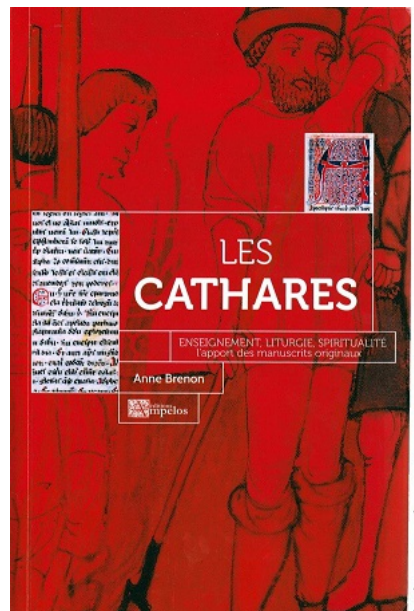


The Cathars. Teaching, Liturgy, Spirituality : The Contribution of the Original Manuscripts

Anne Brenon

Traduction, Beverly M.Kienzle



Back Cover

A veil of romantic mystery surrounds the Cathars and their Church, supported by erroneous interpretations and anachronistic extrapolations.

Translated (retranslated) by the author, the original texts brought together in this single volume convey an accurate and dynamic vision of organized and converted communities.

The fact that the religious movement called Cathar was structured into Churches results somewhat from its exegesis of Scripture and at the same time determines it. What opens up for us through these pages, is actually the exploration, provided by its own writings, of a Christian protest, founded and organized as a Church three centuries before Luther.

Foreword

As its title indicates, this book is dedicated to Cathar religiosity. It aims to clarify from the inside, religious practices and spirituality that medieval authorities condemned as heretical and that remain poorly understood today. To ensure this aim, the book offers readers a new approach. Chapters of historical analysis are followed by a complete and new translation of the original Cathar texts that have traversed time.

Neither castle nor chapel. The Cathars did not build anything, but they did write. From their numerous books of instruction and faith, several escaped destruction. These are beautiful medieval manuscripts that, together with other testimonies, constitute the now missing true written patrimony of a dissident Church.

Let us make clear from the outset that the work here is purely that of a historian, that is to say distanced and critical, even if the subject dealt with is religious, even if the objective employment of original Cathar sources leads naturally to entering deeply into the way of thinking that belongs to people from the past. The Cathar churches had a real historical existence, and endeavoring to highlight it with the appropriate respect and attention is the work of a historian, not an act of faith or a mystical flight.

One will not find within these pages a new account of the battles and burnings that mark “the Cathar epic” (a reference to the major work of the late Michel Roquebert) or the two to three centuries of its history. Those events are generally well known, which is not the case for the faith and spiritual motivations of the Cathars themselves, nor for their religious structures and practices.

Let us place ourselves at the end of the 12th century. Alternative Christian communities, organized into churches, appeared at a still undetermined time on the religious landscape in Italy, in Occitania, but also in Champagne and in the Rhineland. What is involved is a network of churches or sister churches, without any connection to the Roman papacy.

The churches have their own particular institutions, each having its own episcopal hierarchy and clergy—secular and regular. In common, they have liturgies of salvation of the soul through spiritual baptism or *consolamentum*, the same tradition of the learned reading of holy Scriptures, their spiritual teaching on the Kingdom of God, and their apostolic ideals. They also have circles of the faithful,

who in Occitania or in Italy, can be likened to a true Christian people, with distinctive bonds of sociability and solidarity.

In Occitania at the time of the troubadours, the support of the nobility earns these nonconformist faithful the peaceful frequenting of rural lordships and even the quite regular goodwill of the local clergy. In Italian cities, the protection of the Ghibellines, followers of the emperor, spares them the condemnation of the Guelfs and other supporters of the pope. From the end of the 12th century, we see five Churches of this type established in what is now the south of France. The names of the bishops and deacons are known for the Churches of: Toulouse, Albi, Carcassès, Agen and Razès. There are six in Italy: The Churches of Milan-Concorezzo, Desenzano (on the shores of Lake Garda), Vicenza-the Marches of Treviso, Mantua-Bagnolo, Florence-Tuscany and the Valley of Spoleto. Moreover, a Church of the French is evidenced around Champagne as are Cathar bishops in the Rhineland.

