

On *Cloud Atlas* and Catharism

Cloud Atlas: a novel by David Mitchell. 2004.

Cloud Atlas (movie soundtrack by Tykwer, Klimek and Heil), 2012.

Cloud Atlas (movie directed by Tom Tykwer & the Wachowskis), 2012.

Cloud Atlas (audio book versions of the novel, both abridged and unabridged).

Cloud Atlas is a many-layered fictional map of the past and of the future.¹ It is also a work about belief. If one were to scrape away the barnacles of history from ancient Catharism, then one would distill a set of beliefs and a worldview almost indistinguishable from that which permeates *Cloud Atlas*.

In its apparent density² and perceived difficulty *Cloud Atlas* seems not unlike its famous half-namesake *Atlas Shrugged*³ — a philosophical

¹ In a broad sense we might see *Cloud Atlas* as an early cultural manifestation of ‘the movement toward the Long Now’, as spearheaded by The Clock of The Long Now project, and the Long Now Foundation’s ‘Seminars About Long Term Thinking’. The Long Now is a term devised by Brian Eno, and it refers to a shift in mankind’s temporal perception so that our view routinely reaches to the 10,000 year mark and beyond.

² *Cloud Atlas* also adds a further layer of patina intended to intrigue. One example would be the many (possibly trivial) hidden layers and clues which will no doubt be of interest to future dissertation writers. The number “6” has a prominent use in various forms, not least the six sections of the novel, and thus presumably has a symbolic subtext. There are other recurring motifs, including the frequent motifs of falling and rising which are perhaps meant to marry with the theme of music / the ascent and falling of souls / the Christian ideas of the Fall and Heavenly ascension. A more obvious literary allusion is that the name of the central character Sonmi-451 is a reference to the famous Ray Bradbury novel *Fahrenheit 451*. Doubtless there are more such deft touches waiting to be noticed. Some broader interesting themes to be explored could be motifs of poisoning and cannibalism, and of rescue and libraries.

³ Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, Penguin 2005. One of the other parallels with *Cloud Atlas* is the ‘Enrichment Statutes’ law in the era of Sonmi-451, which dictate that consumers must spend a certain amount per month, and that

novel that is a sprawling epic of evil systems and ethical choices, similarly influenced as much by movies as by high literature, and which moves underdeveloped characters around in a deft game of intellectual chess. It is difficult to successfully inculcate radical belief by marrying commercial storytelling with philosophy. Inculcation was certainly Rand's aim with *Atlas Shrugged*. Is it also Mitchell's aim? Who knows?⁴ It appears that the author publically professes no religious belief, other than a vague wish for Christianity to be given a little more credit for motivating people to undertake useful projects in the world.⁵ Perhaps motivation doesn't matter — one of the lessons of

hoarding is an anti-government crime. One could also note Rand's dystopian science-fiction novel *Anthem* (1938) — in it, Equality 7-2521 is a regimented (effectively enslaved) Street Sweeper working deep under the earth, as part of a world of complete social control run by the World Council. It is a world in which certain key terms such as “me” are unknown and thus unspeakable, and having a friend is a crime. But Equality 7-2521 has a forbidden friend, one of the sub-intelligent class of humans called Union, “they of the half-brain”. Equality 7-2521 finds the entrance to an old tunnel. There he tries to rediscover old knowledge. But his ‘new’ old knowledge is a threat to the society, and he is sent to the Palace of Corrective Detention. Equality 7-2521 escapes and travels into the countryside. All this is very similar to the Sonmi-451 narrative in *Cloud Atlas* (the novel includes the escape to the countryside, the movie does not).

⁴ Interestingly, if one *were* looking for a mystic, Mitchell's small part of the English Midlands would be the place to find one. The area notably produced Alfred Watkins (1855-1935), with his off-the-wall “everything is connected” founding notions on ley-lines, and his more plausible notions about some ancient sacred sites and structures being built atop one another through the millennia. The area is also remarkable for its centuries-spanning entanglements of music and literature, and a sort of quiet pastoral mysticism. One might cite William Langland, through A.E. Housman (helped along by the music of Elgar — a minor character in *Cloud Atlas* — and Vaughan Williams); John Masefield (“On Malvern Hill”); Auden's poem to the Malverns; Geoffrey Hill (the Malverns are a notable presence in *Mercian Hymns*); even David Rudkin's famous screenplay for the mystical *Penda's Fen*. The striking lyrics of the cult band The Dancing Did might seem very familiar to *Cloud Atlas's* Old Georgie.

⁵ David Mitchell interviewed by Adam Begley, “The Art of Fiction No. 204”, *Paris Review*, Summer 2010, issue 193. One might note here that a principled 19th century Christian character — a middle-ranking notary — ‘bookends’ either

Cloud Atlas is that the intention of an artist is one of the less important things about the finished work, once the work is swept into the flow of culture-in-time. I admit that any claim that *Cloud Atlas* is a covert vehicle of faith might seem to be undermined by the work's unusual form, which is not exactly designed for easy riding. We are more used to accessible religious texts shouting belief from a bloody cinematic pulpit (as in Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*) or throwing a soft veil of allegory across a bloody cat's-paw (as in Lewis's *Narnia* series). But one might counter this query by suggesting that *Cloud Atlas* instead harks back to the manner of the cloaked or 'reserved' forms of Christian literature once used by the likes of Christina Rossetti. Since the *Cloud Atlas* work⁶ expects, even demands, a second or third undertaking in order to start to comprehend it — and not simply because of its extensive use of salty archaisms from Melville, the one-sidedness of the Frobisher narrative, or the invented 'future-speak' languages. The "secret architecture" of *Cloud Atlas* (the author's own phrase) thus invites a faint suspicion. A suspicion that behind the entrance door there may be something more enlightening than a glassy-eyed stare from the corpse of postmodernism. Or, in David Mitchell's more elegant phrase...

"Faith, the least exclusive club on earth, has the craftiest doorman".⁷

end of the novel. The Hollywood movie version prefers to bookend with Zachary, a character akin to a Biblical shepherd archetype.

