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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

*Heresy and literacy: earlier history of the theme**Peter Biller*

The title of the present book pays respect to tradition, *c.* 1000 as a conventional starting-point in the history of medieval heresy, and *c.* 1530, the beginnings of Waldensian adhesion to Reform, as its conventional end; the chapters are not straitjacketed by those precise years, but go back into the early middle ages and reach well into the sixteenth century. This book does not address the literacy and heresy of the individual academic theologian: his literacy is self-evident. Rather it deals with literacy and ‘popular’ heresy.

Heresy and the question of the ‘literate’, ‘illiterate’ and ‘education’ (*litteratus, illitteratus, litteratura*): whatever these were in historical reality in the middle ages, they have also constituted a *theme*, in the western medieval Church, in Catholic–Protestant polemical historiography, and in twentieth-century heresiology. Sketched in the following is this earlier awareness and discussion of the theme, leading up to this book’s account of it: an overture.

I MEDIEVAL

In the middle ages the early evidence is the *topos* of the heretic as illiterate, whose repetitive and ubiquitous presence implies the theme’s existence in the consciousness of various writers. The theme is implicit in all of the Church’s later action against vernacular texts. It is explicit by the later twelfth century in extended direct discussions of lack of literacy and heretics’ unfittedness to preach, and by the mid-thirteenth century in brief historical schemas of learning in the Church and heresy. It achieves its most precise literary expression in the early fourteenth century, in delicate delineations of heretical ‘textual communities’.

Our understanding of the presence of the theme in texts of this period needs to take into account broad changes in the education

and culture of the Church's writers, broad changes in the dimensions of heresy and its audience, and a general bifurcation of the areas in which awareness of the theme was expressed. Firstly, because of the educational and intellectual developments of the central middle ages there is a gulf between the Church's writers of just after 1000 and those of 1200. Just after the millennium there are writers stimulated, to some degree, by intellectual currents from Cluniac monasticism, but broadly speaking belonging to an earlier and thinner culture, and, more deeply, members of what Morris has described as the predominantly 'cultic' Church of this time. By 1200 there is Morris's 'pastoral' Church.¹ In it there has been the development of cathedral and then university learning and the rise of academic theology, the appearance and from now on residence on the European scene of university masters, and their part grip on high office in the Church. These later writers are showing a rapidly growing capacity to describe and analyse faiths and cults, a development partly forced on by grappling with Judaism, Islam, Catharism and Waldensianism, and, in the mid-thirteenth century, the 'religion' of the Mongols. In the earliest accounts of heresy in the eleventh century a monk with (comparatively) slight resources can do little better than look up St Augustine's *On Heresies*, and produces thin and unsystematised description. By c. 1200 an academic's (Alain de Lille's) account of Judaism, Islam, Catharism and Waldensianism is still 'comparative faiths', but is laying the ground for 'comparative religion' ('religion' in the modern sense of 'religious entity', rather than the medieval sense of 'religious order'). By the early fourteenth century an inquisitor's account of a sect is not only widely based on deposition and literary evidence, but its systematic thematic approach – the history of a sect, its articles of belief, its way of life, its mode of evangelising – implies a yet higher stage in capacity to describe and analyse a 'religious' entity.²

Secondly, there were large changes in the dimensions of heresy. Whether fragmentary (c. 1000 – c. 1050), silent (c. 1050 – c. 1100) or mere prolegomena (c. 1100 – c. 1150), as modern textbooks have it, it was heresy of the later twelfth and first half of the thirteenth century which was itself massive and provoked a massive reaction of the Church, in crusade, foundation of the Dominican Order and (later) the inquisition, the coming into existence of the literary genre

¹ C. Morris, *The Papal Monarchy. The Western Church from 1050 to 1250* (Oxford, 1989), p. 580.

