

Olivi, the Beguins, and the Blurred Boundaries of Academic and Popular Heresy

Justine Trombley

Abstract

This article conducts an initial exploration of the ways in which academic and popular heresy blended into one another in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Often treated as separate spheres in historiography, both in terms of content and the ways in which they were dealt with by authorities, this article argues that contact between the two intensified in the early fourteenth century, creating a third category where elements of both spheres blended into one another. Books are identified as one of the main conduits through which this blending and intensification of contact occurred.

Keywords: academic heresy; heretical movements; heretical books; inquisition; Peter of John Olivi

Introduction

On 7 May 1318, the Franciscan Michel le Moine declared that the books of a certain Peter of John Olivi, a Franciscan teacher and theologian from the diocese of Béziers, had been “through the counsel of many masters in the sacred page rejected and condemned, and also condemned to the fire.”¹ This condemnation had taken place at the Franciscan General Chapter in 1299. Likewise now, Michel continued, Pope John XXII had initiated a new examination of Olivi’s works, particularly of one of his biblical commentaries, the *Postilla super apocalipsim*.² Allegedly, Olivi had written “against the catholic faith and ecclesiastical sacraments and the status, honour, and authority of the Roman church,” and therefore his works demanded scrutiny and censure.³

A historian of heresy might assume from this that some kind of academic censure was taking place. Perhaps Michel was speaking at a disciplinary hearing, perhaps to a group of assembled scholars and teachers from the Franciscan school in Narbonne at which Olivi taught. Or maybe he was speaking at the papal court, where Olivi’s works were currently being scrutinised for heresy. Perhaps Olivi

¹ Michel le Moine, “Inquisitoris sententia contra combustos in Massilia,” 5. This article was first presented as a paper at the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 2022. I am grateful to the session attendants for their comments and criticisms. I also thank the participants in the “Blurred Boundaries of Religious Dissent” Workshop that was held at Queen Mary University in June 2023, where this paper was workshopped, and where I received invaluable feedback. My thanks go also to my fellow medievalists in the History Department at Durham University in 2023, who kindly read a draft of this piece and helped to greatly improve it with their comments and suggestions. Thank you also to the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

² Michel le Moine, “Inquisitoris,” 5.

³ Michel le Moine, “Inquisitoris,” 5.

himself was there, receiving censure for his work and waiting to then recant his teachings in front of his colleagues.

In reality, by this time Olivi had been dead for nineteen years. Michel was an inquisitor, and he was standing in the cemetery of Notre Dame des Accoules in Marseille publicly condemning four of his Franciscan brothers to death. Guilhem Santon, Johan Barrau, Deodat Miquel, and Pons Roca were all convicted of heresy, having refused to submit to the leaders of the order and papal authority which demanded that they abandon their views on poverty and take off their ragged and patched habits. Michel mentioned Olivi because, he said, the four friars' heresies came from the "poisoned fountain of doctrine" (*venenato fonte doctrine*) that was Olivi's *Postilla super apocalipsim*, "and other of his writings" (*in quibusdam eius opusculis*).⁴

But it was not just the four friars who were seen to be causing trouble by using Olivi's writings. Michel went on to say that some people were venerating Olivi as a holy man, and he warned that "one and all, of whichever sex, condition, status, or rank they may be" should stop such behaviour immediately. In fact, crowds had flocked to Olivi's tomb on his unofficial "feast day", 14 March, for years, crowds mostly comprised of lay citizens who were members of the Franciscan Third Order or had other kinds of close contacts with certain groups of friars in the region.⁵ Olivi was to them an uncanonised saint, and then also the "angel with a face like the sun" from Revelations 10:1-3. Six months prior to Michel's final sentencing of the four friars in Marseilles, Pope John XXII had struck a blow to this group's semi-religious lifestyle in the bull *Sancta romana*, and had also condemned supposedly "rogue" Franciscans in another bull issued shortly afterwards, *Gloriosam ecclesiam*.⁶ The events of 7 May were a marked escalation of this crackdown. Men and women—known to scholarship as "Beguins"—were arrested and questioned not just about their views on Franciscan poverty and the four burned friars, but also about Olivi's *Postilla super apocalipsim*.⁷ And their inquisitorial depositions show that they had read it, and had quite a lot to say about it.⁸

I begin with Michel's sentence because it highlights a notable characteristic of the Spiritual Franciscan/Beguine movement: a distinct overlap between academic heresy and "popular" or non-academic heresy. Michel is declaring the erroneous nature of a scholar's writings and ideas, while standing in a cemetery sentencing four convicted heretics to be burned at the stake. At the time, this had not previously been a common combination.

Some definitions are in order here. Academic heresy—to state the obvious—played out in the scholarly and academic sphere, concentrated often, but not always, within the universities, and usually involved individual scholars and their writings and teachings.

⁴ Michel le Moine, "Inquisitoris," 5.

