The War on Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe

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The War on Heresy is the most recent of R. I. Moore’s writings on medieval heresy and repression, which have been appearing since 1970. The most important are the anthology of translated texts entitled The Birth of Popular Heresy, The Origins of European Dissent, and The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250.(1) The publication in 2006 of Heresy and the Persecuting Society in the Middle Ages: Essays on the Work of R.I. Moore was a mark of their impact.(2)

Since The War on Heresy is aimed at a general as well as academic market, Moore has provided its full bibliography on his website (http://rimoore.net/(2), and there will be found also further reflections on his work (under ‘Text and context’). As he writes, what he has brought over these decades to the study of these themes is scepticism: in particular, about the relationship between what the Church’s texts said about heretics and what was out there in reality. This scepticism has been consistent, but its deployment has shifted. In the Origins Moore still accepted the appearance and growth of the ‘Cathar’ sect, but he was concerned to diminish eastern links and to postpone the appearance of the sect, by eroding the evidence regarded by some historians as early sightings of it. In The Formation of a Persecuting Society, the repression of heresy was but one part of a large and original idea, concisely conveyed in the title. The response model of some historians – the Church thinking ‘there’s some dissidence over there, let’s repress it’ – was side-stepped by the shift of attention to medieval society’s new-found need to persecute. And now, in The War on Heresy, there has been a bold extension. Moore’s scepticism has become even more radical, and it has a new target. This comes in the latter part of the book, with the suggestion is that ‘Catharism’ was a construction. It was ‘contrived from the resources of [the] well-stocked imaginations’ of churchmen, ‘with occasional reinforcement from miscellaneous and independent manifestations of local ant clericalism or apostolic enthusiasm, and confirmed from the 1230s onwards by the ingenuity and assiduity of the Dominican inquisitors’. (3) And there is a chronological shift. The centre of gravity of Moore’s work has tended to be quite early. With heresy and its repression this has meant decades of grappling with the texts reporting heresy in the period roughly from 1000 to 1050 and the chronicles, letters and early polemics of the 12th century, with occasional forays past 1200. But now extensive exploration of the systematic scholastic summae and the inquisition records of the 13th century has become key to the The War on Heresy’s big idea.
Moore sets his new work within the history of scholarship on high medieval heresy. First of all, in his view, work has been confined to a canonical body of texts on medieval heresy, something strikingly shown by the substantial overlap in the selection of texts in two independently produced anthologies of translations, his own Birth of Popular Heresy and A. P. Evans and W. Wakefield’s Heresies of the High Middle Ages. Secondly, it has been – astonishingly – only in recent years that the texts used by historians of medieval heresy and its repression have been subjected to rigorous critical analysis and scrutiny. Moore traces this back to the 1990s, and in particular the French historians whose papers were published in a book whose title makes the point, Inventer l’hérésie?, edited by Monique Zerner. The drift of modern scholarship is now in this direction. Singled out for especially high praise, after Zerner, are the works of three modern scholars. These are Uwe Brunn and his monograph on reports of heresy in the Rhineland in the mid 12th century, Hilbert Chiu and his account of the construction of the dualist in academic theology, and Mark Pegg’s monograph using mid 13th-century inquisition records.

Moore’s title is a wonderful choice. It aligns the mind of an American president in his War on Terror with the minds of Church writers, both seeing things, both grasping at shadows. Its wit is all of a piece with the formidable rhetorical skill and agility with which Moore argues his case, and it is not surprising that the dominant note in the book’s reception has been high praise.

Although there are some developments in and changes to Moore’s earlier views throughout The War on Heresy, I shall confine myself to two things, the new idea of the latter part of the book, and Moore’s account of modern scholarship.

