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The Cathar Mary Magdalene and the Sacred Feminine: Pop Culture Legend vs. Medieval Doctrine

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Abstract: This study investigates the historical evidence for the widespread pop culture assertion, disseminated through popular histories, novels, and spiritual tourism, that the medieval Cathars of southern France treasured a tradition that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married and had children, and, as such, the holy couple provides a model for human marriage affirmative of the sacred feminine. The medieval sources indicate that while there are a few testimonies of Cathar belief in a spousal relationship between Christ and the Magdalene, and a notion of female deities married to the good God and his evil counterpart, these doctrines appear to be based on literalistic interpretations of scriptural passages and well-known Catholic metaphors. Although Christianity can benefit from the restoration of Mary Magdalene to her deserved apostolic status, the humanization of Jesus, the recognition of the female divine, and the affirmation of sexuality, medieval Cathar doctrines offer little support for these contemporary concerns.

Keywords: *Cathars, Da Vinci Code, Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Sacred Feminine*

The Popular Narrative and Its Scholarly Reception

Since the publication of *The Da Vinci Code* in 2003, the notion that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married has been linked in popular culture with the Gnostic-like medieval sect known as the Cathars;¹ in particular, with the notion that the Cathars of southern France held to an ancient tradition that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were the ancestors of a royal lineage. In brief, the Cathars (also known by other names; e.g., Albigensians, Manicheans) were a twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christian sect that was considered heretical by Catholic authorities and was scattered throughout western Europe. As early as the 1140s, the Cathar church was hierarchically organized, with a distinctive liturgy and doctrines. Cathars agreed that matter was evil and that the human spirit was fallen from its heavenly origins and trapped in the evil material world; the aim of human life was to free the divine spark within to restore its relationship to God with the aid of the divine redeemer, Christ. Since the material world was utterly corrupt, the ideal Cathar life was celibate, ascetical, and world-denying. Due to their popularity in southern France, especially in the Languedoc, the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229) was proclaimed against them by Pope Innocent III (1198–1216) and several Cathar fortresses were attacked by Catholic forces from northern France. The final Cathar stronghold of Montségur was destroyed in 1244 under the auspices of King Louis IX and the Inquisition. Although Catharism endured underground in other parts of Europe, it had virtually disappeared by the beginning of fifteenth century.² Today, purveyors of spiritual tourism advertise their itineraries

in Languedoc, southern France, with slogans such as “Cathar Country: The *Da Vinci Code* began here”; “Cathar Country: In the footsteps of *The Da Vinci Code*”; and “*Da Vinci Code* Holidays.”³ Many easily accessible Web sites feature the claim that the marriage of Jesus and Mary was a Cathar tenet.⁴

In fact, Dan Brown’s book does not mention the Cathars, or even Languedoc, but credits the Knights Templar with guarding the secret of the messianic lineage. However, the pop scholarship exposés cited by Brown (2003, 253)—Picknett and Prince’s *The Templar Revelation* (1997); Starbird’s *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar* (1993) and *The Goddess in the Gospels* (1998); and Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln’s *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* (1996)—do make such claims, as do subsequent works by these authors (Picknett 2003; Starbird 2005). According to Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln, the Cathars held the unique and secret doctrine that “Jesus was indeed married to the Magdalene,” and, taking seriously the medieval provençale tradition that connects Mary with southern France, they speculate, “If the Magdalene, with Jesus’ offspring, did find refuge with a Judaic community in that region, some knowledge of the circumstances might well have filtered down through the centuries into Cathar tradition” (Baigent, Leigh, and Lincoln 1996, 471). Lynn Picknett hypothesizes that there was a pre-existing Magdalene cult in southern France that harboured doctrines similar to those of the Cathars, who assimilated the Magdalene traditions, including the notion that she bore children fathered by Jesus, testified to by the Black Madonnas that dot the region. These madonnas are identified by Picknett as representing the dark-skinned, possibly Egyptian, Mary Magdalene, not the Blessed Virgin:

Although these statues are specifically associated with the Magdalene and not the Virgin Mary, it is also an uncomfortable fact that these statues are of a *mother and child*. They do not depict a woman alone, as might be expected in representations of the Magdalene, almost certainly a visual confirmation of the heretical belief that she bore Christ’s children (Picknett 2003, 98, 132).⁵

The most influential and passionate promoter of the notion that the Cathars harboured the secret of the sacred offspring is Margaret Starbird, who identifies St. Sarah, the black servant of the Magdalene in the provençale tradition, as the daughter of Jesus and Mary (see Starbird 1993, 60–62, 78; 1998, 10, 87; 2005, 107–108). According to Starbird, the purpose of the Albigensian Crusade against the Cathars of Languedoc was to obliterate “the belief that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were beloveds,” a human husband and wife who were the parents of a child (2005, 108). Sean Martin’s relatively sober popular history *The Cathars* (2005) mentions the conjectures of other writers (notably Baigent et al. and Dan Brown), noting that “the idea that Jesus married Mary Magdalene” does not originate with these authors: “One of the Cathars’ inner teachings, which was only passed on to the Perfect, was that the Magdalene was Jesus’ wife” (2005, 156, citing Stoyanov 1995, 222–223).⁶

