

H-France Review Vol. 9 (January 2009), No. 15

Mark Gregory Pegg, *A Most Holy War: The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom*. Pivotal Moments in World History. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. xxx + 253 pp. Maps, genealogical tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$25.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-517131-0.

Review by James Given, University of California, Irvine.

What, one might ask, is the point to another book on the Albigensian Crusade? The Albigensian Crusade has long been a favorite topic for medievalists. Including the book under review here, at least seven significant works on the subject have been published since 1963. And this total does not include the host of “popular” histories, some of doubtful value, that deal with the crusade. However, Mark Pegg’s *A Most Holy War* is a highly original and valuable contribution to the literature on heresy and crusade in the south of France. It is undoubtedly the most vividly written of the books by a professional historian. And it has some big arguments that it wants to advance. For Pegg the Albigensian Crusade “reconfigured the relationship of divinity and humanity throughout Christendom—indeed, it redefined Christendom itself. What it meant to be a Christian (and, in a certain sense, Jewish or Muslim) would never be the same again. The Albigensian Crusade was a holy war unlike any other before it, a great medieval drama as spiritually subtle as it was crudely brutal and, in its own bloody sibylline way, a terrible prediction of so much sacred violence in the world for the next millennium” (p. 5).

Pegg’s prose has a distinctive, and very personal, “muscular” style. It is marked by a relentless drive and passion that are rare among academic historians. The seamless blending of extensive quotations from the original sources into the flow of narrative lends his recounting of the events of the crusade a very concrete sense of immediacy and tangibility. The description of the crusader army on the march in the summer of 1209 and the terrible massacre at Béziers constitutes one of the best imaginative recreations of the realities of medieval warfare there is. Pegg also has a knack for humor, displayed, for example, by his description of an Englishman who accosted him in a bar in Fanjeaux as a “goldfish in white slacks” (p. xiv).

Pegg’s style is one of the book’s major strengths; at times it is also one of its flaws. Pegg occasionally surrenders to the temptation to over-write. His desire to give his readers a vivid, concrete feel for his subject leads him to assert things that we really can’t know. For example, in describing the debate between church prelates and the Good Men at Lombers in 1165, he tells us exactly how many minutes one of the participants spoke (p. 44). He also puts into the heads of his characters thoughts and emotions to which we, as historians, really have no access. In summing up, for instance, the character of Arnau Amalric, Innocent III’s legate on the crusade and ultimately archbishop of Narbonne, Pegg writes, “A sacred egoism defined the man; he knew better than Him [i.e., Christ] how His war was to be waged and, as his influence was waning after 1220, he wallowed in sanctimonious insouciance” (p. 175). This is highly evocative but it clearly outruns what we can know from the surviving record. Moreover, in his description of Languedoc he flirts with the pathetic fallacy: “There was something grotesque, amorphous, and feculent about the valleys, mountains, and fields between the Garonne and the Rhône” (p. 13).

But the real value and challenge of the work lie in the author’s arguments about the nature of the

“Cathar” heresy that the crusade was intended to combat, and in his claims about the transformative effect of the crusade on Latin Christendom as a whole. The traditional interpretation of Catharism holds that it was a dualist heresy whose followers believed in two gods: one evil, who created the material world, and the other good, out of whose heaven the evil god stole angels to imprison in the material world that he had created. Catharism also has generally been portrayed as a relatively highly organized heresy, with a hierarchy of bishops and deacons, and with links to the Bogomil heresy in the Balkans and the Byzantine Empire. This is an interpretation that is becoming harder and harder to defend. Pegg’s own careful investigation of the great inquisition of 1245-1246 [1] and Uwe Brunn’s recent, brilliant study of anti-heretical polemic in the Rhineland [2] cast a good deal of doubt on the idea that there was anything like an organized heresy professing a dualist theology in twelfth- and early thirteenth-century Europe.

For Pegg, the Cathars were not dualist heretics, but local holy men and women. Known to themselves and their neighbors simply as Good Men, they did not espouse a dualist theology nor constitute members of a rival church. They were people who practiced a type of Christian life that did not fit well with the new attitudes and structures of the post-Gregorian reform church. The gestures and acts in which they engaged, which later inquisitors saw as signs of adherence to a self-conscious heresy, were simply part and parcel of the elaborate code of *cortezia*, the complex of rules of deference, respect, and self-image that shaped the social life of Languedoc. The Cathar heretics who appear in the texts of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries were a figment of the imagination of churchmen.

It was only after a savage twenty years of war and the installation of a formal inquisition of heretical depravity that the surviving Good Men began to conceive of themselves and their beliefs in the same ways as did the inquisitors. They developed dualist ideas, began labeling themselves bishops and deacons, and dressing in vivid blue robes. As Pegg puts it, “The art of living in the world formerly embodied by the holy good men, an aesthetic precisely shaped by moderation and melioration, was now garish and conceited.... [T]he sacrality they exemplified was little more than longing and regret calcifying into an increasingly passive divinity” (p. 168). If one agrees with Pegg, a good deal of the history of medieval heresy needs to be rethought and rewritten.

Pegg also argues that the crusade not only transformed the south of France but all of Latin Christendom as well. Pegg challenges the idea that at the end of the “long twelfth century” Western Europe had achieved “cultural coherence around particular ideas and practices” (p. 148). High churchmen may have created a rich and elaborate interpretation of the Christian life, but ordinary Christians worshipped in often very different ways. Pegg argues that Innocent III understood this. The launching of the Albigensian Crusade was part of his program “to remake Christendom in His [i.e., Christ’s] coherent and unified image....”

For Pegg, the Albigensian Crusade ushered genocide into European culture. The crusade linked divine salvation to mass murder and made slaughter as loving an act as Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. “This ethos of redemptive homicide is what separates the crusade massacres from other great killings before the thirteenth century” (p. 188). “The crusade, far from being a Christian aberration, epitomized the sanguine beauty and bloody savagery of thirteenth-century Latin Christendom. The threat from heresy and the necessity of eliminating that threat were fundamental in creating the Christ-like world that Innocent III struggled all his life to achieve. The ability to resemble Him through day-to-day activity, so much so that you really were Christ, was the sublime religious phenomenon of the Middle Ages.... The Albigensian Crusade offered the opportunity to walk like Him for twenty years within Europe” (p. 189). These are big claims. They may well be true, but Pegg does not so much argue them as assert them. This reader, at least, would have liked to see more developed arguments for his interpretations.

Despite its flaws, *A Most Holy War* is an important book. It is written in a very personal style that differs markedly from the stolid prose usually produced by academic historians. The interpretations—especially

Pegg's claims for the foundational place of the Albigensian Crusade in western history—are original, daring, and challenging. One may not emerge from the pages of *A Most Holy War* altogether convinced by its arguments, but one will have been persuaded that the Crusade is a passionately interesting phenomenon. Everyone interested in the history of the medieval church and heresy should read this book. If you plan to read only one book on the Albigensian Crusade, it should be this one. You will be intellectually challenged and entertained as well.

NOTES

[1] Mark Gregory Pegg, *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2] Uwe Brunn, *Des contestataires aux Cathares: discours de réforme et propagande antihérétique dans les pays du Rhin et de la Meuse avant l'Inquisition* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2006).

James Given
University of California, Irvine
jbgiven@uci.edu

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ISSN 1553-9172