⁶ In a transmedia world, I am thinking of 'the work' as the book | audio book versions | feature film — allied to the collective intellectual discourse on these. A few have hailed *Cloud Atlas* as the first formal response of the novel form to the complexity of the Web, just as painting changed its nature in response to advances in photography. I would liken the shift more to a cultural response to RPG videogames post-*Morrowind* (2002), with their many-layered permutations of stories and choices re-playable with selectable/re-shapeable characters.

⁷ David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*. The quote is from Frobisher's letters.

The above preamble leads toward my central claim about *Cloud Atlas*. I think the work has a deep affinity with a certain type of ancient heretical religious faith called Catharism,⁸ and that there may also be structural influences from some 20th century Catharist fictions.⁹ To the best of my knowledge, I know of no-one who has yet proposed that the philosophy of *Cloud Atlas* has a basis in the Cathars or Catharism. Neither word is mentioned anywhere in the recent 2011 academic anthology¹⁰ of literary criticism of Mitchell's fiction.

Such a claim might initially seem extreme or oddball.¹¹ Surely there is something published which might deflect such an original interpretation? But there is not a great deal, and none of it deflects my argument. Mitchell himself has talked of some of his inspirations.¹²

⁸ “the Buddhists of the West” — Maurice Magre, referring to Cathars.

⁹ In terms of the *Cloud Atlas* structure and Catharism one might note (since no-one else has) the late Catharist/Gnostic novel cycle by Lawrence Durrell, *The Avignon Quintet* (1974-85, rep.2004). These are now obscure and neglected works, sharing much the same fate as the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*. But they are similar to *Cloud Atlas*, in that they are fragmented metafictional linked stories in which each character ‘writes’ the later characters. (Durrell is mentioned in *Cloud Atlas*, when Frobisher writes... “We had the place to ourselves, while Mater and Pater were in Greece holidaying with Lawrence Durrell, if memory serves.”). Also of possible interest is Rudolf Steiner’s now virtually impenetrable early Catharist cycle called the *Four Mystery Plays* (1907-1911), in which linked stories show the passage of reincarnated souls through time and into the modern day.

¹⁰ Sarah Dillon (Ed.), *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, Glyphi 2011.

¹¹ Let me assure the reader that the author of this essay is not and never has been religious, and that I have no religious or faith-based axe to grind.

¹² He notes Jared Diamond’s popular history book *Guns, Germs and Steel* as useful for the background of the Ewing sections. Herman Melville for details of life at sea and in the Galapagos Islands. Eric Fenby’s *Delius As I Knew Him* for details of the life of a great composer’s amanuensis in the early 1930s. Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker* as the originator of a sub-genre of books using the idea of a pidgin language in an far-future agrarian post-apocalyptic society. And Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* for the starting point of the ‘unfinished stories’ structure which Mitchell then ‘mirrored’. Mitchell also has Frobisher explain the mirrored structure of *Cloud Atlas* within the novel itself...

Fannish science-fiction reviewers have nodded to the basic debt that the work owes to science-fiction's literary classics.¹³ Some mainstream reviewers have noted that Nietzsche's concepts of 'eternal recurrence' and 'will to power' abound in the 1930s Frosbisher letters.¹⁴ One movie reviewer vaguely mooted a strange meeting of Darwinism and Buddhism, but did not speculate further. A stack of academic literary criticism has been written over the last decade, but almost all of the authors were scrying at the work through the occluded lenses of Derrida, Foucault, and various postmodernisms. A trawl of academic books discovers only more such, with an occasional paper from someone in linguistics. I have found only two reviews from a serious theological perspective, and one of those partly comes at the work via St. Derrida. The Catholic Church — still vehemently branding Cathars as heretics and as "the Great Heresy" after more than eight centuries — does not seem to have once noticed that Catharism may well have taken a starring role in a \$100m+ movie that is currently on global release.

"Spent the fortnight gone in the music room, reworking my year's fragments into a "sextet for overlapping soloists": piano, clarinet, 'cello, flute, oboe, and violin, each in its own language, key, scale and colour. In the first set, each solo is interrupted by its successor: in the second each interruption is recontinued, in order."

¹³ Although reviewers have overlooked the clear debt to Rand's *Anthem* (see footnote 3), they have noted the dystopian worlds of SF novels such as *1984*, *Brave New World*, and Zamyatin's *We*. Film critics have pointed to classic SF movies such as *Soylent Green*, *Logan's Run*, and *Blade Runner*. I might add that in its basic structure of linked stories across centuries, *Cloud Atlas* echoes an SF form begun by Keith Roberts with his *Pavane* (1968). *Pavane* is an alternate history in linked stories, in which the Catholic Church still has absolute supremacy and the Reformation and Protestantism were stifled at birth. *Pavane* was itself inspired by the centuries-spanning linked stories structure of Rudyard Kipling's fantasy *Puck of Pook's Hill* and its sequel. One might also note the connections with ancient preliterate 'ring composition' methods of storytelling.

¹⁴ On the work's use of a Nietzsche worshipping character, and parallels to real history, see the final footnote in this essay.

Catharism's place in *Cloud Atlas*

How to explicate *Cloud Atlas* alongside details of the Cathar faith, without becoming too hopelessly tangled for the reader? To do this I have written a brief seven-page summary of Cathar beliefs, drawn from scholarly sources. I have chosen to use footnotes to explicate this account, and to show how specific ideas relate to *Cloud Atlas*. My apologies to those for whom such footnotes are an antiquated relic of the days when people did dreadful things such as read texts more than once.

The Cathars were an unusual medieval faith, divided into a small priest class (the Perfects) and their wider lay congregation (the Believers).¹⁵ Beyond those groups lay a much wider circle of sympathisers. Most Old Testament sections of The Bible were strongly rejected by the Cathars, and some of the New Testament saints were also rejected. Cathars rejected the Old Testament idea of a violent and wrathful God, and rejected the authority of the Ten Commandments. Such a loss cut Cathars off from the basic Christian idea that a fiery Hell awaits sinners in the afterlife.¹⁶ But the Cathars found¹⁷ a way to believe in a very different

¹⁵ They went by other names, but for simplicity I shall use these here. The historians appear to know of no evidence for how people came to be moved toward a conversion to Catharism, although the actual conversion ceremony is known in full since written copies survive.

