

THE WAR
on HERESY

Faith and Power in Medieval Europe

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Part One

CRY HAVOC

THE AVENGING FLAMES

Clovis, who believed in the Trinity, crushed the heretics with divine help and enlarged his dominion to include all Gaul; but Alaric, who refused to accept the Trinity, was therefore deprived of his kingship, his subjects and the life hereafter.

Gregory of Tours, *History of the Franks*, III

On 28 December (Holy Innocents' Day) 1022, by order of the French king Robert II, often called 'the Pious', a number of prominent clerics and others, of both sexes, were burned at Orléans. 'Thirteen of them were in the end delivered over to the fire,' says Ralph the Bald,

but when the flames began to burn them savagely they cried out as loudly as they could from the middle of the fire that they had been terribly deceived by the trickery of the devil, that the views they had recently held of God and Lord of All were bad, and that as punishment for their blasphemy against Him they would endure much torment in this world and more in that to come. Many of those standing near by heard this, and moved by pity and humanity, approached, seeking to pluck them from the furnace even when half roasted. But they could do nothing, for the avenging flames consumed them, and reduced them straight away to dust.¹

These were the first people to be put to death as heretics since the end of the western Roman empire six hundred years ago. They could hardly have been more different from the modest young women who would later choose the stake at Cologne and Reims or the illiterate and destitute migrants driven into the Oxfordshire countryside in the winter of 1165. Their leaders were canons of Orléans cathedral, and therefore – although we know nothing about the particular connections or previous careers of these individuals – men of the highest standing and influence. Cathedral clergy were normally drawn from the leading families of the region, though canonries could also be used to recruit and support men whose particular talents and abilities might be of use to the ruler – who, for example, needed someone to write his letters – or the bishop. The leaders among those convicted in 1022 were royal favourites; one of them had been the queen's confessor. Their trial and condemnation, rumours of which reverberated through northern France for at least two generations afterwards, averted a scandal capable of threatening the monarchy itself.

The earliest surviving report of the affair at Orléans is in a letter evidently written soon after the trial by John, a monk of the Catalan monastery of Ripoll, to Oliba, its abbot. Oliba had sent John to the great monastery of Fleury (St Benoît-sur-Loire), near Orléans, to secure for Ripoll a fragment of the relics of St Benedict, for which Fleury was famous. 'If you have heard a rumour of heresy in the city of Orléans', John wrote,

it is quite true. King Robert has had about fourteen of the most reputable clerks and noble laymen of the city burned alive. These people, odious to God and hateful on earth and in heaven, absolutely denied the grace of holy baptism, and the consecration of the body and blood of the Lord. They would also deny forgiveness to those who had committed mortal sins. Moreover, they rejected the bonds of marriage. They abstained from foods that the Lord has created, meat and animal fats, as impure. Enquire carefully in your abbey and in your diocese [Oliba was also bishop of Vich] in case there are some who under the cover of false religion have secretly fallen into these errors – may it never happen!²

John was well placed to confirm the rumour and to describe the heresy, for his host was the king's half-brother Abbot Goslin of Fleury, also archbishop of Bourges, who had been present at the trial. John's summary of the heretics' beliefs accords well with the account of the trial that another monk, André of Fleury, provides in his biography of Goslin. This was not written until after Goslin's death twenty years later, but André had probably attended the trial himself, as one of the senior monks from Fleury he mentions who had accompanied Goslin. He describes the heretics as 'certain clerks, raised from childhood in holy religion and educated as deeply in sacred as in profane letters ... Some were priests, some deacons, some sub-deacons. The chief among them were Stephen and Lisois.'³ Like John, André reports that the heretics denied the efficacy of baptism, the sanctity of marriage and the possibility of redemption from mortal sins, and adds that they did not believe in the church as an institution or the rank of bishops or their capacity to ordain priests. More shockingly still, 'They boasted that their own mothers resembled in every respect the Mother of God, who was like no other woman and has had no successor.' On the other hand, André does not mention the denial of the eucharist or the abstention from meat and animal fats, on which John had commented.

