



## **The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Spectacular Death of the Medieval Cathars**

*Stephen O'Shea*

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Chronicles the life & death of the Cathar movement, led by a group of heretical Christians whose brutal suppression by the Catholic Church unleashed the Inquisition.

## **The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Spectacular Death of the Medieval Cathars Details**

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Author : Stephen O'Shea

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## **From Reader Review The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Spectacular Death of the Medieval Cathars for online ebook**

### **Lissa Notrealywolf says**

I enjoyed this book thoroughly-It doesn't give much information of the belief system of the Cathars, but it does a great job of explaining the political and economic reasons for the Albigensian crusade. We tend to think of France in its familiar squarish shape, but before the country was united by the intervention of Rome it was a collection of small kingdoms. Shifting power by burning heretics and granting kingdoms as rewards consolidated the country into what we now understand as France. This is an interesting companion read to Iain's Pears The Dream of Scipio, a novel about the same region.

What the book does detail is that theological virtue was considered to be a supra-natural gift from God to each individual that allowed human flourishing. The Cathars were beyond Aristotle and human tradition, considered themselves to be a Christian philosophy. Virtue originated from the practice of celibacy and purity. In the 12th century the Church enforced this obligation on the religious. It was accompanied by self hatred and hatred of the body and sexuality in the institutional church rather than understood as personal integrity, an opportunity to know oneself and be self defined rather than relationally defined. These latter characteristics were defined in the 4th century culminating in a sense of the body as sacred property.

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### **Mackay says**

A wonderful book, which presents a perhaps simplified but easy to grasp history of a most difficult time - the Albigensian Crusade against the Cathars in southern France. O'Shea writes engagingly and isn't afraid to voice his opinions and insights, whether these align with or oppose more standard interpretations of these painful events. From this remove in time, what happened to the Cathars might seem unbelievable ... except in this day of jihadists and terrorists, human bigotry and cruelty are all too common for disbelief.

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### **Ann says**

The history of the Albigensian crusade is a case study in senseless violence. So readers of this book must brace themselves against stories of relentless sieges, mass burnings, atrocious mutilations and the like.

That being said, the book is a fascinating read. It is well written, flows well and stays on subject. The author does a great job of explaining the complicated feudal relationships between the various barons, kings and other warlords. The real story here is not one of religion, but one of a clash between the parallel powers of the kings and the popes. But the author skilfully weaves anecdotes or contemporary sources between the descriptions of political manoeuvres and intrigues. So the narrative never became dry or boring - the author kept me engaged by sprinkling in individual human interest stories inbetween the larger political discussions. The discussions of the theological disputes between Rome and the various heretic groups of the 12th century were interesting, but never too detailed or long-winded.

One of the most fascinating chapters was the very last one, where the author describes how, sometime in the 19th century, the Cathars were rediscovered and held up as a shining example of whatever virtue people were interested in. Someone even invented a fabulous Cathar treasure, which pops up every once in a while

in novels of "The Da Vinci code" genre. Hippies, gnostics, even Nazis apparently found something to admire in the gentle souls of Languedoc.

Finally, the user-friendliness of the book is greatly enhanced by the presence of a list of characters at the beginning, maps and pictures.

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## **Eric\_W says**

Note added 12/31/08: O'Shea attributes the phrase, "kill them all, God will know his own" to Pope Innocent III. In Kirsch's The Grand Inquisitor's Manual: A History of Terror in the Name of God the phrase is attributed to The Abbott of Citeaux outside the walls of Beziers, where all the inhabitants were slaughtered. The Wikipedia has this to say: The Béziers army attempted a sortie but was quickly defeated, then pursued by the crusaders back through the gates and into the city. Arnaud, the Cistercian abbot-commander, is supposed to have been asked how to tell Cathars from Catholics. His reply, recalled by Caesar of Heisterbach, a fellow Cistercian, many years later was "Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius." — "Kill them all, the Lord will recognise His own." [5][6] The doors of the church of St Mary Magdalene were broken down and the refugees dragged out and slaughtered. Reportedly, 7,000 people died there including many women and children. Elsewhere in the town many more thousands were mutilated and killed. Prisoners were blinded, dragged behind horses, and used for target practice. [7] What remained of the city was razed by fire. Arnaud wrote to Pope Innocent III, "Today your Holiness, twenty thousand heretics were put to the sword, regardless of rank, age, or sex." [8][9]. The permanent population of Béziers at that time was then probably no more than 5,000, but local refugees seeking shelter within the city walls could conceivably have increased the number to 20,000."