The papacy condemns these dissident religious as heretics in as much as it categorizes them and legislates against them throughout the 12th century, designating them by all sorts of names—Manichaens, Arians, Patarines, and among them “Cathars.” However, they refer to themselves only as Christians, Apostles, Good Christians, or Good Men and Good Women. It is true that their path to salvation is not that of Rome, and that they do not refrain from proclaiming that they alone are the true successors of the apostles. The combined repression conducted by the religious and secular powers of the times is absolute. The Church of Rome and the Capetian monarchy employ the weapons of the crusade and then the Inquisition, structured by virulent antitheoretical propaganda that the Cistercian Order first shaped and then the Dominican preachers. The history of religious dissidence is subject to losses in battle. The Occitanian counties—Toulouse and Carcassonne—are linked to the crown of France. In Italy, the victory of the Guelfs over the heirs of the emperor Frederick opens Ghibelline cities to the Inquisition. Over the course of the fourteenth century, after more than a century of systematized repression, the Cathar Churches were eradicated from Christendom, and all that they might have represented was doomed to shame.

Contrary to common belief, the Cathar phenomenon is amply documented, in the clash of numerous illuminating sources, most of which come in the first place from the authorities who condemned it to disappear. The texts and regulations of the papacy and the councils banished heresy from Christianity. The clerical anti-Cathar polemics demonize “the hydra of heresy” to better refute and combat it. The

chronicles tick off the events of suppression and count the burnings. The archives of the Inquisition, however, shed a somber light on the dissidents themselves: men and women in heresy, religious and lay, living and dead, those who will be sentenced.

Consequently, all that remained for a long time concerning the Cathars was the “official” point of view on the establishment of their Churches and their view of life, that is, the opinion held by the conquerors, derogatory by its very nature or at the least not very comprehensive. That explains the generally negative, even suspicious, sentiment opposing the Cathars in traditional historiography, the latter being primarily the prerogative of Catholic scholars until the middle of the twentieth century. They commented on the dubious Eastern origins of heresy and its pernicious character with regard to Western Christianity. Furthermore, as one view fueled the other, a whole mythical literature multiplied and assimilated the mysterious Cathars to the guardians of who knows what millenarian esoteric traditions. To the point, some researchers aimed to remove history from the matrix of myths. Scrutinizing tirelessly the same incriminating folders in a panicked and contentious atmosphere, they placed the reality of heresy in doubt. Could it not ultimately be reduced to a pure construction of the dominant way of thinking, the self-serving invention of religious power wanting to justify its empire, a simple delusion of clerics? ²

Nonetheless, research on Catharism today benefits from fully renewed viewpoints and transformed perspectives that this book wishes to present modestly. This breath of fresh air is due to the rediscovery-- late and all in all un hoped for—of documents of a different type, nothing less than original Cathar manuscripts, suitable for providing elucidation contrasting with the omnipresent antiheretical speech. These collections of

² Trend in research initiated by the collective work, M. Zerner (dir.), *Inventer l'hérésie. Discours polémique et pouvoirs avant l'Inquisition* Nice (CEM), 1998.

Religious dissident literature, in Latin and in Occitan, was recognized in the holdings of several European libraries and published largely in the second half of the twentieth century, notably by the Dominican scholar Antoine Dondaine. We will return to these documents. René Nelli valuably translated them into French beginning in 1957 under the title *Écritures cathares* (*Cathar Writings*). They provide direct access to dissident religiosity, which means giving it a significant place in the intellectual and spiritual climate of its times. Up until this time, Cathar writings were little taken into account in research work, which progressed slowly but surely. In 1977, the pioneering Jean Duvernoy published his *Religion des cathares* (*Religion of the Cathars*) and caused a great stir. In the light of a wide range of sources, including *Cathar Writings*, Duvernoy granted the “Cathar heresy” its identity as a medieval Christian church, at a time when it was still viewed as inspired by Mani and Zoraster. Today it would not occur to anyone to cast doubt on the fundamentally Christian character of Cathar dissidence, whatever its differences from the Roman Catholic faith. Those who question its existence generally do so only under the pretext of its extreme Christian conformity, which they suggest would indicate a simple rivalry among clerics. Nonetheless, it is difficult to gain a fair appreciation of Christian religiosity among the Cathars without prior study of these texts to the point of being imbued with them. Since we may reasonably judge that the ones who wrote the texts also existed... These texts are therefore as rich as they are unique.

The authors of the *Cathar Writings* are obviously genuine medieval dissidents. However Christian the texts assert themselves and prove to be, they were not ostensibly composed by clerics of the Roman Church in simple negotiation with their hierarchy, even less so by Catholic offices of forgers aiming to discredit heresy. The authenticity of these documents is beyond doubt, although it was understandably legitimate to question it. Their authenticity is signaled even more by their uniqueness and the quality of their discourse. It is indicated by the pertinence of their argument, by the genuine learned culture the writings demonstrate as they develop a very distinct metaphysics and Christian rites that do not resemble those of priests at the altar. These original texts--namely two treatises, two Rituals, three educational and catechetical texts in Latin and Occitan-- are a credit to dissident Churches which alone were able to formulate them so carefully. One does not see what interest an enemy of heresy would have

had in opposing it with forgeries, counterproductive in that they would give it a fully empowering image.

