



# The Church's War on the Cathars



During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the region known as the Languedoc, spreading approximately southward from the Loire to the Pyrenees down into Arragon and eastward to the Rhone, became the most highly civilized area of Western Europe. Its fertile soil and pleasant climate provided the means for a leisurely life. The Rhone and the Garonne were notable routes of communication and the passage of many Crusaders on their way to the East gave an immense stimulus to trade. Above all the Moslem conquest of Spain had brought the influence of Arabic culture. The larger cities had schools of medicine, mathematics and astrology where Arabian scholarship was imparted. Jews were not debarred from public life and were highly respected as doctors and teachers. The Catholic Church no longer held the monopoly of knowledge; and was gradually losing its power hold in the Languedoc.



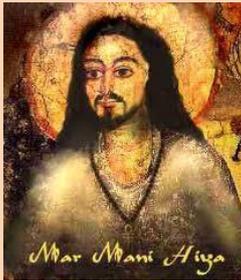
The wealth of the monastic orders and the intolerance of the bishops roused the contempt of the nobles who accused them of self-indulgence and lack of interest in the poor. The common priests, through the neglect of their superiors, had fallen into discredit on account of their poverty and illiteracy. Very different was the behaviour of the Cathars. Their eloquence in presenting their beliefs and their untiring care for all in need of help won the devotion of both nobles and common people. They became known by the name of *bons hommes*. When the leaders of the Catholic Church

realized how widely the movement had spread, it was already too late to stem the tide. It was inevitable that sooner or later the clash would come, for no expressions of faith could be more diametrically opposed between the Catholics and the Cathars.

The heretics were known by a variety of names. In 1165, they had been condemned by an ecclesiastical council at the Languedoc town of Albi. For this reason, or perhaps because Albi continued to be one of their centres, they were often called Albigensians. On other occasions, they were called Cathars or Cathares or Cathari. Not infrequently they were also branded or stigmatized with the names of much earlier heresies - Arian, Marcionite, and Manichaeism.

A distinct influence of the Persian Manichaeism by means of the Bogomils in Bulgaria, and from there to the Cathars is quite certain. Deodat Roche in his *Cahiers d'Etudes Cathares* points out that Gnosticism and Manichaeism had a reciprocal influence upon each other and Manichaeism influenced Christian thought. The nominal Manichaeism who had spread across Europe and Asia, and even reached China, disappeared as the result of persecution. The Paulicians, a Manichaeism-Christian group, survived in Asia Minor and Armenia until 872, when they were overrun by the Greeks and deported to the Balkan peninsula. Here they grew into the organization that was eventually to become the Cathars.

## The Influence of Mani



The originator of Manichaeism, Mani, came from the southern region of Mesopotamia; he probably was born on the 14th of April, 216 AD, in the vicinity of Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris, the Persian capital. His parents are said to be of noble Iranian descent, his mother even of Parthian royal lineage. When he was twelve years old, in about 228/29, Mani had his first vision in which his heavenly double, his "twin," his "partner" or "companion," appeared to him and assured him of his constant protection and help. Later, Mani saw in this the effective revelation of the "comforter," or the "Holy Spirit," who had revealed to him the "mysteries" of his teaching.

When Mani was 24 years old, he confronted King Shapur on the day of his coronation and proclaimed himself a spiritual leader. Mani continued to deepen his teaching more and more with the coming Christianity so that his disciples would be better equipped to give the world a new message.

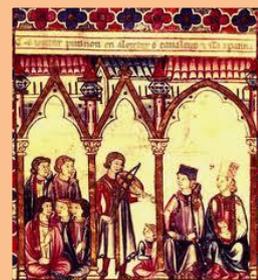
When King Shapur saw his state religion endangered, he condemned Mani to death. Mani escaped first to the castle Arabion, thence to Kayak in Mesopotamia. Here he encountered the Christian bishop Archelaus with whom he had a dogmatic argument on Christianity; Mani refused to accept the bishop's dogma and was banned by a religious council. Again, he was forced to save his life and fled to Khatai in China, and everywhere he founded Manichaean Communities.

When Mani returned to the Persian capital, after the death of King Shapur, he had gone through many mystery experiences. He was a conqueror in Spirit, accomplished as a human being, a teacher, artist and painter. But the successor of King Shapur, his son Barahm, was as hostile as his father and called Mani before a Synod of Persian priests and scholars who demanded that Mani should recant. When he refused, he was condemned to death. His decapitated body was skinned and the skin filled with precious herbs. It was then crucified before the gates of Ghondi-Shapur as a warning.

