

Religion, Violence and the Historian

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'Just before the third year after the millennium, throughout the whole world, but most especially in Italy and Gaul, men began to reconstruct churches, although for the most part the existing ones were properly built and not in the least unworthy. But it seemed as though each Christian community was aiming to surpass all the others in the splendour of construction. It was as if the whole world were shaking itself free, shrugging off the past and cladding itself everywhere in a white mantle of churches.'¹

These words of the chronicler Raoul Glaber (the Bald), writing about 1040, may be familiar to a good many of you, for they are regularly quoted in textbooks of medieval history as emblematic of a transformation in Europe's fortunes at the beginning of the second millennium CE. The past which was shrugged off, according to this firmly established orthodoxy, was characterised above all by violence. Europe had been devastated by the invasions of Vikings, Magyars and Saracens from without and the ceaseless and bloody warring of its 'feudal' aristocracy within. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries western Europe emerged from violence in many forms, especially 'barbarian' invasion and 'private' warfare, or 'feudal anarchy,' a form of 'lawlessness' so-called because it pursued the family interests of the protagonists rather than a perceived public interest - perceived, that is, by historians - such as state- or nation-building, or 'the expansion of Europe' or, more grandly, of civilization - that is, invading and conquering the 'barbarians' instead of being invaded by them.

As that last point reminds us, there is violence and violence. The twelfth and

¹ iii.13, 114 - 7

thirteenth centuries are still regarded as one of the great, creative ages of order and advance in European history, when the national monarchies which became the states of modern Europe (with the portentous exceptions of Germany and Italy) established their sway over their unruly subjects, promulgating law codes to proclaim it and building institutions to realise it in the secular sphere, as the church, reorganised and reinvigorated under a dynamic and innovative papacy, did in the spiritual. It was no coincidence that these developments took place simultaneously with one of the great cultural flowerings in European history: Raoul may have been a monk, but his vision of lavish patronage of the church, and by extension the arts and learning, as the pre-eminent indicator of peace and order was universal.

Assessment of the level of violence is not a simple matter for any society at any period, and has recently been the subject of a good deal of controversy, one way and another, for this one. But it is not evident that violence diminished in the eleventh century, or even the twelfth, if only because most of the achievements which have commanded the admiration of posterity depended on it. Those same textbooks that quote Raoul Glaber follow him up, as likely as not, with Abbot Suger's equally famous portrait of the incessant expeditions, skirmishes and sieges by which Louis VI of France reduced to submission the turbulent baronage of the Isle de France; Louis' contemporary Henry I, the English Lion of Justice, was famed and feared for the cruelty with which he punished his enemies; Henry's grandson, Henry II Plantagenet, father of the English Common law, exercised his rulership through the agencies of *vis et voluntas, ira et malevolentia*, (power and arbitrary will, anger and malice), ruthlessly deployed to keep his enemies in terror and his friends in perpetual uncertainty. If the thirteenth century was the great age of European law codes it was also that of the classification and persecution of all manner of minorities, of the proliferation of cruel and unusual punishments, of the institutionalisation of torture.

It is unnecessary to labour further the point that chroniclers – and hence historians – were a lot more likely to approve of violence, though they did not do so uncritically, when it was carried out by acknowledged office holders in the name of public objectives – the establishment of authority, the maintenance of order, the expansion of kingdoms and so on. In this respect the vocabulary and judgements of the great nineteenth-century historians who established this standard account of the progress of European civilization reflected *avant la lettre* Weber’s classic definition of the state as the monopoly of legitimate violence. The writers of the twelfth century, naturally enough, preferred recourse to the sacred: the peace of all things, Augustine had said, lay in the tranquillity of the divinely ordained order; it was their position within it which legitimated, and indeed required, the violence of legitimate authorities. They and their successors also greatly extended the circumstances in which the Church was prepared to give its blessing to violence, most obviously when it was directed against non-Christians. Those developments will not be pursued further here. My concern is with violence carried on under the banner of religion within Latin, or Catholic or western society, by Christians against other Christians. It may be roughly classified under four headings, in descending order of formal public sanction, as Warlike, repressive, intercommunal, and insurrectionary.