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catharism>

My interest in the Cathars was piqued upon reading The Archer's Tale by Bernard Cornwell. The Cathar heresy rose to prominence in the late 12th and early 13th centuries in what is now called Languedoc in southern France. At that time, the area consisted of city-states that thrived in the tolerant and liberal environment (Stadtluft macht frei - city air makes one free - was the rallying cry of medieval cities to describe the nascent liberties and independence available only in cities)

The Cathars were also known as the Albigensians and, of course, claimed to be the true Christians. Their clergy were poor and ascetic, known as the Perfects. Their beliefs infuriated Pope Innocent III and threatened the Catholic Church in addition to standard feudal relationships. They believed the world was not a creation of a good God, but the construction of a force of darkness. All worldly things were thus corrupt. This included Church sacraments, including that of marriage. In addition, they believed there was no such thing as private property, and the rich trappings and property of the church represented evil. Women were accorded a place equal to men. "Matter was corrupt, therefore irrelevant to salvation." Worldly authority was a fraud. "The god deserving of Cathar worship was a god of light, who ruled the invisible, the ethereal, the spiritual domain; this god, unconcerned with the material, simply didn't care if you got into bed before being married, had a Jew or Muslim for a friend ... or did anything else contrary to the teachings of the medieval Church." The individual had to decide for him/herself whether to renounce the material for a life of self-denial. "Hell

was here, not in some horrific afterlife dreamed up by Rome to scare people out of their wits." The Church itself was a hoax. No wonder Innocent was pissed.

The Albigensian Crusade unleashed by Innocent has passed down a catchword to us: "Kill them all, God will know his own." That phrase is attributed to Arnold Amaury, the monk Innocent placed in charge. His instructions were followed to the letter, and the entire population of Beziers was killed - about 20,000 people. The crusade lasted from 1209-1229 and was unremitting in its violence and cruelty. O'Shea suggests it resulted in the first police state, and so devastated the region that the French monarchy was able to expand its territory into southern France.

The ostensible spark that lit the fire was the murder of Peter of Castlenau. He and several other legates had been sent by Innocent to reason, i.e., convert, the heretics. They had little initial success. Imagine a retinue of rich representatives from Rome, surrounded by sycophants, trying to persuade a dedicated group of ascetics of their essential goodness and humility. When Saint Dominic (Latin wordplay later mocked the Dominican order he founded by calling them domini canes, i.e., the dogs of god) entered the scene, he recognized their error and convinced Innocent to tone things down. The feudal lord, Raymond of Toulouse, was excommunicated for the murder of Peter. He denied having anything to do with it, shades of Henry II and Thomas Beckett, but was forced to publicly humiliate himself and give up a great deal in order to get back in the good graces of the pope. Excommunication was a potent weapon in those days.

The Inquisition ripped apart the bonds of trust that are needed to hold a civil society together. Encouraged to inform on heretics, people often used informing on one's neighbor or kinsman as a strategy to eliminate people they didn't like or to whom they were in debt. For over 100 years, the Inquisition was a fact of life, as the dreaded Dominicans, often assisted by Franciscans, ruthlessly burned those tainted by the brand of unorthodox beliefs. Many of the inquisitors, like Jacques Fournier, later Pope Benedict XII, were extremely efficient - indeed the first Gestapo, as Jews were forced to wear yellow circles and persecuted just as vigorously as the Cathars - assiduously writing down everything and cross-referencing testimony in order to trap those who might be trying to hide their beliefs. Torture was officially sanctioned, although they were admonished not to sever limbs. Even the dead were not immune. Suspected of heretical beliefs, their bodies were dug up and burned. Entire communities were burned in huge pyres. Eventually, by the early 14th century, a backlash began, and the so-called "Spiritual Franciscans" led by Bernard Delicieux articulately argued that the prosecution of "a moribund faith had degenerated into an abuse of power." He despised the Dominicans for their slide into worldliness, but he made the fatal mistake of decrying the wealth of the Church. Fittingly, his brand of apocalyptic piety was declared heretical in 1317. More people to kill.

