Catharism, Celibacy and Marriage: A New Manifestation of an Old Christian Tradition

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As with many aspects of Christian doctrine, teachings on the sacrament of marriage has evolved and been revised in response to detractors and challengers throughout its history, often in response to heterodox or heretical beliefs. The example that will be explored in this study is the case of the Cathar heretics of Western Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Although the specifics of Cathar doctrine varied according to place and time, one practice that was universal in nearly all of the polemics concerning this heresy is that they endorsed chastity and rejected marriage. This presented a conflict for the Christian authors of apologia against the Cathars, in light of the long history of the Church extolling virginity as a sacred calling. When faced with heretics that lived among women, yet practiced a chaste lifestyle, the clergy was challenged to write in a way that condemned the heretic and refuted their practices without contradicting the Christian tradition that virginity and chastity were holy. As we examine a few pieces of anti-heretical polemic, we will be able to observe how the attack on the Cathars’ abstention from sex evolved and how the Church was able to present the chastity of the heretics in a way that made it appear offensive to Christian sensibilities.

The conflicted attitude of the Christian cleric toward marriage and sex began with writings in the New Testament itself, and with the Greek ideal of the chaste philosopher. The teachings of Jesus, and the writings of Paul, are best exemplified in a citation from I Corinthians 7. 1-7:

It is good for a man to have nothing to do with women; but because there is so much immorality, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband must give the wife what is due to her, and the wife equally must give the husband his due. The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it is her husband’s. Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it is his wife’s. Do not deny yourselves to one another, except when you agree upon a temporary abstinence to devote yourselves to prayer; afterwards you may come together again; otherwise, for lack of self-control, you may be tempted by Satan. All this I say by way of concession, not command. I should like you all to be as I am myself; but everyone has the gift God has granted him, one this gift and another that.
According to Paul it is ideal that one should live a chaste life, but this ‘gift’ of celibacy was not given to all people. Marriage is the institution that allows for sexual practice within a context that prevented fornication and allowed one to follow a fully Christian way of life. This passage is significant because it is the record of an apostolic celibate giving his blessing to the institution of marriage.

However, the first sentence, ‘It is a good things for a man to have nothing to do with women…’ reflected the ideology of the Greek stoic, whether Paul was aware of it or not. In Greek Stoicism, passion was at direct odds to reason and therefore, the philosopher was never intended to marry. It is on these grounds that the basis for a Christian hierarchy began with the chaste theologians and clergy occupying the higher strata and beneath these all of the other believers, who were intended for marriage and procreation.

In the late fourth century, Jerome and Augustine debated with each other in the works Adversus Iovinianum and De bono coniugali as to how marriage should be perceived in contrast to virginity. While Jerome argued that marriage was only a step above damnable, at best a permissive alternative to fornication, Augustine argued that it had its place in a Christian life, as a means of procreation. However, neither one would concede that marriage was as virtuous as chastity.

Practices that fell into the undefined space between marriage and chaste asceticism were not approved of by the majority of Christians. In the first millennium of the Church’s history, cohabitation among members of the clergy and/or between a priest and a lay-woman was not uncommon. These couples would live as husband and wife, with the caveat that they did not engage in sexual relations. This practice called ‘syneisaktism’ was routinely frowned upon and disputed by ecclesiastical authorities. John Chrysostom (c., 347- 407) condemned these ‘spiritual marriages’ in two treatises: Adversus eos qui apud se habent virgins subintroductas and Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant, in which he asserted that no matter how devout the couple, temptation by co-habitation was too great, and eventually they would fall victim to the desires of the flesh. Years later, Peter Damian (1007- 1172) would call these unions ‘meaningless’ and condemn them as a mockery of marriage, which he believed to have been instituted for the purpose of procreation. It was at the Second Lateran Council in 1139, that the clergy was officially barred from marriage or co-habitation with the opposite sex in the Sixth Canon of this document which read:
We also decree that those who in the subdiaconate and higher orders have contracted marriage or have concubines, be deprived of their office and ecclesiastical benefice. For since they should be and be called the temple of God, the vessel of the Lord, the abode of the Holy Spirit, it is unbecoming that they indulge in marriage and in impurities.9

