

The Cathars

What makes the Cathar faith so appealing and enduring?

Hardly the wonders of the church architecture it left behind for there isn't any. Cathars believed that God's temple was the heart not any stone building however magnificent. Nor does it lie in the glamorous richness of the costumes they wore for, to the Cathars, the essence of Christ's message was humility and total indifference to material possessions. Of course such simplistic teachings were bound to lead to their undoing, just as they had led to Jesus Christ's crucifixion, for they implied a complete disregard of the whole power structure of the Church. For if God could be approached directly through one's own heart, what need was there of priests or rabbis, or of fine cathedrals, or for that matter the whole hierarchy of the Church - any Church? For the Catholic priesthood, these were vicious teachings indeed, holding within them the threat of redundancy or at the very least a reduction in the power they held over the hearts and minds of the people. Thus they were quick to brand them heresy.

In the struggle against paganism, the Church had successfully separated man from his old familiar gods. Now there was only one God and he reigned in a far off heavenly kingdom surrounded by choirs of angels with an abyss of hellfire in between. The Church was the only bridge over this fiery chasm. Blind devotion to its creed might ensure access to this heavenly pathway. It was the key to the Kingdom and only the Church of Rome held the key.

All this would have been acceptable to far more people had not the priests themselves been so flagrantly corrupt. In the 12C., so many of them were living in licentious luxury that they were openly mocked by the laity and protest movements against such open abuse were inevitable. Even Pope Innocent III could see that the behaviour of his priests was endangering the power of his Church. He railed against it but was unable to control it. Of the Archbishop of Narbonne he wrote:

“...He knows no other God but money and has a purse where his heart should be. His monks and canons take mistresses and live by usury... Throughout the region the prelates are the laughing stock of the laity”.

The Cathar faith came into this fetid atmosphere like a breath of fresh air. Its advocates were called 'parfaits' and were known collectively as 'les Bons Hommes' or 'the Good Men'. Rich and poor alike were eager to offer them hospitality just to listen to their teachings and many lords and ladies openly became followers of the Cathar way. Its chief appeal lay in its doctrine of a personal relationship with God. They held that everything material and physical was the work of the Devil, but deep inside our fleshly prison, was trapped an angelic spirit, a fragment of God Himself, and this angelic spirit was forever yearning to rejoin its Maker. Regular prayer would strengthen it and nourish it, preparing it for the day when death would release it and enable it to rejoin its Maker once again.

For all its shortcomings Catharism was a beautiful approach to Christianity. The world,

particularly the Western world, is immeasurably poorer for its suppression. It is fair to say that the Roman Catholic Church committed a wicked crime against society as well as humanity, when it burnt all the Cathars and deprived us of their gentle faith. The world would have been a better place had Catharism been allowed to develop in its own way. But this was not to be. The Church would countenance no competition and it wiped out its rival in a fervour of feverish intolerance. Only the memory of Catharism and the stark strongholds of its sympathisers have remained. That is until recently, when a growing understanding of its teachings has led to signs of revival on a global basis.

In some ways the Cathars were well ahead of their time. For instance, they were pacifists totally dedicated to non-violence. When nobles and garrisons took their part they frequently defended them out of pure devotion. Sometimes the defenders even preferred to die with their Cathar brethren rather than deny them by accepting their proffered freedom. Cathars too were rigid vegetarians. On occasion their Inquisitors would give them chickens to kill and some went to the stake rather than kill the bird and compromise their beliefs. They also respected, even revered women, many of whom achieved high places in the Cathar organisation. But, above all else they were tolerant of other creeds and this was probably our greatest loss of all. There was no tolerance at all in the Church of the day. In fact the western world is still paying in blood for the merciless intolerance shown by its Crusader assassins during that time.

Although we may not be prepared to accept some Cathar ideas, the basic tenet of their belief ...that there is an angelic spirit deep in all men and women forever seeking union with its Maker... is surely fundamental to all religions. We should be deeply grateful to them for this insight.

More than two hundred Cathars were burnt to death on the grassy slope beneath the walls of Montsegur, but their ideals did not perish in the butcher's flames. Like small flowers springing up between the flagstones of a cathedral precinct, they live on, inspiring all those who look for God, not in stone buildings or in formal groups, but along paths of their own choosing and in the quiet places of their own hearts.

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Doctrines The term "Cathars" derives from the Greek word *Katheroi* and means "Pure Ones". The Cathars professed a theological dualism in which two coequal divine principles, one good and one evil, struggled against each other from eternity. They believed all matter to be evil because it was created by Satan, the principle of evil. The soul, which has its origins in the realm of the good God, is trapped within the material body.

In order to liberate the soul, and thereby to achieve salvation, it was necessary to undergo a ceremony known as the *consolamentum*. After a probationary year of fasting and instruction the believer would be baptised by those who had already received the *consolamentum*. S/he would then make a vow to be celibate, not to own property, not to go to war and not to eat any food

that that resulted from coition. Having received baptism the believer would acquire the title of "Perfect" and be allowed to recite the Lord's Prayer. Those who died without receiving the consolamentum would be reincarnated, only attaining salvation when their soul was purified of all material elements.

Such doctrines necessitated the reinterpretation of the Bible. Much of the Old Testament was viewed with suspicion or even discarded. The doctrine of the incarnation was rejected. Instead Jesus was regarded as an angel whose sufferings and death were only apparent.

