

STORY OF THE CATHARS

Shirley Kinney

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I am a sailor—but only because my husband is a sailor. Consequently, I'm not a very good sailor. And this is probably best illustrated by how I drive a boat—I have the greatest difficulty in going straight for a mark—my path is invariably a series of short zig zag lines.

To help me solve this, Tom has told me to keep looking behind me. My goal should be to make the line made by the boat going through the water straight, or at least as straight as I can. That has seemed to help me.

It's not a bad rule of thumb to use in one's own life, as well. Keep looking behind you to see that your path has been straight towards your mark. I'd like to use it today to look back down the path of Unitarianism. Only I'm going to look way way way far back, perhaps to the very beginning of our religion. This is the story of the Cathars.

Life in Europe during the Middle Ages was not an easy one. The Middle Ages has been described as "1,000 years without a bath". That probably isn't too greatly exaggerated. If you were a peasant or even a craftsman, life consisted of survival.

You couldn't read, there was no hope of your ever getting ahead and just staying even was an iffy proposition. You worked very hard all day, and when night fell, you barricaded yourself and your family and your livestock indoors. Because night and darkness was the realm of bandits and slavers and thieves. And much much worse—of demons and witches and unthinkable horrors. Remember, this was a time when the Devil was a very real thing to most people.

It was a religious world; most people went to church at least once a day. But it was an incredibly violent world, where invading armies killed everyone, where women and children were routinely hacked to death, where pregnant women were eviscerated just for sport.

It was a world that gave lip service to the ideals of chivalry while indiscriminately pillaging and murdering, where women were imagined to be powerless and delicate, yet they ruled fortunes, commanded castles, took lovers at will and plotted assassination and rebellion.

It was a world of shifting boundaries and shifting allegiances, often changing from one day to the next. It was a world of death, of sweeping plagues, of disease, of constant warfare.

Your lord of local baron was sworn to protect you, of course, but he was no doubt out pillaging and looting and raping some neighboring kingdom. There was the church to go to for sanctuary, one might think. At this time, the Catholic Church was struggling

mightily to maintain its own strength. The local priests were usually corrupt—they had bought their right to tax and terrorize you from the equally corrupt bishop.

The priests often were married—a definite no-no. They lived in as much wealth as they could extort from their parishioners. They sold salvation to those lucky enough to afford it. They were sometimes too drunk to hold mass, or too ignorant. Priests often could not read and many had never even heard the words of the Bible.

If a man felt that his sins were weighing too heavily on his soul, or perhaps if he owed his neighbor money he couldn't repay or if maybe he was a murderer facing execution, there was a way out.

He could join a Crusade, go to the Holy Land, and fight the evil Muslim infidel for forty days and all his sins and debts would be magically erased. Plus, maybe he could pillage and loot along the way and come home richer than he left. Or, not come home at all.

In his absence, his property would be off-limits to creditors, robbers, or upwardly mobile young princes. Those who violated this sanctity risked excommunication by the church.

Excommunication—this was a mighty punishment in the Middle Ages. Originally, it brought about the condemned's banishment from Church rites and if the excommunicated died in that state, his soul would go straight to Hell.

The going straight to Hell part was pretty scary, but, since most people didn't respect the Church anyway, not being allowed to participate in the Church's rituals kind of lost its sting. So, the Pope added some more teeth to the measure. Excommunication in the Middle Ages meant, in addition to Hell and banishment from the Church, that any man excommunicated did not exist in the eyes of the church, his property could be seized by anyone strong enough to take it from him, and the victim would have no recourse for help. Now, this was serious.

So, this is a nutshell picture of the state of the Church in Europe in the 1200's. Now, let's narrow the range of field by zooming down to southern France.

Of course, back then, France was mostly just the area surrounding Paris. I'm talking about the area in the south, edging on the Mediterranean. It was called Languedoc. It's a mountainous region, but very rich. It was through this area that goods from the East and from the sometimes-conquered Holy Land were brought to England and to Europe.

This was a land ruled by Raymond VI of Toulouse—a charming romantic, who was loved by his people. He was cousin to Eleanor of Aquitaine and married at one time to her daughter, the sister of Richard the Lionhearted.