In the first category, the Albigensian Crusade (1208 – 1229) was one of the bitterest and most momentous wars in European history. It was not the first to have been justified by the heterodoxy of the victim; religious difference (real or alleged) was certainly not the only issue that fuelled it, or even the most important; it is at least arguable that the redrawing of much of the emerging European nation-state system which it precipitated was of much more lasting significance than any religious outcome. But this was the first time that religion was invoked as the justification for an attack by Catholic Christians on a Christian and avowedly Catholic principality. The spirit in which it was conducted, or at the least that in which it was remembered, is famously epitomised in the legendary reply (legendary, possibly, in both senses) of the Papal Legate when he was asked after

the fall of Béziers in 1209 how the victorious crusaders were to tell the difference among the defeated citizenry between heretics and Catholics. 'Kill them all. The Lord will know his own.' For contemporaries and in memory this was a religious war like none before it and very few after: in European history, perhaps the Hussite Wars in the fifteenth century, the German Peasants' Wars and French Wars of Religion in the sixteenth, the Thirty Years' War in the seventeenth. Religious rhetoric and mutual demonisation polarised the protagonists, intensified the brutality of the conflict, and prolonged it by blocking possible resolutions. It also became self-fulfilling: the categories, on the one hand 'Catholic', on the other the many labels bestowed on various groups of dissenters, both real and imaginary, were hardened and entrenched, conceptually and to an increasing extent in reality.

It is easy, with hindsight, to note how the defence of the faith had over the centuries become increasingly permissive in respect of those against whom the use of violence might be condoned. Augustine, against his own earlier convictions and those of many of his Christian contemporaries, had devised a justification for the coercion of heretics, but the church long remained firmly opposed to killing, and to war, even against pagans. In the twelfth century the alleged propensity of Celtic Christianity to generate heresy had been called in aid of military and political expansion of a Catholic, though not necessarily obedient, monarchy into Wales and Ireland. Increasingly violent polemic against the Greeks, including the charge that they were heretics and fomenters of heresy, formed part of the background to the conquest and sack of Constantinople by the army of the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Whether that atrocity was planned, and if so by whom, remains uncertain, but if there was a design it was for greed, not religion, and was immediately denounced in the strongest terms by the same Pope, Innocent III, who launched the Albigensian crusade four years later. Nobody tried, then or later, to justify or excuse it, and the common anxiety of the narrative sources is to minimise the roles of their heroes and patrons in the events that led up to it.

The case of the Albigensian Crusade – correctly so-called because the Pope had, since 1204, been offering the spiritual incentives and immunities associated with

war in the holy land to those who would take up arms against the Count of Toulouse - is very different. The contemporary narrative sources, with one partial exception, are coarsely and brutally celebratory, and their substance and until quite recently their tone has shaped the historiography ever since. The harmony of Catholic piety and French nationalism on that point, until very recently, is expressed in the title of a standard textbook, *La croisade contre les Albigeois et l'union du Languedoc à la France* (Paris, 1942: the date is not immaterial). Almost all modern narratives repeat the story that Catholicism was on the verge of extinction in the Languedoc, a land long riven by the Manichaean heresy of the Cathars, against which its nobles, led by its principal lord, Count Raymond VI of Toulouse, declined to act, leaving the Pope with no choice but to do so, especially after the murder of his legate, who had excommunicated the Count, by one of Raymond's officials, in January 1208.

That is a very long way from the whole truth. What matters from our present point of view is that while the Albigensian wars were undoubtedly 'religious' by any possible test, their origins were not. They lay in long-standing and complicated competing political claims which were rooted, in the last resort, not in the culture but in the geography of the region. The Counts of Toulouse were historically among the most honoured vassals of the French crown, one of them a leader of the first Crusade. Their remoteness from the northern centres of royal power had given them an extra degree of independence and prestige - they were uniquely permitted, for example, not to attend the royal coronation or solemn courts, for others an indispensable test of loyalty - but had also since the middle of the twelfth century exposed them increasingly to the ambitions of others, including the papacy itself as well as the kings of Aragon and of England. It was the propaganda of the last that generated the image of heresy 'spreading like a cancer from Toulouse through Gascony and neighbouring regions' which, remorselessly repeated through the last decades of the century, provided the rationale for the assault that Innocent III released in 1208. The accusation was