To understand Manichaeism and its attitude to the forces of evil in man and in the world, we are greatly dependent on the writings of the opponents of Manichaeism, especially to those of St. Augustine, the church-father. Augustine's opposition stemmed from the fact that he was unable to overcome the darkness within himself. The Manichaeans believed that in the course of repeated earth lives the light element will be victorious over the darkness, in a process of gradual soul-transformation. Man will become a co-fighter of the King of Light against the Regent of Darkness.

Nicetas, the Bulgarian mystic who several times travelled through Southern France, is said to have laid the foundations of a new church at Saint-Felix de Caraman, and entrusted to certain men, whom he recognised as being pure of heart, the book in which the "spiritual doctrine" was embodied. Nothing is known of him, except the deep impression left by his visit and the extension of the Catharist movement which followed his departure for Sicily.

The Cathars were part of the movement of the "poor," dating back to older times. The "Monachos" went all the way within, to have a dialogue with "God." Wealth, therefore, was being rejected by the Cathars as "external." The way of the Troubadour, on the other hand, valued the ego as a result of self-knowledge. The values contained in the ego, had to come to fruition in order to reach completion. So the Cathars represented more the inward path, the Troubadours the other.



Side by side with the Troubadours, Catharism spread with extraordinary speed in Southern France. It was the radiant cult of the pure spirit which took possession of men's souls, and it seriously endangered the materialistic Church of the Pope. Innocent III realised this and dispatched several apostolic legates to Southern

France. These legates went to Toulouse, which was the capital of Catharism. They were resolved to strike a resounding blow, which should bring misery and terror to the south.

In general the Cathars subscribed to a doctrine of reincarnation and to a recognition of the feminine principle in religion. Indeed, the preachers and teachers of Cathar congregations were of both sexes. At the same time, the Cathars rejected the orthodox Catholic Church and denied the validity of all clerical hierarchies, all official and ordained intercessors between man and God. At the core of this position lay a gnostic tenet - the repudiation of "faith," at least as the Church insisted on it. In the place of "faith" accepted at second-hand, the Cathars insisted on direct and personal knowledge, a religious or mystical experience apprehended at first-hand.

In the Black Mountain, not far from Carcassonne, there was found a chamber, dating from the Cathar period, containing skeletons. "They lay in a circle, with their heads at the center and their feet at the circumference, like the spokes of a wheel." Those who have studied magical rites will recognise in this posture of death a very ancient rite intended to facilitate the escape of the soul, to allow it to traverse the intermediate worlds by virtue of the impetus given by union.

The logical consequence of the Cathar philosophy is that life is evil and that it is expedient to escape from the form in which we are confined. Jesus Christ, the symbol of the Word, came to teach man the means of escaping from this world and returning to the Kingdom of Heaven. Certain of them affirmed that Jesus had no terrestrial existence, that he only came among men clothed in a spiritual body, and that the miracles recounted in the New Testament had a symbolic character and had been performed only on the spiritual plane. The blind were healed only of spiritual blindness, because they were blinded by sin.

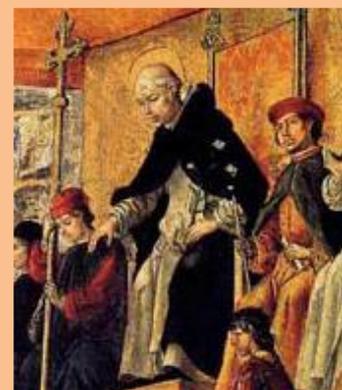


The Cathars, like the Romans under the Empire, sought death gladly by opening their veins. But they were forbidden to end their lives unless they had attained absolute calm, complete indifference, in order to escape a death incurred in circumstances of agony. The executioners of the Inquisition often found Cathar adepts lifeless in their cells, their white faces showing the reflection of the eternal light towards which they were journeying.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, there had been sporadic burnings of Cathar heretics; but it gradually became apparent that these measures had no effect. In 1179 Pope Alexander III pronounced an Anathema against the sect and sent Papal legates ordering the nobles of the Languedoc to take strong disciplinary measures. The report was brought back to him that the disease was far too widespread to be dealt with in this way. When Innocent III came to the Papal throne he determined to bring an end to this scandalous opposition to his authority. He first tried measures of conciliation. In 1203 he launched a preaching campaign to convert all who were straying from the true path. In the chief towns of the Languedoc a series of public debates was arranged. Leading heretics were to meet the Pope's legates and each side was to expound its teaching. It was a remarkable gesture to allow heretics to speak on equal terms with the orthodox, but the Pope imagined that the truth of Catholic dogma must win the day.

The legates arrived in their splendid robes with cavalcades of followers, demanding almost royal hospitality; while the Cathar Perfecti appeared in their modest simplicity. The populace loved the "bons hommes" and despised the haughty representatives of Rome; so the Catholics made little progress.