As noted above, Brown’s novel rests on the claim that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, but rather surprisingly, he does not mention the supposed Cathar tradition of the sacred marriage. However, other novelists have developed this theme—for example, Nita Hughes’s *The Cathar Legacy* (2006); Jennifer Chapin’s *A Song of Songs: Mary Magdalene Awakes* (2008); and, most prominently, Kathleen McGowan’s trilogy, the first volume of which is *The Expected One* (McGowan 2006), followed by *The Book of Love* (McGowan 2010a) and *The Poet Prince* (McGowan 2010b). McGowan also leads tours to southern France, one of several purporting to reveal “Secrets of the Cathars and Mysteries of the Magdalene” (<http://www.sacredfrance.com>; for other examples, see n. 3 of this article). These multiple, popular media mutually reinforce the widespread perception that the Cathars of Languedoc provide a vital link in the secret tradition of a “Jesus dynasty.”

Despite the frequent and confident assertion of these pop culture media that the Cathars believed that Jesus and the Magdalene were a married couple, most academic works on the Cathars do not mention this sensational aspect of their theology (e.g., [Duvernoy 1979](#); [Mundy 1990](#); [Brenon 1997](#); [Lambert 1998](#); [Barber 2000](#); [Weis 2000](#); [Frassetto 2007, 2010](#)); nor is it mentioned in commercial guidebooks written by historians, or by commercial writers with the aid of historical advisors (e.g., [Bély 2006](#); [Roux-Perino and Brenon 2006](#)). Katherine Jansen's study of Magdalene traditions in the later middle ages makes no mention of such a Cathar tradition; however, Susan Haskins does briefly mention, in a note, "the Albigensian heresy that she [Mary Magdalene] was Christ's concubine" (2001, 135, n. 8, citing [Borst 1953](#), 164). Bruce Chilton's "biography" of Mary Magdalene speculates that Cathar dualism demanded a fleshly Jesus corresponding to the spiritual Christ, and that Mary was a "ready-made . . . sinner" for the former to consort with ([Chilton 2005](#), 147, citing [Sibley and Sibley 1998](#), 51).

An exception to the scholarly reticence concerning the putative Cathar belief in a sexual relationship between Jesus and the Magdalene is a dissertation by [Anne Bradford Townsend \(2008\)](#). Townsend's thesis contains a brief account of "some of the research about Mary Magdalene and the Cathars of Languedoc" (106); she mentions both independent scholarship, such as *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, the "Catholic theologian" Margaret Starbird,⁷ and Picknett and Prince (all mentioned above), as well as Laurence Gardiner's *The Magdalene Legacy* ([Gardner 2006](#)), a tome luridly subtitled "The Jesus and Mary Magdalene Bloodline Conspiracy." In terms of academic scholarship, Townsend cites Père Antoine Dondaine, a distinguished Catholic historian quoted in Gardner's book, who stated that the Cathars of Languedoc believed that "Mary Magdalene was in fact the wife of Christ" ([Gardner 2006](#), 110, 317, n. 19, citing [Dondaine 1959](#)). Later, she cites two medieval sources of this notion, a manuscript possibly written by Ermengaud of Béziers claiming that the Cathars believed Mary to be the wife of Christ ([Wakefield and Evans 1991](#), 234), and Peter des Vaux-de-Cernay's *History* ([Sibley and Sibley 1998](#), 11; cf. [Townsend 2008](#), 146), which mentions a Cathar belief that the Magdalene was Christ's concubine. Townsend also cites diverse evidence, including Hippolytus of Rome's commentary on the Song of Songs (third century CE), Bernard of Clairvaux's identification of the Magdalene with the female lover of the Song (*Sermon LVII*), and the reading of that scripture on the feast day of Mary Magdalene (July 22), in addition to several Gnostic references,⁸ all of which, Townsend opines, "demonstrate the Cathars' belief in a relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus" (2008, 146). If her meaning is that ancient and medieval sources sometimes construed the relationship between Christ and the church (or the believer), symbolized by the Magdalene, in terms of the *hieros gamos*, she is correct. However, no firm historical link between the Cathars and the Gnostic traditions can be established (see [Stoyanov 2000](#), 281), and the Catholic association of the female beloved of the Song of Songs with Mary Magdalene refers to spiritual, not physical, marriage. Townsend further, quite plausibly, hypothesizes that Dominican anti-Cathar inquisitors adopted Mary Magdalene as their patron saint in order to neutralize the heretical tradition of her intimate relationship with Jesus (2008, 147).