As John anticipated, the burnings at Orléans created a considerable sensation, and they appear, as he recommended to Oliba, to have been followed by something of a witch-hunt. Before turning to the more lurid descriptions of the affair that circulated in its aftermath, we should pause to consider what we are told by these two, the closest to the event and to the main actors. Both were struck first by the denial of baptism, to which André attributed a wider significance than John had noted:

they pretended to believe in the Three-in-One, and that the Son of God had become flesh; but it was a lie, for they denied that the baptised could receive the Holy Spirit in baptism, or in any other way secure redemption after committing a mortal sin.

Here is a cast of mind that would become the hallmark of the inquisitor at work. In André's view the accused had made statements about their beliefs that were logically incompatible: they could not both believe in the Holy Trinity and the incarnation of Christ, as they claimed, and disbelieve in the sacrament of baptism and the forgiveness of sins. André, in other words, chose to prefer his own understanding of what the statements of the clerks implied to what they had actually said. Whether he was logically, or theologically, correct is, of course, irrelevant to the historical question of whether the accused were deliberately lying, as André supposed, for even highly educated people may be capable of believing at once several things logically inconsistent with each other. As it happens, André, as Archbishop Goslin's biographer, had an interest in maintaining that Stephen and Lisois had lied about their beliefs all along: it excused the king's patronage and exonerated Goslin himself from any suspicion of complicity in the heresy to which, as we shall see, he may have been exposed.

Real or apparent, the contradiction does point to the source of Stephen's and Lisois's beliefs. During the century and a half before their time a way of thinking had become fashionable (though not predominant) in Francia which explains what they said, or what André thought they said. This was neoplatonism, whose influence on some of the most popular works from antiquity such as the *Confessions* of Augustine and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, had been reinforced by the work of the most learned scholar of the ninth century, John Scotus Eriugena. His translation (from Greek into Latin) of the works of an unidentified but probably fifth-century writer now known as the pseudo-Dionysus, and his commentaries on them, circulated widely in tenth- and early eleventh-century monasteries and schools.⁴

There were dangers inherent in this way of thought. Combining the teachings of the church with the methods and conclusions of Classical Greek philosophy had always been a source of inspiration, but also of difficulty, for Christians. Plato's insistence, especially as expounded by Plotinus of Alexandria (AD 205–270) and his followers, on the unity of creation, on the flowing of all things from the Word (*Logos*), in which they began, on the permanence and purity of idea and spirit as opposed to the transience and corruptibility of material things, had great religious

potential. Plotinus's vision of the soul striving to free itself from the prison of the flesh to reunite with the divine essence from which it had been parted offered a powerful appeal to Christian mystics, and to those who sought the religious life. But these ideas also presented serious obstacles to some of the fundamentals of catholic teaching – most obviously that God was Three as well as One, had assumed human flesh through the virgin birth, had lived on earth and been crucified as a man with a human body. So neoplatonism, in many manifestations and formulations, has been a recurrent influence in Christian history, especially at times of religious revival and renewal. But it has also been a fertile source both of heresy and of accusations of heresy, because even when those inspired by it have succeeded in resolving the difficulties to which it gives rise in stating Christian doctrine, the resulting complexities have often left them highly vulnerable to misunderstanding or misrepresentation.