Languedoc was the land where the poetry and romance of the troubadours was born and flourished. Men sang of beauty and love and chivalry and lovely maidens. This came at

a time when the rest of Europe sang poetic songs about bloody intestines dripping from Charlemagne's sword or other gut-wrenching ballads.

The Occitan language of Languedoc was regarded by literate Europeans as superior to French or Italian. Dante originally planned to write The Divine Comedy in that tongue. So, we're talking about a civilized prosperous pocket of the world.

Under the rule of Raymond VI and later of Raymond VII, Languedoc strayed more and more openly from the folds of the Church. In fact, a common expression of disgust there, when someone refused doing an unpleasant task, he would say, "I'd rather be a priest than do that!"

In this region, born perhaps to fill the void the Catholic Church was leaving, or perhaps as an outgrowth of the independent souls living there, a religious group was born, called the Albigensians or the Cathars. Some say there were the first Unitarians.

Actually, the Cathars called themselves Christians, but the Church, and later the Inquisition, called them Cathars. Quite possibly our term catharsis, meaning a cleansing or purification of the mind, derived from the name Cathar. They were also called Albigensians—named for a town in the region. I will use the term Cathar and Albigensian interchangeably today.

In order to understand, if we can, the fate of these Albigensians, a fate that marked the decline of the Catholic Church, we need to look at the group and its religious beliefs.

No Cathar writings exist today, although Cathars were often educated men and women who produced a large body of writings. But, it is likely any heretic writings were burned by the Inquisition.

What we know of the religion comes from how it came into conflict with the Catholic Church, as well as through its external rites and evidence of how its followers lived. Perhaps we can also catch a glimpse of some of our Unitarian roots.

The Cathar equivalent of priest or holy person was called the Perfect. At the height of the religion, historians now estimate there were 1500-2000 Perfects in Languedoc and believers numbering in the tens of thousands. So—a large group of people.

The basis of the Cathar religion was a belief in a dualistic Gnosticism.

Let me say a few words about where we believe the Gnostic Cathar faith came from. Gnosticism had existed since at least the time of Jesus, and later, in the third century, influenced the doctrine of Mani whose followers created the religion of Manichaeism. Manichaeism was cruelly persecuted by the early Church fathers and was, for all intents and purposes, wiped out.

All except for a tiny offshoot that flourished in Asia Minor. In 872, that tiny offshoot was deported to the Balkan Peninsula and there it formed the nucleus of that church which was later to be identified with the Cathars.

The official Cathar Church claimed no ties to the Manichaeism movement and in fact denied it, but that may have been to avoid the stigma of persecution attached historically to that name. The Cathar Church gained strength in Bulgaria and sent holy men to spread the faith, in particular to northern Italy and to the regions of the Mediterranean.

Cathars, like Unitarians today, rejected the idea of the Christian trilogy. In Cathar belief, God was not omnipotent. Evil warred continually against this god. The End of Time, however, would give the final victory to God.

Cathars believed our world was created by the Evil God. However, Evil was not capable of creating life, so he asked the Good God to help by breathing life into a body of clay creating the soul of man. It is generally felt that Evil was the God of the Old Testament.

All things on earth as well as the sun and stars and moon were evil. All worldly authority was a fraud. And so, the Cathar Perfect denounced all earthly things. He gave his possessions to the Cathar Church and lived a life of poverty, fasting often, depending on the charity of others for food and shelter.

The Perfect ate no meat, (fish was OK, since it was widely accepted that fish derived from spontaneous generation), nor ate any by-product of procreation, such as eggs or milk. The Perfect was celibate, since to cause another soul to be born in this evil world would be to condemn it to a miserable existence.

They dressed in black robes and wandered from town to town, talking to believers.

No nice homes, no good meals, and –gasp--, no sex?

So far, much of this doesn't sound too Unitarian, does it? If we look more closely at their day-to-day living, however, it starts to look a bit more Unitarian, a bit more liberal.

The God deserving of Cathar worship was a God of Light, who ruled the ethereal, the spiritual realm. This God, unconcerned with the material, simply didn't care if its believers got into bed together before getting married, or if you had a Jew or a Muslim for a friend.