In the conclusion to her study, Townsend is quite impressed by the Cathar interest in Mary Magdalene, and calls for further research on this aspect of their doctrine, including the possibility of "a powerful strand of the divine feminine" in Cathar mysticism (2008, 184). In contrast, the historian Mark Gregory Pegg is dismissive of such speculations:

My bookshelves groan with novels and histories dedicated to the "secret history" of the Cathars—which leads directly to the "secret history" of Western civilization itself. *The Da Vinci Code* is the most widely known retelling of this untold story. This *sub rosa* history usually goes something like this: Jesus survives the cross; he and Mary Magdalene have kids; they all go to

southern Gaul; the medieval Church hates this bloodline because it fizzes with the Holy Feminine; the Cathars know the truth; and the Albigensian Crusade was the reactionary, repressive attempt to expunge that knowledge from the world (Pegg 2007, x).

The following pages will examine the medieval evidence of Cathar doctrines about the relationship between Jesus and the Magdalene, as well as Cathar teachings concerning the sacred feminine—in particular, concerning female deities⁹—not to debunk this popular narrative, but to investigate, insofar as the scant and Catholic-biased sources allow, what the Cathars actually believed concerning these matters.

The Cathars of Languedoc and Sacred Marriages

There are several tantalizing and somewhat contradictory links between the heretics of Languedoc and the Apostle to the Apostles.¹⁰ The Cathars of Béziers were ruthlessly massacred by the Albigensian Crusade on the feast day of the Magdalene (July 22, 1209) in a church dedicated to her; their defeat was attributed to the insult the heretics had inflicted on the saint—namely, the slander that she was Christ’s concubine, as documented by the monk Peter des Vaux-de-Cernay in his *History of the Albigensian Crusade*, which was composed between 1212 and 1218:

The city was taken on the Feast Day of the Blessed Mary Magdalene. What a splendid example of divine justice and Providence! As I wrote earlier in my book, the heretics said that Mary Magdalene was Christ’s concubine, moreover, it was in her church in the city that the citizens of Béziers killed their Lord, and broke the teeth of their Bishop (Vaux-de-Cernay 1998, 51, cf. 11; for Peter’s earlier testimony, see below).

However, Jansen cites quite orthodox-sounding evidence that the Cathar preachers held out the Magdalene as an example of hope for female listeners, probably because of her post-repentance chastity (2001, 242), a message that seems inconsistent with the notion that she was a concubine, or even a wife, since by all accounts, celibacy and asceticism were fundamental Cathar tenets, and Cathar “Perfects” (full initiates) lived in gender-segregated households (see Roux-Perino and Brenon 2006, 53–55). Most interestingly, as mentioned above, there are indeed medieval reports of secret doctrines held by the Cathars of Languedoc regarding an intimate relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and about the sacred feminine in the form of female deities. The one scholar to have explored these esoteric doctrines in any depth is Yuri Stoyanov (1995, 2000), whose writings are cited by some of the popular writers mentioned above (Baigent et al. 1996, 470–471; Picknett 2003, 35, 40, 98; see also Martin 2005, 165, 167, 168, 171, 172, 184, 186). However, it will be shown below that these historical accounts are far from the romantic narrative, or earth-shaking evidence of a messianic bloodline, envisioned by popular scholars and novelists.

The medieval sources that refer to a Cathar belief in a marriage between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, all three of which are closely followed by accounts of a Cathar doctrine of female deities, are all heresiological, designed to defend Catholic doctrine by exposing and discrediting the errors of dissenting groups. As heresiology, they are averse to Cathar teachings and presented in order to portray Cathar beliefs as bizarre, extreme, and blasphemous. They are also brief and superficial, displaying little interest in, or knowledge of, the spiritual meaning of these doctrines for Cathar believers. Needless to say, such testimonies should be read as hostile witnesses, possibly based on rumour and hearsay, prone to exaggeration and distortion, and maybe even extracted under torture. Nonetheless, they are the only extant textual evidence

concerning Cathar beliefs concerning Mary Magdalene and the sacred feminine, and as such, they figure in pop cultural accounts of these matters.

Probably the earliest of the three relevant medieval testimonies regarding the relationship between Jesus and the Magdalene is part of “An Exposure of the Albigensian and Waldensian Heresies,” dated before 1213 (Wakefield and Evans 1991, 230). It is attributed to Ermengaud of Béziers, a former member of another sectarian movement, the Waldenses,¹¹ who had left to seek reconciliation with the Catholic church and became part of an order known as the “Poor Catholics,” which was particularly hostile to the Cathars and other heretical groups (Wakefield and Evans 1991, 220–222, 230). As with the other two testimonies, the source of Ermengaud’s knowledge of Cathar belief is unknown:

Also they teach in the secret meetings that Mary Magdalen was the wife of Christ. She was the Samaritan woman to whom He said, “Call thy husband.” She was the woman taken in adultery, whom Christ set free lest the Jews stone her, and she was with Him in three places, in the Temple, at the well, and in the garden. After the Resurrection, He appeared first to her (Wakefield and Evans 1991, 234).

A similar, although abbreviated, account is found in an anonymous and untitled testimony:

They also declare that Christ was the husband of Mary Magdalen. To explain this, they say that he was alone with her three times: in the temple, in the garden, and at the well (Wakefield and Evans 1991, 719 n. 35).

