

History of the Crusades.
Episode 111.
The Crusade Against The Cathars.
The Origins Of The Cathars.

Hello again. Last week we took a closer look at southern France on the eve of the Crusade Against the Cathars. This week we will take a look at the Cathars themselves.

In a nutshell, the Cathars were religious devotees who had strayed so far from the orthodox teachings of the Latin Church that not only were they viewed as heretics, there were many who questioned whether they could even be classed as Christians. Central to their belief was the distinction between the temporal and the eternal, the dark and the light, the material and the spiritual. To the Cathars, the material world was the realm of the devil; only the spiritual world was pure and divine. Unsurprisingly then, they rejected material possessions, preached celibacy, and spurned many pleasures of the material world. They had no churches, no holy objects, and their spiritual leaders, known as the "Perfect", wore only common everyday clothes. The Perfect were vegetarians, although everyday Cathars could eat whatever food they liked. They rejected the sacraments of the Catholic Church, and had only one ritual of their own, called the "Consolamentum". The Consolamentum was used to ordain a new Perfect, or to prepare dying Cathars for their journey from the base, evil, material world into the pure, spiritual one.

Cathars rejected the Old Testament, taking for their own scriptures the New Testament, particularly the Gospel According to St John. These were translated into the language of Southern France, Languedoc, and circulated amongst the Cathars. When a Perfect was ordained following the ritual of Consolamentum, he or she was presented with their own copy of this holy book, which was usually small enough to be held in the palm of the hand. This being a couple of centuries before the invention of the printing press, the book would have been copied out laboriously by hand. Only a few of these books have survived into modern times, although if you are curious, there is one on display at the Palais des Arts in Lyon. As you might expect, it is a thing of great beauty, featuring early Gothic calligraphy and illuminated capital letters. The ordained Perfect would take their book and either travel and preach in public places, or conduct prayer groups and meetings within people's houses. Interestingly, a Perfect could be either male or female. In stark contrast to the Roman Church at the time and in fact the Roman Church today, women were eligible to become leaders within the Catholic Church. The Cathars believed in reincarnation. Their thoughts on the matter were: if you were a male in this lifetime, you may have been a woman in your last life, and may also be one in your next life, so why waste time restricting membership of the Perfect to men only.

So we have discussed what the Cathars believed, but how did so many of them come to be in southern France in the early thirteenth century? Well, that is a very interesting question. To answer the question, we need to examine the origins of the Cathar heresy. Now, as Leonard George, the author of "The Encyclopedia of Heresies and Heretics", stated in the introduction to his book, and I quote, "Where there is orthodoxy, there is heresy", end quote. That is an astute observation. Ever since the early days of Christianity, there have been groups whose beliefs differ from that held by the mainstream Christian religion. Of course, the heretics themselves believed that they had found the truth, so to speak, and that all beliefs that differ from their own are misguided or incorrect.

One of the earliest of these groups were the Manichaeans who followed the teachings of the prophet Mani, who lived in Babylonia in the third century AD. Mani was influenced by the dualist religion of Zoroastrianism, which was the dominant faith in Persia. Mani viewed existence as an endless battle between two opposing forces: the evil material forces of darkness and the good spiritual forces of light. He believed in reincarnation, and he and his followers rejected the material aspects of life, concentrating instead on the spiritual. The Manichaean religion, which survived Mani's death, was very influential in the early days of Christianity, and at its height spread from North Africa across the Middle East all the way to China. Even St Augustine of Hippo was a Manichaean. He followed the Manichaean religion for nine years before eventually rejecting it in favor of mainstream Christianity.