There came, however, a surprising diversion. Two Spanish monks, fired with missionary zeal, arrived on the scene. The more energetic of the two, Dominic de Guzman, later to become the famous St. Dominic, reproved the legates for their ostentation and arrogance. He himself even out did the Perfecti in asceticism. When the mob flung mud and threatened to kill him, he replied, "I should beg you not to kill me at one blow, but to tear me limb from limb; I would like to be a mere limbless trunk, with eyes gouged out, wallowing in my own blood, that I might thereby win a worthier martyr's



crown!" Such intrepidity won an awed respect, but in spite of Dominic's determination, no converts of importance appeared.

**T**here lived at that time in Toulouse, in the rue du Taur, a venerable old man named Pierre Maurand, who had been the host of Nicetas and held nocturnal meetings at which he preached the new religion. He was compared to St. John on account of his shining eyes. He was a capitoul (magistrate) and one of the richest men in Toulouse. The legates summoned him solemnly before the people, interrogated him, convicted him of heresy and condemned him to death. The strength of a martyr was not in him. He feared death, which is usually harder for a rich old man than to other men, and promised to return to the Roman Catholic Church. But his return was made difficult. He was compelled to walk barefoot from the prison to the church of Saint-Sernin between the Bishop of Toulouse and one of the legates, who beat him unmercifully with rods. At the church he asked pardon on his knees, recanted, and listened to his sentence, which was that he should have his houses destroyed and his property confiscated. He had, further, to go to the Holy Land and for three years to devote himself to the succour of the poor of Jerusalem. Before his departure, moreover, in order that no inhabitant of Toulouse should remain in ignorance of his recantation, he was obliged for forty days to visit every church in Toulouse, scourging himself meanwhile.



Pierre Maurand, who was then eighty years old, scourged himself and wandered naked about the streets for the prescribed forty days. After that he left Toulouse, crossed the sea and came to the East. He visited Arabia to discuss mystical subjects with the Persian Sufi, Farid Uddin, stayed in Tripoli, learned about the Maimonid philosophy, spent three years in Jerusalem and returned to Toulouse, where his friends had never thought to see him again. His career was not yet at an end. It was hardly more than a beginning. Typical of the stubborn men of Toulouse, he started once more preaching secretly, and for five consecutive periods of three years he was elected consul of the town by his fellow-citizens, who desired to honour him as the national resistance to a foreign pope.

People had grown so used to the idea that death could not take him that it was thought for a long time that he had taken refuge in the forests of Comminges; and a century and a half later inhabitants of the outskirts of Toulouse claimed to have seen Pierre Maurand going the rounds of the ramparts to examine their strength, leaning on his stick and erect as ever.

The south had been terrified by the condemnation of Pierre Maurand. A pope who dared lay hands on this noble old man must be the pope of evil. Catharism grew; the churches were abandoned. A new Church came secretly into being, without buildings, without a hierarchy, without grand vestments. The voice of Dominic the Spaniard rang in vain in the public squares.

**M**ore drastic measures had to be taken. The Pope sent his legate, Peter of Castelnau, to discipline Count Raymond of Toulouse for harbouring and supporting heretics; and, as the Count failed to act effectively, he was excommunicated. Then, almost certainly without the Count's sanction one of his followers kindled the spark which fired the conflagration. In 1208, while crossing the Rhone on his return to Italy, Peter of Castelnau was murdered. The crime seems to have been committed by anti-clerical rebels with no Cathar affiliation whatever. Furnished with the excuse Rome needed, however, the Church did not hesitate to blame the Cathars. At once Pope Innocent III ordered a crusade. Although there had been intermittent persecution of heretics all through the previous century, the Church now mobilized her forces in earnest. The heresy was to be extirpated once and for all.

On the 21st of July 1209, an army of some thirty thousand knights and foot soldiers from northern Europe descended like a whirlwind on the Languedoc - the mountainous northeastern foothills of the Pyrenees in what is now Southern France. In the ensuing war, the whole territory was ravaged, crops were destroyed, towns and cities were razed, a whole population was put to the sword. This extermination occurred on so vast, so terrible a scale that it may well constitute the first case of "genocide" in modern European history. In the town of Beziers alone, for example, at least fifteen thousand men, women, and children were slaughtered wholesale - many of them in the sanctuary of the church itself. When an officer inquired of the Pope's representative how he might distinguish heretics from true believers, the reply was, "Kill them all. God will recognize his own." It typifies the fanatical zeal and bloodlust with which the atrocities were perpetrated. The same papal representative, writing to Innocent III in Rome, announced proudly that "neither age nor sex nor status was spared."