Both of these quotations recall incidents in the Gospel of John (4:7–30; 8:2–11; 20:11–18), although the only New Testament mention of a meeting between Jesus and a woman in the temple is public, not private (cf. John 8:2–4). The third reference, part of Peter des Vaux-de-Cernay’s *History*, was written by a Cistercian monk who participated in the campaign against the Cathars of Languedoc (Wakefield and Evans 1991, 235). Of the three, Peter’s testimony the most scandalous from a Catholic standpoint. The section below is dated to 1213 and is possibly dependent on Ermengaud’s “Exposure” cited above (Wakefield and Evans 1991, 235), although there are significant differences:

The heretics even affirmed in their secret assemblies that the Christ who was born in the visible and terrestrial Bethlehem and crucified in Jerusalem was evil, and that Mary Magdalene was his concubine and the very woman taken in adultery of whom we read in the Gospel; for the good Christ, they said, never ate nor drank nor took on real flesh, and was never in this world, except in a spiritual sense in the body of Paul (Wakefield and Evans 1991, 238; cf. Sibley and Sibley 1998, 11).

Like the first testimony, this tradition takes for granted the western medieval legend that conflates Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and regards her as a sexually promiscuous woman (see De Boer 2006 8–14); however, while the first implies that Mary’s sin was absolved through her relationship with Jesus (cf. John 8:11), the “concubine” tradition, which also presupposes the Magdalene’s promiscuity, posits two Christs, one evil, corporeal, and terrestrial, and one good, immaterial, and celestial. Only the evil Christ has an illicit sexual relationship with the adulteress Magdalene, while the true Christ is so rarefied that his only link with the material world is through his spiritual indwelling of Paul, who never met the earthly Jesus and whose writings frequently contrast flesh and spirit (e.g., Rom 8:1–11; 1 Cor 5:5; 2 Cor 3:3; Gal 3:3; 5:16, 17; 6:8; Phil 3:3).

Neither the “wife” or the “concubine” variant represents Mary Magdalene as a faithful disciple or spiritual equal of Christ; both seem to be influenced by the western medieval tradition of Mary as the repentant prostitute who “gave herself up to all the delights of her body,” crystallized in the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (1275).¹² According to the *Legend*, after her conversion, “[Jesus] embraced her all in his love, and made her right familiar with him. He would that she should be his hostess, and his procuress on his journey, and he oftentimes excused her sweetly” (see n. 12 in this article). From here, it is a short leap to the Cathar doctrine that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were spouses, whether pure and spiritual or base and carnal.

A possible, and necessarily speculative, explanation of the discrepancy between the “wife” and “concubine” traditions is that they derive from each of the two main schools of Cathar thought. All Cathars were dualists, who, like ancient Gnostics, made a radical distinction between heaven and earth, spiritual and material, with the former being divine, pure, good, and celestial, and the latter being base, polluted, evil, and hellish (see Roux-Perino and Brenon 2000, 54). This dualism extended to the lifestyle adopted by the Cathar Perfects, who, as noted above, were ascetic and celibate. The Cathars were gender-egalitarian, but sexuality was regarded with disdain by the Perfects. However, they also ministered to a larger group of Cathar *credentes* (believers), who were able to marry, preferably other believers (see Bély 2006, 29–31; Biller 1990, 139). Some Cathars were “mitigated dualists,” who attributed earthly evils to the fallen Lucifer, the demiurge who had fabricated the vile, material world and the beings in it from the elements created by the good God, enclosing fallen angels in human bodies (see Roux-Perino and Brenon 2006, 54; Wakefield and Evans 1991, 41–50). Others were “absolute dualists,” who posited two mutually hostile and eternal divine powers, a good deity and an evil one. In this system, the lowly material world was a side effect of a primordial attack by Satan and his legions, emissaries of the evil principle, on the realm of the good God. As a result of this attack, a third of the stars (angelic beings) of heaven were swept down to earth (cf. Rev 12:4; cf. 8:2) and entrapped in material bodies (Roux-Perino and Brenon 2006, 54). Whether they held to mitigated or absolute dualism, all Cathars were docetics, who denied the humanity of Christ, interpreting him as a purely spiritual being who only appeared (Greek: *dokeō*) to be human. The belief in a carnal and evil Christ who took a sinful woman as a concubine seems to correspond to the cosmology of the absolute dualists; just as there were good and evil Gods, there were good and evil Christs, the former spiritual and non-sexual, the latter fleshly and lustful. Mitigated dualism leaves room for a celibate marriage between the docetic Christ and his devoted spiritual wife, Mary Magdalene, along the lines of the *Golden Legend*, which describes their chaste devotion in extravagant terms:

And when he saw her weep he could not withhold his tears. And for the love of her he raised Lazarus which had been four days dead, and healed her sister [Martha] from the flux of blood which had held her seven years . . . This Mary Magdalene is she that washed the feet of our Lord and dried them with the hair of her head, and anointed them with precious ointment, and did solemn penance in the time of grace, and was the first that chose the best part, which was at the feet of our Lord, and heard his preaching. Which anointed his head; at his passion was nigh unto the cross; which made ready ointments, and would anoint his body, and would not depart from the monument when his disciples departed. To whom Jesu Christ appeared first after his resurrection, and was fellow to the apostles, and made of our Lord apostolesse of the apostles (see n. 12 in this article).

