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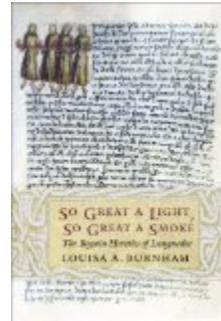
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Louisa A. Burnham. *So Great a Light, So Great a Smoke: The Beguin Heretics of Languedoc*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. xiv + 217 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4131-8.

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Where There Is Smoke...

The southern French Beguins studied in Louisa A. Burnham's engrossing new book were a small group of laypeople (and some priests) with close ties to Spiritual Franciscans in the early fourteenth century. These men and women saw themselves as adherents to the true model of Evangelical poverty and fully expected to play a central role in an apocalyptic scenario whereby elements of the corrupt, carnal church would subject them to persecution in the Last Days. John XXII's attempts to quash Spiritualist "heretics" and their supporters convinced the Beguins that their expectations were on the brink of being fulfilled. Burnham uses a meticulous and imaginative examination of a wide range of evidence to follow the lives of eight individual Beguins, and more specifically to depict their tactics of resistance and—in some cases—their embrace of martyrdom. In the process, she offers a narrative as absorbing as anything that has been published on medieval heresy in recent decades.

Chapter 1 provides the backdrop to the Beguin drama, covering the controversies over poverty and Joachite thought, the eventual split between Spirituals and Conventuals in the Franciscan Order, the life and influence of Peter of John Olivi, the post-Albigensian Crusade origins of heretic hunting in Languedoc, the development of Spiritualist-influenced lay communities drawn to Olivi's apocalyptic message, and the beginnings of persecution under John XXII. In 1317, sixty-one Franciscan brothers of strong Spiritualist conviction were summoned to Avignon and then arrested for their uncompromising stance on poverty and their refusal to obey their more moderate

superiors. After extended incarceration and questioning, eventually all but four of the brothers gave in to the demands of the pope and the minister general. The remaining four, however, were burned by the secular arm in May 1318. In the wake of these executions, lay followers of the Spirituals were rounded up and questioned across Languedoc. Here is where Burnham's Beguin story truly begins.

After a lucid discussion of the methodological dangers inherent in using inquisitorial sources, chapter 2 narrates the experiences of four women and men that exemplify three "tactics of resistance" employed by Beguins. First, the home of Raimon and Bernarda d'Antusan formed part of a clandestine "underground railroad" for fugitive Beguins. When they heard the news of the executions of 1318 and then, even more frighteningly, of the burning of five Beguins in October 1319, Raimon and Bernarda had to decide how to react. This couple was among those who determined that if the four friars were martyrs, then their murdered followers were too, and hence the pope and his bishops and inquisitors must be minions of Antichrist. Because their residence in Cintegabelle was peripheral to the main centers of Beguin activity, for several years they avoided direct persecution and could hide and pass on other Beguins and apostate friars. Although the ultimate fate of Raimon and Bernarda is unknown, Burnham's second case study, Esclarmonda Durban, concerns one of the over one hundred Beguins who went to the stake. In October 1321, Esclarmonda died along with seventeen other

Beguins at Lunel. Sympathizers who had arrived incognito to witness the burnings particularly remembered her patient and brave death—so much so that after dark they returned and gathered up relics, including Esclarmonda’s heart, bones, and still-intact flesh. Though being reduced to ashes may not seem like an entirely effective tactic of resistance, Burnham’s point is that these “martyrdoms” not only created new “saints” for the movement but also actually fed the certainty of its surviving adherents; the more the church persecuted their fellow believers, the more they could be sure that their apocalyptic prophecies had been correct, and that they were therefore fighting the good fight. “Once Beguins started to be burned, who among them could doubt any longer that the pope (who implicitly condemned them) was the mystical Antichrist predicted by Olivi? Or that the Church herself was the Whore of Babylon?” (pp. 80-81). The force of these deaths is nowhere so clearly exhibited as in the Beguin “martyrology” that Burnham is among the first to study, which records the names of those who perished for the cause, beginning with the four friars who died at Marseille in 1318 and ultimately including 113 names (including those outside Languedoc). The last figure examined in this chapter is Bernard Maury, a secular priest of Narbonne and one-time procurator of the Franciscan house there. Arrested in 1319 and released with a penitential sentence, he returned to his support of the Beguins and then fled to Provence (a separate region not only politically but also in terms of inquisitorial jurisdiction). By 1323, he began a traveling existence, escorting younger female Beguins from safe house to safe house. In late 1325 as inquisitors closed in, he tried to flee to Italy but was apprehended in Nice. After intense questioning, he at last confessed to continuing to believe in Beguin tenets, and was executed in November 1326. Flight and exile could delay the inevitable only so long.

