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# **Cathars and Albigenses in 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> Century Western Europe**

-Summary-

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**Key words:** Cathars, Albigenses, Bogomils, doctrine, heresy, Anti-Cathar crusade, Germany, France, Italy.

The history of the heterodox movements and of the heresies is extremely complex and is just as old as the history of Christianity itself. Many of these movements emerged and disappeared without leaving deep traces in the culture of the peoples where they had manifested themselves. Actually, this is the reason why a large proportion of the sects are only partially known, depending on the interest they were able to awaken among the researchers. Nevertheless, there have been heresies which prompted mass movements, lead by famous and intelligent initiators whose ideas turned their religious groups into threats for the social, political, and religious environment in a very short period of time. A heresy that has stirred the imagination of both historians and heresiologists – at least in the West – for more than six centuries, which did not have a renowned founder but did have Gnostic sources, was Catharism. This mediaeval movement is the objects of the present dissertation.

So far the subject has been of little interest to the Romanian scholars and in time this lead to a void of literature and of content in the research centred on mediaeval heresies and Catharism. Mentions of it are found in general works where it is secondary to another subject. On the other hand, in the field of theology the heresy has been addressed from a rather apologetic stance, through studies focused mainly on the sects that have either affected Orthodoxy in general (heresies refuted by the Ecumenical Councils), or have been connected in one way or the other to the Romanian Orthodox Church (the phenomenon of the free churches). Very few studies approached the issue of mediaeval heresies in a chiefly scientific manner. Moreover, given the fact that the Albigenses had been closely connected to the history of the Western Church, of France and to some extent, that of Italy, they did not prove to be an ‘interesting’ subject for the Orthodox historians.

In western historiography Catharism has been mainly researched by French medievalists so much so that this occupation turned into a virtual fashion and subsequently, in 1982 at the initiative of historian Jean Duvernoy the *Centre for Cathar Studies* was founded at Villegly. It is the single centre in the world of its kind and it bears the name of the celebrated ‘catharist’ René Nelli. Due to the lack of funds and to the fact that it could no longer justify its existence, the centre was forced to

close by court order on January 11<sup>th</sup> 2011<sup>1</sup>, a closure that was also a sign of the subject's drifting away into being over-researched.

The chief reason why I chose to study the 'Cathars and Albigenses in 11<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe' was an attempt to fill a void in the Romanian literature on the subject. Nonetheless, it should be mentioned that from the very beginning I have become aware of the problems I will be met with in studying Albigenism, which when not indicated from the start, might be interpreted as shortcomings in the research. Moreover, the difficulties lay not in gaining access to the sources, which in their turn, although not numerous, allow for a thorough research, but with the absence of unanimous consensus among the scholars on the matter. The incongruence of opinions is generated by the different interpretation of the same sources and the way the 'pseudo-Gnostic' thinking of the Cathars is understood<sup>2</sup>. This aspect hinders the researcher in providing a systematic overview of their profession of faith.

On the other hand, I have naturally continued the original researched I had conducted for my master's degree. At the same time I have conceived it as an addition and a continuation of the doctoral studies conducted by other young theologians nationwide, such as the dissertation written by Mihai Floroae, *Inquisition between myth and reality*, currently being published.

**The present state of research.** The first step has been outlining a consistent chapter underlining the most important works published up until 2011, especially in Romania. This chapter entitled 'The present state of research' is crucial for the following sections because it allowed me to identify and stress certain events that had not been researched or had not enjoyed enough attention and it also helped me live aside aspects that are irrelevant to the history of Christianity.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see <http://cecnelli.unblog.fr/category/centre-detudes-cathares/>, accessed January 2<sup>nd</sup> 2012, 18.22.

<sup>2</sup> One of the most popular contemporary authors, who is interested in Gnosis and Gnosticism, a translator of numerous treatises and writings uncovered at Qumran, Jean-Yves Leloup, wrote the following with respect to the Gnostic systems: 'I was writing to a friend who kept telling me about the «great commercial success» of the Gospel according to Judah: «Why do the pseudo-Gnostics elaborate so many systems, emanations, eons, ogdoadis etc.? Just as they attempt to drain the body through orgies (to exhaust it in order to dissociate from it, obliterating it through an ever insatiable pleasure), likewise, by the means of their «mental orgies» they try to drain the spirit, to «gorge» it so that it would «burst» under the burden of so many ideas, images and deliria.' JEAN-YVES LELOUP, *Profunzimize uitate ale creștinismului. Convorbiri cu Karin Andréa de Guise*, [The Forgotten Depths of Christianity. Interviews with Karin Andréa de Guise] traducere din limba franceză de Gabriela Sandu, Curtea Veche, București, 2008, p. 138.