There is one important difference between the strata underlying the early chapters of The War on Heresy and those under the later ones. Early on – chronologically early on - Moore is a historian in his element. He knows the stuff deeply, inside out, and there is palpable pleasure in the sheer mastery of his deployment of the material. In the later chapters of the book – by the 13th century – and with university theology and inquisition depositions, Moore is no longer in his comfort zone. At the same time, there is a great difference between the size of the texts the historian reads around the year 1000 and those one reads in the middle of the 13th century. Take just two texts from the 1240s: a treatise against heresy written by Moneta of Cremona (c.1241) has around 450,000 words, while a manuscript containing inquisition depositions of 1245–6 (Toulouse Bibliothèque Municipale 609) contains about 380,000. It becomes a risky enterprise talking about what is not there in texts of this size. More importantly, if, like Moore, you are writing a very big book, and you are not yourself a specialist scholar in these areas, you have to be more reliant on the guides you choose. The question for the reader changes from ‘How convincing do I find Moore?’ at the start of the book, to ‘How convincing do I find the scholars upon whom he has chosen to rely?’ later on.

One of the four books of Alan of Lille’s treatise On Faith was devoted to heretics to whom dualist propositions were attributed, and there is a description of heretics’ dualist theological in the first part of Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay’s Albigensian History, both of which have been taken to be descriptions of ‘Cathars’ in contemporary Languedoc and based in some way on experience of them. Part of Moore’s ‘dualist mirage’ case is that these are derived instead from the straw figure of the dualist heretic that had developed in theology. There were two traditions. On the one hand there was a line of Cistercians, in particular from Clairvaux and at the forefront in dealing with and repressing heresy, whose writings laid some of the foundations for the dualist heretic. On the other hand there was the ‘ivory tower’ dualist heretic, formed in the academic theology of the schools in Paris, in the writings of Peter Lombard and his pupils, and in routine academic exercises. The doctrine of two principles was ‘regularly deployed as target practice in the classrooms of Paris’ (p. 201). The two lines came together in Alan of Lille, an academic at Paris who ultimately retired to Cîteaux, while Peter’s description of dualism was ‘obviously’ put together out of early Cistercian accounts (pp. 254–5).

The inspiration here is Hilbert Chiu. Surveying medieval academic theological treatises, Chiu argues against the possibility that they might contain reflections on or reactions to contemporary dualist heretics,
vigorously attacking anyone who has suggested this (especially Biller). He finds the treatises, in particular Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of the Sentences*, very preoccupied with dualist theology, using ancient material, retailed by St Augustine and others. Focussing on one book, ‘Against heretics’, in Alan of Lille’s four-book treatise *On Faith*, he finds a hold-all, containing doctrines not relevant to contemporary ‘Cathars’. To minimise the possibility of Alan having had experience of heretics in southern France, Chiu casts doubt on him having lived there.

