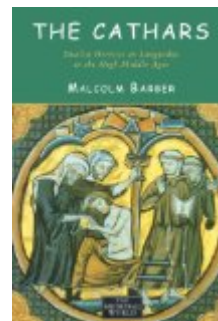


**Malcolm Barber.** *The Cathars: Dualist Heretics in Languedoc in the High Middle Ages.* London and New York: Longman, 2000. vii + 282 pp. \$79.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-25661-3.



**Reviewed by** Dawn M. Hayes

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The Medieval Heresy That Refuses to Die:  
Catharism, Then and Now

The most recent contribution to the history of the Cathars has been made by Malcolm Barber, Professor of History at the University of Reading. Employing a thematic approach within a chronological framework, Barber offers us what is perhaps the first comprehensive authoritative, yet accessible, English-language examination of the Cathars.[1] While firmly rooted in primary sources, supported by an ample amount of footnotes, and demonstrating an impressive command of the fairly extensive secondary literature on the subject, the account is highly readable for the non-specialist audience it targets.

The author begins with a chapter on the spread of Catharism, discussing the probable origins of the heresy and links between early dualists, the Messalians and the Paulicians; and the Bogomils, dualist heretics in the Balkans whose derivative name, Bulgars, by the thirteenth century was used in the West as a general label for heretics. Barber then takes the reader through the question of the relationship between the Bogomil

Church's missionary efforts to spread its heresy to western Europe, most likely (though this is still debated by scholars) by 1140.

Leaving the broad scope of the first chapter behind, the second focuses on the Cathars and their function in Languedoc, arguing that the powerbase of Catharism can be found in the region's "network of interrelated lordships" (p. 43). Writing against a good deal of earlier scholarship that maintains urbanization was crucial to the spread of Catharism in Languedoc, Barber argues that the interaction between the heresy and southern French society was largely fostered by the castra and villages of powerful local nobles, over whom the great lords had minimal control. Though dualism had spread to many regions of Europe along well-trodden trade routes, the degree of the heresy's success in Languedoc was largely determined by its communities' social structures. Their networks of local nobles, linked by marriage, exercised regional influences that permitted Cathars to preach and establish religious communities over relatively large areas.

The Cathar Church is the subject of chapter three. By the late twelfth century Cathars and Bogomils had established sixteen bishoprics stretching from Constantinople to Toulouse. Of note to those interested in feminist history is Barber's questioning of the popular notion that women served as "deaconesses," running many of the Cathar houses. Though this is possible, Barber admits, he contends that it was unlikely since there is no solid evidence to support this idea. In fact, it appears that the perfectae were overall less active in and important to the Cathar Church than the perfecti. Also in this chapter is a discussion of the consolamentum, which was the key ceremony of the western Cathar Church between ca. 1140 and 1320. Though central to their identity, numerous controversies developed around this practice, including a Cathar version of the Donatist heresy. More frequent were the controversies surrounding Cathars who had received the endura and later recovered. Barber ends the chapter with a discussion of the reasons why people were attracted to the church. Ultimately, there were three: the impressive morality of the perfecti; the encouragement of the promise and power of the consolamentum; and the rejection of the Old Testament, whose Jehovah, the Cathars maintained, was incompatible with the God of the New Testament.

The Catholic reaction to Catharism, the infamous Albigensian Crusade of 1209-1229, is the subject of chapter four. Barber is careful to note that the crusade did not eliminate the heresy. It did, however, usher in irreversible changes, transforming Languedoc from a region that was once "expansionist and confident" to one that became "defensive and beleaguered" (p. 139). The ensuing decline of Catharism is the topic of the following chapter. It was achieved via two strategies: the Treaty of Paris of 1229, which helped undermine the social and political infrastructures of the Cathar Church in Languedoc, and the inquisition unleashed against the remaining Cathars. By the 1250s the Cathars had "been driven down the social scale," ultimately losing much of their noble

support (p. 173). Although there is evidence of Cathar resistance to it, the inquisition proved successful.

The penultimate chapter focuses on the last Cathars in Languedoc. In the late thirteenth century the heresy experienced a brief revival, due to the impetus provided by the brothers Peter and William Autier. Never on a firm foundation, the revival was squashed, most notably under the direction of the infamous inquisitor Bernard Gui.

