

**IGLESIA, CULTURA
Y SOCIEDAD
EN LOS SIGLOS XVI-XVII**

**EDS. REBECA LÁZARO NISO,
CARLOS MATA INDURÁIN, MIGUEL RIERA FONT
Y OANA ANDREIA SÂMBRIAN**



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(EDS.)

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THE VIRGIN MARY IN THE VISION OF THE CATHARS

Constantin Zamfir
University of Bucharest

The Virgin Mary occupies an important place in Christianity, being after the The Holy Trinity and above the saints, a very appreciated character. Most Christian denominations recognize her role as mediator between sinners and Jesus Christ, between people and the divinity. The person of the Virgin Mary and her role in the cult was regarded differently since the dawn of Christianity. In the East, in the Orthodox Byzantine Empire, it was very important that Mary was «the Lord's Mother», mother of God the Son (or «theothokos» as the Greeks called her). In the Catholic Western Europe, her Holy Virgin status was also exalted. Anyway, «the purest and ever-virgin mother» is a status claimed for Mary, by the main Christian Churches, the Catholic and the Orthodox.

The religious movement of the Cathars is seen by many as a precursor of the Reformation of Martin Luther and Jean Calvin. The Cathar faith was a christian heresy inspired by Manichaeism and Bogomilism that appeared in Western Europe in the twelfth century. It spread especially in the territories of today southern France and Northern Italy. In the year 1209, the Catholic Church initiated a crusade against the heretics of Languedoc, (it was the so-called «crusade against the Albigenses»), but they, same as those from Italy and Spain, survived until the mid-fourteenth century. The Cathars were rejecting the worship of saints and icons, the infant baptism, the eucharist, did not recognize the Cross

as a Christian symbol, they were believing in the transmigration of souls and reincarnation, were condemning marriage and forbidding procreation, all these were some of the highlights of their dogma, that was Gnostic with Manichaeian influences¹. Regarding the Bible, the Cathars decidedly rejected the Genesis. Also, they did not recognize the writings of the Church Fathers or the decrees of Church Councils. They said that these were coming from people, not from God².

When speaking about the Cathars, the heretics are generally seen as a part of a unitary movement, with the same religious concepts, regardless of their geographical location: Southern France, Northern Italy, Germany or the Balkans. But things were not quite so, between the various groups of heretics there were many dogmatic differences. As remarked by the Italian inquisitor Ranieri Sacconi «the Italian Cathar churches fight each other for reasons of dogma»³. Sacconi knew what he spoke about. After being an important Cathar, he converted to Catholicism in 1245 and became a Dominican monk. Between 1254-1259 he was chief inquisitor in Lombardy, cruelly persecuting his former co-religionists. Let us shortly review the Cathar beliefs concerning the Holy Virgin.

The Cathars inherited some of their beliefs about the Virgin Mary from the Bogomils, there being however differences between Cathar groups regarding how Mary was viewed. Most of them believed that the Virgin Mary was an angel. According to *Interrogatio Johannis*, document of Bogomil origin, God sent into the world an angel, Mary, to facilitate the coming of Jesus on Earth. She was not an angel incarnate, as all humans are in the Bogomil vision, but she was a celestial angel (the Bogomils said that the souls of humans actually are angels trapped in the flesh body subjected to degradation and death, angels thrown to Earth by the Devil). Jesus entered, then exited through the right ear of the Virgin Mary. The Bogomils explained this auricular passage of Jesus, because He was the Logos, the Word of God and He could not enter the Virgin other than by hearing, an opinion shared by John of Damascus (*De fide orthodoxa*, IV, p. 14). The immaculate birth of the Saviour also implied an exit «with the gate locked» and the ear through which Jesus

¹ Eliade și Culiănu, 1993, pp. 141-142.

² Brenon, 2008, p. 181.

³ Brenon, 2008, p. 181.

entered without defilement also served as innocent orifice for exit⁴. The heretics said that the Virgin Mary was not even aware of the passage of Jesus, who passed through her ear «as the water passes through a pipe». These beliefs belonged to the so-called «moderate Cathars»⁵ and were shared by the heretics from Verona and a part of the Bosnian Cathars.

Other Cathars in Bosnia, believed that Jesus Christ, John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary were three angels sent by God. The Cathars in Concorezzo, Italy, said that the Virgin Mary was human, a woman, not an angel. The «radical Cathars» in Desenzano (Northern Italy) believed that Mary was an angel who conceived another angel, Jesus Christ, who did not suffer, did not die and hence did not resurrect, because his body was «a ghost», a spirit (Bogomil doctrine). They also said that Hell was here on earth and there was no other⁶. This was also the view of the radical Cathars from Southern France, called «Albigenses» by the inquisitors (from the French town of Albi, where the heretics were very numerous). The Italian heretics were very divided because «each of the six Italian Cathar Churches from the thirteenth century imagined its own fastidious alchemy of doctrinal beliefs»⁷.