Today, we witness a touristic resurrection of the Cathars, signs all over Languedoc point to Cathar places of interest, and all sorts of myths and legends have been created around them, attributing hoards of vast hidden treasures and even Nazi links to a sect that celebrated poverty and abjured anything official. Figures.

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### **Kiwi Begs2Differ ✎ says**

The book presents the history of the Albigensian crusade. The author does an excellent job in explaining the complex political feudal patchwork that was Languedoc in the early thirteen century. It opens by briefly explaining a few of the tenets of Catharism but it soon focuses on the crusade and the important historical

figures on both sides: the Catholic Church, the Monforts, Capets of France, Saint-Gilles, Trencavel, Foix etc. Some of these important personalities are truly fascinating, Simon the Montfort and Count Raymond VII (of Toulouse) for instance.

The central chapters dedicated to the military campaigns, the sieges and the battles with their frequent reversal of fortunes are detailed and a very engaging read. The author narrative style is a little bit casual for my tastes but the notes, reference to sources and bibliography are useful. I only wish that the author spent more time on the Cathars themselves especially in the years of the crusade, figures like Blanche of Laurac, the lady of who actively sheltered and supported many heretic believers, are only briefly introduced.

For a book with a title of “The Perfect Heresy” not enough of the book centers around Catharism itself which was kind of disappointing. The historical and political aspects of the crusade was well presented in this book, but I found a more in-depth discussion on the religious aspects of the Catharism and its distribution in medieval Europe (not geographically not limited to Languadoc), in *The Cathars: The Most Successful Heresy of the Middle Ages* by Sean Martin, that I read a couple of years ago. Highly recommended to readers interested in the topic.

4.5 stars

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### **Owen says**

From the author of another fine and original book, *Back to the Front*, *The Perfect Heresy* provides an insightful up-to-date review of that most difficult subject, the Albigensian Crusade and the story of the Cathars, whose (lost) lives were at the heart of it. Yes, this is the story (more or less) which inspired some of the most insipid best-selling writing in recent years: Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. Fortunately, the story is a good deal more interesting than Mr. Brown would have us believe, and Stephen O'Shea has gone to great pains to explain why.

Mr O'Shea manages to keep aloof from the Cathar/Catholic controversy, and presents the main lines of this old story in a competent prose, which can be top-heavy at times, as he is wont to enjoy playing around with language (some people will find this a plus; I know I did). Throughout the story, he manages to weave the various other stories that have issued forth from this one (leaving the treasure of Rennes-le-Château right alone, I might add!), thereby adding depth to the whole.

Altogether, a very satisfying read which should be of interest to all those who are tempted to peek into the medieval mists, and come to grips with one of the more successful (all the more successful, in my view, for having apparently failed so completely) attempts to right the wrongs of the Roman church. Talking about equality between men and women, let alone princes and underlings, demonstrated very far-sighted vision indeed, in the 13th century. Highly recommended.

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### **Siria says**

An accessible introduction to the history of the Cathar heresy in medieval France. O'Shea doesn't go particularly deep into their history, or the origins of their particular brand of Christian theology, but he's good at mining the sources—which are almost all from an orthodox Catholic perspective—to see what they

can tell us of the views and the lives of the Cathars. If you have read much about the Cathars before this, then *The Perfect Heresy* might well be a little too simplistic for you; if not, it's a reasonable place to start.

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### **Jo Murphy says**

Excellent history. It covers a period of about 100 years in which the Catholic Church make it their crusade to wipe out the Cathars in what is now southern France. And some pretty horrific atrocities it throws up too. Their major crime was to show up the hypocrisy, corruption and greed that was rife through the establishment. Someone is reportedly to have stated "kill them all God will know his own" - perhaps Obama could adopt this slogan for his drone strikes.