Chapter 3 moves to Montpellier and two more case studies. The priest Peire Tornamira was at the center of Beguin life in Montpellier. From one of the city’s leading families, Peire fell in with Spiritualist circles and in 1316 joined the Franciscan Third Order and adopted a communal life of poverty. By 1320, his associates began to be rounded up and burned, but his family name apparently kept him safe for a time. He briefly fled to Sicily, but returned and was arrested in 1325. Deathly ill, he was nevertheless transported by his inquisitors to Carcassonne and questioned relentlessly up to the moment of his death. Burnham is able to tell his story in great detail due to the surviving inquisitorial testimony, and also because his family waged a subsequent, well-

documented, and ultimately successful battle to get him absolved of heresy and have his body buried in consecrated ground. In contrast to Peire, the widow Sibillia Cazelas was on the margins of Beguin circles. She came to inquisitorial attention through her contact with Prous Boneta, and admitted her involvement with renegade friars, her pilgrimage to Olivi’s grave, and her belief that the burned Beguins were holy martyrs. And yet her sentence in 1328 was of the lightest variety—merely a requirement to make minor pilgrimages. Why? Here, Burnham’s mastery of the notarial archives unravels a mystery in a way that reliance on more traditional inquisitorial sources alone would never have been able to. Notarial documents reveal that a local aristocrat, Gaucelina of Teyran, made over money and sold lands to Sibillia’s benefit only months before the sentencing. Given the fact that one of the figures involved in Sibillia’s testimony (Mennet de Robécourt) was demonstrably corrupt, Burnham is probably correct to argue that this money must have gone to secure a lightening of Sibillia’s sentence. Thus, the author has not only solved a seven-hundred-year-old judicial mystery but also unearthed evidence of support for Beguins among such figures as Gaucelina of Teyran where previous historians had never thought to look.

Finally, in chapter 4, Burnham arrives at her portrayals of two Beguin ringleaders. Prous migrated with her family to Montpellier in 1303 and swore virginity two years later at the age of nine. By 1320, she was a central figure in Beguin circles, living with her sister Aliseta and a friend named Alaraxis in a house much frequented by fellow believers. In 1321, just after many Beguins started to be arrested in Montpellier, she experienced multiple visions and raptures that convinced her that she was a new Mary of sorts—only instead of bringing the son of God into the world, it would be her role to introduce the Holy Spirit. Though Prous’s claims are notoriously fluid, she clearly saw herself as the culmination of an apocalyptic trio alongside St. Francis and her hero, Olivi, that would play the key role in ushering the Joachite third status. She was finally arrested in 1325 and executed in 1328 after eagerly and unrepentantly expounding her beliefs to her inquisitors. Before her death, however, her charismatic presence in prison apparently helped convince several of her fellow prisoners to go to the stake remaining true to their Beguin beliefs. Burnham’s goal here is to portray Prous as an inspirational leader of the Beguins in Montpellier, rather than as a lone (and possibly deranged) visionary as she has more often been seen. If Prous may be the best-known Beguin today,

for contemporaries it was Peire Trencavel who was “the Beguins’ public face and Olivi’s most indefatigable disciple” (p. 161). The amazing aspect of Peire’s career was his seemingly magical ability to slip through the fingers of his pursuers. As a Franciscan tertiary, he moved from Béziers to Narbonne by 1316, and when the persecution and burnings began he was found crisscrossing Languedoc spreading news and organizing resistance. In 1322 or 1323, he was imprisoned in Carcassonne, but promptly escaped. Over the next few years he again led an itinerant existence, apparently devoting himself to preserving and circulating Olivi’s writings, before finally being recaptured in 1327 (along with his daughter). But here, in his ultimate disappearing act, Peire simply vanishes from the records. Only a recent manuscript discovery provides a clue to the fate of this escape artist, showing that by the 1330s he had found shelter in the Franciscan community in Padua. How he eluded his jailors and slipped over the Alps is unknown. The book ends with a conclusion and a very useful appendix listing all known burnings of Beguins in Languedoc and Provence.

So Great a Light, So Great a Smoke balances an eye for historical detail with a flair for fast-paced narrative.

Burnham masterfully evokes the religious and social lives of these long-dead heretics. She evidently empathizes with her subjects and seeks to tell her story from their perspective. Indeed, the most ready criticism that may be leveled at the author is that she identifies so closely with the Beguins that at times she seems almost to want to channel their emotions and reactions even when a lack of evidence leaves a blank spot in the experience of her heretics (the possessive adjective seems appropriate since the book is dedicated to *Beguinis combustis*—to the burned Beguins). This is definitely not an ethereal intellectual analysis, or a study giving much space to the perspective of inquisitors or bishops. It is rather an attempt to marshal every scrap of available evidence to bring this small, persecuted group’s story to life. In this goal Burnham is strikingly successful. Dozens of figures weave in and out of the narrative as their lives intertwine with the eight men and women at its center, each of them seeming to come alive for the reader for a few moments. This is a book that will interest not only scholars of heresy and inquisition, but also anyone who craves a readable and rigorous narrative about struggle in the face of institutional persecution in the increasingly inflexible atmosphere of the early fourteenth century.

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