A systematic study of dualism in 12th- and 13th-century theological treatises would be a good thing to have, but this may not come from Chiu, who does not seem to grasp some quite elementary aspects of academics in this period. The essential work-tools produced by the 12th century, with the *ordinary gloss* on the bible and Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of Sentences*, provided handy selections and rapid retrieval of snippets from a vast range of patristic writings. The consequent fact that these works and treatises using them contained here and there some ancient material on dualism is a commonplace, and does not indicate special preoccupation. Any work of theology contains topics such as God, the creation, and good and evil. These topics *can* but *do not have* to be developed towards the topic of dualism. Their presence does not in itself indicate special preoccupation. Finally, treatises varied. Some were not especially interested in dualism ancient or modern (i); some were interested in and distinguished both (ii); some were specifically directed against contemporary dualism (iii). Peter Lombard’s *Four Books of the Sentences* is a good example of (i), despite Chiu’s desperate attempt to make it contain ‘detailed discussions of dualism’. An instance of (ii) is Alexander Nequam’s *Speculum speculacionum*. After its prologue, the *opening* words of Nequam’s work are, ‘If there were two principles of all things…’ (Si duo essent principia rerum…). ‘The old error of the Manichees compelled me to write’, says Nequam, ‘alas renewed in our days’ (*Vetus error … diebus nostris renovatus*). (12) The juxtaposition of then and now could hardly be more explicit. There could hardly be a greater contrast with Peter Lombard! Finally, an example of (iii) is Moneta of Cremona’s treatise against contemporary heretics. It plunges us into the world of Italian cities in the early to mid 13th century and the polemical debates between heretics and Catholics, and Moneta draws his propositions from what contemporary heretics said and what they wrote, some of which is in effect footnoted, with citation of the author and the relevant part of his treatise. Chiu’s attempt to force all these works into one mould simply flounders. His reading of his main author, Alain de Lille, hardly scratches the surface. Nearly 50 years ago Marie-Thérèse d’Alverny pointed out that there was an earlier version with a narrower focus than the text printed in the Patrologia Latina, omitting the chapters on penance, confirmation, extreme unction and prayer. (13) The relevance to Chiu’s ‘hold-all’ view of the book is obvious, but he has not looked at it – it is not clear even that he knows about it. Investigation of the topic ‘Alan on contemporary heretics’ needs research into another of *On Faith*’s books, the one directed against Waldensians. It has been noticed that in the earliest surviving Waldensian letter (1218), the Waldensians access patristic material through Gratian’s *Decretum*. (14) It has also been noticed that some of the Waldensian arguments described by Alan derived from Gratian: a parallel that bears upon his accuracy in reporting them, and an important comparison.

Here, finally, is one illustration of the strata: first, the known evidence, secondly Chiu’s treatment of it, and finally Moore’s use of Chiu. D’Alverny paraded the trickle of evidence about Alan and southern France, judiciously not making too much of it but also making it clear that it did show Alan spent some time down there. He dedicated *On Faith* to the count of Montpellier. He dedicated his *Distinctiones* to the abbot of a great Benedictine monastery in lower Languedoc, Saint-Gilles. Two posthumous *exempla* depict him lecturing in the schools at Montpellier. Most telling is the fact that in his *Distinctiones* he glosses a Latin word with its equivalent in vernacular Occitan. (15) Next level, Chiu. Omitting all the evidence apart from the first dedication enables him to write of Alan, ‘whether he ever went to the south is contentious’. (16) Final level, Moore, following Chiu. Again there is silence about all the evidence apart from the first dedication, while the denial becomes more declamatory. ‘There is nothing in Alan of Lille’s disappointingly undocumented life to connect him with the Languedoc’ (p. 220).

Let us move forward to the use of the inquisition depositions Languedoc, dipping in at p. 261. Here Moore is describing the ‘Cathar’ rite of *melioramentum*, which inquisitors called *adoration*. As the note in his website indicates, Moore draws here on Mark Pegg’s *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246,*
pp. 92-103. (17) (To avoid misunderstanding – it goes without saying that there is complete propriety in Moore’s use and acknowledgement of other scholars). Pegg’s monograph is ‘brilliant’, writes Moore, and it has a ‘devastating critique of the methods of his predecessors’ in the use of inquisition records (p. 345). What is at issue, then, in our assessment of Moore, is the character of a work that has influenced him so much and given him the green light to carry his brand of deconstructionism into the heart of inquisition records.