This God treated men and women as equals. Historians now believe that this was the Cathars strongest social contribution—the equality of the sexes. This belief in equality is even more amazing when you consider that at the same time, the Catholic Church was teaching that women were the source of all things evil and impure.

Cathars believed that if the follower chose not to adopt a life of self-denial, he would keep returning to this world—hat is, be reincarnated—until he was ready to embrace a

life sufficiently spotless to allow accession at death to the same blissful state one had experienced as an angel prior to having been tempted out of heaven at the beginning of time.

To be saved, then, meant becoming a saint. To be damned was to live, again and again, on this corrupt Earth. Hell was here, not in some afterlife dreamed up by Rome to scare people out of their wits.

God himself could do nothing to help all the lost souls who continued to be reincarnated, since he could have no contact with the material world of Evil.

So, he dispatched a mediator, Jesus, who was the most perfect of angels. Jesus was, at best, an emanation, an illusion. Not a real person. It was unthinkable that goodness and purity should have physical contact with an impure world, so Jesus was only a shadow. Consequently, he could not have been crucified—only an intangible shadow was crucified.

The Devil, being dastardly clever, substituted a false church for the true one to deceive humans. The Catholic Church, therefore, was the church of evil and the true church was the one of the Cathars.

The Catholic sacraments were tools of Evil to lead men into believing that holy relics could lead them to salvation. Communion—the bread and the wine—was Evil. Baptismal water was Evil.

The Cross should not invite veneration, but rather was an object of horror. If the beam of a house falls down and kills the family inside, should it be raised up and venerated?

The Blessed Virgin was not the mother of Jesus, since Jesus never had a material body. She was only a symbol to the Cathars. You can see why the Catholic Church was pretty upset with these Albigensians!

Cathars refused to swear an oath, which presented a major difficulty in medieval life. At the time, swearing an oath was the contractual underpinning of the society. It lent weight to transactions. Cathars refused to swear an oath because they felt it created a link between the evil material world and God.

The family was condemned as a cause of earthly attachment, as was marriage. All violence, including the killing of animals and even the dreaded Muslim Infidel, was a crime. To kill would mean you had deprived a soul of the chance to achieve reconciliation with the Spirit.

Cathars utterly condemned the death penalty. Criminals should be given treatment designed to make them better citizens. These concepts did not mix well with the medieval system of when in doubt, torture.

There were few Perfects in Languedoc because of the stringent conditions they must fulfill. The Perfect underwent several years of probation or initiation within a Catharist seminary where his sense of vocation was subjected to long and rigorous testing.

If he was eventually found to be sincere and to have a strong enough faith, he was presented before the community of Perfects who must elect him. After this election, he had to undergo many days of continuous fasting and vigils and unending prayer.

Finally, he was brought into a room such as this one. The faithful have gathered. Cathars had no church building, so probably it was held in the home of a believer. The room was simple—no ornamentation or idols. The walls were bare.

There were benches for the faithful and a table covered with a white cloth. On it lay the Book of the Gospels, open to John. The table would hold a basin with water, white napkins, and countless white candles, their flames symbolizing the Holy Spirit of God.

The two Perfects who led the ritual washed their hands in the basin before touching the holy Gospels. A lengthy presentation by the Perfect reminded the believers as well as the initiate of all he must renounce and what kind of life he would be expected to lead.

Many times the initiate and the believers gathered recited the Lord's Prayer. Finally, the Perfect placed the Gospels on the initiate's head and together with his assistant, laid his hands on the future Perfect, and, in that instant of the laying on of hands, the man became a wholly new creature.

This laying on of hands was not an empty symbolic gesture. There is no doubt that this rite contained genuine supranatural virtues for the Cathars. In their eyes, it actually brought down the Holy Spirit upon its beneficiary. This was the central keystone of the Catharist Church.

At last the leader read the first seventeen verses of St. John's Gospel and then everyone received the kiss of peace from his fellow believers. (Female members of the group were not kissed, but instead touched elbows. This was the Middle Ages, don't forget!)

At this point a new Perfect was born. His new state was considered so holy that one slip in this strictly enforced regimen—be it as minor as a nibble of veal or a stolen kiss—and the status of Perfect vanished.