⁵ See Burnham, *So Great a Light, So Great a Smoke: The Beguine Heretics of Languedoc*, 1-50.

⁶ Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans: From Protest to Persecution in the Century After St Francis*, 198-200.

⁷ For the difficulties surrounding the term "Beguine", see Nieto Isabel, "Beguines, Free Spirits, and the Inquisitorial Network Conundrum".

⁸ Burnham, *So Great a Light*, charts the years of persecution against the Beguines.

The process of academic censure was largely an internal affair amongst the intellectual elite, often carried out by their scholarly peers, and which, in later centuries, involved inquisition and inquisitors at the later appeal stages or in cases of contumacy.⁹ It usually entailed the examination of a scholar's lectures or their writings which had fallen under suspicion. This process did not hinge upon accusations of adhering to a pre-defined heresy; instead, the heresy was identified and defined during the process itself, as a running conversation about what was and was not acceptable to teach and to write.¹⁰ Crucially, when a scholar was found guilty of teaching or writing heresy, if they recanted they personally would escape serious punishment. Their writings or teachings would certainly be condemned, but their persons would not be, and they would not formally be labelled a "heretic". Only contumacy—the trait of the heretic *par excellence* in the medieval mind—would result in punishment, and even then this usually involved exile or excommunication, rather than execution.¹¹

It is in moving to discuss "popular" heresy that we run into some terminological difficulties.¹² "Popular" is a somewhat inadequate term when it comes to describing heresies which were not academic in nature. It implies mass movements of people that were somehow connected to one another, whereas there were plenty of instances of heresy in the Middle Ages that involved individuals or groups of people who would not be considered part of a "movement".¹³ But "non-academic" as an alternative seems, if anything, even less suitable, as it is defining something purely by what it is not, rather than what it is. Therefore, in the long-standing academic tradition of pointing out the failures of terminology but then making do with the least bad option, I have decided to use "popular", since it at least carries the connotation of involving various kinds of people and also implies a "non-elite" setting. Perhaps one area of future study could be deciding on a new and better term.

To turn, then, to outlining "popular" heresy. It frequently—although certainly not exclusively—involved lay people, and both men and women. The image that most often springs to mind in this category is that of movements like the Cathars or Waldensians, although individuals could also be considered in this category. It often carried the idea of shared doctrine, or at least some kind of commonality of belief between multiple individuals, and often disseminated by social contact and word-of-mouth. Popular heresy was also the classic target of inquisition, what it was essentially created to suppress, and it was something that, in the eyes of the church, required detection and had to be hunted down. Connected to

⁹ See Thijssen, *Censure and Heresy at the University of Paris 1200-1400*.

¹⁰ Thijssen, *Censure and Heresy*, 4.

¹¹ This scholarly privilege would be shattered in the early fifteenth century, when Jan Hus was burned at the stake for heresy at the Council of Constance in 1415.

¹² I am grateful to both the participants in the 2023 Queen Mary workshop and my colleagues at Durham for discussion on this point. Herbert Grundmann briefly considers the difficulty of this term in "Learned and Popular Heresies of the Middle Ages", 217-218.

¹³ For example the case of Marguerite Porete, or any of those persecuted as part of the hunt for the imaginary "heresy of the free spirit".

this is the fact that, unlike academic heresy, the doctrine in question was pre-defined, a pre-determined error that one could “fall” into. In other words, inquisitors knew (or thought they knew) what they were looking for ahead of time, rather than determining what the heresy was in the process.¹⁴ In the popular sphere, conviction also came with greater peril, with formulaic punishments handed out by degree of offence, often involving social ostracization, confiscation of goods, or physical pain, but also with the threat of violent death at the stake hovering over all, should one prove contumacious or relapsed.

The distinctions here fall into various categories. There are social distinctions—the elite scholar versus the so-called “average” citizen. There are distinctions of *what* was targeted: the scrutiny of writings and theological propositions versus the probing of a person’s beliefs, contacts, and behaviours. There are also distinctions in procedure: a panel of theologians assessing writings and lists of articles versus interrogation and deposition by an inquisitor using a pre-set list of doctrines and questions. Perhaps the most common way they are separated is by the different degrees of threat involved: those being interrogated about Catharism by an inquisitor in Toulouse were in far greater physical danger than the scholar called before a panel of his peers at the University of Paris.

In heresy studies, the popular and academic spheres are frequently treated separately—overviews of the various heresies of the Middle Ages almost universally focus on popular heretical movements, and studies of academic heresies/censures rarely touch upon broader movements.¹⁵ It is mainly within studies of John Wyclif, and the influence which his writings and ideas had upon the Lollard movement that appeared after his death, where discussions of the scholarly sphere blending into a popular movement have mainly taken place.¹⁶ In fact, Wyclif and the Lollards are often perceived as the first major instance in the central and late Middle Ages where the two come together so noticeably.¹⁷ But, as my description of Michel le

¹⁴ For the rigidity of heretical categories in the eyes of inquisitors, see Nieto Isabel, “Beguns, Free Spirits, and the Inquisitorial Network Conundrum”.