Whether Stephen and Lisois had indeed strayed into heresy or were misunderstood or misrepresented there is now no means of knowing. Either way, the very brief and, of course, hostile summaries given by John and André show quite clearly that we are in the presence of neoplatonist language, and therefore in one way or another of neoplatonist belief. Thus, neoplatonists might deny that the Holy Spirit was contained in the water of baptism, or conveyed by the hands of the priest in blessing, or of the bishop in ordination, without (in their own view) necessarily denying the sacraments themselves – especially at a time when the nature and indeed the number of the sacraments was still by no means clearly defined. Others might easily fail to grasp the distinction, with or without malice. The difficulty is evident in André's tortuous explanation that Stephen and Lisois did not believe in the church because 'that which is contained cannot be defined by the container'. The meaning seems to be that the power and workings of the Holy Spirit could not be restricted by the confines of a human institution, or perhaps within the material fabric of a church building. Neoplatonist distrust of matter, and so of the flesh, certainly encouraged abstinence both from sex and from meat, and therefore tended to the disparagement of marriage, though not necessarily to denial of its validity. On the other hand, the heretics' assertion that Mary was no different from their own mothers might as easily reflect an affirmation of Christ's humanity as a denial of it.

The story of what had happened at Orléans spread rapidly and was embroidered in the process. That is quite evident in the accounts of two more monks whose writings provide our most extensive, and most controversial, information about early eleventh-century heresy accusations, Adémar of Chabannes, of the abbey of St Cybard at Angoulême, and Ralph the Bald (Glaber), of St Germanus, Auxerre. Adémar, writing about 1025, gives a brief account of the trial and executions at Orléans, giving the number burned as ten, and saying that their leader was Lisois, ‘a man whom the king had once loved for his apparent holiness’. He adds that

a canon of Orléans, a cantor named Theodatus, had died in this heresy, according to trustworthy witnesses, three years before, though he had seemed to be correct in religion. After this was proved his body was taken from the cemetery by order of Bishop Odalric, and thrown into waste ground.⁵

This is a more explicit indication than we had from either John of Ripoll or André of Fleury that there were tensions behind the burnings that went back some way beyond the exposure of Stephen and Lisois. Theodatus has been plausibly identified as a former master of the cathedral school at Orléans whose neoplatonist interpretations of the doctrines of the Trinity, baptism and the eucharist had been attacked some years earlier by Bishop Fulbert of Chartres, the teacher of Bishop Odalric. Odalric’s disputed claim to the bishopric was one of the political conflicts behind the trial of 1022, about which André of Fleury remained discreetly silent.

Adémar has nothing to say about what Stephen and Lisois taught or believed. He explains instead that

they had been led astray by a peasant who claimed that he could give them great strength and who carried about with him dust from dead children which quickly made anyone who came into contact with it into a Manichee. They worshipped the devil who appeared to them on

one occasion in the guise of an Ethiopian and on another as an angel of light, and brought down money for them every day. In obedience to him they secretly rejected Christ, and in private committed sins and crimes which it would be sinful even to mention, while in public they pretended to be true Christians.

Here Adémar betrays his own agenda. Historically, ‘Manichees’ were the followers of Mani (d. AD 231), a prophet and visionary whose faith had flourished mightily in the Roman and Persian empires 600 years or so before Adémar’s time and been fiercely persecuted. Among their followers had been at one time Augustine of Hippo (354–430), subsequently perhaps the most famous (after St Paul) of all converts to Christianity. Augustine was the most influential, in the Latin tradition, of the fathers of the church whose writings laid down the authoritative account of Christian doctrine and practice upon which medieval – and indeed modern – catholicism would be founded. His vivid descriptions of the Manichees, of their belief in two gods – one good, who presided over the realm of the spirit, and one evil, who ruled the material universe – and of their refusal to perpetuate the domain of the latter by eating meat or procreating, made this the most feared of all ancient heresies. Adémar of Chabannes was convinced that it had reappeared in his own lifetime, and that it was being spread among ‘the people’ – that is, the poor and the unfree – by ‘emissaries of Antichrist’. Whether his fears were justified is a question for a later chapter, but the peasant preacher with his magic dust is as manifestly fictitious as he is an improbable prophet of the sophisticated neoplatonism of the canons of Orléans, about which Adémar says nothing. The magic dust itself, and the dead children from whom it was made, are also revivals from the ancient past, echoing stories directed by Roman pagans against the early Christians, and later by Christians against their own heretics.⁶