The perception of marriage has ranged from an act blessed by the Church to a necessary evil that was instituted for the procreation of children and for the prevention of fornication. There was nothing in the Scriptures that stated explicitly that a member of the clergy could not marry. However, the Fathers of the Church argued that marriage distracted from complete commitment to a spiritual lifestyle. In addition, separating the chaste from the non-chaste created a defining barrier between the clergy and the laity.

The sect, which is defined by modern historians as Cathars were not the first religious faction in medieval Europe to have advocated chastity or to have renounced marriage. In the Aquitaine in 1022, a group labelled ‘Manicheans’ in an account by a monk from the monastery at Chartres were said to have rejected marriage.10 The heretics in Arras in the year 1025 were reported as having said, ‘No married person may enter the kingdom of heaven,’ as did the heretics in Châlons-sur-Marne in the 1040s.11 The explanation for this, posited by R. I. Moore, is that this was an anti-clerical reaction to the increased presence of the Church in the everyday lives of the laity. This rejection of the validity of various Church sacraments was seen increasingly following the Gregorian Reform in the second half of the eleventh century.12

In her book, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock*, Dyan Elliot suggests that this rejection of marriage comes as a reaction to the Gregorian Reform teaching, which impressed the importance of the chastity of the clergy. She cites the increased practice of converting to the monastic life on one’s deathbed as proof of the growing belief that the lay Christian might not be saved upon dying if he or she were not a member of the clergy.13 In this view, chastity became synonymous with salvation. It is perhaps understandable therefore, that there were groups, unable or unwilling to enter into a monastery, which chose to live a chaste lifestyle to ensure their salvation. However, those in the cloister saw this as a usurping of the social order and a dangerous practice.

The earliest accounts of the Cathars’ rejection of marriage did not suggest a motive for their doctrine extolling the virtue of chastity. For example, Abbot Everwin of Steinfeld, who is credited with providing the first account of the Cathar heresy in a letter to Bernard of Clairvaux in 1143
writes, ‘They condemn marriage, but I could not learn from them the reason, either because they dared not reveal it, or, more probably, because they did not know.’

The crusader-monk Peter of les Vaux-de-Cernay, accused the Cathars of hypocrisy regarding their teachings of abstinence in his crusader chronicle, the *Historia Albigensis* when he wrote:

[T]hey preached that matrimony was mere harlotry, and that no one could find salvation by begetting sons and daughters. […] The perfected heretics […] claimed (falsely) to practice chastity. They wished to appear that they were not liars, although they lied, especially about God, almost unceasingly! […] Those called ‘believers’ were dedicated to usury, robbery, murder and illicit love, and to all kinds of perjury and perversity.

These accusations are a rarity in anti-Cathar apologia at this time. Most accounts list adherence to chastity as a defining characteristic of the sect. However, some called into question by what power they were able to resist the temptation of fornication when living in mixed-sex groups. Hildegard von Bingen wrote in a letter to Philip, the archbishop of Cologne, that the devil did not plague the Cathar with desires of the flesh as he did with most men, so that they might appear more holy.

Bernard of Clairvaux addressed the *syneisaktism* of the Cathars at length in three of his sermons on the Song of Songs. Bernard did not mention the dualist theology of the Cathars, concentrating instead on their secrecy and questionable lifestyle. When describing the actions of such a heretic in the sixty-fifth sermon in his series on the Song of Songs, Bernard wrote, ‘The creature is very cunning and conceals his own footprints by some unknown artifice […] In fact, if you questioned him about his faith, nothing could be more orthodox; if you question him as to his way of life, nothing could be more irreproachable.’ The real danger in Cathar practice was their co-habitation with women. Questioning a suspected heretic about the nature of their relationships with women was a method Bernard proposed of exposing their heresy. Bernard posits a theoretical conversation between a Christian and a male heretic:

The Christian asks, ‘Now, my good man, who is this woman and where does she come from? Is she your wife?’