As we can see, the opinions of the Cathars about the Virgin Mary were very diverse. These opinions belonged to the heretics from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. After the crusade against the Albigenses in the beginning of the thirteenth century that gave a hard blow to the sect, there followed a relentless hunt throughout the same century in order to liquidate all the groups of heretics who had escaped the initial persecutions of the Inquisition. A small number of Cathars were still surviving in the first quarter of fourteenth century in the mountainous regions of the French Pyrenees. In remote mountain villages, the heretical movement had a small and final «peasant revival», as someone called it⁸. What did these last heretics believe about the Virgin Mary? It seems that they symbolically identified Mary with the Albigense Church or with the community of the Cathar believers. At the same time they ridiculed the Catholic official Virgin⁹. About the birth of Christ by Mary, the last

⁴ Culianu, 1995, p. 254.

⁵ View the *Annex* for the differences between the cathars *moderates* and *radicals*.

⁶ Culianu, 1995, p. 279.

⁷ Brenon, 2008, pp. 116–117.

⁸ The expression is used by Le Roy Ladurie, 1992.

⁹ Le Roy Ladurie, 1992, vol. II, p. 277.

Cathars said that «Christ was never shadowed by something so abject as a woman's womb»¹⁰. What does it mean to be «shadowed»? We are told by a Cathar priest, Pierre Authier, quoted by Culianu: «Same as a man being in a barrel, is in its shadow without taking anything from it, also Christ lived inside the Virgin Mary without taking anything from her... he only was "shadowed" inside Saint Mary not receiving anything from her»¹¹. So, these were the Cathars' opinions about the Virgin Mary and the birth of Jesus Christ.

Regarding the end of the Virgin's life, the moderate Italian Cathars from Concorezzo believed that Mary was in Heaven with the Apostles awaiting the Final Judgement. Other Cathars, also from Concorezzo, a «dissident» group, believed that the Virgin awaited the end of the world in Heaven alongside John the Baptist, whom their heretic neighbours considered to be an envoy of the Devil. As we can see, the Italian heretics were very divided also on this issue, but we will not dwell on the analysis of the differences of opinion between them.

We can add the fact that the heretics had an ambivalent attitude towards women in general. On one hand, «the Perfects», the Cathar elite, did not bear the touch of women, for example they immediately got up from a table or a bench if a woman sat there. For the Perfects any human body was evil, the material body belonged to the Devil, who trapped the immortal souls of the angels inside the human bodies. In their view, it did not matter the gender of the prison body that detained the pure soul. The Devil created the two sexes. However, in the Middle Ages, the Catharism seemingly was «the least misogynistic of the Christian religious systems, although we do not know of any woman who became a bishop or deacon of the Cathar Church»¹².

It should be noted that, being absolute iconoclasts, the Cathars left no artistic representations of the divine characters (God, Jesus, Virgin Mary, the saints). We do not find such representations at the Cathars. There are no paintings or statues. The only copy of a Cathar Bible that survived to this day is not decorated with pictures. Even plant motifs (leaves or flowers) rarely appear. There are some abstract geometrical motifs. The only exceptions are the lily that appears on the margins and

¹⁰ Culianu, 1995, p. 290.

¹¹ Culianu, 1995, p. 290.

¹² Brenon, 2008, p. 188.

the fish within two letrinas. The lily symbolizes purity and the fish is an ancient symbol of Jesus Christ.

As a conclusion, we can say that the Cathar heretics generally considered the Virgin Mary to be an angel sent by God on Earth in order to host Jesus Christ in her body (rather than giving birth to him). All the attributes given to her by the other Christians (Lord's Mother, Mediator between people and Jesus, Queen, etc.) were vehemently denied by the heretics. The last Cathars considered her as a symbol of their persecuted Church and of believers of the true Christian faith. It was a strange and singular position that further highlights the peculiarities of the Cathar heresy which at a time had spread over a large area of Europe.

After ending about the Cathars, we must point out the bizarre situation of another heresy, that of the Paulicians. These were, paradoxically, the ancestors but also the heirs of the Cathars. The Paulicians were gnostic heretics who appeared in the seventh century in Asia Minor, in the area of upper Euphrates river. The founder of the cult was a certain Constantine Mananasis. In the year 653, a Syrian deacon, passing through Armenia, was hosted for a time by Constantine in his home near Samosata. Before leaving, the deacon gave his host a copy of the New Testament. Constantine studied the volume and was very interested especially by the writings of Apostle Paul. Gradually, he moved away from the dogma of the Byzantine official Church and founded his own Church. Constantine adopted the name Silvanus (after a disciple of Apostle Paul), and in the year 660 he founded his first community at Kibossa, in Armenia. Twenty-seven years later, he was sentenced to death by the order of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II (685–695 and 705–711). The sect however survived its founder.

From a dogmatic point of view, the Paulicians rejected the Old Testament and the worship of saints. They did not consider the cross as a Christian symbol, vehemently denied the transubstantiation, did not recognize the priests and above all, they believed in the existence of two Gods. One is the creator of the Universe, «the heavenly father», but who does not have power in the world on Earth. The other is the creator of the world where the humans live. They rejected marriage and procreation and did not believe that Jesus Christ truly incarnated. Strangely however, they sustained that the sufferings of Jesus were real

when he was crucified, although denying his incarnation¹³. Many of these beliefs are later found, at the Bogomils and Cathars.