first promulgated by a Council of the church in 1163, less remarkable for the fact that it was presided over by Pope Alexander III, at that moment heavily dependent on the support of Henry II, than that it was held in Henry 's favourite city, Tours, and on his instructions packed by his bishops, four years after the greatest military expedition of his reign, against Toulouse, had been frustrated by the intervention of the French king, Louis VII. Such an intervention could not be easily repeated if the Count of Toulouse were branded a protector of heresy. The courtiers of Henry II were probably not the first European statesmen to understand that if you repeat something often enough and loudly enough people begin to think there must be something in it, but they exploited it with rare skill, and over the following decades many, with varying degrees of credulity and vested interest, took up the message, as historians have done ever since.

There was a sliver of truth to lend initial plausibility to this caricature of the religious temper of the Languedoc (Occitania). The ecclesiastical reform which since the 1060s had been vigorously though patchily enforced in the more 'advanced' parts of Europe made little headway here. When Bernard of Clairvaux visited the region in 1145 he was scandalised by the absence of the key measures associated with it, including more centralised control over clerical preferment, more uniform practices in relation to baptism, penance and burial, and especially the payment of tithes. By that time, however, attempts to introduce them, which Bernard's efforts doubtless encouraged, were arousing local resentment and resistance, especially in the castellated villages of the countryside. Over the following decades that resentment increased, and with it the influence of the local champions and spokesmen of the traditional ways of doing things, often referred to by a conventional courtesy as 'Good Men' (*bons omes*).

Broadly the same forces, in varying contexts and combinations, were bringing about increasing social distance and deteriorating relations between the clergy

(especially the higher clergy) and the laity in other parts of Europe. Disputes over the control of ecclesiastical appointments and resentment of growing financial demands generated increasingly acrimonious accusations of avarice and corruption on the one side, and of heresy on the other, in Italy, Flanders and the Rhineland in the 1150s, '60s and '70s. When the leaders of the church as a whole had the opportunity to compare notes at the Third Lateran Council of 1179, after almost twenty years of schism, they concluded that they were confronted everywhere by a body of heretics 'whom some call Cathari, some Patarini and some Publicani', but which 'in Toulouse and its neighbourhood had assumed such proportions that they practice their wickedness no longer in secret, but preach their error publicly...' On that basis another twenty years of strident publicity prepared the way for the Albigensian Crusade, and for the establishment and empowerment of the papal inquisition, most actively in the Languedoc, northern Italy and the Rhineland. In invoking the violence associated with that institution, incidentally, we should bear in mind that it was, in a sense, reciprocal, though certainly not symmetrically so: in choosing the stake rather than the recantation which they were invariably and genuinely offered, the victims in effect accepted the inquisitors' understanding of the nature of the conflict in which they were joined. All asceticism, as Nietzsche remarked, and martyrdom especially, is a form of aggression.

That, putting it briefly, is how those who attacked and eventually conquered and colonised the Languedoc became persuaded, or persuaded themselves, that they did so in defence of their Catholic faith. It is not how it appeared to their victims, to whom the aggressors were 'the French' or 'the crusaders' from the beginning. Nor did the war have the effect of exacerbating the division between Catholics and heretics in the native population. On the contrary, statements to the effect that heretics could not be denounced or ostracised because they were friends and relations are quite common. In this respect the account of the Languedoc constructed by the pre-crusade propaganda was true. Catholics and heretics

lived side by side without obvious signs of animosity or mutual hostility. As late as the 1220s, in the memory of those questioned in the Great Inquisition of 1245 – 6, open debate between Catholics and heretics was quite normal in the villages of the Lauragais, and seldom attended by violence or the threat of it. That is not to say that there were never any disagreements between them about other things, or that when there were the religious difference may not have been cited as, or in fact have been, an element of it; but it was not a general or profound source of social division within Occitan society, either before or after the wars. The role of religion in the Albigensian crusade was to assure the attackers of the righteousness of their cause, and by dehumanising their opponents to dissolve whatever inhibitions might have restrained the ferocity of their conduct on the battle field and towards the conquered and their lands – though it should be added that the extent of such inhibitions was not great in any theatre of thirteenth-century warfare.

