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Cathars as Cultural Waste: A Global Theory of Cathar Heresy as “the Other” of a New Social Order

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Short abstract

This paper presents a theory of the function of Cathar heresy in the intellectual culture of 13th-century Western Christendom, based on previous scholarship about the transformation of Western Christendom from 11th century onwards (Max Weber, Herbert Grundmann, Norman Cohn, Lester K. Little, Robert I. Moore, Dominique Iogna-Prat, Pilar Jiménez Sanchez etc.). It interprets the polemical image of Cathar heresy, defined by dualism, rejection of the world, of marriage, of purgatory etc., as a negative self-image of a particular intellectual elite linked to universities and mendicant orders and struggling for intellectual and political hegemony. This image of “the other” was used as a tool to define a new Christian identity emerging in the 12th-13th century, based on positive view of the world and of marriage, on the integration of Christian society by the idea of purgatory, and on a new ecclesiology. Dualist beliefs, actually emerging in dissenting groups, were systematized, transformed and hyperbolized by polemicists in order to restate what Christendom should – and should not – look like. In this view, Cathar heresy can be understood as a sort of “cultural waste”, incarnating radically ascetic ideas and practices undergoing a process of marginalization.

Long abstract

In this paper, I suggest a theory of the function of Cathar heresy in the intellectual culture of 13th-century Western Christendom. This theory is based, for the most part, on a synthesis of previous scholarship. Herbert Grundmann (*Religiöse Bewegungen im*

Mittelalter, Berlin, 1935) has emphasized that different emerging religious movements of the time, be they finally labeled as orthodox or heretical, take part in the same process of change in the Western Christendom. Norman Cohn (*Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom*, London, 1975) has identified a process of demonization of different medieval dissenting movements, culminating in the "witch craze". Lester K. Little (*Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, London, 1978) has shown the close link between the boom of new religious movements stressing voluntary poverty, and the economic and social change Europe was undergoing. Robert I. Moore (*The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, Oxford, 1987) has sought for an explanation of the increase in persecution of various minorities in Western Christendom between the 11th and the 13th century. He has argued that persecution was neither natural nor necessary; it was a part of the political program of new elites struggling for legitimacy and supremacy. Dominique Iogna-Prat (*Ordonner et exclure: Cluny et la société chrétienne face à l'hérésie, au judaïsme et à l'islam, 1000-1150*, Paris, 1998) has focused on the ways in which the construction of "the other" – heretics, Jews and Muslims – was vital for the formation of a new Christian identity by the clergy. Pilar Jiménez Sanchez (*Les catharismes: Modèles dissidents du christianisme médiéval (XII^e-XIII^e siècles)*, Rennes, 2008) has placed Cathar dualism firmly into the context of theological debates in the 11th-13th century.

In Latin Europe, 11th-13th century was a time of deep economic and social changes, and Christianity was changing too. Scholastic thought of the 13th century as cultivated at the universities and in mendicant *studia* created a new form of Christianity, purged of many elements of radical asceticism that were once normal in the Christian culture, but scholastics viewed them as disruptive for their political program of creating a unified Christian church/society. Scholastic theology promoted the accommodating ecclesiology and much more inner-worldly understanding of Christianity, and strongly rejected any forms of elitist ecclesiology, typical of monastic Christianities. Scholasticism brought a much more positive view of the world, of marriage, of secular government, of worldly society. I believe that it might be analytically useful to see this type of Christian thought as a product of a specific ideal type of rationality, which could be called "socio-constructive rationality".

I argue that Cathar heresy, defined by harsh rejection of the world, of marriage, of secular government, of violence, of judicial punishment, of infant baptism, of purgatory, and of *cura mortuorum*, as well as by dualistic theology and sexual deviations, was one of the preeminent "others" used to define the new, world-affirming version of Christianity, and to delegitimize some forms of traditional ascetic Christianity that the scholastic intellectuals rightly saw as one of their principal challengers in their struggle for legitimacy and hegemony. I also believe that the image of Cathar heresy served to set very clear limits to *all* forms of ascetic and/or elitist Christianity, even those not directly addressed by the polemicists.