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### **Michael says**

Since the name is "Perfect Heresy" I was expecting more details about the actual heresy, the theology, doctrine of the Cathars etc. Instead is was a detailed (reality based) history of the Cathars in what is now southern France. When things started, the region the Cathars were living in was an semi-independent area with its own language, not quite French or Italian or Spanish, but related. Not everyone was a Cathar but non-Cathars respected and protected them. This was because the Cathars, for the most part, were better behaved and more moral than the established Catholic church. Then over the course of 3 or 4 generations a Crusade was launched against the heretics and the local lords who protected them. At the end of the Crusade, the King of France controlled the area and the local lords were exterminated or exiled. There was a lot of politics involved and religion was just an excuse to finance the wars and recruit soldiers.

The book covers mostly the events, personalities and politics and does not go deeply into the religion.

I say it is reality based, because since the early 1800's a lot of semi-fictional writing has taken place that connects the Cathars with the Knights Templars, the Holy Grail, hidden treasure, ancient mystic eastern knowledge and a supposed line of kings descended from Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. This is all false and the development of these myths is gone over in the epilogue.

I did learn that the Albigensian Crusades took place over generations, that many who fought with the Cathars were not believers and that the local power structure was deeply involved. I wanted more information on the actual beliefs of the Cathars but this was not the book for that.

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### **Jeffrey Coleman says**

eloquently written, poignantly told, detailed but insightful and fun, and thorough, it's the kind of accessible academic writing I'd like to one day put my name to myself. Tragic tale, true to human experience in a beautiful locale... perfect title

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### **'Aussie Rick' says**

In my library I have three books that cover the Crusade to destroy the Cathars in Southern France. This is one of the first I read and I found it to be very enjoyable. In around 264 pages the author, Stephen O'Shea, gives you a decent overview of the life and death of these so-called 'heretics'. The author also supplies numerous notes and a decent bibliography along with a guide to recommended reading. There are a number of small black & white illustrations within the narrative but it would have been nice to see a few colour photographs of the locations visited by the author during the preparation of this book.

The story of the Crusade against the Cathars is truly horrifying in some places. The atrocities carried out by men of God against a peaceful population all in the name of religion is outstanding. During the Albigensian Crusade in 1209 Catholic Knights stormed the village of Beziers. Before breaching the walls they asked their spiritual leader, Arnold Amaury, how could they distinguish Catholic occupants from the heretics. His reply was "Kill them all, God will know his own."

That one line sums up this terrifying period of French history. The continual battles, sieges and murders that followed by the Inquisition where friend betrayed friend, family betrayed family, all just to survive under the 'just' rule of the Catholic Church. We read about that famous French Knight, Simon de Montfort and we find out that in reality he wasn't all that nice! We read about ordinary people, the true heroes of this story, just trying to survive and eke out a living during extraordinary times.

The narrative flowed along and you found yourself drawn into the story with the occasional tourist guide information. This is a great introduction to this period and it should appeal to all that enjoy good historical writing. I would also recommend Jonathan Sumption's 'The Albigensian Crusade' and Zoe Oldenbourg's 'The Massacre at Montsegur'.

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### **Laura says**

The Cathar's; their dualist belief system was such a threat to the Catholic church that the church launched an all out assault for a hundred years to stamp them out, thus giving birth to the inquisition. Pope Innocent III, the same pope that granted legitimacy to St. Francis of Assisi and St. Dominic, paves the way for hundreds of years of future brutal repression by endowing Simon de Montfort with the task to make war on anyone who harbors Cathars at the same time increasing his own fortune & lands. Stephen O'Shea recounts this history in *The Perfect Heresy*, a compelling story filled with medieval warfare, atrocities, courage and ultimate despair as the last Cathar leader is burned. This is a book I would recommend to anyone with little to no knowledge of the Cathar's who would like a general overview of their history; you don't need to be a professor to read the *Perfect Heresy*; absolutely absorbing & quenches any inquisitive mind. An enjoyable read!

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### **Richard Derus says**

Ye gods and little fishes, what a ghastly thing the Catholic Church is. Reading this book about the treatment meted out to the unquestionably heretical Cathars, or "the Perfect" as they called themselves, makes me feel

sorry for the "saints" and "holy" men involved in the brutal and complete suppression of this dualistic religion.

