Our New Albigensian Age
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This was one of SCSS president and Franciscan University of Steubenville professor Stephen M. Krason’s “Neither Left Nor Right, but Catholic” columns that appeared initially in Crisismagazine.com on September 17, 2013. It points to the curious similarities between what the adherents of the Albigensian heresy (a version of Gnosticism)—which, incidentally, helped trigger the Inquisition—believed and current cultural perspectives. The parallels between the Albigensians and the current age, especially on sexual and human life questions and male-female relations, are striking.

In an old (1950) monograph entitled The Truth about the Inquisition, Dr. John A. O’Brien, a Notre Dame history professor of the time, provides a brief but interesting exposé of the Albigensian heresy. Few people recall that almost maniacal rebellion against Catholic teaching, and for that matter, commonsensical and civilized living was the trigger for the much-misunderstood Inquisition. O’Brien’s discussion makes one think of many aspects of our current civilizational crisis, even though the comparison could not have been so evident in 1950.

The Albigensians, or Catharists, were neo-Manicheans, regarding material creation as an evil and viewing all of existence as a conflict between evil matter and good spirit—but O’Brien says it was much more. Like all Gnostics, of which Manicheanism was a branch, they believed themselves to be the only “pure” ones and the only ones to have the truth. They were certainly a forerunner of Protestantism and even more specifically of the most ardent of contemporary fundamentalists, with their complete rejection of the Real Presence, transubstantiation, the Eucharist, and the Mass, and their belief that the pope was the Antichrist. Their teaching and practice, however, had enormous implications for marriage, sexual morality, and social and political life.

The parallels to the present are almost uncanny. While hatred for the Church is nothing new, the visceral character of the Albigensians’ hatred bears a resemblance to the ugliest side of the Reformation and today’s assaults on religion. For example, O’Brien tells us how the Albigensians were known for indiscriminately chopping down crosses and stamping on them. In America today, we see the relentless efforts by rabid, uncompromising church-state separationist groups to remove all religious sym-
bolts from public places and the heightened vandalism of crosses and other Christian monuments.

The sexual libertinism, views about marriage, and feminism of our time resemble the Albigensian heresy. While the Albigensians considered sex an “inherent evil,” it seems as if it was not so much sex per se that they rejected but the proper context for it. They utterly rejected marriage, mostly because it meant bringing children into the world. Pregnancy for them was diabolical. Their confusion about sexual matters made them believe that marriage was worse than fornication and adultery. In our time, people don’t quite make this claim, but marriage has become irrelevant as the condition for engaging in sexual activity and no judgment is made about the morality of almost any sexual practices. For many, particularly in lower socio-economic groups, marriage almost seems obsolete; children are routinely born out-of-wedlock. Others, particularly among the affluent, enter marriage—or what is called that—but have no intention of bearing children. While people may not proclaim pregnancy as evil, they act as if it is in our contracepting age. As O’Brien says, for the Albigensians even perversion was preferable to marriage. In our time, we witness the celebration of sexual perversion as a good thing—as “LGBT pride.” While the Albigensians wanted to abolish marriage, we have transformed it into something that they would have lauded: an association devoid of procreative intent or even—in the case of same-sex “marriage”—capability. As far as traditional, true marriage is concerned, we increasingly give it no special support or even recognition as uniquely important for society. We say that people are free to choose what “version” of it they prefer—and be officially “affirmed” in their choice.

So the Albigensians, who so rejected sex as part of their disdain for the material world and supposedly in the interest of spiritual purity, actually opened the door to sexual debauchery and the corruption of both body and soul. This was typical of Manicheans historically. Some would become extreme ascetics, and others utter hedonists.