**S**urviving Cathars disappeared into remote hiding places in the forests and mountain clefts of the Pyrenees. Yet it is known that many of the Perfecti travelled freely from place to place, comforting and encouraging their followers, who risked death in keeping them provided with food and other necessities. From time to time, citizens of the towns which capitulated were commanded to affirm their loyalty to the Catholic faith. Those who refused were burned to death, but no real suppression of the heresy was achieved and no attempt was made by de Montfort to win the support of the population.

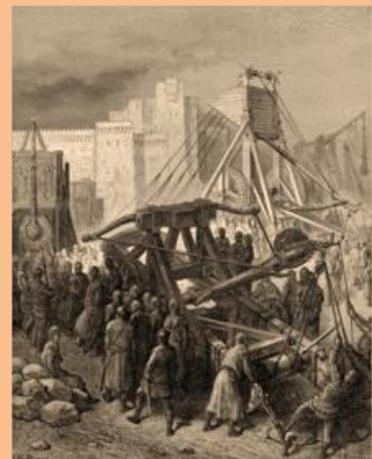
At first, the remote refuge of Montségur, seems to have been used only as centre of pilgrimage, but from 1233 onwards it became the heart of the resistance movement. The origin of this fortress is a mystery as it was not constructed according to any accepted plan of defence. It guarded no main route and protected no fertile district; it seemed more fitted for a sanctuary, secluded in its wild forbidding surroundings. It is thought that it may once have been a Celtic temple.

An ancient Manichaean temple consecrated to sun worship, Montségur became the Mount Tabor of the Cathari by means of a spiritual affiliation.

There were some forty-odd subterranean passageways dating back to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and all of the subterraneans have a chapel hall wherein is found a sort of altar; for a given region all the subterraneans are so oriented that they converge toward a single point. They were temples where the Cathars, before the period of the persecutions, celebrated their initiation ceremonies. Montségur became the last stronghold of the Cathar movement.

Yet in 1242, the invading armies in collaboration with the church, decided to attack Montségur. And by April of 1243, a vast army of more than ten thousand surrounded the mountain.

With this vast force, the besiegers attempted to surround the entire mountain, precluding all entry and exit and hoping to starve out the defenders. Despite their numerical strength, however, they lacked sufficient manpower to make their ring completely secure. Many troops were local, moreover, and sympathetic to the Cathars. And many troops were simply unreliable. In consequence it was not difficult to pass undetected through the attackers' lines. There were many gaps through which men slipped to and fro, and supplies found their way up to the fortress.



The Cathars took advantage of these gaps. In January 1244, nearly three months before the fall of the fortress, two parfaits escaped. According to reliable accounts, they carried with them the bulk of the Cathars' material wealth - a load of gold, silver, and coin that they carried first to a fortified cave in the mountains and from there to a castle stronghold. After that the treasure vanished and has never been heard of again.

On March 1, Montségur finally capitulated. By then its defenders numbered less than 400 - between 150 and 180 of them were parfaits, the rest being knights, squires, men-at-arms, and their families. They were granted surprisingly lenient terms. The fighting men were to receive full pardon for all previous "crimes." They would be allowed to depart with their arms, baggage, and any gifts, including money, they might receive from their employers. The parfaits were also accorded unexpected generosity. Provided they abjured their heretical beliefs and confessed their "sins" to the Inquisition, they would be freed and subjected only to light penances. Yet, they decided not to do so.

Not one of the parfaits, as far is known, accepted the besiegers' terms. On the contrary, all of them chose martyrdom. Moreover, at least twenty of the other occupants of the fortress, six women and some fifteen fighting men, voluntarily received the Consolamentum and became parfaits as well, thus committing themselves to certain death.

On March 15, the truce expired. At dawn the following day more than two hundred parfaits were dragged roughly down the mountainside. Not one recanted. There was not time to erect individual stakes. They were locked into a large wood-filled stockade at the foot of the mountain and burned en masse.



Documents of the Inquisition confirm that the night preceding the capitulation of Montségur, four Cathars let themselves down on ropes along the veniginous side of the mountain (Aican, Poitevin, Hugh, and Alfaro) and managed to make good their escape into the surrounding mountains, carrying off with them the sacred treasure. Tradition has it that when the Grail had been saved, a flame appeared on the neighbouring mountain of Biaorta, announcing to the Cathari of Montségur that they could now lie in peace.

Most of the Pures perished on the pyre. Esclarmonde of Foix perished on the rocks. According to legends, when she knew the Grail to be safe, she climbed to the summit of Mount Tabor, changed into a white dove, and flew off toward the mountains of Asia.

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*With warm thanks to the author whose love for the cause is not undetected.*



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