¹⁶ Neither Jesus nor St. Paul mentions Hell in the New Testament. By removing the potent threat of Hell, medieval religionists would need a strong new form of enticement to make their religion work at the practical level.

¹⁷ They found this idea from circa the year 1179, in a creed called 'absolute dualism'. 'Absolute dualism' is a belief in the eternal existence of two equal and opposing worlds of Good and Evil, and Heaven and Hell. These worlds or forces are not mixed or intermingled (as in the Tao) but rather they are absolute and irreconcilable forces, as they are in *Cloud Atlas*. Although some intermingling *is* implied in the Cathar belief about the nature of souls — since although all human souls are tainted by an Evil not of their making, through reincarnation and love a soul can be slowly cleansed until it is perfect and fit to rejoin with Heaven.

kind of Hell. The Cathar priests (Perfects) pledged to despise the earthly material world, which they deemed to be Hell and the creation of absolute Evil.¹⁸ Thus the world was understood to be a kind of illusion or ‘virtual reality’¹⁹ conjured up and maintained by Evil.

In this earthly Hell each human soul was understood as a descendant of an angel,²⁰ who had been trapped on earth at the Fall from Heaven and then seduced by Evil.²¹ As direct descendents of an angel, all humans carried a fragment of Heaven within their soul.²² The nature

¹⁸ This belief in an earthly Hell neatly solves the very basic emotional / religious problem of ‘theodicy’: i.e.: why a kindly God appears to ‘permit’ evil things to happen in the world that he created. However this also implies that: i) the beauty of nature is an illusory seduction, and thus that all forms of Animism are evil (interestingly, animism and idols recur many times in *Cloud Atlas*); and ii) that it is folly to try to violently change what is bad in the world, and that any change is best wrought upon one’s own soul through one’s own virtuous actions (another common theme in *Cloud Atlas*).

¹⁹ A potent visual metaphor relating to this idea occurs in the movie of *Cloud Atlas*. It is the key scene where technology quickly transforms an evil-looking bare concrete shell into an elegant apartment. The ‘virtual’ nature of Sonmi’s world leads to an inherent indeterminacy in relation to truth, making truth something that is only kept accurate in a basic way over generations by the effort of honest notaries and archivists. Emotional truths, on the other hand, are kept true by a different class of people, the storytellers. This dualism might be seen to mirror the manner in which Cathar influenced culture is thought to have contained within it both the Cathar scribes devoted to the plainness of the accurately copied book and also a thriving troubadour tradition.

²⁰ “the Cathar idea of the soul as a fallen angel trapped in a human body” — L. J. Sackville, *Heresy and Heretics in the Thirteenth Century: The Textual Representations*, York Medieval Press, 2011, p.47.

²¹ As a consequence of believing in an ‘absolute dualism’, it was difficult to understand Evil as being in the form of the traditional Devil (i.e.: as just one of God’s fallen angels), since Evil was deemed an alternative and co-equivalent power to God. Recent scholarship shows such ‘absolute dualism’ reached the Cathars, very probably via the Bogomil sect in Byzantium, in the year 1179.

²² Broek writes... “The Cathar notion of the Holy Spirit [as interpreted by Catharists as an individual human spirit] as a collective of all heavenly spirits [i.e., as Heaven/God] was unknown in the western world.” — Roelof Van Den Broek, in *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times*, SUNY Press, p.98.

of the Fall²³ meant that human nature was mixed in its predispositions, but (due to its partly angelic and thus Godly origins) the soul had an essential and steadfast will toward the good. Evil had then cruelly used our earthly yearning for the good, to convince humanity that Evil was actually the one true God.²⁴ Hence the Cathar rejected the Catholic Church as utterly evil, since the Catholics were deemed to worship Evil.²⁵

This foundational set of Cathar beliefs was told as a story²⁶ and it was apparently a story known only among the Cathar priest class (the

²³ There is an echo here of the Biblical seduction of Eve by the Serpent, in the Garden of Eden. But the radically different Cathar version casts no Catholic pall of Original Sin on humanity, since humanity is only imagined to have been the mere offspring of two higher beings, each human offspring bearing within him or her one part of the essence of the original Angelic being and thus of Heaven and God. Such dispersal and bringing together of souls might seem to find an echo in *Cloud Atlas's* much-quoted line...

“My life amounts to no more than one drop in a limitless ocean. Yet what is any ocean, but a multitude of drops?”

This could, of course, be an echo of the New Testament, Romans 12:5, in which Paul wrote...

“we [Christians], who are many, are one body in Christ”

²⁴ In *Cloud Atlas* Cavendish sees the evil Florence as... “An angel incarnate”, and there are many other such examples of wholly mistaking evil people for angels or saviors.

²⁵ Christ was venerated by Cathars, but was understood as a sort of an ethereal angelic “manifestation of the will to do good”, and not as a real man. The cross thus symbolized a routine instrument of state repression and capital punishment, something to which the Cathars were utterly opposed, rather than any sacred symbol of Christ’s suffering. In *Cloud Atlas* the fabricant Sonmi-451 is a similarly ‘unreal’ Christ-like figure, and arises into the world from a wholly artificial ‘womb’ without any actual human birthing.

The Cathars rejected the cross, and their only symbols seem to have been the fish and the lily (the Lily of Heaven, not of earth). In the context of *Cloud Atlas* it is intriguing to think that the symbol of a bending-stalk-and-flower of a single lily might be mistaken for a comet.

²⁶ Carol Lansing, *Power & Purity: Cathar Heresy in Medieval Italy*, p.109.