¹⁵ See for example Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from the Gregorian Reform to the Reformation*; Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition*; Christine Caldwell Ames does include some mention of the theological controversies over Aristotelian philosophy in her *Medieval Heresies: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, but mostly focusses on heretical movements. On surveys of academic heresy see Thijssen, *Censure and Heresy*; Moule, *Corporate Jurisdiction, Academic Heresy, and Fraternal Correction at the University of Paris, 1200-1400*. Heinrich Fichtenau did consider the two spheres alongside one another in the context of the early schools and the rise of Catharism, but still maintained a line between intellectual and popular religiosity. See Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars in the High Middle Ages 1000-1200*.

¹⁶ For example see Ghosh, *The Wycliffite Heresy: Authority and the Interpretation of Texts*; Ghosh and Soukup (eds.), *Wycliffism and Hussitism: Methods of Thinking, Writing, and Persuasion c. 1360-1460*. Outside of the Lollard context, Grundmann also briefly considered the two spheres together—although focussing more on “learned” rather than specifically “academic” heresy—in “Learned and Popular Heresies of the Middle Ages”. Felice Tocco also considered the relationship between scholasticism and heresy in *L’eresia nel medio evo*.

¹⁷ Kantik Ghosh has described Lollardy’s “unprecedented” achievement in translating academic ideas into “popular vernacular currency”. Ghosh, *Wycliffite Heresy*, pp. 2 and 210. See also pp. 19, 20-21. Ghosh and Soukup also comment on how a “notable characteristic” of 1360-1460 is the volume of ideas moving between university and “an extra-mural world”. Ghosh and Soukup, “Philosophy, Politics, and *Perplexitas*: A Socio-Epistemic Approach to Late Medieval Religion”, 13.

Moine's sentence above suggests, the two spheres were already coming together in important ways well before Wyclif, in the first decades of the fourteenth century. Furthermore, while scholarship on the Beguins has frequently focussed on them as a popular movement in which the text of a scholar prominently features, few studies have paused to consider the wider elements of academic heresy and popular heresy, how they merge in their case, and how unusual some of these interactions are.¹⁸ A main objective of this article is to analyse some of the defining characteristics of the Beguin movement more closely, in order to explicitly point out the ways in which the boundaries between the scholarly and popular spheres significantly overlapped with one another in this episode of the early fourteenth century. My concern here is not with the intellectual atmosphere in which this took place, nor am I concerned with hermeneutics. Rather, I have a nuts-and-bolts approach: I intend merely to point out and comment on certain features. What is more, I will show how this blurring of boundaries can be seen both in characteristics of the movement, *and* in the procedures and methods used to suppress it. The end of the article then raises larger questions prompted by this case that point to potential future areas of investigation.

At this point one might ask: Why focus on the Beguins? Were they the first to exhibit this academic-popular combination? The answer to that is both "yes" and "no".¹⁹ A case one could point to earlier than the Beguins is that of the Amalricians, condemned for heresy in 1210, a group that got its name from the theologian Amalric of Béne, who was dead by the time the sect bearing his name came about.²⁰ Amalric, a scholar at the University of Paris, had been censured for his beliefs between 1205 and 1206, and died –purportedly from embarrassment– shortly thereafter. A few years later a group seemingly made up of some of Amalric's former students and colleagues were accused of heresy, and were said to have been preaching their doctrines to lay citizens in the villages around Paris. Those seen as the leaders of the group were arrested, charged with a list of errors, and then interrogated. On 20 November 1210, ten Amalricians were executed, and four sentenced to perpetual imprisonment. Amalric himself was eventually exhumed and burned,

¹⁸ Some discussions of Olivi's influence on the Beguins can be found in Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, at various places in chapters 8-12; Burr, "Did the Beguins Understand Olivi?"; Vian, "L'interpretazione della storia nella Lectura super Apocalipsim di Pietro di Giovanni Olivi e i contesti della sua ricezione"; Burr, "Na Prouz Boneta and Olivi"; Burnham, *So Great a Light*, 15-50 and 61-64; Burnham, "The Angel with the Book".

¹⁹ My focus here is on heresy as it was dealt with in the central and late Middle Ages, rather than the earlier medieval scholarly heresies (e.g. Pelagius and the Pelagians, Donatus and the Donatists), as the ways in which heresy was approached and dealt with were profoundly different between the two periods.

²⁰ The history of the Amalricians remains relatively understudied. See Dickson, "Joachism and the Amalricians"; Dickson, "The Burning of the Amalricians"; Thijssen, "Master Amalric and the Amalricians: Inquisitorial Procedure and the Suppression of Heresy at the University of Paris"; Capelle, *Autour du décret de 1210: Amaury de Bène: Étude sur son panthéisme formel*; Lucentini (ed.), *Contra Amaurianos, D'Alverny*, "Un fragment du procès des Amauriciens"; Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 306-311, and Grundmann, *Religious Movements of the Middle Ages*, 153-159.

and was then officially condemned by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215.

