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Chris Sparks, *Heresy, Inquisition and Life Cycle in Medieval Languedoc*, York: York Medieval Press in association with The Boydell Press, 2014. xii + 170 pp. Notes, glossary, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-903153-52-9.

Review by Megan Cassidy-Welch, Monash University.

A poignant story in a thirteenth-century inquisitorial register inspired Chris Sparks to investigate how medieval people experienced religion and belief over the course of their lives. In 1273, a witness named Durand told an inquisitor that “his son, named Peter of Rouffiac, whom the same witness loved very much, had gone overseas with merchants four years ago to Alexandria, and the same witness had prayed and begged God day and night to bring him back alive and well, he at last learned that he had died at Acre. And, devastated by this, he said that it did a man as much good if he prayed to God as if he did not” (p. 151). Durand’s story, notes Sparks in this erudite and imaginative book, reminds us that although such “self-conscious accounts of life-cycle change are rare” within the inquisitorial testimonies of thirteenth and fourteenth-century Languedoc, it is nonetheless possible to find encounters with belief and the sacred that are intimately connected to the life trajectories of their narrators.

Sparks aims to explore how those accused of heresy and heretical association in medieval southern France told inquisitors about their beliefs, and what those stories then reveal about the spiritual landscapes of the region’s thirteenth and fourteenth-century inhabitants. The author sidesteps the issue of whether there was such a thing as “Catharism” by focusing entirely on the wider issue of “belief.” A short and conciliatory tone is struck at the start of the book in relation to issues of definition that have dogged recent scholarship on the reality and mythology of the Cathar question, but overall Sparks sees Catharism as a “belief system and as a body of people” (p. 5).^[1] This means that he is able to concentrate on encounters with forms of religiosity that are not always easy to categorize, particularly as they pertain to lay people. In this way, this book is a social history as much as it is a study of belief.

The concept of a life cycle frames the book. As Sparks acknowledges, this is a tricky paradigm to apply to medieval society, where life was understood to be mostly organized into the “ages of man,” which might be divided into three, five, six, or seven phases. Sparks has decided to deploy a life-cycle model derived almost entirely from modern historiography, which privileges childhood, adolescence, marriage, and death as the principal stages of life. There is some organizational sense to this choice. The book is able to engage with the relevant historiographies as they arise, but I worry that these are also categories that may leave out other groups—single women, for instance—or relegate those groups to only one stage of the life cycle.^[2] It may well be that the depositions do not furnish enough cases about such groups to warrant their inclusion, but more than a nod to the gendered construction of life cycle frameworks would nonetheless have been welcome.

The book’s four sections, childhood, youth, marriage, and death, are carefully written. The sources used are mainly testimonies (or depositions) given by witnesses to various inquisitors who visited Languedoc from the mid-thirteenth century. These include the famous depositions contained in Toulouse MS 609 (from the inquisition conducted by Bernard of Caux and Jean of Saint-Pierre in 1245–6), material from volumes 21 and 22–6 of the *Doat Collection*, the fourteenth-century register of Geoffroy d’Ablis, Bernard Gui’s *Sentences*, and the well-known register of Jacques Fournier. Together, these sources introduce the historian to hundreds of individuals and almost a cacophony

of past voices. Indeed, it is one of this book's great strengths that this material, so often studied separately, has been brought together at all. It is also germane to remember, however, that these sources are each singular products of unique historical contexts. Inquisitorial documentation, questioning and responses to heresy changed significantly from the beginning of these tribunals in the mid-thirteenth century to time of Fournier, as Sparks acknowledges. Cutting across historical time and context by focusing on belief as part of life cycle is intended to emphasize variety of belief, and mostly this is successfully delineated, as in the chapter on childhood, where the records reveal less public contact between children and "good men" (the Cathar term for the elect) across time. Yet, occasionally the choice of evidence from so many incarnations of inquisitorial presence has the effect of constructing an undifferentiated temporality, flattening text and practice across the decades.