In my opinion, in order to understand an event or what a chronicle recounts, one needs to correctly employ of the terminology. Therefore, after analysing the current state of research, I have dedicated a chapter to the evolution of the words ‘*secta*’ and ‘*heresis*’ from antiquity to the Middle Ages, based on two reasons: first, in order to accurately use the language of the heresiologists, and second, to prevent eventual criticism aimed at ‘confessional’ vocabulary. Therefore, when referring to the Cathars’ sect, or heresy, these terms will be employed in their mediaeval sense.

**The history of the Cathar churches.** Since the issue of the vocabulary has not been explicitly dealt with, I deemed it necessary to focus once again on the terms ‘Cathar’ and ‘Albigense’. What was their origin? What semantic repertoire did they involve? What did they refer to? These aspects have been addressed in the preliminary section of the chapter dedicated to the history of Catharism.

After defining the major lines connecting Cathars and Bogomils, a relationship that became apparent in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, I went further back in history. Since most historians speak of the so-called ‘proto-Cathars’ or ‘Manicheans’, as the heresiologists of that period used to call them, I’ve considered it useful to mention those heretics whose teachings would later resurface in classical Catharism. Moreover, I have also paid attention to the first mentions referring to Cathars in mediaeval sources, and I have ultimately presented the actual Cathar reality in the various western regions, mainly in Occitania, an extremely vast French territory that during the mediaeval times comprised all the territories where òc language (Occitan) was spoken<sup>3</sup>. Although Occitania and Lombardy had been centres for the formation and development of this dualistic heresy, the German territories – where despite the fact that the Cathar presence is not mentioned in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, there are 12<sup>th</sup> century explicit records of Cathars living in Rhineland – also needed to be mentioned. After these sections, a special place has been reserved for the Cathars in Lombardy, in whose case the sources have been more than generous, especially with regard to their hierarchy. Identifying a hierarchy as well as radical dualist churches in Northern Italian areas has been instrumental in structuring a systematic presentation of the way in which the Italian Cathars administered themselves and who were their foremost leaders.

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<sup>3</sup>For more details on the òc language see the dissertation, n. 388, p. 81.

As was to be expected, particular attention was paid to the events of 1209-1229, coinciding with the crusade against the Albigenses, because this subject had not yet been extensively researched in Romanian literature<sup>4</sup>. As was the case for the other chapters, I did not wish to give a dry, purely historical and chronological presentation, but rather build the framework of ideas that had led to those events. Given the circumstances of how the crusade had taken place – *cismarina* and not *transmarina* – as well as the fact that the institution of the crusade had changed its paradigm, I resorted to the authority of the councils, to the canons that had legitimised the raids of the Pope's subjects within the very territories of *Christianitas*<sup>5</sup>. Following this presentation, there came a section describing the idea of chastisement and the evolution of how the heretics had been punished before the eve of the crusade. Emphasis was also laid upon the concept of holy war and crusade, on the way they can be justified within Christianity, a religion of love. The presentation of the theoretical framework was followed by a recount of the trail of events culminating in the 'royal crusade' and annexing Occitania to the French kingdom. After the peace of Paris in 1229 there have been a series of attempts of the Southern noblemen to free their native lands, as well as various alliances with and secret support from the Cathars, but all of them ended tragically with the fall of the most important Cathar outpost – Montségur – in 1240-1244. Historians believe – and it is perfectly justified view – that this was the beginning of the end. Whereas the crusade had forced the Cathars to go 'underground', to flee into exile and to live anonymously, taking their stronghold meant they had to scatter throughout Occitania and were rendered vulnerable. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the Inquisition had been activated in 1233 by Pope Gregory the 9<sup>th</sup>. The strategies of the Dominicans and of the Franciscans (in a certain period) succeeded in diminishing their numbers to the point where the last of the Cathar *parfaits* (perfects) were mentioned in 1321. A presentation of Guillaume Bélibaste, the last of the Cathar *parfaits* closes the chapter entitled 'The demise of the Albigenses', the last of the chapters belonging to the historical section of the dissertation.