Yuri Stoyanov (2000, 279) observes that the belief that Mary Magdalene was the wife or concubine of Christ is unique to the southern French Cathars; it is not found in the Bogomil

tradition, a Balkan-Byzantine heresy thought to be related to Catharism, or among Cathar-like groups elsewhere in Europe (see [Stoyanov 2000](#), 161–167). Although it has affinities with ancient Gnostic beliefs about the relationship between Jesus and the Magdalene, there is no evidence of direct knowledge of ancient Gnostic texts among the Cathars ([Stoyanov 2000](#), 179–180). It seems likely that the Cathars of Languedoc were influenced by the popularity of Mary Magdalene in southern France, where she was believed to have preached and performed miracles and where she was supposed to have been buried after her retirement from a life of service to her spiritual bridegroom into a life of seclusion, contemplation, and extreme asceticism, qualities that would have been admired by the Cathars (see [Jansen 2001](#) 36–46; [Haskins 2007](#), 98–133; [Bridonneau 2006](#)).

As mentioned earlier, from a Catholic perspective, an even more exotic aspect of Cathar theology was the belief in female deities. Such a Cathar belief is attested to by references to divine wives of God, mentioned by the three witnesses to the Cathar belief in a “married” Jesus cited above. The first is from the “Exposure” attributed to Ermengaud:

For God himself, they say, has two wives, Collam and Colibam, and from them He engendered sons and daughters, as do humans. On the basis of this belief, some of them hold that there is no sin in man and woman kissing and embracing each other, or even lying together for intercourse, nor can one sin in doing so for payment ([Wakefield and Evans 1991](#), 233).

The surprising reference to sexual licence in this testimony is preceded by a description of the heavenly “land of the living,” a utopian garden of delights where “everyone shall have his wife . . . and sometimes a mistress” ([Wakefield and Evans 1991](#), 233). Possibly, this scandalous report of Cathar sexual laxity refers to the pleasures of the heavenly realm, as opposed to the mores of earthly credentes. The second testimony, which appears shortly after Vaux-de-Cernay’s reference to the Cathar belief that Mary Magdalene was the evil Christ’s concubine, briefly notes: “The heretics also taught that the good God had two wives, Oola and Ooliba [*sic*], upon whom he begat sons and daughters” ([Wakefield and Evans 1991](#), 238; [Sibley and Sibley 1998](#), 11). The final report, which appears in the anonymous testimony cited earlier, in which Christ is called the husband of the Magdalene, adds an account of divine adultery perpetrated by the good God:

They say that the good God had two wives, Collam and Hoolibam [*sic*], from whom he engendered sons and daughters in human fashion. They say that He had to do with the wife of the malign god, and the malign god, enraged thereby, sent his son into the court of the good God, whom he deceived, and took from thence gold and silver, human and animal souls, and sent them forth and dispersed them among his seven realms, those, indeed, to which Christ was sent ([Wakefield and Evans 1991](#), 719, n. 35).

As with the Cathar accounts of the relationship between Christ and Mary Magdalene, the notion of the two wives of the good God is loosely based on biblical exegesis, in this case Ezekiel 23:1–43, where Oholah and Oholibah are two sisters described as the wives of Yahweh. In the Ezekiel passage, the two “wives” are explicitly said to personify the divided Israelite kingdoms of Samaria and Judah: “Oholah is Samaria, and Oholibah is Jerusalem” (Ezek 23:4 NRSV). The sisters flagrantly commit adultery against their divine husband, and they are brutally treated by their abusive lovers, the Assyrians (Oholah) and Babylonians (Oholibah).

Like the testimonies concerning Mary Magdalene, the evidence of the Cathar belief in the divine wives is meagre, and it all derives from Catholic witnesses who regarded the Cathars as heretics, so it is impossible to offer anything but conjecture as to the meaning of these

doctrines for their proponents and as to whether the testimonies are fair and accurate, or exaggerated and distorted. Further, as Stoyanov observes,

It is . . . difficult to identify the provenance or the exegetical dynamic behind the radical dualist Cathar cosmologies that establish male/female pairs in the opposed realms of light and darkness asserting thus the bisexual nature of the divine world as well as their possible relation to the emergence of Cathar traditions treating Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene as a kind of paradigmatic gospel couple (2000, 283).