‘No,’ he says. ‘That is forbidden by my vows.’

‘Your daughter then?’

‘No.’
'What then? Not a sister or niece or, at least related to you by birth or marriage?'
'No, not at all.'
'Then how will you preserve your chastity with her? You can’t behave like this. Perhaps you don’t know that the Church forbids cohabitation of men and women if they are vowed to celibacy. If you do not wish to cause scandal in the Church, send the woman away. [...]'
'But,' [the heretic] says, ‘can you show me a passage in the Gospel forbidding this?’
The Christian replies, ‘You have appealed to the Gospel; to the Gospel you shall go. If you obey the Gospel, you will not cause scandal, for the Gospel clearly forbids you to do so.’

Bernard’s hypothetical dialogue reveals that the Church’s discomfort with the Cathars’ ascetic lifestyle was not based in doctrine but in a practice that complicated an established delineation. The Cathars had begun to occupy a niche in society monopolized by those vowed to a religious life. In the first twenty years that the Cathar heresy was recorded, it seemed that this chaste asceticism was born out of piety. This would have been disconcerting to the clergy, but nearly impossible to refute on theological grounds, as one can observe from the tenuous argument provided by Bernard above.

Later apologia put forward more sinister reasons for Cathar chastity that painted the sect in a less virtuous light. In 1163, Eckbert, a monk at the Premonstratensian Abbey at Schönau in the Rhineland, produced a collection of sermons against the Cathar heretics, detailing their heterodox doctrine. In his sermon, ‘Against the Heresy Concerning Marriage,’ Eckbert writes:

I know of one of your secret whispers, I have learned a word of your secret, which is fundamental to your heresy which you have concerning marriage. [...] Truly, you say that the fruit of which God commanded the first man in paradise not to taste, that this was nothing if not the woman that he created.

Therefore, according to Eckbert, the Cathars had changed the Genesis story so that the forbidden fruit of which Adam and Eve had partaken was sexual union. This theme in which sex was the forbidden fruit was repeated by anti-heretical polemicists in works against the Cathars multiple times over the next century in Southern France and throughout Italy. In this way, he provided a heretical reason for the Cathars’ piety, which turned it from the admirable into the perverse.
In the 1180s Alain of Lille provided more evidence of Cathar heretical doctrine in Book One of his Liber contra haereticos. He writes:

Also, the aforementioned heretics damn marriage. Truly, they say a certain thing of theirs, that in all ways man ought to purify that which he has from the Principle of Darkness, that is from the body and therefore, everywhere and in every way one should fornicate, to be freed more swiftly from evil nature. And for this reason they damn marriage, which confines the flow of filth. [...] Moreover, they seek to prove that marriage is damnable by authoritative and rational means. The first way: If marriages were not cursed, the Lord would not have recalled John the Evangelist from the tempestuous storm of marriage. And because marriage is not consummated if not through carnal union, and thus, through sin, they declare union to be cursed, and if the lovers live in purity, they are potential followers of impurity and vice.  

This passage is reminiscent of Augustine’s works against the Manicheans, such as Contra Faustum and De moribus manichaeos, in which he explains that the heretics believed that there were certain dark energies that were trapped in the human body from an evil creator. Augustine writes in Chapter Fifteen of De moribus manichaeos:

God is daily being set free in all parts of the world, and restored to its own domain. But in its passage upwards as vapour from earth to heaven, it enters plants, because their roots are fixed in the earth, and so gives fertility and strength to all herbs and shrubs. From these animals get their food, and, where there is sexual intercourse, fetter in the flesh the member of God, and, turning it from its proper course, they come in the way and entangle it in errors and troubles.