While the Amalricians seem to have attracted at least the attention of certain lay citizens—as some of these were arrested along with the leaders of the group—the scholarly-popular exchange here seems to have been brief and limited. The core followers of the group all seem to have been scholars and clergymen.²¹ The lay followers who were initially arrested were let go without punishment because they had been “corrupted and deceived”.²² The main link between the scholarly and popular spheres were those students and clerics who were condemned, and who held and disseminated the ideas. They were the main targets of the inquisition which followed, and the lay members of the movement appear to have had very little involvement. So, while we can discern some kind of contact between academic heresy and popular heresy in the case of the Amalricians, it can be seen perhaps as more of a brief prelude, rather than an equal forerunner of, the kind of blending of scholarly and popular that we can see in the Beguins.²³ Let us now turn to their case.

Background: Spiritual Franciscans, Peter of John Olivi, and the Beguins

The Beguin movement was bound up with the decades-long controversy within the Franciscan Order over the issue of poverty. Almost from the Order’s inception in the thirteenth century, the degree of poverty that ought to be adhered to by the brothers was a cause of intense debate and tension. Eventually, this tension devolved into a showdown between strict “Spirituals” who advocated absolute, radical poverty and “the Community” who felt that the rule of poverty could be subject to modification and relaxation.²⁴ Along the way, the Spirituals’ zeal for poverty began to meld with apocalyptic ideas in the tradition of the twelfth-century abbot Joachim of Fiore, which had been popular within the Franciscan Order since the thirteenth century.²⁵ Among other things, these included the idea that a group of “spiritual men” would appear to renew the church and fight Antichrist in a coming Third and final Age that was imminent. From 1300-1317 tensions within the order became intense, and finally, after a series of rebellious acts on the part of Southern French Spiritual

²¹ Of the fourteen who were condemned, nine are said to have “studied” theology, and of those one was said to have lectured in the arts at Paris. Caesarius of Heisterbach also described them as “certain learned men”. Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus*, in Capelle, *Autour du décret*, 101.

²² William the Breton, *Gesta Philippi*, published in Capelle, *Autour du décret*, 100.

²³ Fichtenau noted that “The Amalrician sect is also noteworthy for molding the new academic system into a vessel for an irrational viewpoint that might have developed into a popular heresy”, but that potential was never fully realised in their case. See Fichtenau, *Heretics and Scholars*, 311.

²⁴ These were by no means neat categories, as a wide spectrum of opinion existed within both the Spirituals and the broader Franciscan Order, but I use these terms here for simplicity’s sake. For a discussion of the term “spiritual” and its use see Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, 11-41; for discussion of the term “the Community”, see Cusato, “Whence ‘the Community’?”, who notes that it appears to have been a self-referential term used by the Order’s hierarchy in the early years of the fourteenth century.

²⁵ Potestà, “Il ‘Super Hieremiam’ e il gioachimismo della dirigenza minoritica della metà del Duecento”; Potestà, “Forme di una retorica profetica e apocalittica: i frati minori e il gioachimismo (secoli XIII-XIV)”.

Franciscans, a group of them were summoned to Avignon by Pope John XXII in 1317. There they were imprisoned, and made to recant their views on poverty and submit to their superiors. As mentioned above, four of the imprisoned friars refused, and they were burned at the stake in Marseilles in 1318. This touched off decades of inquisitions aimed at crushing the intricate network of renegade Franciscans and their lay followers, the “Beguins”, that stretched across Languedoc.²⁶

Crucial to this story was the figure of the Franciscan theologian Peter of John Olivi, who was associated with the Spirituals’ cause.²⁷ Olivi was educated at the University of Paris, and held various teaching positions in Italy and Southern France throughout his lifetime. Like Amalric of Béne, Olivi had been controversial in his lifetime—he was censured in 1283—but had never been personally condemned as a heretic. In 1297, Olivi completed a commentary on the book of the Apocalypse, the *Postilla super apocalipsim*. In it, Olivi drew heavily on Joachite apocalyptic ideas in his view of church history, and provocatively linked the issue of poverty with this apocalypticism in his commentary. Between Olivi’s death in 1298 and the burning of the friars in 1318, his commentary circulated rapidly and widely amongst both Spiritual Franciscans and the lay Beguins.²⁸ It eventually became a crucial component of the Beguin movement and achieved a quasi-scriptural status amongst them, with copies of the *Postilla* circulating through the network in both Latin and vernacular versions. Olivi himself was revered as an uncanonised saint and his writings—and *Postilla* in particular—were seen as holy. Such reverence for Olivi and his writings came to be key identifiers of the Beguin heresy in the view of inquisitors.²⁹ When it became clear that Olivi’s commentary was fuelling Franciscan dissidents, Pope John XXII initiated two condemnation processes against it: the first lasting from 1318-1319, and the second from 1322-1326, each one involving the consultation of a group of theologians on extracts taken from the commentary in order to assess its orthodoxy.³⁰ It was eventually condemned in a papal bull in 1326, the text of which does not survive.