Possibly, the adultery between the good God and the wife of the evil God in the last account corresponded to the marriage between Christ and the adulterous Magdalene. Contrary to pop cultural assertions, whatever the Cathars meant by representing Jesus and Mary as a couple, it is unlikely that they meant to portray them as a wholesome paradigm of human marriage, to portray loving sexuality as an earthly manifestation of the divine as both male and female, or to demonstrate the full humanity of Jesus.¹³ Similarly, the Cathar doctrine that the good and evil deities had mysterious, and sometimes adulterous, celestial wives is a far cry from the calls for restoration of the sacred feminine heralded by authors such as Margaret Starbird, Kathleen McGowan, and, lastly, Dan Brown, whose character Leigh Teabing (an anagram of Baigent) reveals, “The quest for the Holy Grail is literally the quest to kneel before the bones of Mary Magdalene. A journey to pray at the feet of the outcast one, the lost sacred feminine” (Brown 2003, 257). And, although the medieval witnesses agree that the Cathars’ good God had divine sons and daughters by his heavenly wives, there is no mention whatsoever of corresponding children of Christ and Mary Magdalene, much less a royal bloodline.

Cathar Sacred Marriages: A Hermeneutical Key?

It seems obvious that the Cathar doctrine of the two wives of the good God is the outcome of a literalist interpretation of Ezekiel 23, in which the two straying spouses of Yahweh were interpreted as two actual female deities. Sarah Hamilton (2005) has noted a similar literalist tendency in Cathar teachings on the Virgin Mary. Hamilton summarizes Cathar Mariology this way:

Moderate dualists taught that the good god created Lucifer, who rebelled against god’s authority, and was cast out from heaven; on being cast out it was Lucifer who fashioned both the material world and the first man from matter which the good god had left behind . . . Christ was sent by the good god to the evil world, and assumed flesh from the Blessed Virgin Mary but he did not take a human soul . . . In contrast, the absolute dualists believed in two co-eternal principles of good and evil, locked in perpetual conflict, and in two parallel worlds, one good, ruled over by the good god, whilst this earthly world was the dominion of the evil god. Thus “the Son of God did not acquire human nature in reality but only its semblance from the Blessed Virgin, who they say was an angel. Neither did he really eat, drink or suffer, nor was He really dead and buried, nor was His resurrection real, but all these things were in appearance only” (2005, 26–27, quoting Rainerio Sacconi, Summa 71).

That is, while the mitigated dualists regarded the Virgin Mary as a human receptacle for the spiritual Christ, they believed that she gave birth to a son who only appeared to be human and who did not partake in her human nature at all. In contrast, for the absolute dualists, the Virgin was an angelic being who gave birth to an equally angelic Christ.

While the notion that the Virgin Mary was an angel—or archangel—seems to be far from warranted by a literal reading of the Gospels, the absolute dualists justified their interpretation by the fact that Mary’s birth is not recorded in the scriptures, thus indicating that she had no

human parents; they also cite other Gospel incidents where Jesus disclaims his relationship with his mother and other family members: John 2:4; Matthew 7:48–50; Luke 11:27–28 and cf. John 17:14–16, where Jesus claims to be not “of the world” (see [Hamilton 2005](#), 34–36). Hamilton also adduces ample evidence of Cathar and Bogomil knowledge of the Catholic teaching that Mary had conceived Jesus “through the ear.” For the Catholic theologians, this was a metaphor for the Virgin’s obedience to the word of God (cf. Luke 1:38), exemplified by sources as diverse as Ephrem of Syria (d. 373), Zeno of Verona (363–372), and the eleventh-century *Canterbury Benedictional* ([Hamilton 2005](#), 45). While the Catholics viewed Mary, who *heard* God’s command and obeyed by consenting to be the mother of Christ, as the salvific antitype of Eve, who chose to disobey God and thus brought sin into the world, moderate dualists appear to have interpreted the metaphor literally to mean that the Virgin Mary had conceived—and brought forth—the spiritual Christ through her ear ([Hamilton 2005](#), 43–44).

The Cathars, then, seem to have had a tendency to interpret scriptural texts, and orthodox images based on scriptural passages, literally: Mary’s angelic status was proven by Jesus’ disavowal of his human family and by his claim to be not “of the world”; the Virgin had conceived and given birth to him through the physical orifice of her ear. This propensity to literalize scriptural and orthodox ecclesiastical teachings, also illustrated by the interpretation of Ezekiel 23 as pertaining to literal wives of God, might well be the origin of the Cathar doctrine that Christ and the Magdalene were married. As noted earlier, the legendary life of Mary Magdalene, best known through *The Golden Legend*, describes her relationship with Jesus in florid, romantic terms. Medieval theologians often rhapsodized on the spiritual intimacy between Jesus and the Magdalene as *sponsa Christi* and *amica Dei* (see [Haskins 2007](#), 206–234; [Jansen 2001](#), 126, 261, 303; cf. 240, 291, 241). As Jansen notes, the relationship between the spiritual beloveds was often described in highly erotic terms:

Scriptural exegetes such as Alain de Lille explicated the lover of the *Canticles* [Song of Songs] looking for her lover as the prefiguration of the Magdalen in the garden, searching for the Lord . . . By maintaining her purity, preachers argued, the Magdalen was transformed from *terra inculta*, a desolated and deserted land, into a garden abounding in delights (2000, 241–242).