An obvious implication of these facts is that the division between Catholics and heretics did not correspond to any profound or general fissure in Occitan society – a point the more noteworthy because by all accepted accounts the region was politically extremely fragmented and socially highly diverse. Experts on it (which I am not) offer differing accounts of the social basis of heresy, and in particular of the relationship between its currency in the villages, at the courts of the greatest of the nobles, and among the citizens of the largest towns. What is pretty obvious is that no simple class-based analysis is likely to be correct, and that if heresy ‘arrived’ in the Languedoc before, or more than a few years before, the crusaders – a view which, as I have said, I do not share – it did not owe its success to its appeal to any single sector of the population.

If the conclusion that heresy *per se* was not socially divisive in the Languedoc seems at first sight surprising, it is in part because the category ‘heresy’ is itself unhelpful: there is no necessary or in my observation simple correlation between

the doctrines of religious groups and their social roles and dynamics. We may clarify the issue by returning two hundred years or so, to the period at which popular religious movements appear as a major force in European social history.

The classic case, and the best documented, is that of the Patarenes who from the 1050s until the 1070s kept the city of Milan in turmoil with their attacks – including physical attacks – on the Archbishop and clergy of the city. The campaign was directed at clergy, who were married, or who paid for their benefices. Because the elimination of simony and clerical marriage was at the heart of the programme of the ‘Gregorian’ reform which reshaped the church over the next two centuries, of which the Patarenes provided an advance guard, they have never been classified as heretics, though it is at least probable that their leaders subscribed to the very serious Donatist heresy – the one which had caused Augustine to embrace coercion – that sacraments conferred by unworthy priests were invalid. Conversely, the practices that were attacked were neither new nor peculiar to Milan, although the Milanese clergy claimed that marriage was permitted to them by a special tradition sanctioned by their patron saint, Ambrose, and traffic in preferments had been routinely organised since the Archbishop distributed the lands of his diocese as fiefs among its leading families (*capitanei*) in 983, and particularly blatant as the rapid growth of a money economy made payment in cash increasingly common. But marriage, especially of the lower clergy, was general everywhere in Europe at this time, and clerical positions and the revenues they carried had been a major instrument of patronage and a lucrative ingredient of seignorial estates at least since the ninth century. This did not prevent the Patarenes, and their allies in Rome, from characterising them as, respectively, the *heresis nicolaitana* and the *heresis simoniaca*.

The Patarene movement was both violent and socially divisive. ‘If you had seen the city with its deserted palazzi and now fallen towers’ one chronicler

complained, 'you would have concluded that you were amidst the ruins of Babylon, not Milan, once the noble seat of the kingdom.'² The word *pataria* from which the movement takes its name is thought to have referred to the rag-pickers who were the lowliest casual workers of the cloth trade, but its leaders were from knightly families and its patrons included merchants and bankers. Priests were attacked in their houses and forced to give up their wives; at least one church was seized and taken over by the rebels. On the other side, riots and popular protests against the clergy were brutally suppressed by the armed henchmen of the *capitanei* families, who roamed the streets, butchering and torturing at will. The divisions created, or reflected, in these events, however, were not only of class: no doubt – and this is a point to which I shall return – at least partly because it was a religious movement, inspired by eloquent preaching and united by shared worship and common ritual practices as well as by religious rhetoric, it also divided families:

One household was entirely faithful [that is, for this chronicler, pro-Patarene], and the next entirely faithless; in a third the mother believed with one son, while the father disbelieved with another son.³

In this the Patarenes were characteristic of the evangelical movement from the early eleventh century, which gave rise to a large number of monastic foundations all over Europe, and which equated the adoption of the religious life with the disavowal of family ties and privileges; a hundred years later Bernard of Clairvaux, main spokesman and propagator of the Cistercian order, was still quite ruthless in his insistence that family ties, between parents and children, between husband and wife, must always be sacrificed to the call of the religious life. The Patarenes also foreshadowed not only the programme of the 'Gregorian' reform movement in the church, as we have seen, but its tenor and

² Landulf, q. Stock 187

³ Andreas 10, p. 1057, q. Cowdrey, 31

temper. The Pope from whom that reform takes its name (Gregory VII, 1073 – 83) flooded Europe with letters that urged the faithful – note the word – not only to boycott the services of married priests, but to withdraw their obedience from bishops who failed to obey his precepts or to carry out his programme. That was a direct incentive to rebellion, and was frequently accepted as such. In Gregory's time and for almost century after it the progress of 'reform' in Europe was regularly accompanied by civil disobedience, boycotts and riots: by the threat and the reality of violence. It must be very doubtful whether the reform could have prevailed, as eventually it did, without it.