² P. P. A. Biller, 'Words and the medieval notion of "religion"', *JEH* 36 (1985), 353–69.

of anti-heresy polemic, and counter-reform: in Pullan's usefully provocative formulation, a twelfth- and thirteenth-century 'proto-reformation' and 'counter-reformation'.³ At the centre were Waldensianism and Catharism: and therefore more focussed attention and reaction to what lay at the heart of these movements in terms of texts, reliance on memory and reading, and education. With counter-measures and counter-reform there came bifurcation of the areas in which one finds the theme of heresy and literacy present: on the one hand, directly present in anti-heresy polemic and descriptions of heresy; on the other hand, indirectly present in counter-measures and counter-reform where these focussed on the literacy of the orthodox clergy.

(a) *Early dominance of the 'topos' of 'illiterate' heretic*

By the mid-thirteenth century writers were to have at their disposal some heretical texts, much deposition evidence, discussions with heretics, and the Church's accumulated experience of heresy. So much less was available to earlier writers. When dealing with heresy and the literate or illiterate, their thesaurus of words and concepts came partly from scripture, partly from patristic writings, partly from inherited and contemporary Latin usage. Hints from scripture suggested cunning in a heresiarch, his vulpine or fox-like nature, the sheep-like simplicity of his followers, and the presence of women (pejoratively *mulierculae* (little women)) among them.⁴ Where these might seem easily usable, other texts and traditions may have caused hesitation or embarrassment. One was the tradition about apostles and learning which went back to Acts 4:13: John and Peter as *sine litteris, et idiotae* (unlettered and idiots); in the formulation of Caesarius of Arles, Christ chose as apostles *piscatores sine litteris* (unlettered fishermen).⁵ The suspectness of learning and holy simplicity were commonplace themes in subsequent monastic discussion. Much of what was most evident in the most prominent early father, St Augustine, was also not apposite: his emphasis, in his *On Heresies*, on heresy originating in philosophic speculation, and in particular his emphasis on bookishness in his description of the Manichees. These were ignored – deliberately?

Prominent in the Latin of these writers were the words and

³ B. Pullan, *A History of Early Renaissance Italy* (London, 1973), p. 67.

⁴ Judges 15:4–5, Song of Songs 2:15, Matt. 7:15; 2 Tim. 3:6.

⁵ Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo* 1.20, ed. G. Morin (*CCSL*, 103, 1953), p. 16.

concepts *litteratus* and *illitteratus* (literate, illiterate). The growth of vernacular literature and of lay people who could read was soon to begin a slow erosion in the meanings of these terms, but in the eleventh century they still designated, as Grundmann showed in 1958,⁶ two 'education-worlds': 'literate', the education-world of Latin and the cleric, and the norm of reading and writing; 'illiterate', the education-world of the vernacular and the lay person (of any estate), and the norm of not reading and writing. When reading these words it is important to remember both the original distance from the modern meanings of the two words and the gradual changes which were about to occur.

In the earliest period then, in the eleventh century, the first *topos* to emerge was that of the heretic as illiterate,⁷ that is to say, outside the Latin 'education-world', when heresy was contrasted with the literate Church. This was complementary to the *internal* picture of teacher and taught inside a sect, when a sect was being looked at in its own right. Then, internally, in a sect, there were the masters or teachers, who were cunning and clever; and there were the simple or stupid people they seduced. Where agency of the devil was emphasised, teachers' cunning could acquire diabolic assistance, enabling an adept, for example, to become learned in letters in a matter of days.⁸

Where, however, the sect was compared to the Church, there was the simple counterposing of the illiterates of the sect and the literate men of the Church: to be found universally in chronicles, canon law, inquisitors' treatises, polemics, this flourished for a long time. It acquired a stock theme (earliest with Guibert de Nogent, *c.* 1115):⁹ exemplification through an example of mistranslation of a brief passage in the Vulgate, showing simultaneously lack of Latin and stupidity.

By the late twelfth century, in the writings by Bernard of Fontcaude and Alain de Lille against preaching by the Waldensians, the theme of heresy and literacy or illiteracy is explored extensively. Before parading his ripostes, Bernard reports the Waldensians' arguments – St Gregory's *Dialogues* preserve the memory of laymen who preached, the first apostles were 'unlettered idiots' (again Acts 4:13), they were lay and preached, we should imitate their acts.¹⁰

⁶ Grundmann, 'Litteratus'.

⁷ There is fuller citation of evidence on this in Biller, 'Topos'.