According to an allegory composed by Johannes de Biblia, after her “zealous lord” occupied and cared for Mary’s land, “Bursting into flower it became a garden. In the following summer he guided the abundant fruit to ripen. Thus she was transformed into a garden of pleasures just as if she were a sort of paradise of delights” ([Jansen 2001](#), 240–241). Giovanni Columbini speaks of the Magdalene “searching for her beloved spouse as if drunk and half mad” ([Jansen 2001](#), 261). However, part and parcel of the “marriage” between Jesus and Mary Magdalene was her post-conversion “virginity” ([Jansen 2001](#), 242–245), thus making the beloved “spouse of Christ” into an ideal model for women in the religious life (see [Jansen 2001](#), 126, 260–261). Jansen quotes a letter of Raymond of Peñafort (d. 1275) that thanks a Dominican abbess for her prayers, where he envies the delightful intimacy that she and her sisters, with the Magdalene, shared at the feet of their beloved spouse, Jesus Christ, enjoying their loving familiarity with him “in the secrecy of your chamber” (2000, 126). It is easy to see how such extravagant, erotic language could be construed by Cathar readers with a literalist propensity to mean that Jesus and Mary were actual spouses.

Undoubtedly, Catholic theologians of the time were as dismissive of the notion that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were literally married as they were of the belief that God had two wives, that the Blessed Virgin was an archangel, or that Christ was conceived and birthed through the Virgin’s ear canal (see [Hamilton 2005](#), 35–44). In view of Cathar docetism, and the Cathars’

negativity toward human sexuality, it is unlikely that even they would have regarded the marriage between the pure, spiritual Christ and the Magdalene (a reformed Samaritan adulteress) as a consummated sexual relationship, although the absolute dualists would have probably held that the evil Christ, being fleshly and base, would have had intercourse with his equally degraded concubine. As Hamilton notes, the difference between Catholic and Cathar doctrine was a matter more of degree than kind (2005, 45–46, 48; cf. [Townsend 2008](#), 183–185; [Wakefield and Evans 1991](#), 49–50); both valued chastity and celibacy as the Christian ideal. The orthodox left room for marital sex within strictly defined parameters and required celibacy only from the clergy and monastics; similarly, although *credentes* were allowed to marry, the Cathars ruled out sex and marriage for Perfects, since procreation would only prolong the entrapment of souls in the base material realm and delay their salvation ([Roux-Perino and Breton 2006](#), 54). Presumably, the reason why *credentes* were encouraged to marry other believers was to increase the chances that their children would grow up to be Perfects and thus halt the cycle of rebirth (cf. [Biller 1990](#), 139). Perhaps this is why there is no report of a Cathar tradition of offspring of the marriage of Christ and Mary. In contrast, the propagation of spiritual sons and daughters by the good God and his Goddess wives would be a desirable proliferation of divinity.

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper has not been to discredit popular notions about Cathar beliefs on the marriage between Mary Magdalene and Jesus, their royal bloodline, or the sacred feminine. Rather, it has been to investigate and interpret what the medieval sources actually say about these matters in a historically and theologically plausible way. There is indeed evidence that southern French Cathars transmitted esoteric doctrines of Mary as the wife or concubine of Christ, possibly on the basis of an overly literal interpretation of Catholic teachings on the Magdalene as beloved spouse of Jesus. In fact, prior to the twentieth century, these Cathar doctrines appear to be the *only* explicit reference anywhere to a marriage between Mary Magdalene and Jesus. There is no evidence that the Cathars had any tradition of offspring of this union. In view of Cathar docetism and sexual asceticism, it is unlikely that the Cathars regarded the Christ-Magdalene marriage as physically consummated, although absolute dualists may well have envisioned the relationship between the evil Christ and his concubine as sinfully carnal. Further, the doctrine of the docetic Christ's marriage to the repentant Mary does nothing to support Jesus' true humanity. With respect to the sacred feminine, some Cathars do seem to have had a secret teaching that the good God had Goddess wives who gave birth to divine children and that the evil God had at least one wife, with whom the good God had intercourse. This doctrine may have borne some relationship to the belief in a spousal relationship between Mary Magdalene and Jesus; however, this is not spelled out in the medieval sources. Although the Cathars regarded Jesus as a divine being, there is no evidence that they interpreted the Magdalene this way. In and of itself, the Cathar doctrine of good and evil deities with divine wives does little to bolster contemporary quests for the sacred feminine.