The Cult of the Scholar

As we can see, in a way similar to the Lollards, a scholar stood (or was seen to stand) at the foundations of Beguin belief, in the figure of Olivi. While Olivi certainly had influence and associates during his lifetime, there is no indication that anything like a movement had sprung up around him while he was living. In death, however, Olivi

²⁶ For an overview of both the intra-Franciscan conflict and the persecution of the Beguins see respectively Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans*, and Burnham, *So Great a Light*. On the co-creation of Beguin beliefs through persecution see Nieto Isabel, “Beliefs in Progress: The Beguins of Languedoc and the Construction of a New Heretical Identity”.

²⁷ Despite being closely associated with Spiritual circles, Olivi was by no means among the most radical proponents of poverty. See Burr, *Olivi’s Peaceable Kingdom*, and Burr, *Olivi and Franciscan Poverty*.

²⁸ Early indicators of Olivi’s influence can be seen in the condemnation of his works by the Franciscan general chapter in 1299 and Boniface VIII’s request to Giles of Rome to examine Olivi’s *Postilla* in 1303. See Burr, *Olivi’s Peaceable Kingdom*, 198-199.

²⁹ See Nieto Isabel, “Beliefs in Progress”.

³⁰ Both condemnation processes are outlined in Burr, *Olivi’s Peaceable Kingdom*, 198-220 and 221-239. See also Piron, ‘Censures et condamnation de Pierre de Jean Olieu: enquête dans les marges du Vatican’.

became a veritable celebrity: a saint, an angel of the apocalypse, a prophet. Long before persecution of the Beguins began, a cult following had sprung up around him, with crowds flocking to his tomb every year on his unofficial “feast day”.³¹ Starting out as an uncanonised saint, Olivi eventually became to the Beguins the “angel with a face like the sun” from Revelations 10:1-3, playing a cosmic role in the apocalyptic scenario they believed was playing out all around them.³² Olivi’s ideas penetrated deep within Beguin circles, and, importantly, were recognised as being his – that is, the ideas were not disembodied from the man.³³ A crucial factor in this circulation was the fact that Olivi’s own writings – especially his *Postilla super apocalipsim*, but also other didactic and exhortative texts – were preserved, circulated, read and read aloud within the group, even smuggled along the Beguin network as heretical contraband.³⁴ Inquisitors repeatedly asked Beguins what they thought of Olivi, and what they thought of his writings – to which many Beguins replied that they thought his doctrine was good, and catholic, and contained no errors.³⁵ In his inquisitor’s manual, Bernard Gui also singles out reverence of Olivi as a key signifier of Beguin belief, noting that they “found” some of their errors in his “books and booklets” and that they “in their depraved understanding apply [Olivi’s writings] in support of themselves and against those whom they call their persecutors”.³⁶

At first glance, perhaps, such unofficial veneration is not particularly odd. After all, unofficial cults sprang up all the time, in both orthodox and heterodox contexts. One only needs to look to a group like the Guglielmites, persecuted in 1300 in Milan, and their veneration of the deceased holy woman Guglielma of Milan as the incarnation of the Holy Spirit, for a near-contemporary example of the unofficial saint-to-heresy pipeline.³⁷ But if we pause and think more carefully about Olivi the man, and exactly what he was venerated for, things start to look more unusual. Olivi is not typical saint material.³⁸ Whereas someone like Guglielma of Milan was known for living an exceptionally ascetic and typically “saintly” life, the defining characteristic of Olivi’s saintly nature seems to have been his authorship of a book. Even later, when he had been firmly designated

³¹ Burnham, *So Great a Light*, 21-24. A sect surrounding Olivi had also been perceived by leadership within the Order as early as 1299. See Burr, *The Persecution of Peter Olivi*, 74.

³² Burnham, “The Angel with the Book,” 384-390. A defining feature of the angel with a face like the sun is his having a book in his hand.

³³ Perhaps the most vivid illustration of Olivi’s presence in Beguin belief is in the deposition of Na Prou Boneta. May, “The Confession of Prou Boneta, Heretic and Heresiarch”.

³⁴ See Pales-Gobilliard, *Les livres des Sentences de l’Inquisiteur Bernard Gui, 1308-1323*, 1298-1416; Burnham, *So Great a Light*, 61-62.

³⁵ See for example the *culpe* of Beguins in Pales-Gobilliard, *Livres des Sentences*, 1298-1416.