Perfect), and not among the wider Cathar lay congregations (the Believers).²⁷

The absolute Cathar belief in Good|Evil meant that the Evil material world was seen as being mirrored by an absolute and co-equal Heaven. Quite where this Cathar Heaven was meant to exist seems a little hazy today.²⁸ But a key Cathar belief was that a shard of Heaven lay safeguarded within each human soul or heart,²⁹ and that this can be gradually made perfect again by love, friendship, and virtuous actions.³⁰ Through such actions and the process of human reincarnation, this individually ‘embodied’ aspect of Heaven can be perfected through the

²⁷ In Sonmi-451’s world her sisters are all clones, thus descendents of a single being. The angelic Sonmi-451 and her clone-sisters live in a hell, but they do not know it. They have been convinced that the Evil which created their world (Papa Song) is actually a kind of beneficent God who will take them to a form of Heaven — a theme which has many wider echoes throughout the work. This Evil is sanctioned and perpetuated by a theocratic state which through ubiquitous computing is ‘all seeing’, and which in garb and tone and terminology has many similarities to the Catholic Church. ‘Papa’ is Latin for ‘Pope’.

²⁸ Most Cathar texts and books were destroyed, and most of what we know is from the detailed records kept by their Catholic accusers and inquisitors. But it seems their Heaven was thought to somehow overlay or run parallel to the material world, and even perhaps duplicated the world’s forms as a sort of “invisible world”. Though they rejected of all iconography and animistic forms, the sort of ‘hands-across-time’ déjà vu and strange dreamlike recognitions that occur in *Cloud Atlas* might not have been unfamiliar to them.

²⁹ This belief entails that the sacred can never be represented in a physical iconography or paintings of an allegorical natural world. The copying and passing on of elegantly produced simple books (without any worldly ornamentation) seems to have been the Cathar’s only systematic cultural activity other than perhaps music. In this context it is interesting that the saving, copying, and passing on of manuscripts and texts is central to *Cloud Atlas*.

³⁰ The implication is thus that redemption of the earth is a slow and laborious individual process, the quietist techniques of which are to be passed on from generation to generation, and that forced mass/group conversions of the type common under medieval Catholicism and Islam are utterly forbidden.

generations.³¹ This absolute belief in reincarnation is central to Catharism, and is one of several remarkable beliefs that seem to set it apart from traditional western religion.

The sanctified Perfects were each deemed a ‘theotokos’, meaning god bearer — so that they were deemed to physically carry the purest essence of Heaven within them. The Perfect could pass this heavenly essence to one of the Believers, through a group ‘laying on of hands’, as part of a rare ceremony to create a new Perfect priest.³² Or, much

³¹ Catharism’s central belief seems to have been about human or higher animal reincarnation, rather than returning as a grasshopper or a stone. Nor was it perhaps about an endless cycle of reincarnation, but instead the progressive process of emptying the earth (something perhaps mirrored by the ending of the movie of *Cloud Atlas*). The ultimate aim of all this reincarnation appears to have been to attain a Heaven that is described as very much like earth, but a numinous earth in a perpetual asexual ‘springtime’ state that precluded any chance of procreation. The purified angelic souls from earth would inhabit it in a form neither male nor female but somewhere in-between, with no need to procreate (the presence only of children and the elderly in the ending of the movie of *Cloud Atlas* once again resonates with this, as does the fabricants’ lack of sex organs in the novel of *Cloud Atlas*). Although it should be noted that some Cathars appear to have believed that angels had sexual desire, since angels could obviously be enticed or seduced. Catharism thus presented a fascinating potential for the peeling apart of categories of: bodies | gender | procreation | sexual desire | sexual acts | and love.

³² The Cathar structure of Perfects and Believers is mirrored in the far-future sections of *Cloud Atlas*, with the Prescients priestly class of ‘Perfects’ and the ‘Believer’ islanders. Zachary and the islanders simply have faith in the goddess Sonmi, while the Prescients “know the whole story” about Sonmi and how the ‘world’ of the island came to be. The Prescients have a fatalism about the wider ‘fallen world’ comparable to that of the Perfects, so not interfere with the islanders, nor do they try to impose their own sexual morality or ascetic beliefs (presumably austere, judging by attire and posture). It follows that it does not matter - in the great scheme of things - that Zachary or his son cannot understand Somni’s orison, only that the elite Prescients know and have copied and perpetuated its truths. This benign neglect is made to seem preferable to the ‘charitable’ enslavement (through either actual slavery or tobacco or legal forms or fabricant ‘soap’) found on the various other ‘islands’ throughout *Cloud Atlas*. The Prescients’s ‘charity’ to the islanders is instead embodied in simple friendship and a regular fair-trading of goods, in a Catharist manner.

more frequently, a Perfect could perform a deathbed *consolamentum* ceremony which would help purify the heart and renew the soul of a (usually very worthy and very old) Believer just before death.³³ To die in such a state was deemed to confer no need of further reincarnation, so long as the recipient took only water after their *consolamentum*. To eat any earthly food would contaminate the consoled person and thus invalidate the *consolamentum*.³⁴ This short fasting period was called the *endura* — in effect, a form of encouraged and sanctioned suicide.³⁵

Love and friendship was seen by the Cathars as something to be encouraged across creeds and races, social classes, and age-groups.³⁶

Incidentally, Orison is from Old French, *oreison*. It is in a Cathar ceremony that survives — “Have mercy on the spirit placed in prison, and administer to us days and hours, and genuflexions, and orisons, and preachings...” Cathar initiation of a Believer begins with what was called “Delivery of the Orison”.

³³ Sonmi-451: “the nature of our immortal lives is in the consequences of our words and deeds, which go on apportioning themselves throughout all time.” This is core Catharism.

³⁴ Contamination and poisoning is a key theme throughout *Cloud Atlas*.