Published here in a new and complete translation⁶, these texts form the framework of the present volume, dedicated to the religious existence of dissidence.

Discovering the texts is rewarding. The direct contribution of their perspective, overlying our current formulations appears as a given for the reader. Consequently she will be able on her own, as long as she wants during her reading, to draw on sources of a different Christianity, Cathar Christianity. The translation of a document today called Charter of Niquinta precedes the other texts. Although it differs in its nature from the others, it could constitute the oldest of the texts attached to a Cathar origin. It is in fact dated to 1167, but known only through seventeenth-century copies of a copy from 1223.

Let us endeavor to eliminate any confusion between manuscripts and texts that are copied from them and often have a life of their own. Here we publish texts as reinforcements, not the manuscripts that contain them. Thus “The book of Two Principles” is not a book. Everyone may not know that. It does not constitute a particular manuscript but is copied among other texts, mentions, and excerpts of all types, such as lists of citations from Writings, or in the heart of a collection, which itself forms a manuscript thanks to heretical hands.⁷ But this is not the case for another earlier Cathar treatise.

If we set apart the Charter of Niquinta, what have come down to us today are six great texts of religious literature of Cathar origin, or more precisely seven, because a very small last text, copied on fewer than four pages, can be added to the six. The oldest, an anonymous Cathar treatise originated from Languedoc (called the *Traité Anonyme* or T.A.), written in Latin and dating from before 1200,⁸ is not from a Cathar hand. It exists only in the form of a somewhat late copy, made by a cleric concerned with refuting it in his own treatise “against the Manichaeans.”

p. 8 The six other pieces of Cathar religious literature preserved today are divided over three manuscripts which are very likely original Cathar books, that is, books from a heretical hand. Let us clarify right away that a fourth original manuscript, in fact the oldest of them all, does not play a role here except by way of a simple mention, because we will not use it. Known under the name of *Codex* of Vienna, because it is preserved at the National Library of Austria, this manuscript in Latin dates from the very beginning of the thirteenth century. It contains the complete

text of the New Testament, as well as a version of the New Testament apocryphal writing of Bogomil origin entitled the *Interrogation of John (Interrogatio Iohannis)*. Other Latin copies of the *Interrogation* exist, notably the one called “Carcassonne,” which was preserved until the eighteenth century by the Inquisition of Carcassonne. It was probably employed by western dissidents, and it testifies to contacts that they could have maintained with their close relations, the dissidents of Greek Christianity. Nonetheless, we prefer to limit ourselves here to the religious works with ties to the so-called Latin Cathar Churches.

In the chronological order of the three extant original manuscripts, here they are with the six Cathar texts transmitted:

1. The Florence *Codex*, so called because it is kept in the collection of suppressed convents of the National Library of Florence. It was probably copied between 1250 and 1270 in connection with the Italian Cathar Church of Desenzano-Sirmone and contains in particular two sizable texts in Latin: a second Cathar treatise replying one generation later to the *Anonymous Cathar Treatise*; the *Book of Two Principles (Liber de duobus principiis)*; as well as the complete Ritual of the *consolament*, known as “The Latin Cathar Ritual.”
2. The Lyon *Codex*, so called because it is kept in the collection of the Palais des Arts of the Municipal Library of Lyon. Copied around 1300 in the setting of the last Good Men’s refuge in Italy, the beautiful volume contains a complete translation of the New Testament, decorated with magnificent initials, and followed by a collection of *consolament* rituals and various rules for religious discipline, known as the *Occitan Cathar Ritual*.
3. The Dublin *Codex*, a beautiful manuscript kept since the seventeenth century at the library of Trinity College, Dublin. It seems to be a somewhat late copy (dated from 1375) from a dissident environment (Waldensian?) of the three probably oldest works of religious literature in Occitan: A Catechism on the Church of God, or *Gleisa Dio*; a *Gloss* or commentary on the Our Father (*Pater*); finally, a short teaching on the Holy Church, or *Sancta Gleisa*.

The translation of several medieval documents of a different type has been added to the translation of the Cathar texts to give them prominence. These different documents come from the inexhaustible reservoir of the inquisitorial archives. They include the account of a Good Woman’s entrance into the religious life at the start of the thirteenth century, the report of a *consolament* by a former Occtan

Cathar dignitary as well as the narrative of the sermons of the three last clandestine Good Men in Occitania.

The careful repeated reading of these texts leaves an unambiguous picture.

The original sources transcend the vast documentary corpus relating to the phenomenon of heresy.

That the religious movement called Cathar was structured in Churches flows in some way from its exegesis of the Scriptures and at the same time determines it.

What opens for us in the course of these pages is the investigation, powered by its own writings, of a Christian protest founded and organized into a Church three centuries before Luther.