

The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Death of the Medieval Cathars

Stephen O'Shea

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In broad terms, the Cathar drama was played out between 1150-1250 in the Foix-Toulouse-Albi-Carcassonne-Béziers area of Languedoc. It began with the Cathars' peaceful rejection of the grasping Roman Catholic Church and its plutocratic bishops; it was ended by the Vatican's near-genocidal political-military response. Indiscriminate slaughter, with believers perishing with dissidents, was easily dismissed: "Kill them all: God will know his own."

As O'Shea concisely describes, Cathars rejected the carnal and material worlds and believed in a duality of good and evil. Worse, they saw much of the Old and New Testaments as merely allegorical and rejected most Sacraments as invalid. As "Believers" they limited their needs and worldliness; if deeply committed, they became even less worldly, renouncing sexual congress and finally achieving the status of "Perfect." By their saintly simplicity of life, the Cathars discredited the fear-driven, revenue-greedy Catholic orthodoxy—and an apprehensive Church retaliated. As O'Shea demonstrates, it was undoubtedly fortunate in its leader.

Innocent III (1198-1216), who became pope before becoming ordained a priest, brought Machiavellian political acumen and relentless zeal to ensuring the Church's life-and-death power over king, count and commoner, whether orthodox Catholic or heretic Cathar. The pitiless crusade Innocent launched against the Cathars powerfully illustrates Realpolitik, and readers will recognize where the twentieth century police state was born. O'Shea describes inquisitorial visitations, demands for denunciations, and death-carrying charges of heresy. The excommunication of Cathar-protecting counts and local rulers and the forfeiture of Cathar property weakened the cause. What broke it, as O'Shea tells in chilling detail, were the bloody sieges of Cathar strongholds and wholesale burnings of men, women and children—10,000 or more at a time. The Inquisition (Europe's first) and the stake ensured the extermination of Catharism.

In evoking Languedoc's rich mercantile culture and troubador traditions, O'Shea also identifies the region's fatal weakness: too many ruling families possessing too limited resources. Lack of military cohesion among Languedoc's patchwork of feudal holdings richly benefited the Paris-based French monarchy: as a papal ally, the Capetian dynasty won sovereignty over the conquered region, completing a major step in creating the modern French realm.

O'Shea surveys recent authors (mystics and cranks included) writing about the Cathars. This exploration, together with the extensive annotated bibliography of scholarly sources, enriches his exciting account of this blood-stained chapter in European history.

PETER SKINNER (July / August 2000)

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