³⁵ The Cathars... “astonished observers by their calm acceptance of death.” — Walter L. Wakefield, *Heresy, Crusade and Inquisition in Southern France*, 1974. Cathar pro-suicide beliefs can be closely compared to the pro-suicide ideas woven around the suicide of Frobisher in *Cloud Atlas*. Ideas which are then paired with reincarnation: Frobisher: “Once my Luger lets me go, my birth, next time around, will be upon me in a heartbeat.”. Suicide threads through and evolves throughout the novel, from that of the cabin boy in the Ewing section to the purebloods in Nea so Copros who... “take drugs that cut their lives short before they suffer the ravages of age.” Evil in *Cloud Atlas* is closely associated with suicide and other forms of premature death brought on by a ‘collective of bullies’ in various forms (gangs, slavers, prisons, influential cliques, governments, military-industrial corporations, theocratic corpocracy), groups which individuals (rather than other groups *en masse*) by their actions take a choice to stand against. The stance in *Cloud Atlas* is thus against groups who would deny the Cathar ideal of a long and educated life in which a person may try their best to be virtuous, leading to a peaceful and consoled death of old age.

³⁶ Friendship and love across age groups is one of the main themes of *Cloud Atlas*. The young Frobisher and the ageing Ayr; the film version’s pairing of 13 year-old Javier Gomez and 30-something Luisa Rey (in an easy-going 1970s

Thus Cathar friendship went beyond the routine stress on the extra-familial bonds of fealty and guild required by a feudal society...

“The god deserving of Cathar worship was a god of light, who ruled the invisible, the ethereal, the spiritual domain; this god, unconcerned with the material [world], simply didn’t care if you got into bed before getting married, had a Jew or Muslim for a friend, treated men and women as equals”³⁷

The idea of marriage was shunned by the Cathars as a worldly irrelevance, although they seem to have accepted married Believers into the faith. Their Catholic persecutors alleged that Cathars permitted orgies and sodomy. That may have been largely propaganda, but there does appear to be some evidence for permissiveness in attitudes to love expressed through sexuality...

“Many followers believed that until they received the *consolamentum* sex acts not resulting in birth were permissible.”³⁸

The wider lay congregation (the Believers) could...

“have a great deal of freedom in sexual matters”³⁹

intergenerational friendship of a sort which today would have social workers hammering on the door); the 30-something Luisa Rey and late-60s Rufus Sixsmith; the book’s friendship between the 16 year old Zachary and the 50 year old Meronym. Cavendish also muses on the wider illusion of physical age...

“Middle age is flown, but it is attitude, not years, that condemns one to the ranks of the Undead, or else proffers salvation. In the domain of the young there dwells many an Undead soul. They rush about so, their inner putrefaction is concealed for a few decades, that is all.”

³⁷ Stephen O’Shea, *The Perfect Heresy: The Life and Death of the Cathars*, Profile 2011, p.11.

³⁸ Evans (1978), citing Arno Borst, *Die Katharer*, Hiersemann 1953, p.182.

³⁹ Gerda Lerne, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*, Oxford University Press, p.75. Possibly the sexual act was seen

“So long as it did not lead to the conception of children they positively seemed to encourage sexual intercourse, or at least not discourage it — a complete reversal of the Catholic view.”⁴⁰

Permissive attitudes to homosexuality are also implied, since the Cathars believed that gender and sexual difference were artificial divisions instituted by Evil, and also because they rejected the Old Testament on the matter.⁴¹

Such attitudes arise from and are implicated with the Cathar notion of the body as a mere fleshy ‘cloak’ of meat or a meaty ‘sack’ for the spirit. References to human bodies as mere earthly meat abound.⁴² It follows that a dead body had no sanctity whatsoever...

as a simple act of relief, permitted by Cathars among Believers if it was non-procreative. In the novel of *Cloud Atlas*, Sonmi-451 tells her interrogator of her sex with Hae-Joo... “Our sex was joyless, graceless, and necessarily improvised, but it was an act of living.” The ‘improvisation’ was because fabricants have no sex organs... “fabricants stolen [in the slums] end up in brothels, made serviceable [for sex] after clumsy surgery”. In the hands of the Wachowskis in the movie version of *Cloud Atlas*, this becomes a more liberatory act of love-making where it is contrasted with the earlier submissive coupling that Yoona-939 has with the boorish overseer.

⁴⁰ Steven Runciman, *Mediaeval Manichee: a Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p.152.

⁴¹ Procreation was not permitted for the Perfect, although that may not have barred them from other physical expressions of love. Kissing a Perfect for instance, was a key part of the ceremony of becoming a lay Believer. There are hints (from interrogations only) that masturbation to orgasm was permitted, so that the Perfect would not ‘burn’ with desire. But for a Perfect to bring a child into a world of Evil was an evil act, largely because of the inevitable suffering that the child and the mother would have to endure. This meant that although the Perfect did pair (in same-sex couples, it seems) they shunned all procreative sex. Possibly such pairings were effectively no-sex ‘spiritual’ queer marriages. One then wonders what influence Catharism may have had on shaping the potent medieval French ideals of chaste and ‘chivalrous’ love, of the type that seems to inform Frobisher’s love for Eva in *Cloud Atlas*?

⁴² Again, the reference to humans as ‘meat’ is something one can see multiple times in *Cloud Atlas*, and the idea is central to the Sonmi-451 story.

“For Cathars, dead bodies were putrid meat.”⁴³

Since procreative sex was frowned on,⁴⁴ Cathars seem very likely to have encouraged basic forms of practical birth control. Such a practice may well have been done under the tutelage of older women, since there was a good deal of equality between the sexes⁴⁵ in Catharism. Female Perfects could and did preach to the Believers, even if few women appear to have risen to high offices in the faith or performed the *consolamentum*...

“the Cathars regarded women as the equal of men, and Catharism offered women the chance to participate fully in the faith at all levels.” [and] “there was nothing to stop any girl or woman becoming a Perfect.”⁴⁶

The Cathars had books as their only outward sacred instruments, and the Cathar faith could not be achieved without books.⁴⁷ These austere but elegant books were there to be read, rather than to be used as mere religious talismans. Use of books involved both private reading and public reading aloud to groups of Believers.