In this view, Cathar heresy could be seen as a sort of "cultural waste" – a set of hyperbolized marks of radical otherworldly asceticism and "anti-social" monastic

elitism that the proponents of the socio-constructive rationality set out to eliminate from the Christian tradition. Under the label of Cathar heresy, polemicists were fighting against traces of what once was a legitimate version of the Christian tradition.

Introduction

- I have entitled my paper “**Cathars as Cultural Waste: A Global Theory of Cathar Heresy as ‘the Other’ of a New Social Order**”. What I will try to do, basically, is to suggest a theory of the **function of Cathar heresy** in the intellectual culture of the Western Christendom between about 1160-1300 .
- That means I will deal with the *polemical construct* of **Cathar/Patarene/Manichean heresy** in the 12th-13th century. I will **not** deal with the **real life and organization** of groups labeled Cathar in modern scholarship.
- I would say that there is something asking for explanation in the way Cathars were portrayed. Consider this. On the one hand, you have a **bunch of people seeking spiritual perfection here and there**, creating small and mostly disconnected groups, sometimes perhaps with a couple of named functions like deacons or bishops, but with no effective centralization, no clear doctrinal identity, hardly any institutionalized mechanisms of tradition, and hardly any political impact (cf. Zanella 1986: 45). Jean-Louis Biget has taught us that dissenters were demographically insignificant even in the most affected areas (Biget 2002: 60-61). He and others like Gabriele Zanella (1986, 2000), Marg Gregory Pegg (2001), Julien Théry (2002), and Pilar Jiménez Sanchez (2008), to name but a few, have argued that there was no real heretical anti-Church, and the groups were mostly local and unaware of each other, and with some reservations to particular arguments, I can subscribe to this. **It is hard to see a real political threat** in these groups.
- But on the other hand, you have **the huge reaction**: anti-Cathar preaching missions, literally thousands of pages of **polemical treatises**, general and local **councils and meetings**, unseating of some Languedoc bishops, a crusade, an important corpus of new legislation, a formalization of the inquisitional procedure, etc.
- Therefore, my question is the following. **Why the intellectual and political elites invested such considerable cultural resources into suppressing groups with hardly any importance?**
- In this paper, I would like to suggest an **answer** to this question by arguing that Cathar heresy had some *function* in the culture of these elites.
- **I will proceed in the following way:**
 - **1) Roots of this theory in previous scholarship.**
 - **2) Presentation of the theory itself.**
 - **3) What kind of theory it is and what are its limits.**

- 4) Time for discussion.

1) Roots of the Theory in Previous Scholarship

- The theory I am presenting here is based, for the most part, on a **synthesis of previous scholarship**. I do not seek originality here, but an explanation of what I need to explain.
- **Max Weber** (e.g. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1905) has shown that such a fluid thing as rationality can be an important factor of cultural change.
- **Herbert Grundmann** (*Religiöse Bewegungen im Mittelalter*, Berlin, 1935) has emphasized that different emerging religious movements of the time, be they finally labeled as orthodox or heretical, take part in the same process of change in the Western Christendom.
- **Norman Cohn** (*Europe's Inner Demons: The Demonization of Christians in Medieval Christendom*, London, 1975) has identified a process of demonization of different medieval dissenting movements, culminating in the "witch craze".
- **Lester K. Little** (*Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, London, 1978) has demonstrated the close link between the boom of new religious movements stressing voluntary poverty, and the economic and social change that Europe was undergoing in the 12th-13th century.
- **Tzvetan Todorov** (*La Conquête de l'Amérique: La Question de l'autre*, Paris, 1982) has offered an intriguing account of how the construction of "the other" is vital for the construction of group identity.
- **Robert I. Moore** (*The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250*, Oxford, 1987) has analyzed the persecution of various minorities in Western Christendom between the 11th and the 13th century. He claims that persecution was neither natural nor necessary; instead it is a part of a deep change of European society, which resulted in a real "persecuting society". Developed in id., *The First European Revolution, c. 970-1215*, Oxford, 2000, and id., *The War on Heresy*, Harvard, 2012.
- **Dominique Iogna-Prat** (*Ordonner et exclure: Cluny et la société chrétienne face à l'hérésie, au judaïsme et à l'islam, 1000-1150*, Paris, 1998) has focused on the ways in which the construction of "the other" – heretics, Jews and Muslims – was important for the formation of a new ecclesiology and Christian identity by the clergy.
- **Pilar Jiménez Sanchez** (*Les catharismes: Modèles dissidents du christianisme médiéval (XII^e-XIII^e siècles)*, Rennes, 2008) has placed Cathar dualism firmly into the context of theological debates in the 11th-13th century. For Jiménez Sanchez, the dissenters labeled Cathars are not an offshoot of Bogomilism coming from the east, but a deeply Western movement, offering different solutions to problems widely discussed in Western theology of the time.