This ritual was felt to be so binding on the Perfect that throughout the terror of the Inquisition, when the religion was put through excruciating torture, there are only three recorded instances—by the Inquisition's own records—of a Perfect recanting his vows.

The Cathar Church also granted a shortened ritual to those on their deathbed, thus ensuring a better life in the next reincarnation. The dying person had to vow that, for the rest of his life, he would eat no more meat, swear no more oaths, constantly pray and be

pure, and most importantly, to no longer engage in sex. I suppose this sounds like an easy set of rules to follow, given you have only moments left to live.

But, during the years of the Inquisition, even this offered no release. At least one instance was recorded similar to this: a servant was asked to fetch a Perfect to assist a dying old woman in these Cathar last rites. The Perfect came and granted the woman the Sacrament. But the servant had also secretly fetched an Inquisitor, who was dining in a nearby inn. The Inquisitor came and overheard the sacrament being performed. At that point, he ordered the woman to recant. She wouldn't. So, she was ordered to get up from her bed and proceed to an official Inquisition on the spot. She was dying and unable to rise. So, the Inquisitor had the old woman strapped to her bed, carried outside and set on fire. Afterwards, the Inquisitor returned to his lunch.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. It is now 1209. Pope Innocent III has just been proclaimed Pope of the Catholic Church. His Church is losing its control over the people—kings and commoners alike. He needs a tool to unite his flock and return them to the fold.

And so, Pope Innocent III called upon the barons and kings of the Christian world to send their armies to Languedoc to wipe out the heretics, those Albigensian Cathars.

The Pope began by sending a party of Catholic officials to Languedoc, to instruct the Cathars in the path to salvation. This failed miserably.

Then the Pope sent Dominic, a monk famous for his piety and pure and simple life and total obedience to Rome. Dominic led a life much like the Albigensians, he was poor, truly devout, and yet, unlike these Cathars, he was a staunch supporter of the Catholic Church and its teachings.

Eventually, Dominic too failed to persuade the people of Languedoc to return to the fold.

Back at the Crusades, while Dominique was doing his best in Languedoc, the Pope was doing his best to stir up the barons and kings of all of Europe to send their armies against this group of fellow Christians. He met with a good bit of resistance at first. But, eventually, the Crusade began.

Fifteen thousand knights and their retinue, mercenaries, and pilgrims set out for Languedoc. Each had a cross sewn on the shoulder of their tunic.

The expedition had all the advantages of a crusade to Palestine with none of the drawbacks of distance. For the French from the north, the proximity of Languedoc was ideal for doing one's quarantine—the forty days of military service necessary to earn the crusader's indulgence.

Then he could return home in time for harvest and hunt, happy in the knowledge that Heaven's gate had swung open for his soul. The warriors did not consider the intended

victims of their crusade to be fellow Christians. Heretics were not Christians—they were heretics. The Cathars of Languedoc and their Catholic countrymen saw the approach of tens of thousand of attackers plus their war machines plus their wagons and barges of supplies...and they laughed. The Cathars were not about to renounce their religion and their Catholic neighbors were not about to side against their friends and family members, and allow the Crusaders to enter their towns.

Surely their well-fortified mountain cities could withstand this ugly mob. Besides, the larger the invading army, the more difficulty it would have feeding and controlling its people during a long siege. And that's how wars were fought back then—lay siege to a town and wait for surrender.

The first town the Crusaders besieged was Carcassone. The Crusaders set up camp surrounding the town and began to settle down for a long wait. The city folk were standing on the town ramparts—watching the action and heckling the crusaders.

After a few hours, a handful of city hecklers got restless, so they decided to go outside the city gates and yell their taunts and jeers. Big mistake. The Crusaders were rested and anxious to get to killing and looting. They saw an open gate and charged, taking the townspeople totally by surprise.

They ran through the town, killing everyone in sight. The Christian commander, seeing this total and indiscriminate slaughter was asked how to tell the Cathars apart from the true Catholics. He supposedly replied, “Kill them all. God will know his own.”

Whether or not he really said this, that's exactly what happened. Every living soul in the town—20,000 people—were murdered.