⁴³ Carol Lansing, *Power & Purity: Cathar Heresy in Medieval Italy*, p.107.

⁴⁴ In *Cloud Atlas* Ewing notes that the South Seas are... “noxious with fertility”. There are numerous other such examples to be had in the novel.

⁴⁵ Again, there is an obvious parallel to the attitudes to gender in *Cloud Atlas*, especially the simpler love-story oriented movie version. Although several key scholars do suggest that the number of females who became Perfects has been overstated. The split was not 50:50, but the numbers of female Perfects are still substantial in the historical record in France and Italy. One scholar suggests the difference had to do with female literacy rates, given the Cathar stress on reading and writing books. It should also be said that strong medieval misogyny sometimes appears to creep in markedly in some late Catharism, as it is being deeply persecuted and thus heavily fragmented and degraded.

⁴⁶ Sean Martin, *The Cathars* (2005), Pocket Essentials, p.53 and p.74.

⁴⁷ The relevance of this to *Cloud Atlas* should be obvious.

What else might be relevant about the Cathars? They rejected traditional church trappings and finery, and appear to have built no churches but did have a sort of convent system (perhaps often serving as a type of public medical service).⁴⁸ Cathars met and heard sermons in people's homes and (as Catholic persecution grew) in barns and fields. The Perfect wore ordinary black robes without weapons on their belts, and refused to swear oaths (i.e.: binding promises or verbal contracts) or lie or steal. They would not kill anything, including animals. They respected private property, the principles of fair trading, and of fair payment for work.⁴⁹ The Perfect were poor and ate and drank like ascetics.⁵⁰ One could not 'buy their services': offerings to them were rejected, yet they often forgave minor sins and blessed people. The Cathar Perfects were non-violent in a wider sense and so utterly condemned religious persecution, capital punishment, and war.⁵¹ They condemned the Catholic Church⁵² with a mix of

⁴⁸ Peter Biller, Joseph Ziegler, *Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (2001), p.171.

⁴⁹ Payment was often overlooked by Catholic church builders, who expected to have the work and materials of local craftsmen for free, in the manner of the work system on the Societies/Chatham islands visited by Ewing in *Cloud Atlas*.

⁵⁰ Eating meat was rejected by the Perfect since it was deemed a product of procreation and thus an especially evil part of an evil world. Fish was acceptable, since water was deemed pure – and possibly also because no-one in the medieval world actually knew that fish reproduced rather than spontaneously generated themselves. In *Cloud Atlas*, redemption is closely associated with water or liquids:— Ewing's salt-water purge; Frobisher's use of the bath (empty, for a suicide); Luisa Rey's savior sees that "newborn sunshine slants through ancient oaks and dances on a lost river" as he dies after saving her on a sailing ship; a tooth splashes into Cavendish's beer just as he realizes he is free; Union plans to add liquid catalyst to the Fabricant wombtanks in order to ascend the fabricants; and there is also Sonmi-451's first sight of the ocean.

⁵¹ Note Frobishers' arguments about war in *Cloud Atlas*, and his noting of the Moriori that "war was an alien concept to the Moriori". Note also the culminating capital punishment of Sonmi-451.

humorous scorn, wordy invective,⁵³ and common sense arguments — rather than by scurrilous lies and physical attacks.⁵⁴

This brings me to a final aspect of Catharism: namely its persecutors and exterminators, led by the Dominicans of the Catholic Church. Cathar faith was understood as a threat to Catholics⁵⁵ not only theologically and because of its strong anti-war stance, but because in the Languedoc region Catharism was tightly integrated into a flourishing peaceful society which aspired to and expressed high cultural values and learning. Seen with modern eyes the Cathar extermination seems to have been a clear template⁵⁶ for the future systematic persecution and genocide of non-violent groups in Europe — yellow badges of shame and identification; isolation and transfer to hostile towns; informers and turncoats; torture;⁵⁷ censorship; book burnings; mass burnings of people; an educated mass bureaucracy perfectly aware of what they were helping to efficiently organise.

Yet, in a concern for voluminous amounts of truthful and accurate documentation of the Cathar persecution the Catholic Church both

⁵² *Cloud Atlas's* Nea so Copros's Corpocracy seems obviously modeled on Catholicism. Government and consumerist creeds are enshrined in Catechisms. There is a similar concern with the intellectual challenge of recording and documenting, in order to make their oppression all the more effective in the future. Dress and bodily rigidity is similar. There are other similarities.

⁵³ I speculate, but one wonders if they were inheritors of the practice of Druidic curses, or forerunners of the Protestant practice of the 'speech of fury'?

⁵⁴ Sonmi-451 fights the Corpocracy only with the truth and with her words.

⁵⁵ *Cloud Atlas* says of Union: "should the day ever come when the Board decided they were a viable alternative to corpocratic ideology [they would be destroyed]".

⁵⁶ See Cullen Murphy, *God's Jury: The Inquisition and the Making of the Modern World*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012.

⁵⁷ Frobisher continually recites various actual medieval Catholic torments and tortures, as he imagines grisly fates for those he encounters and dislikes.

condemned itself to future historians, and inadvertently served to preserve a very detailed record of the Cathar faith.⁵⁸ In the later periods of persecution, the Catholic Church may also have shaped what remained of Catharism into a convenient vortex into which they could attract and trap many other forms of political dissent and supposed heresy,⁵⁹ although this Foucaultian take on the history appears to be considered rather speculative among most scholars of the subject. Finally the Catholic Church branded the Cathars the worst heresy of all time: “the Great Heresy”.^{60 61}

⁵⁸ In its orchestrated persecution of Union and Sonmi-451, the Corpocracy inadvertently gives Sonmi the double-opportunity to spread her heretical Ascended Catechisms of Declarations. Once via her final media broadcast, and again via her Testimony, given to the interrogating Archivist (who in the movie is converted and becomes her first apostle).

⁵⁹ A “swamp of dissent” as *Cloud Atlas* has Ewing call it...