**Doctrine and moral in the Cathar churches.** The third part of my dissertation focuses mainly on Cathar doctrine and moral teachings. I have tried to

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<sup>4</sup> Professor Alexandru Florin Platon mentions this in *O istorie a Evului Mediu* [A History of the Middle Ages], Polirom, Iași, 2011, but he believes it stops in 1213, without citing a specific source.

<sup>5</sup> For the historians of the middle age period this phrase refers to all the territories belonging to the Holy See in that epoch.

configure a coherent view on the matter, although the sources were not very helpful. My main interest was their cosmogony and anthropology, because for those fields I possessed the best scientific instruments.

In the first chapter I analyse a vital work, the Occitan New Testament, in order to be able to conclude whether heresy of the Cathars had been evangelical (meaning Bible-based) or not. I believed it was important to present this book in a critical-historical perspective, because to my knowledge, it has not yet been approached in any other Romanian research paper.

The second chapter is concentrated around the two types of cosmology the Cathars possessed, namely that of the moderate Cathars, essentially based on *Interrogatio Johannis* and that of the radical party, based exclusively on *Liber de duobus principiis*. I have additionally outlined the two types of dualism, moderate and radical, based on the sources.

In the last chapters I approached the issues of baptism and marriage, which are dependent upon cosmology, as well as the relationship between body-soul and spirit found in Cathar dualist doctrine.

As some historians had put forth the idea of a doctrine of reincarnation within the Cathar heresy, I believed it was crucial to address this subject too. The conclusion of my research is clear: there are no direct Cathar sources that could substantiate this theory and this convinced me that the metempsychosis is not a pure Cathar idea; it hadn't even been borrowed or inherited by their doctrine.

I have dedicate a separate chapter to the Cathar cross, because on one hand some historians had reassessed and supported the idea of its existence, but on the other hand, it is incompatible with Cathar teachings. Therefore, I had to pay a special attention to this issue. The general conclusions complete the dissertation.

The last section consists of a bibliography listing the literature I used in order to complete my research. Most of the titles are foreign and some of them have not yet been used in Romanian scholarship on the subject of the Cathars' heresy. It is comprised of the following sub-sections: published direct sources, unpublished indirect sources, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, collective works, works belonging to one author, studies and articles, followed by annexes.

## **Conclusions**



11<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries have proven to be decisive for Europe's religious future. Of all the sects that had emerged around the turn of the second millennium, Catharism, due to its influence as well as the savage way it was eradicated by the Inquisition, was the only one to leave deep marks in the collective European mentality. Some historians have developed an obsession with this subject and in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries it had been the bone of contention between Southern and Northern France, when the Albigenses' enthusiasts considered that the heresy had been the fruit of free thought and of prosperous people superior to those in the North.

The bibliography dedicated to this subject is quite substantial. Albigenism has been a constant concern of the French medievalists, as illustrated by the historiographical works of Herbert Grundmann or Jörg Oberste, cited in the dissertation. With regard to this heresy, the German literature is sparser. Although the German historian Arno Borst has made quite a stir with his work 'Die Katharer', for two decades, he dropped the subject after being faced with criticism and never reached the level of the French scholars Antoine Dondaine, Christine Thouzellier or Jean Duvernoy. They became the norm for all those wanting to study Catharism. As to the Romanian literature, it is extremely poor, and the works translated from French – Anne Breton, *Catarii* – or from German – Otho Rhan, *Cruciada împotriva Sfântului Graal* – are not among the fundamental ones. Otho Rhan cannot even be taken into consideration, due to his interest for the esoteric and the occult.

Romanian scholarship lacks a semantic analysis of the terms *sect* and *heresy*, *Cathar* and *Albigense*, as well as a clear dogmatic distinction between radical and moderate Cathars. What's more, none of the works provide a history of the sect from its beginnings to its demise; neither do they place the heresy in the wider European geography. Relating to those works, I haven't been able to find something that differentiated the Cathars from the Bogomils or vice-versa, as the sole difference was geographical or the mere mention, with respect to the Cathars, that they were *the Bogomils of the West*. Identifying this bibliographical void I have tried, to the best of my abilities, to shed more light on the issue of the most analysed medieval heresies. The conclusions I have come to are as follows:

