

# THE CATHAR HERESY

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(edited from an interview by David Rabinovitch)

## THE CHURCH AND THE MATERIAL WORLD

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The Cathar heresy was a major challenge to the Roman Catholic Church. It combined a tradition of itinerant preachers in the forests of France with a very ascetic quality. The Cathars rejected the Roman Catholic, the entire church structure. They said they were the only true Christians. They developed an alternative religion, an alternative hierarchy, an alternative priesthood that attracted many adherents in that period, which is why the Cathar heresy above all occasioned the founding of the inquisition.

Thirteenth century was at a high point of its power and influence. The popes of that period were very powerful and they interfered very broadly in the affairs of secular monarchies. They had tremendous power over religious orders and very significant authority over the appointment of bishops. It was a very powerful church but it was also a church that was troubled by corruption. It was struggling with the problem of clerical celibacy, whether or not to allow priests to be married, what sort of relationships should they have with women? So it was very troubled on the one hand but very powerful on the other.

The Cathar movement rejected the material world. In so far as the Church had become enmeshed in the material world, it was no longer really a spiritual movement. It was now a movement that had brick and mortar churches and episcopal hierarchy and an elaborate bureaucracy and it collected tax money from all over Europe. Some of its prelates lived in great splendour, they were like feudal lords themselves. In so far as the Church was enmeshed in the world the radical rejection of the world by the Cathars posed an enormous threat.

## CHRISTENDOM

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Referring to Western Europe, the world of Christendom was a world of monarchies that were developing, but were as yet poorly organized. The papacy itself was also a monarchy, having the papal state in central Italy; the pope ruling as a secular ruler with about a third of Italy under his direct control. That was probably the best organized of all of the medieval monarchies.

Every sovereign took upon himself the protection of the Roman Catholic Church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Europe was completely Roman Catholic. There were other religions extant in Europe at the time, Judaism and Islam, but there were no state religions anywhere but in the Moorish enclave of Granada in southern Spain, which was the only place that another religion held sway and was entrenched politically. So the sovereign and sovereign power was closely identified with Roman Catholicism and the maintenance of Roman Catholicism. A heretical movement therefore in seeking to undermine Roman Catholicism also could be seen as a direct threat to the State.

## HERESY = TREASON

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Heresy, given the political theory of the Middle Ages, could easily be equated with treason as we would understand it. In other words, a betrayal of government and society - simply because there was a total identification between religious belief and loyalty to the sovereign.

Catharism is a threat to the Church because it rejects the Church as part of the material world. The Cathar movement in

effect draws on a kind of Manichaeism, a radical disjunction between the world of heaven and the material world. The world of Earth and the material world is fundamentally evil. So Catharism is a direct threat to the Church in so far as it identifies the Church with the material world. Catharism rejects everything to do with the church, its hierarchy, its ceremony, the crucifix itself. Everything to do with the Church is rejected because the Church is seen as part of the works of Satan and Satan, according to the Cathars, created the material world.

It was a period of tremendous controversy over the nature of papal authority, how far should that authority extend? The issues about centralization, devolution of power, what some of the reformers in today's Catholic Church call collegiality – some of these very same debates were prevalent in the 12th and 13th century.

Catharism becomes the most important of the 13th century heresies, in part because of the support of the lesser nobility, in part because it struck a responsive chord among so many people in Medieval Europe in terms of their own apprehensions and insecurities about the Church and their feelings that the Church needed to be reformed or changed or maybe itself was evil because of its own corruption.

## THE ALBIGENSIAN CRUSADE

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The popes were concerned about this radical rejection of the Church and so Pope Innocent III launched the Albigensian crusade which was named after the town of Albi in southwestern France in the mountains of the Pyrenees. The Albigensian Crusade led by Simone de Montfort was an invasion of southwestern France by knights from north and central France, and it was a very bloody affair.

The Crusades were designed to attack non-Christians and to spread the power of Roman Catholicism and so far as the Cathars were considered to be heretical it could be conceived of as valid that the crusade could be directed against them. One of the interesting things to reflect on with regard to the Albigensian Crusade is how effective was it in fact? What is interesting about the area of southwestern France where the Albigensian Crusade was directed is the fact that that very same area became the hotbed of the development of French Calvinism, the Huegenot movement, in the 16th century. While it can be said that the Albigensian Crusade may have failed, it may have simply driven heretical movement and heretical feelings underground only to resurface again at the time of the 16th century French religious wars.

The Albigensian Crusade was a very bloody affair. One of the key events was the conquest of the city of Toulouse. The famous phrase uttered, at least putatively by Simone de Montfort when his officers came to him and said, 'we don't know which of these are Cathars and which are not,' he said, 'Kill them all. The devil will know his own.' Whether he said that or not, it's a phrase that bespeaks the kind of ruthlessness and zeal that motivated the Albigensian crusaders, so that thousands of people were killed.

## THE INQUISITION BEGINS

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The crusade itself was really not sufficient – you have to root out the heresy in people's minds and in their behavior. The Inquisition comes about because the papacy recognizes the need for an ongoing commitment to rooting out the heresy all over Europe. It starts with the Dominicans in 1231 in Germany and then in 1233 in southwestern France in Languedoc where the heresy really had taken root. And it was the Dominican order that was responsible for carrying forward the Inquisition.

The Inquisition, even though it was founded in the early 13th century, had some curiously modern aspects to it. It kept records. The inquisitors were appointed for long periods of time. They bequeathed their written records to their successor so that the institution of the Inquisition had an ongoing database and they were able to maintain a high degree of continuity.

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*Writer and Distinguished Research Professor at Northern Illinois University, Stephen Haliczer is one of the leaders of the "new Inquisition scholarship". His book on Valencia's inquisitorial tribunal, *Inquisition and Society in the Kingdom of Valencia* (University of California Press, 1990) is one of the pioneering studies of a local inquisitorial tribunal. His most recent book, *From Exaltation to Infamy; Female Mystics in the Golden Age of Spain*, which was published by Oxford University Press in the Spring of 2002, uses Inquisition case files to compare women mystics punished by the Holy Office with those who, like Saint Teresa, were accepted by the wider society. He has been visiting professor at the Universidad de Alcalá de Henares (Spain) the École Pratique des Hautes Études (Sorbonne, Paris) and Catholic University in Santiago, Chile.*