The reasons for the violence which accompanied both the monastic movement and the wider movement of ecclesiastical reform are not far to seek. Those who inspired and conducted it had been among the losers in a widespread and ruthless revision of family structures and succession customs to secure family patrimonies by restricting inheritance to a single son, usually the eldest. This meant excluding from their customary share, and their livelihood, not only daughters but younger sons, and sons of concubines – all, of course, categories which were in consequence greatly elevated in importance, and in rigour of definition. The conflicts to which this process gave rise, from late in the tenth century, were often peculiarly savage. Stories abound of blindings, castrations and other mutilations, inflicted by blood relations, including brothers, on each other, and obviously designed to exclude the victims from succession. From the point of view of the family, entry to the religious life, either as a monk or as a secular clerk, was a form of castration, and by no means always voluntary. The anger directed back at the family by the religious is well known in the creation of a religious culture founded on 'the contempt of the world' and its impurities. Two other expressions of that anger shaped the future of Europe. An elegant resolution of the property question was worked out painfully and peace-meal through the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The elimination of clerical marriage and the traffic in clerical office amounted to removing the church and its

property and prerogatives from family control; on the other hand, legitimation and consolidation of the dynastic principle required the co-operation of the church - that is, of the dispossessed - in defining and enforcing the new understandings of marriage and incest upon which that principle was founded. Accommodation was secured by dividing the land and its fruits into two categories, secular and ecclesiastical: access to the one was controlled by blood and the sword, to the other by vows or ordination and by office, and qualification under either head constituted a disqualification under the other. Secondly, and less overtly, the younger sons, with determination and sophistication increasing throughout the period, and a considerable measure of long-term success, were instrumental in subordinating the interests and power of the family to the institutions of church and monarchy, of which the new order of social *castrati*, clerks and knights, provided both the theoretical and the executive arms.

All this - which, I have argued elsewhere, amounted to nothing less than a social revolution that formed European civilization, with its distinguishing culture and institutions - required as its first condition the shattering of one structure of family and kinship among the warrior class and its replacement by another, based on directly opposing principles - on monogamy (in principle), rather than polygyny (in practice); on strictly defined hierarchy among siblings, according to maternity, birth order and gender, rather than general equality within the kin-group of expectation and opportunity; and, in consequence of that hierarchy, on the lifelong and usually involuntary commitment of individuals to specific roles and functions, with their accompanying privileges and privations. This was achieved without the aid of any central authority capable of imposing it either by deference or coercion, and indeed without conscious design, against all traditional values and radically against the interests of arguably the most elementary source of power in this society, young men of fighting age. Two things made the achievement possible. One, as I have said, was extreme violence.

The other was religion. In the conditions of the eleventh century – perhaps in any conditions – such a transformation of values as I have just described could not be imposed, except in particular, local circumstances, and in the very short term. It must be embraced, and it could be embraced only if accepted and internalised, and by the losers as well as by the winners. That is why it was not only expressed as but needed religious faith, with its power to override traditional, family, ties and obligations, and to unite its devotees indissolubly to one another and to their cause, in the face of every threat and every temptation – in Weber’s terms, to replace the community of blood by a community of faith. And it is the construction of that community which provides the link between the two parts of my argument, for it was precisely in its name and by its most brilliant architects that the Albigensian crusade was conceived and carried out, as a crucible and consummation of the two great constructs which proclaimed its triumph, the church universal and the European nation state.