Pegg whittled away the conventional picture of ‘Catharism’ in Languedoc, which had included a ‘Church’ that even for some years had its specific headquarters, a hierarchy of bishops, their successors and deacons, formal rituals and the use of a liturgical book laying down how they were to be carried out, written theology and a financial system. The erosion techniques were simple. The first and fundamental technique was silence about evidence. The silence was of two sorts. First, analysis was confined to one source, the 1245–6 enquiries contained in MS Toulouse 609. So, the depositions of the lord of Gaja-la-Selve, Peter of Mazerolles, are in Toulouse 609. So Peter is in Pegg’s book. His mother Helis’s deposition is in another manuscript. (18) So she is not in Pegg’s book. The loss of some complexity in our picture of one family’s involvement with ‘Catharism’ is not in itself very significant, and this is presented only as an illustration of the cordon sanitaire Pegg has placed between Toulouse 609 and other evidence. One useful image in E. H. Carr’s much-mocked What is History? is the notion of a Club of Historical Facts, with historians deciding on entry. With one simple stroke Pegg has excluded from the Club a whole heap of evidence. A detailed description of a ‘Cathar’ Council, bishops, ordinations, contact with Italian Cathars – such as the rare and precious testimony of a letter from a bishop of ‘Cathars’ in Cremona being received by a bishop of ‘Cathars’ in Languedoc: through silence Pegg can keep his readers ignorant of all of this. The other silence is about Toulouse 609 itself. It is a manuscript, in some areas difficult. So very few readers are going to be able both to access and read it. This is an opportunity for the scholar exploiting its contents to keep quiet about parts that contradict what they are saying.

As earlier with Chiu, let us look at an example of the strata, first the evidence, then Pegg, then Moore. First, the evidence in Toulouse 609. Here in translation an example of a confession. ‘Stephen of Rouzégas [and others] … adored the said heretics, each of them individually saying three times for themselves, on bended knees in front of them, ‘Bless’, and adding, ‘Lords, pray God on behalf of this sinner, that he may make me a good Christian and lead me to a good end’ (f. 4v). The degree of complexity in the ritual makes it unsurprising that deponents often recounted how a heretic had ‘taught’ and ‘instructed’ (docere, instruere) them how (quomodo) to perform it, showing (ostendere) them the its exact form (modum) (e.g. 5v, 117v, 124r-v, 175r, etc). The next level is Pegg’s chapter 13, entitled ‘Words and nods’. After describing an adoration, Pegg retails variations on it. He is entirely silent about all the statements that the ritual was taught to people. And then, from p. 94, he packs his sentences more and more with a thesaurus of ‘respect’ words and phrases: giving a ‘respectful nod’, ‘being civil’, showing ‘habitual politeness’, perpetuating ‘an etiquette’, giving ‘a couple of courteous hellos and goodbyes’, ‘civilities’, ‘honors’, ‘mark of respect’, and ‘routine cortesia’. Prose laden with these words, acting on the reader like so many hidden persuaders in advertising, softens up readers for Pegg’s conclusion, that ‘the friar-inquisitors objectified a style of highly contingent politeness into the classifiable form, adoratio, so that it forced people to see their past and future nods and benedictions as much more formulaic than they ever were’. Finally, Moore. The inquisitors in 1246 attached ‘great significance to body language … asking whether people had “adored” the good men. They were looking for evidence of a ritual of which they had read in their scholastic texts, called the melioramentum. … But those who were questioned merely described what they knew as formal but everyday gestures of respect whose exchange was simply a matter of cortezia. … routine good manners’ (p. 261). Moore does not identify the ‘scholastic text’ he says the two inquisitors, Bernard of Caux and John of Saint-Pierre, had been reading, and he is of course silent where Pegg is silent.

What would Moore’s construction look like if he used as his prop when surveying the depositions of 13th-century Languedoc other Anglophone scholars who read this evidence? Two outstanding examples are Malcolm Barber and Claire Taylor. Moore’s silences would now no longer be influenced by Pegg’s, for these are historians who read all the inquisition registers rather than just one, and apply to them scholarship
that is scrupulous as well as critical. From the many things that feature in their work that do not feature properly in The War on Heresy I pick out two examples – first of all debates. Moore knows about the large and formal debates between ‘Cathars’, Catholics and Waldensians that are described, for example, in le Vaux-de-Cernay’s Albigensian History. If he followed Taylor into the penances of the inquisitor Peter Sellan, he would enter an extraordinary world of smaller occasions. ‘William of Caveroque… Waldensians came to his workshop … He disputed with Franciscans whether a man should kill’. ‘Bernard Raymond … went to the heretics, wanting to test who were the better, the Waldensians or the heretics … He disputed with someone about the faith of the heretics and the faith of the Waldensians, and he confirmed the faith of the heretics’. ‘William of Breuil saw heretics, heard their preaching and disputed with them about the creation’.