³⁶ Gui, *Inquisitor’s Guide: A Medieval Manual on Heretics*, 92-94. For the intensity of belief in Olivi’s writings that some Beguins had, see not only Na Prou Boneta but also Burnham’s example of one Guilhem Serralier who, just before being burned on 1 March 1327, cried out to the assembled crowd that Olivi was a saint and all his writings holy. Burnham, “The Angel with the Book”, 366.

³⁷ Newman, “The Heretic Saint: Guglielma of Bohemia, Milan, and Brunate”; see also Larmon Peterson, *Suspect Saints and Holy Heretics: Disputed Sanctity and Communal Identity in Medieval Italy*.

³⁸ I am grateful to Dr Delfi Nieto Isabel for discussion on this point.

as a prophet and the “angel with a face like the sun”, both of these designations hinged upon his writings, and not on any particular saintly conduct during his life.

We can see this in Beguin depositions and *culpe*, where the majority of mentions of Olivi occur in reference to his writings and doctrine; rarely was just his person mentioned alone.³⁹ He was never said to perform miracles while alive. He was not particularly known for asceticism, or visions. Even an account of his death, which was circulated amongst the Beguins as a little written story that they read to each other, emphasises his scholarship and intellect. Even though it was given the saintly-sounding title of *The Passing of the Holy Father*, the description of Olivi’s death is distinctly un-saintly. He is referred to as ‘the most holy father and *most excellent scholar*’, and the remarkable event which occurs at his death is that he confesses that all his knowledge came from a sudden revelation he received in Paris. Nothing else is related.⁴⁰ Furthermore, unlike Guglielma, almost none of those who were to be persecuted for venerating Olivi could be considered his “disciples” or would have ever met him, as he had been dead for nearly twenty years by the time inquisitions against the Beguins began in earnest in 1318.⁴¹ To paraphrase Louisa Burnham, it was Olivi’s writings, and not his way of life or person, which made him a saint in their eyes.⁴² This means that Olivi was venerated by a group of lay followers almost exclusively for his intellectual activity and scholarly output, and not for his way of life. His books, and not his person, connected those in the movement both to him and to one another.

Makeup of the Movement

The key avenues along which Olivi’s writings, ideas, and image spread into the Beguin population were likely the deep ties that the Spiritual Franciscans of the Southern French convents had to the local communities there. They acted as the spiritual confessors of the townspeople, and lay citizens attended masses and heard sermons at the convents; Beguin confessions reveal that they had heard some of the articles they were confessing to in the sermons of some Franciscans.⁴³ But this was not simply a case in which Olivi’s ideas were communicated verbally, where his writings became abstract “texts” existing in oral form, disembodied from their physical origins and existing purely as ideas that eventually coalesced into a “heresy”.⁴⁴ The books and writings themselves were front and centre: circulated and read repeatedly, having an almost living presence in the movement. Those who could not read had the writings read aloud to them.⁴⁵ They also circulated a variety of writings, both Olivian and

³⁹ For examples see again Pales-Gobilliard, *Livres des Sentences*, 1326, 1334, 1364.

⁴⁰ Bernard Gui reproduces this text in his manual. *Inquisitor’s Guide*, 136-137.

⁴¹ Burnham, “The Angel with the Book”, 367-368.

⁴² Burnham, “Angel with the Book”, 367-368.

⁴³ For example in Peire Tort’s *culpa*, in Pales-Gobilliard, *Livres des Sentences*, 1396-1416. See also Burnham, “The Angel with the Book”, 369.

⁴⁴ This function of texts within religious groups is most famously described in Stock, *The Implications of Literacy*.

⁴⁵ Bernard Gui also notes how “Earlier members have repeated his sayings to later ones, they recite them to each other, share them among themselves, and reverence them as if

non-Olivian.⁴⁶ But among these, one in particular stood out as being of paramount importance: Olivi's Apocalypse commentary, the *Postilla super apocalipsim*. The text itself was an object of veneration among the Beguins, and was also the text that most interested the inquisitors and those in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Olivi's *Postilla* can be seen as the lynchpin upon which a remarkable level of interpenetration between the academic and popular turned, and potentially marks a new way in which those two spheres could and did blend into one another. It is particularly striking when we consider the question of genre. Much like Olivi was not typical saint material, the *Postilla* was not a text one would usually expect to ignite lay enthusiasm. It was a Latin, scholastic biblical commentary, a genre of work which was very much the preserve of the scholarly elite.⁴⁷ It was not a sermon, or any other type of exhortative piece; in other words, it was very much *not* the kind of text that was frequently circulated to or read by the "average citizen", literate or otherwise, or the type of literature that often sparked a spiritual or devotional movement. And yet, the *Postilla* did just that, moving beyond scholarly circles and penetrating into the community surrounding Olivi and beyond. But it went far beyond just circulating: it became a foundational, deeply embedded element of the Beguin belief system which circulated widely amongst them. Again, it was not a case of the book's ideas becoming disembodied from the pages and organically taking on a life of their own separately from the book. While the Beguins certainly put their own spin on some of Olivi's ideas, the evidence makes it clear that the book itself, in physical form, remained firmly in place as a touchstone of their beliefs. Numerous Beguins confessed to having either heard the *Postilla* read, or that they had personally read it themselves.⁴⁸ It was preserved, hidden, and smuggled out of the area during periods of persecution, and circulated amongst the Beguins both in Latin and vernacular translations.⁴⁹ It was not just a sideshow, but a central element of their worldview, and was revered as good, holy, and sent by the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰ It was a sustaining text, read as a way of bolstering morale and making sense of the persecution that was unfolding around them. Inquisitors, too, saw it as foundational, asking about it specifically during