Suddenly, all the surrounding towns were eager to open their gates to the Crusaders, if only they would spare the lives of the Catholics. Although Catholics managed to smuggle hundred of Cathars into safety, still the Cathars were burned by the hundred.

With the continued torture of the land and the people and the violence of the Crusade, Cathars and Catholics alike were further persuaded of the illegitimacy of the Catholic Church and the unholiness of its supporters.

The Catholic Church suffered a significant setback as a result of the Crusades. Practicing Catholics saw what their religion was sanctioning and turned away. Priests in Languedoc began fearing for their own safety as Cathar sympathizers took out their anger at the Pope and the Church on the priests.

It became general practice for Catholic priests who had to go out into the cities among the people to try to hide their identity. They were said to attempt to cover their shaved tonsures on their heads—the sign of the holy order—by brushing the long back hairs up over their bald spot. (And we thought that was only a sign of male vanity!)

Soon these Crusaders met with closed city gates. No more would cities turn their Cathar neighbors over to certain death. The Crusading army settled in for what would turn out to be twenty years of fighting and killing.

At the end of twenty years, the Crusade ended, but many many Cathars still continued to practice their religion in Languedoc. The Pope saw that he would need help in cleansing Languedoc of the heretic Cathar religion. So, he set up an organization called the Inquisition. He needed a dedicated hard-working unit of men to handle the job of questioning and punishing heretics. Someone who wouldn't be swayed by pity or have a squeamishness for the occasional lopping off of body parts on the victims.

The Dominican friars fit the bill perfectly. Yes, this is the same Order of Friars begun by Dominique—that gentle barefoot saint.

And the Inquisitors burned Cathars and their sympathizers by the thousands. They even convicted dead heretics, dug up their bones and publicly burned them.

For the remaining Cathars, life became an incessant flight from one sanctuary to another. At last, by the late 1230's, the last five hundred Cathars and supporters had taken refuge in the seemingly impregnable castle of Montsegur.

This fortress was built on the sheer limestone cliffs of a mountain peak 3500 feet high, in southwestern France. The mountain of Montsegur is a rounded outcrop of rock that is inaccessible except on its western flank. Even there the path down into the valley is steep and exposed. The rock lies on the northern slopes of the Pyrenees in the middle of a large forest wilderness.

Neither the Church nor the royal army knew what to do with this protected mountain castle, so for years it was left alone. Finally, the Catholic Church directed an army of several thousand troops to lay siege to Montsegur.

The castle held out for nine long months through a bitter winter. The Pope's army had difficulty surrounding the mountain peak's broad base and the countryside was full of Cathar sympathizers. But the number of defenders continued to dwindle through starvation and wounds, even though reinforcements managed to stream into the fortress despite the siege and despite the certain knowledge that all who were a part of this group at the inevitable end would surely face a horrible death.

At last, in early March of 1244, the castle was compelled to surrender. For some reason, they were granted a period of two weeks before they had to leave the castle. One would think they might have seized the chance to flee with their lives, but instead, sympathizers from the surrounding areas took the final vows and became Perfects.

And so, on March 16, 1244—exactly 700 years to the day of my birth—the army led more than two hundred Cathars down the mountain to an enormous pile of dry wood and burned them alive in the meadow.

Although thousand of Cathars were put to death by the Christian Church, they still exist in us—n Unitarians—today. We share many of their ideas and values. I seriously doubt that our UU faith and belief in our ideals would hold up under the persecution and torture and death by fire that those Cathars endured.

Perhaps they had a passion we no longer feel. Perhaps our modern spirituality has been diluted and watered down over the 757 years that have passed. Perhaps that kind of passion has no place in a more rational world.

At any rate, the Cathars' love of honesty and courage and a willingness to question established beliefs still lives on in us. The Catholic Church is no longer a threat to our religion, although the Born Again Christians would, no doubt, wish to erase Unitarianism just as Pope Innocent's troops did.

Let us hope that as we face today's challenges of faith, that we may look back at our UU path and try to keep a straight course and remain steadfast to our beliefs despite life's distractions and those who would try to change us. Let us be true to ourselves, as did our Cathar ancestors.