‘The brothers Bernard Durand and Gaubert received three heretics … who stayed in their house for a day and a night, and there was a disputation between them and the priest of the place which lasted virtually the whole day’. ‘Raymond Pellegrini … kept the heretics’ book, where anyone who wanted to would read’. (19)
The penances are suffused throughout with this sort of detail, from a world where all sorts of people knew theology and argued about it. Theology was the football and disputations the TV of countless ordinary folk in Languedoc. Do we see them as passive recipients of ‘ivory-tower’ theology projected down upon them somehow (it is not clear how) by Parisian academics?

The second example is Montségur. Had Pegg or Moore followed Barber they would have found a fine and very solidly based account of something they sideline and ignore. ‘Cathar’ leaders successfully petitioned Montségur’s co-lords for permission to use it as the headquarters of their Church, and this they did for some years. Evidence survives about their activities there – their bishops, ordinations, preachings and so on – providing a good glimpse of what ‘Catharism’ was like when living under protection. Of course, the fact that Montségur is the object of modern popular fascination is convenient. Point to modern myth-making and you can then ignore the real past existence and character of ‘Catharism’ in Montségur. It is an easy trick to play.

The heart of Formation of a Persecuting Society was a sociological model. But the version provided here – extended chronologically and thematically into the theology of the Paris schools and the inquisition records of Languedoc – has ceased to be in a mutually modifying dialogue with the evidence.

Moore is of course not responsible for the quality of Chiu’s and Pegg’s work, but he is the person who has chosen to rely on them rather than on good scholars. That, of course, is not his view of the field. I outlined earlier Moore’s account of the history of scholarship, and need to turn to this now. To recap, in Moore’s eyes there was an unquestioned and rather narrow canon of texts on heresy and its repression, and scholars were largely uncritical of these documents until the 1990s. A Manichean split has come about now, between those who uphold traditional views, because they are uncritical of documents, and the sophisticated document-critics, whose searching analyses lead to necessarily to deconstruction. The critical force is with Moore.

It is a jaw-dropping claim. To begin with, it leaves out Germany. 1927 was the year of publication of the account of the ‘type’ of the heretic and sect and how this is deployed in the medieval Church’s texts, written by Herbert Grundmann, who went on to produce many more fundamental critical articles, especially on the source-critical problems in depositions. (20) 1953 was the year of publication of Arno Borst’s towering masterpiece, Die Katharer. This is the principal modern account of ‘Cathars’, and its long opening chapter proceeds systematically through the sources. The section sub-titles - i. ‘The chroniclers of the 11th century’, ii. ‘The letter-writers (c. 1140–1160)’, iii. ‘The Critical Polemicists (c.1160–1230)’, etc – all tell their own story. That is, that these sources have their own generic characteristics and concerns, and that therefore they shape things accordingly. Needless to say, Borst’s texts were not drawn from a narrow canon. And 1968 saw the publication by Alexander Patschovsky of the most searching and critical account of an inquisitor’s anthology that we are ever likely to see. (21) These are central, fundamental and famous works. Secondly, there is no equation between being acutely critical of documents and writing them off. A group of five document, orthography and language experts came to Monique Zerner’s conference on the document emanating from the Council held by ‘Cathars’ in Saint-Félix in 1167. They were from the from the Institut de Recherche et d’Histoire des Textes, where people know a thing or two about texts. It was these professionals who pronounced the document authentic. (22) It was left to the non-professionals, the
deconstructionist historians, to go on clinging to the their faith that it was a forgery.