Regarding the Virgin Mary, the Paulicians did not recognize her virginity and sustained that, after she gave birth to Jesus Christ, she gave also other sons to Joseph. According to the Paulicians, Jesus used the body of Mary as a bag and passed through her as through a channel¹⁴. Despite these derogatory ideas and the denial of Mary's virginity, they venerated Mary as a symbol of the «heavenly Jerusalem»¹⁵.

In the ninth century the Paulicians were for a short time a serious military threat to the Byzantine Empire (though they were defeated in the year 872 by the troops of emperor Basil I the Macedonian). A century later, another Byzantine emperor, John Tzimiskes (969-976), deported them in the european part of the Empire. The heretics were placed in the Thrace thema, around the city of Philippopolis¹⁶, in northwestern Bulgaria. For about a century, they were allowed a relative religious tolerance in exchange of their military support for the Byzantines against invaders from the north. Things changed in 1081, when Paulician soldiers deserted the Byzantine army during a fight with the Normans, causing their punishment from Byzantyne emperor, Alexis I Comnenus (1081-1118). Despite the persecutions to which it was subjected, the sect survived until the seventeenth century, when some of its followers were converted to Catholicism by Franciscans and Jesuits. Other Paulicians fled to the north of the Danube, their traces being found to this day in Romania (there is a village keeping their name, *Pavlicheni*, in *Calarasi* county) in *Baraganului Plain*, but especially in the *Banat* region (in *Caras-Severin*, *Timis* and *Arad* counties). Let us see what happened, what caused this migration to the north of the Danube.

This dramatic event in the history of the bulgarian Paulicians took place by the end of seventeenth century. Since the beginning of the century, the Catholic Church had begun quite a vigorous proselytism in north-western Bulgaria, in areas inhabited by Paulicians, who were mistaken for the Bogomils by many. This proselytism was facilitated by

¹³ Culianu, 1995, p. 239.

¹⁴ Culianu, 1995, p. 237.

¹⁵ Stoyanov, 1999, p. 95.

¹⁶ Culianu, 1995, p. 63.

the settlement of German immigrants, brought by the local authorities in those areas in order to work in mining.

These German miners were mostly Catholics. Combining the presence of Catholic miners with the action of Franciscan monks, the Catholic Church started in Bulgaria a campaign of converting the heretics, who kept their beliefs inherited from ancestors undisturbed by the Ottoman rule. By 1623, the Franciscans succeeded to convert a few hundred Paulicians¹⁷. Catholicism seemed to increase in that area. But the Bulgarians did a bad error by the end of the century. In 1688, the Bulgarian Catholics from the town of Kiprovats (located some 60 kilometers to north-west from Sofia) revolted against the Ottoman rule. They hoped that the Austrians, who were at war with the Ottomans, would come to help them, but that did not happen. The town of Kiprovats was besieged and conquered by the Ottomans on October 18th, 1688, after a short but fierce resistance. The entire population of the town was massacred or enslaved. The crushing of the revolt caused a massive emigration of the Bulgarian Catholics to Wallachia and Transylvania. The Paulicians, who did not participate in the revolt, stayed in place. But the Turks did not trust them too anymore, so they began to exert pressure on them. By the end of the century, the Paulicians from the region, plus those from Nikopole and Shvishtov, emigrated in Transylvania, settling in the Banat region of Romania.

As a conclusion, the Paulician sect that appeared in the seventh century, before the Cathars, survived the latter for a long time, their traces being found close to modern times. Regarding the Virgin Mary, the Paulicians too had a complex attitude towards her, similar to the Cathars, showing that this mixed view was a characteristic of the Dualist and Gnostic heretical movements.

ANNEX

The Cathars were separated by their Catholic opponents, between «moderates» and «radicals», according to the degree of their dualism regarding the creation of the world. The «moderates» believed that God was the creator of the Universe, of the primordial matter, and the Devil was the organizer, the artisan of the world. The Devil closed the souls of the angels in the human bodies. This group, was generally prevalent

¹⁷ Frazee, 1983, p. 109.

in Northern Italy, their approximate vicinity with Dalmatia explaining the doctrinal influence of the Bogomils. The «radicals» believed in the existence of two Gods, one good, the other evil, each one having his own trinity and world. These radicals flourished mostly in Southern France, being the famous «Albigenses». Ion Petru Culianu, in his «The Dualistic Gnosés Of the West», does a thorough analysis of the «fragmentation» of Cathar groups, even if that idea was contested by Manolache, but confirmed and emphasized by Anne Brenon in her conclusions on the dispersion of the Cathar beliefs.

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C o l e c c i ó n B a t i h o j a



El presente volumen recopila una serie de trabajos que, con enfoque multidisciplinar, abordan la relación entre Iglesia, cultura y sociedad en los siglos XVI y XVII. Los temas varían desde la perspectiva filológica e histórica hasta la teológica y filosófica, todas las cuales aplican su método específico de análisis a las obras del Siglo de Oro español (con extensión, en algunos casos, a la cultura rumana), destacando así la multitud de perspectivas desde las que dicho periodo se puede pensar y (re)interpretar.

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