⁸ Wakefield and Evans, p. 139; on this text, which is now known to date back at least to the early eleventh century, Moore, ch. 2 below, n. 5.

⁹ See, below, Moore ch. 2, p. 23, and Patschovsky, ch. 7, p. 132.

¹⁰ Bernard of Fontcaude, *Adversus Valdensem sectam* 4.15, *PL* 204.809.

Alain takes up the point more forcefully in extended discussion of the inappropriateness of a non-literate teaching what he cannot understand.¹¹ Meanings of the key-words overlap in these texts: 'layman/illiterate' (= not belonging to the Latin education-world), 'layman' (= not in orders) and 'illiterate' (= not educated, not able to understand).

The *topos* was to have a later history, and a persistence throughout the middle ages. With the appearance of extensive polemical refutations, from the later twelfth century, there was to be a lexical development: a widening of the thesaurus of words meaning 'stupid' which were used about parchment/paper opponents. More significant was to be the widening of 'literate : illiterate' in the mid-thirteenth century by the Anonymous of Passau. In his powerfully polarised features of 'Church : Heresy' the theme was linked to numbers, rank, power and sex. 'A multitude of believers [proves our faith], for every kind of man has our faith: philosophers, the literate [*or* educated], and Princes; but only a few have the faith of the heretics, and these are only the poor, workmen, women, and idiots [= the illiterate]' ('Multitudo credencium, quia omne genus hominum habet fidem nostram: philosophorum, litteratorum, principum. Sed hereticorum pauci et hoc tantum pauperes et opifices, mulieres et idiote').¹²

(b) *The crisis of c. 1200: grappling with literacy among heretical preachers*

The *topos* of heretic as illiterate persists – one finds as ever, for example, a Prussian inquisitor and polemicist writing in 1395, 'O vos illiterati haeretici' (Oh, you illiterate heretics).¹³ But it was no longer centre-stage. The massive growth of heresy in the later twelfth century was making the Church think why heresy had such an appeal. A lack of educated preachers was decried in a crescendo of voices from St Bernard ('Who will give me "literate" pastors?')¹⁴ onwards through the twelfth century. There followed fundamental

¹¹ Alain, 2.1–4, 377–82.

¹² Patschovsky, *Passauer Anonymus*, p. 109.

¹³ Peter Zwicker in his *Cum dormirent homines*; see Patschovsky below, ch. 7, n. 49, and P. P. A. Biller, 'Les vaudois dans les territoires de langue allemande vers la fin du xiv^e siècle: le regard d'un inquisiteur', *Heresis* 13/14 (1989), p. 215.

¹⁴ R. Ladner, 'L'Ordo Praedicatorum avant l'ordre des prêcheurs', in P. Mandonnet, *Saint Dominique. L'idée, l'homme et l'œuvre*, ed. M.-H. Vicaire and R. Ladner (Paris, 1938), vol. II, pp. 11–68 for the following general picture, and vol. II, p. 17 and n. 27 for St Bernard; d'Avray, ch. 1, gives a more modern account of the general background.

legislation in 1179 and 1215 for the provision of diocesan education of the clergy and the institution of preachers, and the emergence of the concept and then the existence of an 'Order of Preachers', precisely dedicated to a preaching efficiently based on a highly functional education system and the use of practical 'how to do it' pocket-manuals. In the decades around 1200 papal bulls, legislation, treatises of reform (most notably in Jacques de Vitry's account of the western Church) and sermons contain countless allusions to and discussions of preaching and instruction, literacy/illiteracy of preachers (including the persistent but minor theme of the holy 'illiterate' preacher, following the early illiterate fishermen). These commonplaces in the history of the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Latin Church are repeated here as a reminder that such thought spelled out, and repressive measures and counter-reform implied, awareness of the same range of reasons: lack of 'literacy' in the Church's preachers when compared to the preaching of skilled heretical preachers, the expectations of their audience and (more particularly) the question of the use of vernacular texts. Present throughout implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, was the theme of heresy and literacy/illiteracy. By the mid-thirteenth century descriptions of heresy assume this backcloth, and when they turn to literacy/illiteracy and heresy they concentrate on particulars.