So dualism was present in the Middle East in the early centuries of Christianity. How did it move into Europe? Well, apparently it was all due to the Armenians. A community of people with dualist beliefs calling themselves the Paulicians sprang up in Armenia in the fifth century. They denied links with the Manichaeans, although their beliefs were markedly similar. In the eighth century, when Armenia was part of the Byzantine Empire, a bunch of troublesome Armenians were relocated from Armenia to Thrace, where the Emperor hoped that they could put their love of fighting to good use, fighting opponents of the Empire in the borderlands of the Balkans, instead of fighting the Empire itself. Back in Armenia, at least some of these resettled Armenians were Paulicians, and they seized the opportunity to seek out converts to their new religion and happily went off preaching to the masses, not only in Thrace but in the neighboring kingdom of Bulgaria.

The Paulician spread of the beliefs of dualism, paved the way for the establishment of the first major dualist Church in Europe. The Church was founded by a man called Bogomil, who lived in Macedonia in the tenth century, and who had been influenced by the Paulicians as well as by Gnosticism and Manichaeism. The leaders of the Bogomil Church were known as the Perfecti. The Perfecti were celibate preachers who abstained from eating meat and who traveled around teaching others about their beliefs, and rejected materialism. In exchange for providing the Perfecti with the necessities of life, such as food and clothing, ordinary Bogomils, who were not required to live the austere lives of their spiritual leaders, were provided with teaching and instruction. The Perfecti were ordained via a ritual called the Consolamentum, and an ordinary Bogomil facing imminent death could be given the Consolamentum, meaning that he or she would die as a Perfecti, without having had to make the sacrifice is necessary to live as one. The Bogomil religion was highly influential in the Balkans and across eastern Europe.

The next question, obviously, is: How did the Bogomil religion based in Europe become the Cathar religion of southern France? Well, most theories concerning how dualism crossed from eastern Europe into western Europe revolve around trade routes, particularly those of western European cloth merchants who had commercial ties to the east. But there is one other theory that is particularly interesting.

Dualism first gained a foothold in western Europe in the regions of Flanders, Champagne, the Loire Valley, and the Rhineland during the twelfth century. These were also the regions which supplied most of the Crusaders who left to conquer Jerusalem on the First Crusade. Adding to this, evidence that the Crusaders apparently founded settlements of Paulicians near Antioch in 1097 and near Tripoli in 1099, some historians believe that the Crusaders traveling through the Balkans on their way to Constantinople were influenced by the

Bogomils and the Paulicians in the region. When they returned to their homelands in western Europe following the First Crusade, they brought their new beliefs with them.

The newly arrived heresy proved popular amongst the peasants of twelfth century Europe. The Latin Christian Church was increasingly seen as being for the benefit of the nobility and the wealthy. The wealth and immorality of clergymen was being openly criticized in some quarters, and protests against the materialism of the Church in general were occasionally escalating into armed rebellions. The anti-material nature of the new dualist religion, with its spiritual leaders living in poverty and imparting their teachings to people in their own houses, instead of in sumptuous cathedrals, hit a chord with many peasants. By the 1140s, highly organized and extensive communities of dualists were identified across the Rhineland and in the Low Countries, particularly in the cities of Liege and Cologne.

Those within the hierarchies of the Latin Christian Church labeled this new heresy "The Manichaean Plague", but its adherents had a different name: they called themselves "Cathars". The word "Cathar" was apparently derived from the Greek term "Kathara", meaning "pure". The Church initially seemed to be at a bit of a loss as to what to do with this growing group of heretics. They were openly denounced by the Church, and Churchmen of esteem such as Bernard of Clairvaux preached passionate sermons against them, all to no avail. Within just two years, the Cathar movement had spread from the Rhineland all the way south to the Pyrenees. Two main centres of Cathar teaching were established in the mid twelfth century, one in Champagne in northern France and one in Albi in southern France. From these bases, the Cathar Perfect traveled across France and into Italy, preaching their message of rejecting the evil material world and embracing the pure spiritual one.

With the Cathar heresy spreading rapidly across Europe and even making its way into parts of Spain and England, the Church decided it needed to strike back. It had already preached against the Cathars, and directed that their adherents be cast out of the Church as heretics, but by the mid twelfth century, it was clear that a firmer approach was required. In the year 1163, the Cathars of northern Europe began to be violently suppressed, beginning with the burning alive of a group of Cathars at Cologne, which I mentioned a couple of episodes ago, in my short introduction.