“As many truths as men. Occasionally, I glimpse a truer Truth, hiding in imperfect simulacrums of itself, but as I approach it, it bestirs itself & moves deeper into the thorny swamp of dissent”

In the novel of *Cloud Atlas* the claim that Union is a puppet of the Corpocracy is clear. They wish to use Union and Sonmi-451 to...

“generate a show trial... To make every last pureblood in Nea So Copros mistrustful of every last fabricant. To manufacture consent for the Fabricant Containment Act being presented to the Juche. To discredit Abolitionism. The whole conspiracy was a resounding success.”

This conspiracy is not so clear, and is only implied, in the movie (implied by the way that Hae-Joo is never really at risk in his staged battles, by how Hae-Joo returns from apparent death, and by the knowing glance of co-conspirators on the stairs before entering the Union HQ).

If I am right, and underlying *Cloud Atlas* is essentially a work of faith, then its own “theatrical production” moves along the same trajectory as the Corpocracy’s plot — from a set of interlocking fictions arises a genuine truth.

⁶⁰ This last point is something clearly mirrored in *Cloud Atlas*...

Sonmi-451: “Ascended Catechisms of Declarations, [and] their logic and ethics, [were] denounced at my trial as “the ugliest wickedness in the annals of deviancy,”

A problem for Catharism within *Cloud Atlas*

There are a number of apparent problems in Catharism, over and above the simple fact that any religion is a fiction and is not true. One key problem is that ‘good intentions’ and ‘progressive’ notions can be retrogressive or evil in their actual outcomes.⁶² Perhaps this is especially so in the aggregate, because: i) the altruist impulse to tinker or interfere in order to ‘do good’ is far more pervasive in the modern world⁶³ and it can use more powerful methods than previously; and ii) because this impulse has been twisted and calcified over time by authoritarian forces such as

In this context there is not a little irony that the name “Cathar” may have been a rude name in medieval French, imposed on the historical record by the Catholic Church. It apparently meant something like “Cat Arse Lickers”. The irony is that the pronunciation of the word “Catholic” now contains inherent within it the potentially comic interpretation of “Cat-hole-lick”.

⁶¹ For those interested in such things, I should mention that there was a rather farcical 20th century afterlife for Catharism, called ‘neo-Catharism’. For a strong short overview of the various ridiculous forms that this took — such as confabulating Victorian historians, grim Holy Grail-hunting Nazis, swivel-eyed occultists and other fruitcakes, doped out post-1968 French hippies, and money-grubbing French Tourist Boards — see the epilogue of Stephen O’Shea’s book *The Perfect Heresy: The Life and Death of the Cathars* (2011).

⁶² To be fair, this apparent problem is tangentially addressed by Meronym near the middle of *Cloud Atlas*, when she briefly makes Zachry aware of the non-intervention edicts of the Prescients...

“I ain’t here to play Lady Sonmi ev’ry time sumthin’ bad happ’ns an’ click my fingers’n make it right!”.

She swiftly breaks these edicts to help Catkin, and later intervenes again in a more violent manner. The novel has other discussions around the topic. For a wider modern discussion of unintended consequences see Edward Tenner’s excellent book *Why Things Bite Back: new technology and the revenge effect* (1996).

⁶³ Despite what our media would have us believe, from its interminable daily drip-feed of assiduously collected bad news.

religion and socialism, and has been mummified within governments. On the other hand, some apparently neglectful, domineering or even cruel and exploitative acts may have long-term emancipatory effects for future generations⁶⁴ — and not simply because these may sometimes provide a locus for resistance to power.⁶⁵

Despite its often brutal depiction of a ‘might makes right’ world, *Cloud Atlas* departs from an absolute Good|Evil dualism, in that it seems to show that within an Evil world there exist a spectrum of good<->evil, along which individuals might traverse toward the good.⁶⁶ This view of a wholly Evil world containing perfectible souls is profoundly Catharist. But the work also leaves one with the strong Catharist impression that individuals can only traverse this spectrum slowly, painfully, over many centuries (via a believed process of reincarnation). This might seem a depressing and off-putting conclusion, especially if one can find no objective evidence for

⁶⁴ The ‘crucifixion’-like execution of Sonmi-451 springs to mind as the most extreme example. Also, the re-working of the film version of *Cloud Atlas* toward an American notion of ‘manifest destiny’ on the frontier (in this case what must be a terraformed Mars, complete with a beautiful new ice-moon towed in from the asteroid belt) obliquely suggests that territorial conquest has equalled progress toward the good.

⁶⁵ A minor example is that in the novel of *Cloud Atlas*, Frobisher steals rare early books and an “illuminated manuscript” from Ayr’s neglected library (Ayr’s sight is very poor due to venereal disease, and he can presumably no longer read print), and sells them to a British dealer for a tidy sum in cash. Frobisher steals them from a decrepit house infested with mould and moth, a place shortly to be in the teeth of a war-zone. Thus by his dishonest act he very probably saves the manuscript and books for posterity.

⁶⁶ The work also accepts that characters who are well along the road in their reincarnations can commit bad acts — Zachary’s throat-slitting incident springs to mind here. A Catharist idea of regression seems pertinent here, of how trivially easy they deemed it to be to make a slip in one’s behavior and to ‘fall back’ down the ladder of reincarnation.

reincarnation. But perhaps it is precisely such a quietist⁶⁷ and individualist route which offers a similar but non-religious solution to the problem of the unintended negative consequences of altruism.

Cloud Atlas, informed by Catharism, appears to suggest a practice in which:

— one must perfect oneself slowly, and on an individual and daily basis, through learning and friendship and stories.

— one must restrain oneself from imposing a theoretical or inherited ‘programme of perfection’ on others.

— one should live by individual example,⁶⁸ without too much reference to antiquated tribal norms and conventions.

— one’s prime ‘activism’ should be the accurate recording of other people’s stories,⁶⁹ so those stories can survive into the Long Now⁷⁰ of future history.⁷¹

⁶⁷ I mean here the anarchist use of ‘quietist’, not the Catholic use of ‘quietist’.