2) Cathar Heresy as “the Other” of a New Social Order: Presentation of the Theory

- The 11th-13th century = **time of huge changes** in Western Christendom.
 - **Population growth.** Between the year 1000 and 1250, it is estimated that the population of Europe tripled. Enormous.
 - **Economy:** Lester K. Little (1978): transition from gift economy to profit economy.
 - Growing **urbanization**.
 - Growing importance of **written law** and **other bureaucratic elements** in the organization of the Church and of society.
 - **Universities** and the coming of **scholasticism**. The importance universities gained in judging what is the right doctrine.
 - **Church reform** affecting most of the major areas of Church life.
 - **There was *really* something going on here.**
- Pointing to these changes was the first step in my argument. Now, the second step: In a time of such huge changes, any society is likely to **search for a new social order**, which would legitimize the changes of institutions, and, more broadly, would make sense of the changing world. And, in 12th-13th-century Western Christendom, we find a brand new system of teaching, learning, and producing knowledge – scholasticism. It is scholasticism that, quite naturally, would be expected to provide the “ideological” foundations for such a new social order. So, it actually seems reasonable to assume that some of the scholastic thought **participated in the search for a new social order**.
- Now, it seems that, in a quite explicit way, some of the **important thought patterns** in scholastic Christianity were **directed against radical asceticism**, against the “religious virtuosity” Sita Steckel was speaking about in her paper this morning. I will try to substantiate this claim about **relative anti-asceticism** in three points, closely related to each other.
 - **1) Scholastic Christianity was a form of Christianity purged of many elements of radical ascetic thought and practice** once quite normal in the Christian culture. Scholasticism rejected them very clearly, and brought a **much more positive view of the world**, of marriage, of secular government, of necessary violence, of society... Scholasticism brought a much more positive view of eschatology, too: consider the victory of the idea of purgatory and the related cultural practices, opening wide the gates of heaven to all those little baddies who would *never ever* get there if monastic types of eschatology continued to rule all over the place.
 - **2) Scholastic Christianity was relatively inner-worldly** in comparison to older models of Christianity I know. In scholasticism, the world became slightly less provisional, and Christianity’s engagement in

worldly society gained more legitimacy than it had before. I am aware that this claim to increased inner-worldliness of scholastic Christianity should be made more grounded, and I will be very happy to have your views on this!