Moore’s own approach to documents has a distinct profile. On the one hand he is concerned with the political context of a document and the possibilities that an author is exaggerating or fabricating or that a text is forged, and on the other hand he tends not to be interested in relating the specific genre of a text to its language and shape. So, for example, he is unlikely to analyse a letter in terms of contemporary treatises on letter-writing. In his review of Lucy Sackville’s *Heresy and Heretics in the Thirteenth Century: The Textual Representations* (23), there was a telling display of irritation at the fact that this brilliant exploration of the distinct genres of texts in the Church – and the ways in which these variously depicted heretics and heresies – did not lead on to straightforward demolition. And Moore’s use of critical commentary is one-directional. It is designed to minimise the existence of a text or its apparent meaning. How do you get round conciliar decrees pointing to heresy in Toulouse? Politics. Gervase of Canterbury mentioning a letter written by the count of Toulouse in 1177, saying that heretics in Toulouse speak of two principles? Ask why another source does not mention it. Drop in a phrase like ‘if authentic’, or in the last resort simply simply assert that a text is a forgery.

Finally, it has been suggested that the deconstructions of the two sects conventionally regarded as the major sects of the high middle ages, ‘Waldensianism’ and ‘Catharism’, are signs of our historiographical times. I confess to having paid too little attention to the differences. The leader in the case of the Waldensians, Grado Merlo, is very interested in textual genres, sees texts as positioned, and tries to take as much into account as possible: there are no obvious silences. The passionate element in his inquiry is investigating historiography – calling everything into question – rather than demolishing. And that is what led him to call for examination of what lay behind the singular construct Valdismo, as also the historiographical positions of all relevant historians. And though he raised deconstruction of singular Valdismo into plural Valdismi, he did not rig the enquiry to predetermine the answers. In fact, at a conference in 2008 he announced a change of mind.(24)

Merlo’s successful demonstration of the specificity of this or that local manifestation of Waldensianism was comparable to the worthwhile element in Pegg’s work, the concrete localism of his depiction of ‘Catharism’. Both share in the wide, complex and varied revolution in the study of the lived Christianity of medieval people that has taken place over the last half century. Scholars have been trying out exciting new approaches and ideas, and an important part of the work is unpacking traditional approaches. Now, when an inspired and intellectually revolutionary scholar tries out this or that mind-game in the study of a parishioner, however destructive they are, there is always a safety-net. No-one is really going to doubt that the stone-built parish church is there, that baptisms are carried out, that lawyers are examining marriage cases and that the pope is raising money. There is no such net for those the Church called heretics. Their own names are hardly used, the Order of the Poor of Lyon and the Church of Good Christians. The ordinary texts of their administration, such as letters or rationes of annual financial accounting, have long been lost. And the Church has destroyed virtually all of their works of high theology and their liturgical books. Those things most likely to help modern minds grasp that they were once real have gone. The medieval Church ensured their death in the middle ages, and now modern deconstructionism goes further, erasing their past reality. I am puzzled about the difference between my hatred of medieval persecution and Moore’s. My hatred does not have to be helped by the notion that whenever an inquisitor ordered someone to be burnt to death his own imagination had conjured up what that person believed. I can see the moral calculus at work, that persecutors who get it wrong are even worse than persecutors that get it right: so add that to their indictment. But the cost is high: denying to men and women in 13th-century Languedoc what they believed in when they chose an agonising death.

Notes


2. Heresy and the Persecuting Society in the Middle Ages: Essays on the Work of R. I. Moore, ed. M.

10. With his permission Moore has made use of Chiu’s MA dissertation, ‘The intellectual origins of medieval dualism’ (2009). This has been but is no longer accessible online, and my comments are based on an article emerging from this, ‘Alan of Lille’s Academic Concept of the Manichee’,published in a special number of the *Journal of Religious History* devoted to Australian studies on Cathars, 35, 4 (2011), 492–506.
15. ‘Alan of Lille’s Academic Concept’, 496 n. 12.
17. Paris, BnF, Ms Collection Doat 23, f. 162r-180r.

**Other reviews:**

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