- a) I perceived the importance of the subject from the great number of works written in the West, despite the very few sources discovered so far. Being so numerous, it was only natural that a hierarchy had to be established. Some of them illustrated the historical part, whereas others, the dogmatic and

philosophical side and other were simply trying to promote the subject. Instead, in the Romanian studies and works, these sources were cited chaotically without abiding by a hierarchy dictated by their scientific value. For this reason, in the chapter dedicated to the current state of research, I pointed out some of the most important historians who dealt with the Cathar heresy in their works. Among them the following need to be mentioned: P. Antoine Dondaine, Edina Bozoky, Christine Thouzellier, Anne Brenon, Michel Roquebert, Walter Wakefield, Jean Duvernoy, Jean-Louis Biget, Monique Zerner Chardavoine and F. Sanjek. Because a Ph.D. thesis cannot be justified without recourse to the sources, I tried to use as many of them in this paper: *Liber de duobus principiis* and *Interrogatio Johannis*. From these I have been able to identify two types of Catharism, their respective doctrine and moral teachings. Secondly, in order to better illustrate the stages of this heresy's development and downfall, I turned to chronicles, inquisitorial trails, such as those of Bernard Gui, Geoffroi d'Ablis or Jacques Fournier, as well as treatises written by anonymous authors, such as *De tractus hereticis*.

- b) Nowadays, the terms *heresy* and *sect* are used first and foremost in a denominational sense, bordering on the pejorative. As the chapter devoted to these words proves, they have different meanings and values depending on the period and the culture in which they were employed. Thus, their spectrum of meanings ranged from a mere 'different opinion' to a 'philosophical school' and from 'political party' to 'sect', understood as a religious faction opposing an official system of beliefs. Clarifying these terms and presenting their semantics is justified even more by the fact that the more recent literature increasingly often avoids to use them, in an attempt to not be biased<sup>6</sup>.
- c) Although the notions *Cathar* and *Albigense* refer to the same religious group, they have been presented by the Romanian scholarship as two distinct heresies. It has nevertheless been shown<sup>7</sup> that these distinctions are pointless, because just as the Cathars from Southern France were called *Albigenses*, those from Italy were known as *Garatenses* or *Albanenses* but they were all

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<sup>6</sup> See one of the most recent books published DIARMAID MACCOLLOUGH, *Istoria Creștinismului* [The History of Christianity], traducere de Cornelia Dumitru și Mihai Siliviu Chirilă, Polirom, Iași, 2011, p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> See the dissertation, pp. 83-84.

members of the same heresy, Catharism. It is true there are great differences between radical and moderate Cathars and that the historians are tempted to talk about Albigenses when referring to the moderates and about Lombard Cathars with respect to the radicals, but on closer scrutiny it becomes apparent that they were mixed together; in the Albi area, in Occitania, in the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, both groups were present and all were designated by the same name: *Albigenses*.

- d) 1154 is the year when they are first mentioned as Cathars. Even so, the historians wonder whether Catharism had actually been present and active even prior to this date in the West. And they are right to ask this question! Because, even though there were no Cathars per se, there were *proto-Cathars* who shared the same characteristics: denying Baptism, the Cross, the Sacraments, the official Church etc.
- e) After 1154 the references to the ‘neo-Manicheans’ as the Cathars were also called, became more frequent. Their influence was being exerted both in the pauper layers of society and the rich ones. I have attempted to elucidate the reason behind their enormous success; therefore I have analysed some possible causes of their emergence and why they had been supported by the Southern noblemen. Clearly, the causes are complex, but some of them I believe, were crucial: the clergy’s immorality, the religious illiteracy of the faithful, and the failure of Gregorian reformation.
- f) As they were a threat to the Church of Rome, Innocent the III<sup>rd</sup>, the great pope of the 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century devised a strategy to eradicate the sect that later took shape in the ‘Albigensian Crusade’. This event hasn’t yet enjoyed much attention from the Romanian historiography and therefore, I took special interest in it. Carefully analysing the documents I found out that this crusade marks the change of the crusade’s paradigm. Two ecumenical councils, Lateran III and Lateran IV had stipulated the canonical framework for the development of such an attack. It soon becomes the bloodiest fight waged on European soil and designated as a crusade. The historians have counted it among the *cismarina* crusades, whereas the classical crusades have been called the *transmarina* crusades. Pope Innocent’s intention to destroy the heresy completely failed, even though the persecution launched with his blessings lasted from 1209 to 1229. I have also shown that this crusade had

not been organized in 1213, as some of the most recent Romanian works on the subject claim, but it did end with the peace struck in Paris in 1229, when according to the documents, the king of France ordered Occitania be annexed to his kingdom.