History The origins of the Cathar movement lie in the missionary work of the Bogomils, a dualistic sect that emerged in south eastern Europe in the 11th century. During the 12th century the doctrines of the Bogomils were brought to western Europe by missionaries and soldiers returning from the second crusade (1147-49). In about 1150 the first Cathar bishopric was established in France. A few years later two more bishoprics were set up in the regions of Albi and Lombardy. By the end of the 12th century the Cathars had eleven bishoprics - five in France and six in Italy.

Such was the perceived threat posed by Cathar doctrine to the mainstream church that in 1209 Pope Innocent III proclaimed a crusade against the Cathars. There followed twenty years of ruinous warfare, during which cities and provinces throughout the south of France were devastated. In one of the worst episodes of the war almost the entire population of Toulouse, both Cathar and Catholic, were massacred. Resistance continued until 1243 when the Cathar fortress of Montsegur in the Pyrenees was captured and destroyed. Those who refused to renounce their beliefs were often tortured or put to death by fire. In spite of continued persecution the Cathar movement continued through the 14th century, only disappearing in the 15th century.

Symbols The belief that all matter was evil discouraged the Cathars from using symbols, including the sacramental bread and wine and baptism by water. However, certain ritualistic actions could be interpreted as of symbolic significance. During the consolamentum the candidates were baptised by the laying on of hands, signifying the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Perfect were distinguished from other Cathars by the black clothes they wore.

Adherents No contemporary adherents.

Headquarters/

Main Centre The movement had no headquarters. It was dominant in the regions surrounding Toulouse in the south of France.

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The Cathars believed that the world was split along lines of matter and spirit, good and evil. They believed in purifying themselves, clean living, chastity, poverty and equality of the sexes.

If you're thinking to yourself, "danger, danger, must exterminate," you would have made a good Pope Innocent III.

The Cathars were a gnostic Christian sect that arose in the 11th century, an offshoot of a small

surviving European gnostic community that emigrated to the Albigensian region in the south of France. The name "Cathar" comes from a Greek work meaning "Pure Ones," a noble enough sentiment but one that would get them into a lot of trouble.

They took the "pure" thing very seriously. Cathars reportedly took vows of chastity, poverty and non-violence. Sounds innocuous? Hell, no!

The Catholic Church was the dominant religious force in France at the time. Medieval priests were somewhat less than scions of morality, however. For one thing, they were notorious lechers, fornicating all over the place and fathering bastards where ever they went. Other clerical practices of the time included selling salvation to the highest bidder and accumulating large amounts of property and personal wealth.

The priests felt that all this poverty and chastity was making them look bad, which in fact it was. The Cathars were very popular at the time, and they developed a strong base of support. They were also buddies with the Knights Templar, a powerful and fabulously wealthy Holy Grail cult based in the region.

The ironically named Pope Innocent III came on the scene as the 11th Century became the 12th, and he had some pretty specific ideas about the papacy, based on the groundwork laid by his predecessors. Chief among these notions was that the pope should be king of the world. As such, he had to send out a message to the common folk: "Resistance is futile. Prepare to be assimilated."

Innocent launched a Crusade against the Cathars, who managed to endure for about 20 years, despite the whole non-violence thing, a rather remarkable accomplishment when you think about it. The Crusaders slaughtered whole towns, sometimes indiscriminately, in search of the heretics.

After the open warfare had ended, those pesky Cathars STILL hadn't been exterminated. There were stories that the Knights Templar, also based in the region, had preserved some of the Cathar secrets and sacraments, possibly pertaining to the Holy Grail or the existence of living descendants of Christ in the region, offspring resulting from hot heretical action with Mary Magdalene. Pope Clement V and the King of France sent the Inquisition to exterminate the Templars, but that had less to do with the Cathars than the Templars' fabulous real estate holdings, which both the pope and the king coveted.

Regardless of the various baser motivations behind the killing of the Cathars, their beliefs did appear to be fairly heretical, although the primary historical record comes from their murderers.

The Cathars are thought to have been a pretty pure offshoot of the original Gnostics. They believed the God of the Old Testament was a blind and evil god, responsible for creating the world of matter. Ipso facto, the world of matter was therefore evil and should be spurned, including all its perks, such as sex, drugs, goodies and rock-n-roll. They are also thought to have believed that Jesus Christ didn't actually take on one of those dirty, dirty bodies with all its dirty, nasty bits, but that he was a purely spiritual being, thus rendering the Crucifixion a big hoax on an

unwitting public, not unlike the Fake Moon Landing.

The Cathars had no use for the Catholic sacraments, according to contemporary accounts. Once medieval inquisitor reported that the Cathars were particularly down on Holy Communion, pointing out that "the eucharist (...) cannot contain the body of Christ, for had this been as great as the largest mountain Christians would have entirely consumed it before this." The Inquisitors apparently felt Jesus was an all-you-can-eat deal.

Instead, the Cathars came up with their own sacraments, including the consolamentum, a yearlong bodily purification which ended in a vow to be poor, non-violent, celibate and Vegan. In other words, they promised not to enjoy anything, period. They also had a dramatically scaled down "breaking of the bread" (sans logic-defying cannibalistic elements) and public confessions.

As the wrath of Innocent III descended on the Cathars, the luxuries of non-violence and vegetarianism grew to be problematic. Consolamentum was often delayed until the final moments of life; the Catholics countered by inventing the "last rites," a sacrament in which a dead person receives a blessing with no tangible benefit from an attending priest.

As it became increasingly associated with deathbeds, stories began to circulate that the consolamentum was actually an assisted Suicide ritual, in which the participant was sent off to meet God with the help of some lengthwise gashes along the wrists. This may have been Catholic propaganda, but since it's much more colorful and garish than the other version, we recommend that you believe it.