These conceptual reservations should not detract from what is a thoroughly researched and thoughtful monograph. The first chapter on childhood sketches a fascinating picture of both children's encounters with Cathars and attitudes toward childhood more generally. Children's experiences of religious practice in Languedoc and their contact with "heterodox" ministers are traced in the first section of this chapter. Sparks finds that family contexts were unsurprisingly influential in determining how and when children encountered the "good men." More active participation in Cathar activity is also discovered, particularly from the 1240s, when the practice of children receiving the *consolamentum* seems to have been more frequent. Sparks notes that this practice, which seems to have been more common for girls, died away once inquisitorial presence in the region became more entrenched. Overall, Sparks finds that the experiences of heretical activity by children were always mediated by adults, either by their own households which supported or prevented such experience, or by good men and women themselves through formal inclusion in ritual practice.

The second chapter is the shortest, mainly because "[y]ouths are—quite frankly—hard to find in the depositions" (p. 91). Nonetheless, Sparks makes a valiant and sometimes fruitful effort to illuminate the lives of medieval young people (mostly young men) and their encounters and engagement with the Cathars. "Youth" is an especially difficult term to use in relation to medieval understandings of life stages and, as Sparks discovers, it is also difficult to separate children from youths in the depositions, when ages are not always given and when depositions are sometimes based on recollections of events from many years previously. Indeed, it is the eventual observation of this chapter that "youth" was only part of a number of other identifications of those between childhood and marriage: "[i]t always existed in parallel with other more powerful identities' mostly describing work and status (squire, apprentice, pupil, servant, son or daughter)" (pp. 92-3). These groups experienced more interaction with heretics than children, given their independence, but the extent and nature of such interactions remains frustratingly elusive.

With the category of marriage as its foundation, the discussion in chapter three rests on firmer ground. Inquisitors found heretics to be famously hostile to marriage, so exploring how heretical association or belief impacted the (eventually) sacramental relationship between husband and wife offers a most interesting line of inquiry. Sparks discusses the wider social and religious construction of marriage before turning to the lived reality of marriage in thirteenth and fourteenth-century Languedoc. Despite their vociferous preaching against marriage, it seems that good men were not interested in dissolving actual marriages. Married couples could be some of the good men and women's strongest supporters, hosting them in their houses, warning them of impending danger, supplying them with information or food and goods, and maintaining their secrets. Not all husbands and wives shared the same convictions, however, and Sparks finds a number of examples of tension in marriages where one spouse was hostile to the other's religious leanings. Over time it seems that good men and women became less vocal about their opposition to marriage, perhaps as a result of the fracturing of communities once inquisitorial activity became more frequent and damaging. Communities of believers could only be held together, Sparks suggests, if good men and women were prepared to change their views on how those groups could stick together.

The final chapter deals with death, mostly focusing on the ritual aspects of dying. The *consolamentum* and *endura* rituals, the practice of will-making, the performance of grief and the practicality and meaning of burial are all touched on here. Sparks finds that although the moment of death also

signified the promise of eternal life, it was also a tense and dangerous time when the presence of good men and women was needed, but sometimes disrupted, where “expectations of sociability clashed with an urgent need for secrecy” (p. 150). The interactions between members of lay community, good men and women, and family members are brought together in this chapter to reveal an unexpectedly empathetic landscape of bereavement, where formal ritual and grief could coincide with the support of disparate members of the community.

This is a well-researched and nicely written book which collates a wealth of detail to offer a fresh perspective on the social and religious history of thirteenth and fourteenth-century France. In a historiography recently marked by debates over definition, and more recently ethics, Chris Sparks offers a diplomatic and cordial intervention.[3] He reminds us that historians on both sides of the Cathar debate are dealing with the question of belief, not just how it was constructed, but how it was narrated and recorded, and what those stories and texts might tell us about both the history of medieval belief and the lives of those who accommodated it.

NOTES

[1] Mark Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245–1246* (Princeton, N.J., and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001); *idem*, “On the Cathars, the Albigensians and Good Men of Languedoc,” *Journal of Medieval History* 27 (2001):181-95; R. I. Moore, *The War on Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe* (London: Profile Books, 2012); Peter Biller, “Goodbye to Waldensianism?” *Past and Present* 192 (2006): 3-33.

[2] For this category, see Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, eds., *Single Women in the European Past, 1250–1800* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); and most recently Cordelia Beattie, *Medieval Single Women: The Politics of Social Classification in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[3] Peter Biller, review of *The War on Heresy: Faith and Power in Medieval Europe*, (review no. 1546), <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1546>. (Accessed 22 September 2014, with author’s response).

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