Contemporary feminism has a ring of the Albigensian. Instead of equality in marriage, it effectively placed women in a dominant position. As O’Brien explains, since pregnancy was despised, married women who were converted to Albigensianism unilaterally abrogated their husbands’ marital rights and consigned them to “an enforced celibacy.” It was considered “sinful and degrading” to even touch a woman (even if innocently and in a pure way). This almost rings of the extremes to which sexual harassment has gone in our day. It makes one think of the anti-male ethos in the statements of some of today’s feminists. The female dominance was further seen in that a religious punishment of fasting for inter-gender
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touching could only be imposed on a man, even if the woman did the touching.

Today, abortion seems to have become a positive good for ardent feminists and their fellow-travelers. It’s much like the Albigensians, for whom O’Brien says, “abortion was highly to be commended.”

The Albigensians anticipated today’s assault on human life in other areas, as well. Believing that the seriously ill would gain eternal bliss if they did not recover their health, they encouraged them to commit suicide. In fact, they practiced assisted suicide. The assisted suicide advocates of today are different only in that their methods are (usually) more technologically sophisticated. The Albigensians either suffocated or starved the person. Today’s practice in medical facilities of hastening death by withholding nutrition and hydration was what they did—except it took place in the person’s home. Like today, the person was supposedly given a choice: They gave him a choice of these two methods of death, while today people sign living wills. Either way, the supposed choice is no real choice. In both eras, there is a coercive backstop. The Albigensian leaders forbade the sick person’s family from feeding him, or would forcibly remove him from his home if they weren’t “reliable.” In our day, family members may make a choice for death even if the patient didn’t want it, or increasingly, the medical authorities do it even when it’s against the patient’s or the family’s wishes.

The present era, prodded along by the likes of Peter Singer, pushes more and more toward post-partum infanticide. Even on this, the Albigensians were a precursor. They insisted upon—even enforced—among their followers the starvation of very sick children. To make sure their parents didn’t lose their nerve, the sect leaders frequently visited their homes to monitor them. So, the Albigensians also anticipated our era’s undermining of parental rights.

While human life was in the crosshairs, animal life was sacrosanct. The Albigensians would never take an animal’s life. This was because they believed in something like reincarnation, so a dead person’s soul might be within an animal. They were a harbinger of today’s animal rights thinking. Indeed, their view had its roots in Eastern thought, whose influence in the turbulent 1960s may also have helped fuel our animal rights movement.

The Albigensians unconditionally rejected capital punishment; like current liberalism, it seemed to be the only life issue that troubled them. In fact, they held that the state had no authority to administer justice or punish crime at all. Thus, they undercut one of the most basic rationales for political life, and made unthinkable anything like a rule of law. While this does not seem to conform to our current reality of big, increasingly over-
bearing government, it does reflect the underlying notion about politics since Thomas Hobbes that the state is not natural to man. That government is an artificial construct to be twisted, used, or expanded in whichever way has underlain most modern political ideologies, and its consequence is strikingly evident today as constitutional principles are left behind and executive fiat is substituted for duly enacted law. The Albigensians, in effect, didn’t think that government was completely necessary or at least legitimate. That sounds like Rousseau and Marx later on—two thinkers whose views, in one form or another, resound through the contemporary world. I recall Catholic political scientist Peter V. Sampo once saying that governments inspired by a neo-Gnostic idea—like Communist regimes and increasingly today’s Western arch-secular states—tend to be formless, less prone to limitation and open to unlimited expansion.

The Albigensians even condoned stealing, so long as it was done from the “right” person (that is, not one of their own sect). This makes me think of eminent social scientist Kenneth Clark’s justifying interracial muggings by minorities a few decades ago as an act of “social protest,” and how some today do not want to hold members of certain “favored” groups to the same moral standards as others.

Today’s secularist elite—so dominant in Western politics, culture, and opinion-making—are dualists, like the Albigensians. Even though the Albigensians rejected the material and today’s secularists reject the spiritual, the consequences are strikingly similar. Also, like the Albigensians, they think they are all-knowing—and the implications for Western culture, as any serious observer realizes, are similarly grave.