Detailed quotation and discussion of these later texts appear elsewhere in this book (see especially Patschovsky, Biller, Paolini and Lerner). Here one should note some salient features. The Cathars appear as very learned: for example, in Alain de Lille's presentation of southern French Cathars, who use alongside authorities arguments (*rationes*) which depend on scholastic logic,¹⁵ or in Yvo of Narbonne's letter, where Italian Cathars send adepts to the University of Paris.¹⁶ The Waldensians are painted with various shades by Stephen of Bourbon and the Anonymus of Passau. These include use of the vernacular, degrees of literacy, relationship between texts, literacy and the extensive use of memorisation; the latter present in more stereotypical form in the treatise by the (Pseudo-)David of Augsburg.¹⁷ Writers now display much sophistication on these themes.¹⁸ In the mid-thirteenth century Stephen of

¹⁵ Biller, ch. 4 below, n. 114.

¹⁶ Paolini, ch. 5 below, n. 59.

¹⁷ For this use of memory, see Biller, 'Construction', pp. 44-7.

¹⁸ Patschovsky, ch. 7 below, emphasises more the element of caricature.

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Plate 1 Scene from the life of St Dominic, when, during debate with Cathars, books are put to ordeal by fire, in which the Cathar book is consumed but St Dominic's book escapes unharmed. Relief work by Nicola Pisano (c. 1264-7) on the tomb of St Dominic, Church of St Dominic, Bologna. (With permission of the Convento Patriarcale S. Domenico, Bologna.)

Bourbon and the Anonymous of Passau seem to be essaying a historical presentation of degrees of learning in the Church and heresy, comparing *c.* 1200 with the mid-thirteenth century: *then* many learned heretics but few in the Church, by implication as opposed to now.¹⁹ In the early fourteenth century, in the set-piece systematic descriptions of sects in his inquisitor's handbook, Gui delicately discriminates (with an accuracy which is not at issue here): literate, not literate, or a mixture; use of texts; vernacular of Latin; modes of their use. One example is his description of the dissemination of books and pamphlets of Olivi, records of Olivi in different sorts of texts, specification of Latin and vernacular, followers living in villages and gathering to listen to readings in the vernacular (see plate 9).²⁰ To the modern reader it uncannily calls to mind the most sophisticated modern analysis of heresy and literacy (discussed below) and its 'textual communities'.

Broader stereotypes came to be established in art during the thirteenth century. The Church's crisis around 1200 achieved general representation through the iconography of one scene in the lives of St Dominic and St Francis. St John Lateran – and, more widely, the Church – topples down while a pope (Innocent III) sleeps within and dreams; St Dominic (or St Francis) rushes along to prop up the Church. One regularly represented scene from St Dominic's life was rooted, historically, in one of the formal debates between Cathars and Catholics in southern France, where there were exchanges of schedules or little books containing arguments and counter-arguments.²¹ Two little books are thrown on to a fire: the heretic's book is consumed, while St Dominic's leaps out miraculously (see plate 1).²² Elsewhere, a confuted heretic came to be represented as someone tearing up a book.²³ Commonplaces for the later middle ages were thus provided, both of the crisis of *c.* 1200 and one of its elements: heresy with a book, a peril vanquished by St

¹⁹ Biller, ch. 4 below, nn. 87, 122. ²⁰ Lerner, ch. 11 below, nn. 5 and 54.

²¹ Biller, ch. 4 below, n. 72.

²² G. Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Tuscan Painting* (Florence, 1952), col. 311 and fig. 358; the earliest pictorial representation known to me is the relief work of the Arca di S. Domenico, Bologna (*c.* 1264–7). The falling church: cols. 313–14, 389, 391–2, and G. Kaftal, *Iconography of the Saints in Central and South Italian Schools of Painting* (Florence, 1965), cols. 357, 473–4.

²³ In the 'Mission of the preachers in the Church' fresco by Andrea Bonaiuti in the Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence (between 1366 and 1368). For an example of earlier heretics represented thus (*c.* 1400), J. and P. Courcelle, *Iconographie de Saint Augustin. Les cycles du XIV^e siècle* (Paris, 1965), p. 98 (and fig. 107).