- **3) Third point: Scholastic Christianity was purged of elements of monastic elitism** – that sort of elitism basing authority not on the legal position, but on ascetic charisma. Instead, scholasticism typically promoted an **accommodating ecclesiology**, stressing that salvation can be attained in any social status.
- One more comment before I continue developing the argument. I believe that it might be analytically useful to **identify the intellectual background of this type of Christian thought by a special concept**. I suggest that this version of Christianity is a product of a *specific ideal type of rationality* that could be called **“socio-constructive rationality”**.
- Now, in the fourth step of the argument, I will focus on the **image of Cathar heresy in polemical writing**. I want to show that polemical image of Cathar heresy was a **nearly exact opposite of the aspects of scholastic Christianity** I have just presented. I have worked mainly with the following polemical writings, you may have a look : Ekbert of Schönau, *Liber contra hereses katharorum* (1163/1165); Hugh Eteriano, *Contra Patarenos* (1160s/1170s); *Liber contra manicheos* (1220s?); *Liber Suprastella* (1235); Moneta of Cremona, *Adversus catharos et valdenses* (1241/1244); *Disputatio inter Catholicum et Paterinum hereticum* (1240s); *Las novas del heretje* (1240s); a couple of *summae auctoritatum* against “Manicheans”; Pseudo-Cappelli, *Summa contra hereticos* (1240/1270).
 - **Harsh rejection of the world**.
 - **Dualistic theology** – in several senses: God or Satan, God or the world, asceticism or hell (the ethic of the “two paths”, very common in the Christian tradition).
 - Rejection of **marriage**.
 - Rejection of **secular government, oath-taking, violence, judicial punishment**.
 - Severe version of **predestination**.
 - Rejection of **all means removing the complete individual responsibility for salvation**, like **infant baptism, purgatory, offerings for the dead** and such.
 - **Elitist ecclesiology**, where only the “pure ones” form the Church.
 - Most of these beliefs have a **long tradition**, and could be documented as *legitimate in the older history of Christianity*, which is quite interesting.
- And I arrive to the **main point** I want to make. I argue that Cathar heresy, defined by the attributes I have just mentioned, was **designed by scholastic intellectuals to form one of the preeminent “others” defining the new, world-affirming version of Christianity**. Under the label of Cathar heresy,

scholastic polemistis strived to **delegitimize some forms of ascetic Christianity**, which were their principal challengers in their struggle for authority. Some of the groups or individuals involved actually *held* some beliefs that could be called dualist, or at least arrived to such beliefs during the 13th century, while others never held them. I would argue that the polemic against Cathar heresy served to **set very clear limits** not only to specific dissenting groups, but to *any* actual or possible form of ascetic or elitist Christianity.

3) What Kind of Theory Is This?

- In the third and last part of my paper, I will make a couple of comments on what kind of theory this is, and what we might – and might not – expect of it.
- First, this theory is, for the most part, a **synthesis of previous theories, most of them relatively “large-scale”**. It is **not based primarily on what the sources say explicitly**. If you look at these sources, you won’t find any *explicit* confirmation of what I am talking about. I am talking about a mechanism that *neither* polemistis *nor* dissidents are likely to be aware of.
- Second, this theory is **totally unsuitable to interpret most of dissenter’s texts**. It is an explanation of the *importance of Cathar heresy in polemical writing despite the relatively small number and relatively inefficient organization* of groups labeled Cathar/Manichean/Patarene. Nothing more.
- Third remark, this is a sort of **“big theory”**. “Big theories” are necessarily more disconnected from particular data than “small theories”. They offer something like paradigms or “grand narratives”. The theory of evolution might be useful sometimes, for example if you need to explain why squirrels hide nuts. But it is *completely useless* if you need to explain why a *particular* squirrel hid a nut under a *particular* tree.

Conclusion

- Let me now **conclude** with a short **rephrasing of the argument**.
- Given the relatively small numbers, relatively low political significance, and relatively low degree of organization, the groups labeled Cathars/Patarene/Manichean **were not a real threat** for the much more successful transmission of organizational structures and institutions of the Roman Church.
- This relative insignificance **contrasts sharply with the importance they got in polemical writing and inquisitional action**.
- To explain this disproportion, I have tried to show that **Cathar heresy had a function in the transforming society of 12th-13th-century Western Europe**. I

have argued that Cathar heresy *as portrayed in polemical writing* is a sort of **negative self-image of a new Christian identity**, designed by scholasticism striving to delegitimize some radical forms of Christian asceticism.

- So, Cathar heresy could be seen as a sort of “**cultural waste**” – something that was born from Christian society, but its elites now preferred to throw it away. The polemical image of Cathar heresy is a set of **hyperbolized and systematized features of radical otherworldly asceticism** and “anti-social” monastic elitism that the proponents of socio-constructive rationality set out to eliminate from the Christian tradition. Under the label of Cathar heresy, they were indeed fighting what once was a legitimate version of Christianity. But not now. Times have changed.
- Thank you very much for your attention.

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