they were genuine and authentic documents. His supporters have also passed on much information to the Beguin men and women of today." Gui, *Inquisitor's Guide*, 93.

⁴⁶ For a description of the variety of texts see Burnham, *So Great a Light*, 62; Burnham, "The Angel with the Book", 373-375; Montefusco, "Structure and Tradition of Pierre de Jean Olieu's Opuscula: Inner Experience and Devotional Writing"; Lerner, "Writing and Resistance Among the Beguins of Languedoc and Catalonia".

⁴⁷ See the analysis of the commentary in Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom*. See also the edition and translation by Lewis, *Commentary on the Apocalypse*.

⁴⁸ See for example the *culpe* in Pales-Gobilliard, *Livres des Sentences*, 1298-1310, 1310-1314, 1326, 1334, 1348, 1354, 1364, 1396-1416.

⁴⁹ See the efforts of Peire Trencavel, in Burnham, *So Great a Light*, 161-177. The vernacular version—probably the version which most Beguins encountered—was likely a Catalan version which was slightly more radical in its apocalyptic outlook and designated certain contemporary figures in certain apocalyptic roles. Burnham, "The Angel with the Book", 382. On the condemnation of the Catalan version see Burr, *Olivi's Peaceable Kingdom*, 206-213.

⁵⁰ See references in Nieto-Isabel, "Beliefs in Progress," 108, and, for example, the *culpe* of Guillem Ros and Pierre Tort, in Pales-Gobilliard, *Le livres des sentences*, 1364 and 1410-1414, respectively.

interrogations, and in other contexts declared it to be the “poisoned fountain” of the Beguins’ beliefs, as we saw in Michel le Moine’s sentence. As noted above, Bernard Gui states that the Beguins found some of their “poisonous opinions” in the books of Olivi, which “they read, believe and respect them as if they were genuine Scripture”, and from which they “suck poison”.⁵¹

Procedures of Suppression

The blurred boundaries between the scholarly and the popular within the Beguin movement itself were then also reflected in the ways in which authorities attempted to suppress it. The interrogation and public punishment of members through the process of inquisition was certainly the dominant way in which ecclesiastical authorities dealt with the Beguins between 1318 – 1330.⁵² But this particular series of inquisitions was undergirded by another procedure usually reserved for the scholarly sphere. Here again Olivi’s *Postilla super apocalipsim* proves crucial. As mentioned earlier, when the influence of the *Postilla* within the Beguin movement became clear, John XXII initiated two condemnation processes: the first in 1318-1319 and the second in 1322-1326—in other words, concurrent with the beginning of inquisitions against the Beguins.

It was, of course, not unusual for a suspect work to be given to a panel for assessment. But the context and reasons for this assessment are notable. The *Postilla* was examined not as part of an accusation against a lone scholar, or to pronounce judgment on a work or set of teachings in order to prevent them from going further. John XXII set these condemnations in motion *as a consequence* of the role it was playing within not just the Spiritual faction of the Franciscan Order but within a *lay* dissenting movement. The first condemnation process is initiated in the same year as the burning of the four friars in Marseille and many of the initial inquisitions against the Beguins. The reactive nature of the condemnation processes is also made explicit in one of the assessments of the *Postilla* from the 1322-1326 process, found in a manuscript held by the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris, where the author urges the pope to condemn the *Postilla* because the dangerous “Olivian” heresy is spreading across Europe.⁵³ We can see, then, that the condemnation of the Apocalypse commentary was a tool to further clamp down on the movement unfolding in Languedoc, by striking at what was seen to be one of its central components.

The usage of the condemnation as such is borne out by the evidence, which shows widespread knowledge and application of the judgments within the inquisitorial process. As noted above, deposition records show that questions about Olivi’s works and his *Postilla* in particular routinely appeared within interrogations, and well before the final judgment of 1326. Bernard Gui, also writing before this final judgment and when discussing how some of the

⁵¹ Gui, *Inquisitor’s Guide*, 93-94.

⁵² See Burnham, *So Great a Light*.

⁵³ Burr, *Olivi’s Peaceable Kingdom*, 222-223. This kind of process was a hallmark of John XXII’s papacy: he was particularly keen on commissioning assessments not just of books but also many other theological issues. See Sylvain Piron, ‘Avignon sous Jean XXII: L’Eldorado des théologiens’.