Dominic with a book. The heretic's book has already vanished or is being destroyed, while the Church triumphs through the continuing visibility of its book.

(c) Heretics' views

Heretics' own commonplaces were close parallels of the two discussed above: first, heretic as illiterate opposed to the literate Church; second, a view of the heresy and Church in which both had literacy and books, but each was characterised differently.

The *topos* of heretic : illiterate was appropriated by heretics and turned round, in their version of the tradition of the unlettered early apostles. This is implicit in an address by an early thirteenth-century French Cathar to the Catholic clergy: 'O insensati litterati' (Oh, you insensate literate (*or* learned) men!).²⁴ It is explicit in a letter by Italian Waldensians of *c.* 1367 in which the Waldensians write extensively about themselves as the unlettered, using the phrase of Caesarius of Arles ('unlettered fishermen') quoted above; unlettered, and also weak in worldly terms, following the early apostles.²⁵ Irony: the Cathar was writing a treatise in elegant and learned Latin, the Waldensians a letter in flowery and quite learned Latin! The opposed literacy of the Church was rationalised: 'Although chaplains and religious understand the scriptures and the law of God, they do not want to reveal [them] clearly to the people, the better to rule over them' (*Capellani & religiosi licet intelligant scripturas & legem Dei nolunt revelare clare populo, ut ex hoc melius dominantur in populo*).²⁶ The Waldensian follower attesting this in 1311 recalls the Anonymous of Passau linking literacy with the powerful.

In a rather different context the encounter of 'oral' peasants with the learned apparatus of inquisitors, handbooks, leading questions and written process produced an uneven sharper expression, proverbially expressed. As one follower of the Cathars said to another, who was about to be interrogated, 'bouem rapit homo per cornu et rusticum per ling[u]am' (A man takes an ox by a horn and a peasant by his tongue).²⁷ One particular example of 'us' and 'them'

²⁴ Biller, ch. 4 below, n. 107.

²⁵ Biller, 'Aspects', pp. 278–80.

²⁶ Limborch, p. 377.

²⁷ Doat 25, fol. 296v. Compare J. W. Hassell, *Middle French Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases* (Toronto, 1982), p. 55, no. B118.

is momentarily glimpsed here in 'peasant' minds as 'literate' versus 'oral'.

The second theme looms larger – heretics' own use of books, the enormous implications of their use of the vernacular, their own literacy. One example of their rare general presentations of this comes from Waldensian preaching remembered in Piedmont. In this, the apostles split into two groups. The smaller and weaker group, four apostles, had Christ's books (i.e. the Gospels), and people understood their singing (i.e. preaching – because in the vernacular, or un glossed?), while the larger and stronger group, eight apostles, had other books, and no-one understood their singing. The larger group took the marketplace (openness), and drove the smaller group into secrecy.²⁸ Here the view of Waldensian/Church contrasts (small : large, weak : powerful, secrecy : publicness) had been added to contrasts in the books possessed and their use: Christ's books : other books, comprehensible : incomprehensible. We have only the final result of a contemporary contrast perceived and thought about so deeply and for such a long time that eventually it had acquired its own historical myth, its historical warranty, in a projection back to apostolic times.

2 CONFESSIONAL POLEMICAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: PROTESTANT HISTORY

Confessional polemical history dominated heresiology between the sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries, and continued to supply the biggest stimulus to the public's interest in medieval heresy till well into the twentieth century. Here only one strand appears, Protestant history, and only one representative of that strand, Flacius Illyricus, who was, after Bale,²⁹ its most important begetter. His *Catalogue of Witnesses to the Truth* (*Catalogus Testium Veritatis*) laid down the fundamental lines of interpretation, a continuity of witnesses between the early Church and Luther, and provided basic material for later historians through its editions of important medieval texts on heresy. Although the ancient theme of the fittedness of

²⁸ Merlo, p. 220, and for discussion Merlo, pp. 22–4, and Biller, 'Construction', p. 50.

²⁹ On Bale's contribution, see L. Fairfield, *John Bale, Mythmaker for the Reformation* (West Lafayette, 1976).