Alain’s account is a similar concept in which particles of an evil deity are trapped within human flesh and fornication was the method by which it could be released. In this case, sex in a monogamous context was a way of ensuring that these evil particles remain trapped within the human body. Therefore, he transformed the condemnation of marriage from an act of piety into an act of sacrilege, a mockery of the sacrament precisely because it prevented fornication.

Motives for the Cathars’ chastity that were omitted are as intriguing as those that the polemicists provided. The Cathars believed that the flesh was evil, a creation of malign deity and
taught that the souls of angels are entrapped within human form. Therefore, one apparent conclusion would be that they abstained from sexual relations to avoid procreation. However, this is mentioned infrequently within anti-heretical literature. There is a testimony from at least one inquisitional account in the Languedoc in the 1240s when a pregnant Cathar woman was told that her condition was shameful because she was gestating a demon. This example aside, there is little in the way of anti-Cathar polemic that specifically stated that Cathars held procreation to be evil. This is especially unusual given that so many polemicists borrowed from Augustine and he accused the Manicheans of practicing contraception because they wished to avoid procreation. Yet even in Moneta of Cremona’s extensive work against the Cathars in 1240s, where he devotes over thirty folios to the Cathar views of sex and marriage, he does not mention rejection of procreation as a motive for abstaining from sex.

What can be observed is a more complex theology emerging that paints the heretics’ chastity in a way that was increasingly more difficult to the lay Christian to appreciate. What started out in the mid-twelfth century as a pious practice that was an anti-clerical protest of the sacraments of the Church evolved into an heterodox perversion of the creation story and became a way to avoid trapping evil particles that were the result of a malevolent creator deity.

There are a few possible explanations for this evolution of ideology. One is that the Christian clergy did not know the theology of this sect of heretics when they first appeared. The Cathars were notoriously secretive regarding their practices and teachings. That which was unknown at the time of Everwin of Steinfeld might have become common knowledge forty years later by the time of Alain of Lille. Another possibility is that the theology of the Cathars changed in response to their interaction with ecclesiastical authorities. The Church was wont to label any heterodox group that abstained from sex or the consumption of meat ‘Manicheans,’ in the Augustinian tradition. It is possible that, having been identified as this extinct heretical sect, the Cathars adopted some of their beliefs in an effort to craft their identity as an outlier sect. A third possibility is that, realising that attacking the Cathars’ chastity was nearly impossible to do without undermining their own position on virginity, certain members of the Church found a way that would seem to make the Cathars’ reasoning for abstaining from sex was abhorrent, thus effectively labeling them as ‘the other’, outside society, unable to compete with members of the Christian clergy for the same socio-economic niche.
Since literature written from the Cathars themselves is scarce and dates from the latter part of the twelfth and thirteenth century, historians of this sect are tasked with interpreting the reality of Cathar theology in the negative spaces in the writings of their opponents. So whilst we may not be able to ascertain the full nature of the Cathar rejection of marriage, we are able to understand the magnitude of the threat this sect’s asceticism posed to the Church by observing how the attacks against the Cathars escalated. These polemics demonstrate that Christian theologians were able to expose Cathar beliefs in such a way that made their veneration of celibacy appear unseemly and even evil without compromising their own traditions extolling the virtues of virginity.

3 Elliot, pp. 40-41.
7 Elizabeth A. Clark, ‘John Chrysostom and the “Subintroductae”’, Church History, 46 (1977): 171-185 (176); Elliot, pp. 36-37.
8 Brooke, p. 47; Elliot, pp. 99-100; Resnick, p. 356.
13 Elliot, p. 107.


18 Bernard of Clairvaux, pp. 186-187.

19 ‘Scio unum ex susurris vestris, novi verbum occultae sapientiae vestrae, quod est fundamentum haeresis vestrae quam de coniugio habatis [...] Dicitis enim quod tructuc ille de quo praecepit Deus primo homini in paradiso de gustaret ex eo, nihil aliud fuit nisi mulier quam creavit,’ *PL*, 195, Col. 35-36, Sermon V.