- g) The last Cathar *parfaits* are listed in the trials lead by the Inquisition in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Many historians have considered Guillaume Bélibaste to be the last Cathar *perfect*. My conclusion, based on his own testimony recorded by the inquisitors that he was not a member of Cathar hierarchy but a pseudo-perfect, since he disobeyed every rule imposed on a Cathar ‘prelate’: he was married, he ate meat and lied, and such trespasses would have automatically annulled his consecration. For this reason I have also presented Pierre Authié the last authentic perfect, who does not raise any questions with regard to the authenticity of his ordination and who attempted to revive the Occitan Catharism but failed. It needs to be stressed that in the second half of the above mentioned century, there are no more records about Cathar perfects and Catharism did in fact disappear. This heresy had a completely different history than the ones of the Bogomils or Waldenses, with whom they have been often mistaken. Once their hierarchy had been destroyed, the believers scattered in small groups, but they did not – as it is often believed and said in school books – that they eventually merged with 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestants, which is in fact the case of the Waldenses, or of the Bogomils who merged with the Muslim in the Balkans.

As to the second part, focused on doctrine and moral teachings, I wanted to clarify several aspects regarding the differences identified within Cathar churches and the stance with respect to the Holy Scripture, Baptism, Confession of sins, Marriage and the Holy Cross. My conclusions were as follows:

- a) There have been many trends of thinking among the Cathars but two of them took precedence and were recorded by history as the *radical* and the *moderate trends*. The dualism they embraced transpires mostly in the treatises *Liber de duobus principiis* and *Interrogatio Johannis*, but also in the Inquisition’s documents. The moderates claimed that at the base of the Universe, of the world and of the man there are a good God and Satan, one of God’s sons, whereas the radical Cathars argued that there were two opposite principles: Good and Evil.

- b) Whether absolute or moderate, it could not be said that Catharism had something completely original, that it was a doctrine which revolutionised the religious systems. Not at all! Quite to the contrary, seen from a dogmatic perspective it is an uninteresting system, syncretistic, vague, and as much complicated as it was complex. This is also the reason why they fashioned one image of themselves in their treatises and the inquisitors described them completely different in their records.
- c) The way they related to the Holy Scripture (there is no Romanian study on this subject) was just as complex as their entire system. The Cathar enthusiasts of the historians see it as a religion of the Gospel according to John. However, it is not necessarily so: as much as they may have used the fourth gospel, they have also made use of the Gospel according to Matthew. As to the Occitan New Testament, it was scarcely used, at least not by the Cathar leaders, because they clearly read the Latin biblical texts (mostly Vulgata) rather the Occitan text.
- d) Their moral was extremely austere and the inquisitors' records suggest that actually implementing it would have posed a real threat for the society. When one tries to understand the Cathar system of thought, one eventually realises that this is a deconstructive doctrine which, had it survived, would only have generated a profound demographical crisis and a climate of great social tension. Blaming and vilifying the body, releasing the angel from its clay prison, prompted many Cathars to resort to *endura*, the well-known suicide by starvation. Their refusal to accept marriage and sexual intercourse, the way they perceived children as demons' incarnations made the Cathars an extremely dangerous sect for the socio-political environment.
- e) Dogmatically, the most important conclusion reached relates to the difference between Cathars and Bogomils. There are dissimilarities between radical Cathars and Bogomils with regard to how they related to the principles of good and evil, which changes the entire dogmatic system in fact. On the other hand, the moderate Cathars and the Bogomils share a series of common aspects.

Another point I wanted to emphasise in the conclusions is the issue of the new research directions this dissertation outlines:

- a) The *Neo-Cathars* mentioned in the chapter dedicated to the 'Cathar Cross' is one such direction. Present on the internet, they lambaste everything about the

Catholic and the Orthodox Churches and claim to be the heirs of the old Cathars. I believe it would be useful to identify the points they have in common with their alleged forefathers, as well as those that set them apart from each other, to compare their purpose to the one of the heretics whose descendants they claim to be.

- b) Moreover, another important direction would be conducting a study that would focus on the marketing component involved in glorifying the Albigense 'values', which have almost been wiped out by the 'malice' of the official Church. The last century recorded a flourishing tourism in the 'Land of the Cathars'.

To sum up this summary, it should be said that these conclusions are based on the present state of the Cathar sources that this dissertation could not pretend to be exhaustive, though it could be the first step in researching mediaeval heretic movements. When new manuscripts will be brought to light, texts that are most certainly lingering in wait of discovery in the Archives of the Catholic Church in Vatican, Florence, Paris or Madrid, they will be able to bring new information and maybe even radically change the way we look at this heresy.