Perhaps the most intriguing chapter of the book, however, is the last, "Cathars and Catharism," which sets the heresy in its later historiographical context. Barber notes at the end of his introduction that "[e]ven more than most historical subjects, the Cathars are viewed today through the many-layered filters of the more recent past" (p. 5). He returns to this idea at the end of the book, exploring how these filters have influenced the way various people have interpreted the Cathars and their demise. Deodat Roche, founder of the *Cahiers d'Etudes Cathares* and a twentieth-century magistrate of Limoux and Carcassonne who was removed from his position by the Vichy government for his interest in religion and spirituality, wanted to lay bare to his contemporaries the light which the Cathars had tried to reveal to the medieval world. A self-proclaimed neo-Cathar, Roche believed deeply in the need to uncover the true history of the Cathars, which had been obscured by an intolerant medieval Church.

Simone Weil, a French philosopher of the inter-war period, was moved by Roche's work, particularly by his discussion of the Cathar's rejection of the Old Testament Jehovah (whom she saw as a god of "pitiless cruelty" and, like the medieval Cathars, believed was incompatible with the God of the New Testament). Living during some of the darkest days of Europe's history (she died of tuberculosis in 1943), Weil saw the Roman Empire and its child, the Catholic Church, as the original

sources of European totalitarianism, brutally exercised by the Office of the Inquisition.

To the twentieth-century German writer Otto Rahn, the Cathars were able custodians of a dualist tradition that predated Christianity. In fact, to Rahn, the Cathars carried on traditions that can be traced back to the Celts and the Iberians. Published in Germany during the late 1930s Rahn's second book, *Luzifers Hofgesind* (1937), argues that the Cathars were disciples of Lucifer, the Bringer of Light, whose church was an enemy of the "Judaic" Catholic Church. An instrument of Nazi propaganda (Rahn worked for Heinrich Himmler, chief of the Schutzstaffel and later head of all German police forces, during these years), *Luzifers Hofgesind* argues that until the thirteenth century the Cathars maintained a European tradition that did not have to be purified of "Jewish mythology" (p. 210). Although it didn't have a major impact during the war years, in the recent past *Luzifers Hofgesind* has stimulated a genre of books employing unconventional historical approaches, such as Jean and Michel Angebert's 1971 work *Hitler et la tradition cathare*, that claims to uncover secret relationships between the Cathar tradition and the Nazi regime.

The chapter concludes with discussions of Protestantism and Catharism and the role of the Cathars in modern Occitan identity. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, some fifty years after the publication of Jacques Benigne Bossuet's *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*, many Protestants believed that they were successors to a Cathar tradition, which for centuries the Catholic Church had been trying to destroy. It was around this same time that perceptions of thirteenth-century Languedoc began to gel as French writers cultivated an image of the Albigensian Crusade as a barbaric papal attack against an innocent people and their highly developed culture. As regionalist movements became popular in France during the 1970s, their adherents in Languedoc began to see themselves as neo-

Cathars who, after seven centuries, were yet again fighting for their cultural independence. Though the occitaniste movement was ultimately unsuccessful (actually, it was the French government that was responsible for the popularization of regional languages in the 1980s), the legacy of these ideas can be seen in modern television, advertising and tourism where local towns present their Cathar credentials to gullible visitors. Hautes-Corbières has become le pays cathare and a commemorative stone which reads "[a]t Lavaur, the occitan people lost their independence but seven centuries later the laurel grows green again" can be seen at the Esplanade de Plo. Barber concludes that "superstition and credulity" have enabled modern audiences to distort the history of the Cathars and manipulate it for financial gain or the satisfaction of personal fantasies (p. 225).

The historian Norman F. Cantor has long been arguing that among the modern educated reader is a vast and relatively untapped interest in the Middle Ages. And he challenges professional medievalists to write the kinds of works that will target this readership. This is not a simple task; many people prefer to imagine the Middle Ages rather than read responsible reconstructions of the period. As Barber has noted, during the recent past various people with less than honest motives have hijacked the subject of the Cathars. It appears, though, that he has written a book that can effectively and responsibly meet the needs of lay readers who want to learn about the Cathars and the heresy for which many lived and died. With its three tables, seven maps, bibliography, adequate footnotes and suggestions for further reading this is a solid work. Yet at the same time it is highly readable and a potential antidote to the tendencies toward invention and distortion.

#### Notes

[1]. Though it is not the first comprehensive examination of the history of the Cathars, as the publisher's WWW site maintains. For example, readers who are interested in an account that tar-

gets a scholarly audience can pick up Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars* (Oxford, England and Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998). Comprehensive foreign language accounts may be gleaned from Barber's bibliography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-catholic>

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