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Mark Gregory Pegg, *A Most Holy War: The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008. Pp. xxx, 253. ISBN 978-0-19-517131-0.

Reviewed by Steven Muhlberger, Nipissing University (stevem@nipissingu.ca).

Mark Gregory Pegg, Professor of History at Washington University in St. Louis, has written a short and gripping history of the early thirteenth-century Albigensian Crusade, in which Pope Innocent III waged holy war on the South of France, with far-reaching political and religious consequences. A relatively short (and cheap: \$15.95) paperback, it is one of the first entries in Oxford's new "Pivotal Moments in World History" series. Though no doubt designed for undergraduate course adoption, the book has much to offer a far wider range of readers.

A sense of the attractions of this book, as opposed to the several others available on the subject, may be gained from its last paragraph:

God's homicidal pleasure lasted another eighteen years. Mountaintop castles were assaulted. Castrum after castrum was razed to the ground. Young viscounts died of heartache. Counts were humiliated. Toulouse was besieged. Corpses fouled rivers. Great long meandering armies traipsed every summer from the Rhône to the Garonne. Vultures and ravens grew plump. Legates cried out for vengeance. Men died hearing *Veni Creator Spiritus*. Wives and little girls worked catapults. Great cats assaulted battlements. Skulls were crushed. Murder was a path to redemption. Vines and fields were devastated. A pregnant girl was mocked. Good men became heretics. A young count surrendered to a boy king. Inquisitors scoured the countryside. Heretics dangled from walnut trees. Very few who began the war lasted to the end. The world was changed forever (191).

This is not only a good sample of Pegg's hard-hitting, vivid, and economical style, but a reasonable summary of the book. Pegg is convinced the Albigensian Crusade is a turning point in European history, even in the relations of Western Christians with Jews, Muslims, and Christian schismatics. In telling such a tale, he is not content to take a cool, analytical stance, systematic to the point of dullness. If the world changed forever, the story deserves a stylistic treatment worthy of its importance.

This might give the impression that *A Most Holy War* is an opinionated, emotional tirade, but such is not the case. Certainly there are opinions here, strongly presented, on all manner of events, movements, and developments. But Pegg, concerned to reveal the minds, emotions, and motives of his subjects, skillfully and gracefully uses quotations to give the voices of historical figures—clerics, counts, chroniclers, and troubadours—precedence over his own.

Readers unacquainted with Pegg's scholarship may be surprised by his presentation of the heresy Innocent III was trying to extirpate. In a previous book¹ and several articles and reviews, he has attacked a consensus going right back to the Middle Ages—that the heretics of the South of France, usually called "Cathars" or, earlier, "Albigensians," constituted a dualist counter-church. Its doctrines were descended from those of the Manichaeans, Bogomils, and Paulicians of Christian antiquity, and its growth owed much to missionaries from the Eastern Mediterranean beginning in the eleventh century. Pegg, on the other hand, believes this interpretation depends more on presuppositions of medieval heresy hunters (long since adopted by modern scholars) than on contemporary evidence. Theologians of the Middle Ages tended to see all disbelief as a single subversive plot against the truth. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, ecclesiastical authorities became increasingly obsessed with any deviation from "orthodox" teachings and rituals, both of which were being more strictly defined and enforced. In actual fact, Pegg argues, there were no Cathars or Albigensians till activist monks, bishops, and popes detected and named them.

1. *The Corruption of Angels: The Great Inquisition of 1245-1246* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2001).

In taking this bold position in a complex debate, Pegg plainly follows Robert Moore's seminal book, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society*.² Whether or not that position ultimately survives criticism, Pegg at least clearly explains his view of the nature of southern French deviance, emphasizing that the heretical leaders were commonly designated "good man" or "good woman," a form of address appropriate to just about any respectable person at the time. Similarly, he contends that the ritual greetings of heretical "believers" to their supposed leaders were mannerly gestures with no particular religious content. In the South, the exchange of courtesies, essential to the peace of a fragmented society, had its own flavor and terminology, and unsympathetic outsiders put a harsh interpretation on them. The efforts of these outsiders to control and reform southern French behavior according to their own standards, according to Pegg, had a strong effect on the culture of the church hierarchy and the theory and practice of crusade. Indeed, "the Albigensian Crusade is one of the great pivotal moments in world history The crusade ushered genocide into the West, changing forever what it meant to be Christian, what it meant to be like Christ" (xiv). This is Pegg's sincere justification for considering his book's subject to be a world-historical "pivotal moment."

Remarkably, this book's less than 200 pages of main text includes far more than a critique of heresiology and descriptions of the religious views of various major actors. It also outlines the politics and military activities of a more than twenty-year period through brief but vivid vignettes that well convey the flavor of original source material: "The Count of Montfort must know that a mob of *bordoniers* [stick carriers, pilgrims] will never take my *castel*," boasted Guilhem Peire, lord of St.-Antonin. By nightfall the village was taken and Guilhem carted off to Carcassonne in chains. 'I think you would have barely cooked an egg,' quipped Guilhem de Tudela, 'in the time it took to seize the place'" (121). The book treats tactics, equipment, supplies, size of forces, and particularly the damage done to a medieval society by prolonged warfare.

The author has worked hard to make distant and unfamiliar events comprehensible to readers: a *dramatis personae* helpfully identifies important crusaders, princes, and troubadours, making it possible to sort out, for instance, the various Raimons and Raimon Rogers who populated the South and are ubiquitous in the pages of this book. Seven pages of genealogical tables facilitate the tracing of personal and political connections among various counts and viscounts. And there are nine attractive, if sometimes too small, maps. All this additional material will appeal to a scholarly as well as a nonspecialist readership.

If the book has a flaw, it is its failure to draw sufficient connections between the Albigensian Crusade and the general phenomenon of crusading. Readers conversant with the career of Innocent III and his desire to mobilize all of Christendom against its various enemies might well wonder why a crusade in the South of France was so crucial a prelude to later genocide. It would not have taken more than a few paragraphs to make a stronger and clearer connection between the preaching of Gregory VII and Urban II against emperors and Turks, and Innocent's determination to rally Christendom to fight the whole disobedient world, whether Markward of Anweiler or Raimon of Toulouse or the Livs in the Gulf of Riga. The case for the uniqueness of the Albigensian Crusade is not made as strongly as it might have been.

Nonetheless, Pegg has succeeded in writing a stirring and memorable treatment of an event easily overlooked because it does not fit neatly into conventional narrative histories based on national boundaries and categories.

2. Subtitle: *Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950-1250* (1987; 2nd ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).