Also in the year 1163, Pope Alexander III held a Church Council in France, under the patronage of King Henry II of England. The council declared that, and I quote, "In the district of Toulouse, a damnable heresy has recently arisen which, like a cancer gradually diffusing itself over the neighbouring places, has already infected vast numbers throughout Gascony and other provinces and, hiding itself like a serpent in its own folds, undermines the vineyard of the Lord, the more grievously it spreads among simple folk. Therefore, we command the Bishops and all God's priests resident in those parts to be vigilant, and to prohibit everybody, under pain of anathema, from sheltering the known followers of this heresy in their lands, or presuming to protect them." End quote.

This was an important declaration for a number of reasons. Firstly, because it went further in its proclamation against the Cathars than previous Church positions. Previously, the Church had focused only on the heretics themselves, declaring that those who had rejected the teachings or sacraments of the Roman Church be cast out of the Church as heretics, and dealt with by the relevant civil authorities. This new declaration extended the wrath of the Church beyond the individual heretic, to all those who assisted or protected the heretics.

Secondly, the Council focused on the area of Toulouse. As the heresy had spread all the way across Europe, why single out Toulouse? Well, the Cathar heresy had spread like wildfire through the county of Toulouse and the neighbouring regions of Languedoc. For the fiercely independent, free-thinking people of the region, this religion seems like a perfect fit. Whereas the heresy mainly attracted a peasant following in northern Europe, in the south of France even noble families were adopting the beliefs of the Cathars. As you might remember from last week's episode, in the south of France women were allowed to inherit land, and many noble families had a noblewoman at their core. A religion where women could be spiritual leaders, in exactly the same way as men, held an obvious appeal to the powerful noblewomen of the region.

But there was another reason why Toulouse was the focus of the Council's attention. The Council meeting was held under the patronage of King Henry II, and at this point in time King Henry II had his sights on conquering, yes that's right, the County of Toulouse. Knowing that the direction made by the council was likely to adversely affect and perhaps even destabilize some of the more powerful families in the region wouldn't have worried King Henry one little bit.

Over the next fifty years, the Church in northern Europe waged a violent campaign of repression against the Cathars, and by the end of the twelfth century, the Church had pretty much succeeded in wiping out the heresy. In the north, the Church had the support of the civil authorities, which it used to mete out punishment to the heretics. Viewing burning people alive as possibly contrary to its teachings of peace and goodwill to all men, the Church merely had to declare a certain individual a heretic. The heretic was then handed over to the civil authorities, for them to mete out whatever punishment they saw fit. If that punishment happened to be a sentence of death by a slow and tortuous means, well that had nothing to do with them, so far as the Church was concerned.

In the south of France, however, the civil authorities tended to be sympathetic to the Cathars. With the heresy pervading all facets of society, the local Count or Duke, who was meant to mete out the punishment, probably knew someone who was a Cathar, and maybe even had a close family member who was a Cathar. Regardless, the area of Languedoc was full of people who didn't like to be told what to do by outside authorities, whether they be Kings or Popes.

So by January 1208, when the Papal Legate Peter of Castelnau is setting out on his doomed journey from the castle at Saint-Gilles, northern Europe didn't really have a Cathar problem. Most surviving Cathars had taken their families and moved south, to a place where they knew there would be unlikely to be persecuted. More specifically, they moved to Languedoc. By the early twelve hundreds, Catharism was so solidly entrenched in southern France that it's estimated that the Cathar religion and the Roman Church were of equal standing in the region, half the population being Roman Catholic and half the population being Cathar.

Southern France most definitely did have a Cathar problem, and it was a problem that the church was going to have to address. Join me next week as we see what the church is going to do to try and address the problem of the Cathars. Until next week, bye for now.

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