This is not to say that the renewed interest in Mary Magdalene's role in Christian origins, especially in her capacity as a successor of Jesus ([Schaberg 2004](#)), is misguided; in my view as a biblical scholar and a feminist, it is well justified. The notion that Jesus was a human being, subject to all the strengths, weaknesses, and even sins of the species, is much more historically plausible than the Christian doctrine of a sinless Jesus (2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:22; Heb 4:15; 1 John 3:5). Theologically and theologially speaking, the emerging interpretation of Mary as a female counterpart to Jesus is welcome, as is the advent of the female divine, especially within a

tradition as resolutely patriarchal as Christianity, and especially in its contemporary Catholic form. As Lisa Bellevie observes, such *Da Vinci*-inspired speculations serve as “an excellent jumping-off point for discussions of religious history, the development of doctrine, and associated spiritual explorations. The fact that so many people are fascinated by it proves that there is healthy dialogue to be had on these subjects” (Bellevie 2005, 258). However, the Cathar teachings concerning Mary Magdalene and the wives of God, insofar as they can be discerned from the sources, while of historical interest, do little to uphold contemporary popular conjectures on these matters.

Notes

1. The designation of the Cathars as “Gnostic” does not presuppose any direct connection between the medieval sect and the early Christian Gnostic churches, but acknowledges that there are typological similarities in their doctrines (see Stoyanov 2000, 281–282). The term Cathar is from the Greek term *katharoi*, “Pure Ones.” They were also known as the Albigensians, after the town of Albi in southern France. Their preferred self-designation was “Good People” or “Apostles.”
2. The brief account of Catharism is adapted from *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. “Cathari,” <http://www.britannica.com.cyber.usask.ca/EBchecked/topic/99473/Cathari> (accessed 28 September 2012). For an accessible introduction to Cathar history and doctrine, see Martin 2005.
3. See http://www.whitehousefrance.co.uk/Cathar_Country.html; https://www.isango.com/travel/the_da_vinci.html; <http://www.davincicodeholidays.co.uk/area.htm> (accessed 26 January 2012).
4. For example, “Did Jesus Have Descendants?,” www.perillos.com/gimenez.html; “Resurrecting Mary Magdalene,” www.southerncrossreview.org/42/conroy-magdalene.htm; “Templars, Cathars, and Mary Magdalene,” http://gordonnapierhistory.blogspot.com/2010/04/templars-cathars-and-mary-magdalene_21.html; “Remembering the Cathars,” www.ru.org/spirituality/remembering-the-cathars.html (accessed 28 September 2012).
5. In fact, Black Madonnas are found in many European countries, as well as outside of Europe, and they are overwhelmingly identified as images of the Virgin and Child (see Begg 2006; Galland 1990).
6. The “Perfects” (*Parfaits*, *Perfecti*) were a class of male and female Cathar clergy who preached and presided over the Cathar sacrament (the *consolamentum*) and ceremonies, and lived celibate and strictly ascetical lives (on Cathar church polity, see Roux-Perino and Brenon 2006, 53–55).
7. In fact, Starbird is not a theologian but an amateur scholar whose historical research is motivated by a personal spiritual quest to restore Jesus’ “lost bride” (see 1993, xxiii; 1998, xii; 2005, 147). Her most recent book acknowledges that the Mary Magdalene she constructs from various sources is an archetype of the female divine that has been lost in Christian consciousness (Starbird 2005, 1–7, 142, 147), although she continues to insist that Mary was the literal wife of Jesus. She also—rather surprisingly—regards the royal bloodline hypothesis as “basically irrelevant, except as it applies to the question of the full humanity of Jesus” (Starbird 1993, 178). The gematria that, according to Townsend (2008, 108), Starbird uses to demonstrate the special relationship between Mary and Jesus and their significance to the Cathars (see Starbird 1998, 155–156, 159–160) is in fact not cited by Starbird with direct reference to Cathar beliefs. Furthermore, Starbird’s numerological hypothesis is anachronistic, as the use of gematria is not documented prior to c. 200 CE (see <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6571-gematria>), and it is grounded in the conviction that the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are sacred and, properly interpreted, may reveal hidden meanings. Starbird’s interpretation is based on the Greek of the New Testament and fails to take into account the alternative spellings of Mary (*Maria*, *Mariam*) found in the Gospels; *Maria* in Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40, 47, 16:1; Luke 8:2, 24:10; John 19:25, 20:1, 11; cf. Mark 16:9; *Mariam* in Matthew 27:61, 28:1; John 20:16, 18. Also, in the Gospel references to Mary Magdalene as *Maria*, the manuscript tradition often includes variants that spell the name as *Mariam* instead.

8. Townsend refers to the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Pistis Sophia*, and the *Gospel of Mary*, although she does not cite chapter and verse (2008, 146). The relevant references are *Gos. Phil.* 56, 59; *Pistis Sophia* 1.17; *Gos. Mary* 6.1, 10.7–10.
9. In both the popular and the academic discourse, the terms “sacred feminine,” “divine feminine,” “holy feminine,” “divine female,” and “goddess” are used synonymously, as they will be throughout this article.
10. On the use of this title with reference to Mary Magdalene, see Haskins 2007, chap. 3.
11. On the Waldenses, see Wakefield and Evans 1991, 50–53.
12. See the translation available at <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/golden230.htm> (Ellis 1900) (accessed 29 September 2012).
13. As novelist Kathleen McGowan puts it, “The idea that two people honouring each other in a sacred relationship is the greatest expression of God on earth” (2006, 65).

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