⁶⁸ “your own acts can have as much influence as anyone else’s, in a local sense, around you, within your family, your circle, your workplace, your acts can have a lot of influence. Maybe even more so than Westminster, the United Nations, the White House, the big economic summits.” — David Mitchell, interviewed by Wayne Burrows, March 2004.

⁶⁹ Helping truthfully record and disseminate the life stories of others in is a key theme of *Cloud Atlas*: Ewing listens to the life-story of Autua; Ewing’s diary is edited and published by his abolitionist son; Frobisher’s letters are preserved by Sixsmith then Megan Sixsmith then Luisa Rey; Frobisher’s musical life-essence the *Cloud Atlas Sextet* is (presumably) preserved with the help of Luisa Rey; the theme is key to the brief musings of Isaac Sachs; Luisa Rey’s story is turned into a novel by Javier Gomez (Hilary V. Hush?); movie makers help preserve Cavendish’s experiences for viewing by Sonmi-451; the archivist/interrogator records and preserves Sonmi-451’s life story and thus inadvertently becomes her first apostle, Meronym listens to the sudden blurting out of Zachary’s life story.

⁷⁰ A 10,000 year timeframe. See footnote 1 for explication of this phrase. Such recording-as-narrative would run alongside science-fiction, and the knowledge that such a new and disciplined future-oriented practice had arisen

— one should train oneself in practical logic and ethics so as to recognize and meet the ‘one key moment’ in one’s life, the moment when one might have enough leeway within society to act to break a wider cycle of evil.

— one should then bear witness to that moment, by truthfully recording the details of it for posterity. Such a recording might take many forms: a diary, a symphony, a set of letters, a novel, a movie, a simple factual testimony.

The latter list of forms originates of course with *Cloud Atlas*, and in its numerous suggestions that our books and media can provide useful bridges into the future.⁷² The written word and other cultural forms, such as deep music,⁷³ enshrine the distilled knowledge and sensibilities of dead ancestors, and do so in ways that allow the dead to speak to the living. In its science-fiction *Cloud Atlas* also suggests⁷⁴ that we

might even re-shape science-fiction’s increasingly grumpy middle-aged view of what the human future might become.

⁷¹ The breakthrough nature of *Cloud Atlas*, in relation to helping to radically extend our culture’s time-horizons, was identified by Lana Wachowski...

“We [our society] think of the future as something we can’t deal with, we have to deal with the present. That’s not our concern, the future. And so what David [Mitchell] does in his novel is, he begins to break down all of those barriers.” — Lana Wachowski interviewed by Tasha Robinson, *A.V. Club* interview, 25th October 2012.

⁷² Unlike the old oral cultures, which could not make sudden and startling ‘leaps across time’ unless taken down by notaries — as were the oral fairy-tales that became a book which inspire the initial escape of Yoona-939 in *Cloud Atlas*.

⁷³ One of the great aspects of the remaining French Catharist heritage may be the medieval French troubadour tradition, although subject to many reinterpretations and fabrications over time. 20th century ‘neo-Cathars’ have probably overblown the possible connections, so as to boost tourist trade.

⁷⁴ Zachary’s valley people are at risk of losing their ability to understand the wisdom of the ages, for instance, as language and technology becomes corrupted and decays. The temple dwellers in the novel face the same problem.

must take care that our ‘new media’ so that it has same ability as the ‘old media’ has to... “cross ages like clouds cross skies”⁷⁵ and become culture-in-time. That it must retain the ability to reincarnate ideas and stories and characters⁷⁶ into future ages, for future uses as yet undreamed of.

Cloud Atlas also reminds us that within such a practice, one would have to work to counter critics who may seek to maliciously destroy a good work (the *Cloud Atlas Sextet*); detect circumstances in which critics combine to champion a bad work (*Knuckle Sandwich*); and perhaps to place alongside the archived work a considered list of the ways in which the good intentions of the writer might go terribly awry.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*.

⁷⁶ This idea perhaps anticipates humanity’s future ability to effectively store and recall ‘recorded digital personalities’ for interaction with as if they were human, through the use of semantic sorting and artificial intelligence clusters that pass the Turing Test. *Cloud Atlas* is of course concerned with deeply ingrained ideas about ancestral idols and their ability to ‘speak’, a thread which runs from Ewing’s initial encounter with the hidden animistic idols onwards.

⁷⁷ For instance, one of the first scholarly excavators of the Cathar heritage was the gay poet and medievalist Otto Rahn (1904-1939). Between 1930 and 1933 in Paris he researched and then published a groundbreaking scholarly book on the Cathars, *Crusade Against the Grail* (1933). He returned to Germany following an offer of work by Himmler and he became a member of Himmler’s staff, becoming a Lieutenant archeologist under Himmler in the elite Nazi S.S. Under Himmler’s close tutelage he continued his work on the Cathars from 1933-39. By uncovering the precise details of the various refined mechanisms by which the might of the Catholic Church persecuted and eradicated the Cathars, Rahn may have provided the Nazi high command with a template for tightening their persecution of the Jews and others. After being sent to work at the Dachau death camp after his homosexuality accidentally became common knowledge, Rahn appears to have killed himself. Although the texture of the relationship between Ayr and Robert Frobisher was based on that of Frederick Delius and Eric Fenby, the structure of the Frobisher story in *Cloud Atlas* is very similar to Rahn’s story: a younger man is avidly taken up as the proxy of an older Nietzsche-worshiper in the 1930s, for whom he writes works, and then the younger man’s sexuality causes rejection and suicide. A similar ideological

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trajectory, but in reverse, occurs in an episode within the Forbisher-Ayrs relationship: in the novel the *Todtenvogel* they compose is mis-interpreted as an anti-Nazi work (ironic, since Ayrs is an ardent worshiper of Nietzsche) and Ayrs is branded a ‘Jewish devil’ by the Nazis. Admittedly, the cause of their parting in the novel is not homosexuality, but this does not invalidate my comparison.

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