

Sparks, Chris. *Heresy, Inquisition and Life Cycle in Medieval Languedoc. Heresy and Inquisition in the Middle Ages, 3.* York: York Medieval Press / The Boydell Press, 2014. Pp. xii, 170. ISBN 978-1-903153-52-9 (hardcover) \$99.

In this short and accessible monograph, Chris Sparks explores the beliefs and daily life of the ordinary laymen and women belonging to the Cathar sect in the Languedoc region between the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Conscious of the abundant historiography on the topic of the Cathar heresy and the Albigensian Crusade, Sparks moves away from the traditional approach focusing on the elite members of the Cathar faith, the so-called “good men and women,” turning instead to their unordained followers, great in number, yet somewhat set aside in the anonymous margins of history. The volume is organised according to a four-part life cycle structure: childhood, youth, marriage, and death. Sparks thus examines various inquisitorial records, among them the well-known register of Jacques Fournier, the material of Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou*, looking for the lived experience of men and women of every social station and every life stage in thirteenth-century Languedoc.

The study’s strength lies in Spark’s both determined and sensitive approach to his sources. While each chapter provides a useful summary of the Catholic and Cathar doctrine and liturgy concerning each life cycle stage, the volume is at its best when it brings to life and interprets the memories of the deponents who testified before the inquisitors. In this sense, it reads like a work of social history more than one of religious history. The chapter on childhood offers some particularly vivid episodes. It relates, for instance, how casual the interaction between children and good men and women could be before the persecutions of the 1230s: some deponents remembered Cathar ministers giving them nuts, fruits, and bread. In general, the contact between children and Cathars would have been mediated by adult parents and relatives. The conversion of children to the Cathar faith seems to have varied greatly in the thirteenth century according to the climate of persecution. Based on the sparse details of the inquisitorial records, it appears that child converts did not receive any special treatment in the Cathar community, any age distinction having been washed away along with their sins once they had received the Cathar equivalent of baptism, the *consolamentum*.

The author is often careful to highlight the limitations of his evidence, itself defined by the diverging interests of the inquisitors, the deponents they interrogated, their Cathar ministers, and the modern historian. His section on youth, for example, is the shortest, and it is perhaps where the strain imposed on the evidence by the lifecycle structure becomes clearest. On top of familial connections, youths’ interaction with the Cathars was determined by their mobility and their occupation as squires, apprentices, servants, or farmhands. In the case of apprentices, they would be introduced to the good men through their masters and employers,

leading certain trades like weaving and skinning to become associated with Catharism. Although Sparks does not go as far as equating these trade workshops with Cathar seminaries as some other scholars have, he acknowledges that such professional networks could easily overlap with religious ones and foster the spread of Cathar beliefs.

The chapter dedicated to marriage presents some of the most solid and maybe striking insights of the volume. Much as the Cathars were notorious for their discourse against marriage, Sparks finds that married couples constituted the bedrock of the good men's support networks. Indeed, Cathar couples would be involved in the life of their religious community by attending and organising sermons, services, and other rituals together, but most importantly, by serving as hosts for good men and women in need of shelter. The deponents' testimonies reflect the mutual agreement, compromise, or outright conflict which husbands and wives experienced as they negotiated the demands of their faith and those of their spouse.

At last, the chapter on death touches upon the topics of will-making, grieving, and burial, as well as the rituals of *consolamentum* and *endura*. The last moments before death appear to have been the life stage in which the presence of the good men and women became most insistent. In contrast with the Catholic extreme unction, the Cathar *consolamentum*, which required the minister to place the Gospel at the faithful's head, lay on hands, and recite prayers, was indispensable to the faithful's salvation. Upon receiving the *consolamentum*, the believer was purified from his sins, but any lapse could precipitate him back in the state of material corruption. This explains why, after having been consoled, certain Cathar followers chose the path of *endura*, fasting until death, as a means to preserve their state of absolute purity. Apart from these two rites, however, this final chapter illustrates in many ways the co-existence and even the intermingling of Catholic and Cathar practices. Bequests to the Cathar church, for instance, did not differ much from donations to Catholic institutions. As the evidence attests, some individuals seem to have in fact considered Cathar and Catholic last rites as interchangeable, receiving the *consolamentum*, then opting for oblation *ad succurendum* in a Cistercian abbey!

Sparks' bottom-up history unearths the Cathar beliefs and practices that rhythmised the everyday life of men and women in Languedoc from their birth to their death, and in doing so, exposes the complex social networks that sustained the Cathar faith and its leaders. While the life cycle approach sometimes suggests certain gaps or unexplored avenues, it is certainly successful in demonstrating the day-to-day negotiation of heterodoxy and heresy, and restoring the reality of individuals reduced to silence for too long.