Beguins found their errors in Olivi's writings, makes a point of noting that several articles of the *Postilla* were in 1319 "adjudged to be heretical" by masters of theology, using the condemnation to clearly assert the heretical foundations of Beguin belief, and he includes questions about the *Postilla* and whether the pope could legitimately condemn Olivi's writings in his Beguin interrogatory.⁵⁴ We can then see these questions put into practice, as for example in the *culpe* of Bernard de Na Jacma and Guillem Ros, both of whom say that the pope had no power to condemn Olivi's works.⁵⁵ The condemnation is also referenced directly in the deposition of Na Prous Boneta, a Beguin visionary of Montpellier, as she declared that the pope's condemnation of Olivi's writings is one of the reasons that the sacrament of the altar lost its efficacy.⁵⁶

When it comes to the campaign against the Beguins, then, we see a more hybrid repressive response. It is not split between censuring a scholar and then separately pursuing a popular movement. A process usually reserved for academic censure was initiated in response to what was occurring within a largely lay movement. The results of that academic process were then communicated outward in order to strengthen the efforts of inquisitors in the persecution of that movement, efforts which they had already begun. It was not kept separate, but informed the inquisitors' treatment of those they interrogated. Furthermore, this is being done not after the fact, when the movement had been suppressed, but in the moment, while the movement is still very much alive and active. It was not symbolic, but an active part of the suppression of a wider movement. Therefore procedures for academic censure and procedures for the suppression of heretical movements were brought together in the case of the Beguins.

Conclusion

This article is meant as only a preliminary discussion: the case of Olivi and the Beguins raises some broader questions about the history of heresy and inquisition in the Middle Ages, which point to areas for further investigation. In recent years, there has been an attempt to identify what distinguishes "late" medieval heresy from "high" medieval heresy. The feeling has always been that something is different, but exactly what that difference is has yet to be fully articulated. One question to be asked then is: Do the Beguins represent a turning point? Is the blurring of boundaries between scholarly and popular heresy something which marks out late medieval heresy from its high medieval counterparts? In the introduction to a recent volume entitled *Late Medieval Heresy: New Perspectives*, Sean Field and Michael Bailey gesture towards this possibility, pointing out how in many instances of late medieval heresy earlier intellectual and spiritual currents were reworked and changed as they came into contact with other currents.⁵⁷ Numerous other cases of the fourteenth century seem

⁵⁴ Gui, *Inquisitor's Guide*, 93, and 121.

⁵⁵ Pales-Gobilliard, *Livres des Sentences*, 1334 and 1364.

⁵⁶ May, 'Confession of Prous Boneta', 15.

⁵⁷ Bailey and Field, "Historiography, Methodology, and Manuscripts: Robert E. Lerner and the Study of Late Medieval Heresy", 8-9.

to carry similar crossovers between the academic and popular worlds, not just in the obvious case of Wyclif and the Lollards, and also Jan Hus and the Hussites, but also, it could be argued, in cases like that of Meister Eckhart, the heresy of the free spirit, and Marguerite Porete. The extent to which Olivi and the Beguins “broke the mold” and were the real turning point is debatable, but the question is worth pursuing.

Another avenue worth pursuing, which relates closely to this, is the role of books. In examining the case of the Beguins, the thing which perhaps jumps out the most is how much the overlap between academic heresy and popular heresy is facilitated by a book. Not only does it demonstrate the movement of a text usually the preserve of the educated elite into wider popular circles, but the book also solidifies the link between scholarly and popular by its adoption into the movement as a central fixture of belief, and something which could transmit and sustain that belief *independently* of any specific person. The book is also what gives rise to the hybrid procedure of suppression, bringing in the process of academic censure to inquisitions against a popular movement.

This repressive crossover is, again, not just a feature of the Beguins. In several other cases of heresy in the early fourteenth century and beyond, books seem to play an increasingly prominent role, and also start to attract more directed inquisitorial attention.⁵⁸ Are books, then, another defining feature of late medieval heresy? Are they playing new roles, or are they merely being paid more attention? Again, these are questions which merit a future, larger-scale study.

For now, whatever their place within the history of heresy and inquisition, it is clear that the Beguins present a case of scholarly heresy melding into popular heresy in the early years of the fourteenth century. Their case shows that this occurred not only in the ideas and makeup of a popular movement, but also within the procedures of suppression used against it. Faced with a hybrid movement, authorities reacted with a hybrid method.

⁵⁸ Cases such as Marguerite Porete (d. 1310), Arnau of Vilanova (d. 1311), and, of course, the Lollards and the Hussites much later on, all spring to mind. On the inquisitorial side, see for example Nicholas Eymerich’s *Directorium inquisitorum*, where he includes a whole section on heretical books in his catalogue of heresies.

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