Ralph the Bald also attributed the appearance of the heresy to contamination from the lower reaches of society, this time ‘a woman from Italy’, who converted ‘not just the uneducated and peasants but even many who passed amongst the most learned of the clergy’. His account of the content of the heresy is somewhat confused: he likens it to the Epicureans – not Christian heretics at all, but a school of ancient philosophy

– ‘in that they did not believe that carnality was a sin meriting avenging punishment’. Nevertheless, he took it seriously enough to devote several pages to his own rebuttal of it, and in doing so reflects, though apparently without understanding, the neoplatonist influence that lay behind it. Ralph’s description of the circumstances in which the heresy had spread and been discovered, and of the people involved, however, adds significantly to what we learned from John and André. He identifies as its leaders Lisois, whom we have already met, ‘the [royal] favourite among the clerks in the cathedral’, and Heribert, master of the school at another church in the city, St Pierre-le-Puellier. Enthusiastic to spread their teaching to other cities, they made contact with a priest in Rouen, who reported the approach to Duke Richard of Normandy. Richard in turn informed King Robert, who summoned a meeting at Orléans of ‘many bishops and abbots and some religious laymen’ to look into it.

When inquiry was made among the clergy of the city to see what each felt and believed about the truths which the catholic faith by apostolic precept unchangingly observes and preaches, Lisois and Heribert did not deny their divergent beliefs but revealed all that they had previously kept hidden. Then many others professed themselves adherents of this sect, and declared that nothing could ever separate them from their fellows.

Refusing to retract, ‘on the king’s orders and with the consent of the whole people’ thirteen of them were consigned to the flames.

Ralph the Bald was a highly inventive writer with an agenda of his own. But he was also very well informed, and had a wide circle of acquaintance in the high political and clerical circles in which the burning at Orléans and its aftermath reverberated. In some of its essentials he supports, or is corroborated by, the fullest but most questionable surviving account, that of yet another monk, Paul, of the abbey of St Père at Chartres. Paul’s story is a sort of extended footnote to a compilation of documents that he put together to replace the abbey’s records, destroyed in a fire

in 1078.⁷ It is best known for its more elaborate version of the prurient rumours that Adémar of Chabannes had circulated half a century earlier:

They met on certain nights in the house which I have mentioned, each holding a light in his hand, and called a roll of the names of demons, like a litany, until suddenly they saw the devil appear among them in the guise of some wild beast. Then, as soon as they saw that sight, the lights were put out and each of them grabbed whatever woman came to hand, and seized her to be put to ill use. Without regard to sin, whether it were a mother, or a sister, or a nun, they regarded that intercourse as a holy and religious work. On the eighth day they lit a great fire among them, and the child who was born of this foul union was put to the test of the flames after the manner of the ancient pagans, and burned. The ashes were collected and kept with as much reverence as the Christian religion accords to the body of Christ, to be given as a last sacrament to the sick when they are about to depart this life. There was such power of diabolic evil in this ash that anyone who had succumbed to the heresy and tasted only a small quantity of it was afterwards scarcely ever able to direct his mind away from heresy and back to the truth.

Paul's account of how the heresy came to be discovered and unveiled is almost equally melodramatic. It begins with Heribert, a clerk in the household of Harfast, brother-in-law of Duke Richard of Normandy, who went to Orléans (which at this time 'shone more brightly than other cities with the light of wisdom and the torch of holiness') to study, met Stephen and Lisois, and was converted to their heresy. When he got home, he announced the good news to Harfast, who, horrified, went straight to the duke, asking him to warn King Robert and offer to help root out the heresy. The king responded by ordering Harfast himself to Orléans. On the way he stopped at Chartres to consult Bishop Fulbert, the most celebrated teacher of the day. Fulbert was away, but Harfast was briefed instead by Everard, a senior canon of the cathedral, who 'advised him to seek the help of the Almighty every morning, to go to church, devote himself to prayer and fortify himself with the holy communion of the body and blood of Christ'. 'Thus protected by the sign of the