Conclusion

We have seen in eleventh- and twelfth-century northern Italy and northern France what we did *not* see in the thirteenth-century Languedoc: religion providing the driving force which shattered from within old solidarities and communities, and constituting new ones, as (according to the social theorists) it is supposed to do – processes accompanied by a great deal of violence at all levels. It ought to be noted that this was a far more universal process, manifested in far more various ways, than I have indicated in this paper. Some of them were hailed by Raoul Glaber in the quotation with which I began, but I have said nothing of the multitude of ways in which people rallied around the bones of their saints, or acclaimed the miracles of their prophets, to resist rapacious lords, to give identity to new settlements, to proclaim urban communes – all of which might easily be and routinely were accompanied by considerable violence;

nothing about the ways in which both Christians and Jews became more assertively conscious of their religious identities. And so on. It is not too much to say that the whole history of Europe in this period could be written in terms of the formation and re-formation of communities, and the religious expressions and manifestations of those processes.

But then, of what region, at what period, could this not be said? *'The fundamental question we hope to begin exploring,'* the organisers of this conference have told us – and I'm confident that I speak for you all in thanking them as warmly as I know how for asking the question, and for the generosity and panache with which they are pursuing it – *'is if there is something unique or different about religion that leads [to] particular patterns of conflict across time and space.'* The formulation implies some kind of comparison between religion and other kinds of social or cultural phenomena, and therefore calls for a definition of religion itself, neither of which I propose to attempt. The best I think my material can offer, at least for the moment, as a possible, partial, response, is a suggestion as to why the violence associated with religion is often so extreme, and as to the circumstances in which the combination is likely to arise.

I hasten to say, however, that my conclusions are so little original that they are readily accommodated within some of the most familiar generalities of social theory. Some of you, indeed, may think that I have said nothing that was not said, or at least implied, by Weber, or by Durckheim, and I plead guilty to that. More directly, Max Gluckman's classic account of 'peace in the feud' suggests that violence within communities is self-limiting because it reaches a point at which the over-lapping, 'cross-cutting' interests of the protagonists make it counter-productive. The currently prominent notion of 'multiple identities' (as elaborated, for example, by Sen) similarly points to the multiplicity of interests and identities possessed by every individual, in varying combinations, as a key source of tolerance and restraint. These are in effect different expressions of the

same point. Multiple identities create cross-cutting ties, which among other things imply recognition of the humanity of opponents, because they share some identities with oneself, and imply also the relation of conflict to context. Conversely, the cases I have discussed this morning suggest that a key characteristic of *new* religious movements and ideas (including, in general, new movements within established religions, and including here the movement to crusade and inquisition from the late twelfth century) may be to eliminate cross-cutting ties by prioritising a particular identity: in Sen's terminology a 'fanatic' might be defined as one who sees all conflicts and issues from the perspective of a single identity. Consequently, the language of religion may be deployed to repudiate such ties and so facilitate the violence that might otherwise be inhibited. That worked for the Albigensian crusaders. But neither heresy nor crusade – nor, indeed inquisition, a story that I have not been able to examine here – had dissolved or over-ridden the traditional loyalties and solidarities of Occitan society. Among these solidarities were traditional religious ties, variously interpreted, which were not perceived by Occitanians as over-riding or exclusive of others, most obviously (but not only) those of family.

This conclusion runs contrary to a common understanding of religion, and especially religion violently expressed, as the embodiment of ancient and unchanging communities and communal loyalties. That, indeed, is how it generally represents itself, and is represented both by its spokespersons and by its adversaries. It was also the basis of the concept of 'civilizations' which in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries constituted the building blocks of world history, and the master narrative of it that prevailed for most of that period. One of its consequences with particular implications for the ways in which we thought about the history of Europe, and of the 'neo-Europes', for example, was the image of 'traditional' non-European societies as stagnant and unchanging, set firm in the moulds fashioned by the prophets of their dominant religions. It was an image as much Marx's as Weber's, and still widely taken for granted only a

generation or so ago, though now unimaginably remote except at certain rather rarified levels of the stratosphere, where turbulence at the upper levels of the Ivy League occasionally precipitates ideological overflow into think-tanks and bureaucratic channels. In the European high middle ages, to the contrary, religion, and religious violence, were expressive, and indeed constitutive, of new values and solidarities at all levels of society, of discarding the old and sanctifying the new.