the result of religious propaganda, not just of a lack of an understanding. Corascendea]

About the Cathar Doctrines

Catharism spread from the East, and it is in the Eastern religions that its origins sit. The main core of their belief was the rejection of the material world, which was seen as a trap imprisoning the Soul. All things material were hence seen as intrinsically impure, if not evil, and as such, were not to be unnecessarily held on to. Hence, they built no churches, were largely vegetarian and shared both common possessions and ate common meals. Though it is true that their doctrine had room for Jesus and the Bible, especially the Gospel of John, and that they proclaimed Christ had no real body (if he was the Son of God, how could he have a body of flesh, which was evil?) and hence also died no real death, all of these accommodations should be seen as educational tools so that they could explain to those that had been raised as Catholics where both teachings differed.



The sincere denunciation of material riches by the Cathars appealed to the people who were used to witnessing how the Catholic clergy were corrupt and as materialistic as one could be. Though historians have often noted that the Perfects were not as perfect as they could have been when it came to having sexual intercourse and having children, whereas they may have pledged to live a celibate life, it is clear that in general, their house was far more in order than that of the Pope.



Today, Catharism is largely seen as a dualist doctrine, like most Gnostic and oriental teachings. A dualist doctrine is primarily seen as one that describes two competing forces, good versus evil, but it is much more than that. An insight into the Cathar cosmography comes from Authié. It shows that major historical eras were accounted for and sought to be explained. Authié preached that the Devil had sneaked into Paradise, after waiting 1000 years at its doors. Cathars in Southern France, where Mary Magdalene was a popular saint, used her in their cosmography, to illustrate the feminine aspect of the divine duality they believed in.

[The least understood facet from the Cathar doctrines appears to be re-incarnation and the need or otherwise for re-incarnation, although it is this tenet on which Catharism stands. Many iconic pictures appeared indicating the need for the Soul to progress to levels of attainment. Cathars facing the prospect of being hurled into a bonfire would have quite understandably sworn never to come back. But when the pain of the material world is over, and what is left is victory, and while the need for

able Souls to be taking more responsibility exists, then the Soul can choose, and the interest of the wider community may require, that it reincarnates again, perhaps even with a specific mission. Hence, if some Cathars came back, it was not the Cathars who did not get the lesson about re-incarnation right. This paragraph had been written and added by Corascendea, November 2011.]

Though consolamentum, which involved the laying of hands on another person, was simple to observe and would have been easier to comment on, not even this was spared of exaggeration and distortion. The consolamentum was performed at the ordination of the Perfect, as well as for the dying, to whom it was a blessing. Once received, the dying person would often not take any sustenance other than water. Indeed, the endura was nothing more – or less – than a state of being to safeguard the integrity of the consolation. It was, in short, a hunger strike, to enter death “pure”. [But there was no obligation for it. It is false to suggest that the Cathars would have themselves chosen, or encouraged others to end their lives prematurely. It would have defeated the purpose of incarnation – which is the growth of the Soul by overcoming the challenges and hardships of the incarnate life. Corascendea.]

The longest endura on record lasted twelve weeks, from a woman of Coustaussa, a village opposite Rennes-le-Château. A person was able to receive the consolamentum more than once, underlining the sacred nature of the blessing performed by a person who chose to be pure. But as the consolamentum had to be administered by a Perfect, and the Inquisition specifically chased down the Perfects (for that very reason), as fewer priests were around to perform it, those who received it, even if they had a chance to survive their illness, often chose to die. Eternal life is, after all, more important than holding on more than necessary, to the purgatory of Earth.

The Cathar treasure

Following the demise of the Cathars there were always those, who hoped to discover the lost treasure of the Cathars – and the Templars – which many believed, will have contained the Grail itself. Esclarmonde of Montségur would have hidden it at Montségur, just before she perished on the rocks, some suggested.

It is generally believed that the Cathar Treasure contained a holy book, the Cathar scriptures about God. It is unlikely that the Cathars would have secured a physical treasure, if only because it would have been too heavy, and in their eyes, unimportant: Catharism saw everything on this plane of existence as despicable; money and wealth were chief amongst Earth’s – and Satan’s – devices only to bring out the worst in people.

Authors such as Walter Birks and R.A. Gilbert, as well as Elizabeth van Buren, have therefore suggested that the Cathars guarded a manuscript, knowledge – a spiritual treasure.



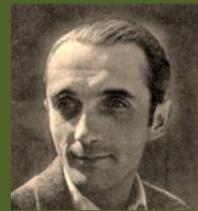
This manuscript is often said to be the “Book of Love” and is linked with the Gospel of John, and is claimed to contain “sublime teachings, marvelous revelations, the most secret words confided by our Lord Jesus Christ to the beloved disciple [John the Evangelist]. Their power would be such that all hatred, all anger, all jealousy would vanish from the hearts of men. The Divine

Love, like a new flood, would submerge all souls and never again would blood be shed on this Earth."

It is known that books were very important to the Cathars, and some, such as "Stella", by the Cathars of Desenzano, talk about the wars between God and Lucifer – underlining their dualist doctrine. But as Saint Dominic, founder of the Inquisition, is often depicted committing these books to the fire, it should come as little surprise that few have survived his "intervention".

20th Century Cathars

Otto Rahn was a German academic, whose books greatly advanced interest in Montségur and Catharism, both in the 1930s and at present. The countess Pujol-Murat was one of Otto Rahn's patrons. She claimed to be a descendent of Esclarmonde of Foix.



[Rahn was a sensitive young man. His story is inadvertently linked to the rise of the Nazis and their quest to prove Arian perfection. He may have had a drop of Jewish blood in his ancestry and died under perceived as mysterious circumstances by freezing in the snow. Rahn was a Cathar. To date the Cathars remain a misunderstood and misinterpreted group. From a Cathar point of view, it is easy to imagine that the interest which his beloved Catharism attracted from some quarters, may not have been the kind that he could have eventually approved of, or wanted to remain a part of. Cathars respect symbolism. A young man emotionally torn by circumstances beyond his power to resolve, standing at a mountainside before a snow storm, may have whispered the words: "If you want me to continue, you will take me to the other side." God would have seen that the man's pain is fulfilled, and received him. Note Rahn's apparent aura on the photograph. Corascendea.]

Deodat Roche, born before Rahn, was the second Cathar who kept the torch lit. He is known to have made solitary early morning walks to a hill just outside of Arques, where he was taken as a young child by his father. The site holds a statue of the Virgin Mary, and though this might appear typically Catholic, the Cathars of the 14th century are known to have made similar pilgrimages to the nearby basilica of Notre-Dame-de-Marceille, which held a Black Madonna. On the picture he appears with his friend and Professor of Sociology René Nelli of the University of Toulouse, who lectured on the subject all over France.



His home town of Arques had a strong connection with Authié. Roche once unearthed an image of Authié and both he and others who saw this, noted how remarkably similar the two men looked. Roche was not only mayor of Arques; he had also held important positions within the French judicial system. He was a very private individual. Unless the photo deceives us, light emanates also from within his inner being.

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[Dhaxem.com](http://www.dhaxem.com)



THE CATHAR TESTAMENT

http://www.dhaxem.com/documents/CATHAR_TESTAMENT.pdf