Hell, in which they seem to have believed unquestioningly, must resound with their cries and pleas for mercy and understanding.

The political threat of the anti-clerical, anti-authoritarian Cathars could not be tolerated. The Church would have been suicidal to ignore the appeal of the Manichaean world-view in a priest-ridden, anarchic world just clawing its way out of a devastating few centuries of almost simultaneous economic and population collapses beginning in the sixth century. Imagine, after quite a looong time of answering to your overlord and only vaguely to the local priest, having to \*ask\* the \*Church\* for permission to get married! The very idea! That the Church, where one went for spiritual uplift, should suddenly interest itself in who you sleep with!

It was one of many means the Church used to make itself the replacement for the vanished Roman Empire. It caused a bitter backlash. It was viewed as unChristian (Heaven, after all, is the Church's stated model for life, and in Heaven there is neither marriage nor giving in marriage, right?). And along come these religious guys, doing the work of the world along side you, saying scrupmtious things like the entire physical world is a snare of the Devil, so what's a "Holy Mother Church" doing trying to tell you what to do in it, instead of telling you how to get out of it?

I would've loved the Cathars. They said that all the Heaven and woo-woo stuff was codswallop, and the best you should do in this world is Not Hurt Nobody Nohow. As you, o creature of flesh, learn more and more and more to follow that rule, you \*step off the cycle of rebirth\* and cease to be flesh.

In fact, I \*do\* love the Cathars.

So anyway, their commonsensical view of the teachings of Jesus caused no end of angst in Rome, and the Holy Office of the Inquisition was invented to cause these right-thinking Perfect as much pain and suffering as possible.

It worked, as viciousness and evil routinely triumph over good, at least in the short run (though 800 years don't seem so short to me, but then I'm only a Devil-created human, ain't I?). It was painful to read this book because I knew how it would end, it was painful to read because I felt such compassion for the Perfect, and it was just damn good and depressing to be reminded of the horrors humans visit upon each other in the name of their big-bully imaginary friend in the sky.

If this is what "God" really wants, I say screw him. Fortunately, I don't for one single instant believe such a "God" actually exists. The Divine might not be susceptible to our limited reasoning power, but active evil such as the Crusades, the Reformation, the Counter-Reformation play no part in its wishes.

The author pens a creditable sentence, and tells the well-known tale with such true compassion that it's as though he feels the flames and screams the screams. I'd recommend it to the anti-Christian/Catholic contingent, the spiritually honest Christians, and the stout of heart. Not for True Believers or those seeking peace.

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**Geoff Boxell says**

Whilst working at the University of Waikato I made great use of their library for my own nefarious purposes: I was running an Executive Management programme, not anything at that time to do with history (that came later). Doing research on Simon de Montford and the Second Barons' War I came up on his ancestor of the same name - the man who did the most to crush the Cathars. Fascinated I felt compelled to read more about the Albigensian Crusade.

This book is much more lightly written than the text books and academic papers I had access to at Uni. It may lack a lot of the details, especially about the Cathar belief system, but it does give a decent broad brush coverage of their history. It also, at the end, shews how Catharism, as a concept, has been kidnapped by many others since, others whose actual beliefs have little or nothing to do with actual Catharism.

The truth is the Albigensian Crusade was as much about the Northern French making a land grab as it was about crushing heretics. The Cathars were strong in number, and tolerated, in the southern land of Languedoc, which had a language and culture more in line with Aragon than it did with the France. The whole being complicated by varying allegiances.

I am a Christian, but nothing, in my view, could ever justify what the Church of Rome instigated, condoned, and encouraged in its desire to enforce orthodoxy. The Inquisition was a child of the Albigensian Crusade and its horrors spread and grew throughout Christendom: I shake my head in how the teachings of Jesus could have lead to such practices.

So, this book is a good general introduction to the Cathars and their fate.

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### **Alison says**

Gives a great account of the persecution and genocide of the Cathars in Languedoc in 13th century France. It is very readable history, the author has a lovely humour in his writing style and although the book obviously covers some horrific violence that occurred this is dealt with in a factual style that does not disturb the reader. A very satisfying read.

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