Waldensian History:
A Brief Sketch

Introduction

This is merely an overview of Waldensian history, based primarily on the sources noted below. Also included are personal observations from years of studying medieval history and heresy.

Tourn, Giorgio. *You Are My Witnesses* (Torino: Claudiana, 1989). Available in the United States through Friendship Press, PO Box 37844, Cincinnati OH 45222; (513) 948-8733. Highly readable and informative.

Stephens, Prescot. *The Waldensian Story: A Study in Faith, Intolerance and Survival*. (Lewes, Sussex: The Book Guild Ltd, 1998) ISBN 1 85776 280 0. When in stock, available in the U.S. through the American Waldensian Society, P.O. Box 744, Whitehall, PA 18052. Covers Waldensian history to the present. Also very readable. For periods with enough documentation as evidence, he is willing to discuss the occasional Waldensian weaknesses as they dealt with their challenges.

Cameron, Euan. *The Reformation of the Heretics: The Waldenses of the Alps, 1480-1580* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Cameron's claims about the dating and meaning of the synod at Chanforan in 1532, where the decision was made to adhere to the Reformation, have not been accepted by other historians. Further, he limits too severely the sources of information he is willing to consider. This attempt to eliminate sources that may bias his findings results in an unfortunate counter-bias that skews some of his conclusions. It is primarily useful for the detail about Waldensians in the Dauphiné (eastern France).

If you wish to read one or more of these but prefer not to buy them, your nearest library that belongs to the Interlibrary Loan system should be able to obtain a copy.

The Early Period

Historical Accounts—Then and Now

Let's begin with a comment of my own. Many of the older Waldensian histories speak of them as a body of Christians, hiding in the Alps from the days of the original apostles, or at least from the time of Claude, archbishop of Turin. But the eminent French historian Jean-Pierre Poly has shown that from 883 until 972—nearly a century—Saracen pirates fully controlled southeastern France and the Alpine passes. There simply could not have been a continuous group there. Nor is there any evidence of a group from elsewhere who suddenly “rushed in” when the Saracens were defeated and left the area.

Beginnings

Historians now agree that the Waldensian movement began in Lyons, France about 1170. It is now also universally agreed that the founder's name was not Peter Waldo; he was never called Peter until some 150 years after his death.

The form of his name currently accepted is either *Vaudès* or *Valdès*, depending on how the particular scholar interprets the amount of influence the northern "French" language had on the southern "Provençal" language in Lyons at the time. We will use the form *Valdès* here, as the "l" sound is maintained in the current name Waldensian and will therefore be more familiar.

And, until joining the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s, his followers never called themselves "Waldensians" ("Vaudois" in French). That term was applied to them by those who sought to destroy them and therefore carried negative connotations. Rather, they consistently referred to themselves as the "Poor of Christ," the "Poor men of Lyons," the "Poor in Spirit," or more simply "Brothers".

About 1173-1176, Valdès, a wealthy merchant of Lyons, had a life-changing experience. There are several versions of the experience, but they center on his sudden awareness of Christ's injunction to the rich young man, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor…and come, follow me" (Matt. 19:16-21, King James Version).

Deeply touched, Valdès arranged for his wife's welfare, placed his daughters in an abbey—perhaps even at Fontrévault, which bespeaks his means—paid two clerics to translate portions of the New Testament and some maxims from the early church fathers (Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory) into Franco-Provençal, and began preaching.

Key Early Characteristics

The basic points of his efforts, which persisted until the Reformation, were (1) the literal interpretation of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, (2) genuine poverty, and (3) preaching.

By then (the twelfth century), the Catholic clergy consisted of members of the higher classes, often younger sons who had little if any chance of having any other inheritance. The clergy had long been highly politicized, and positions could be bought—or wrested by force. The higher classes, whether in public or religious stations, were accustomed to a life of ease. They couldn't relate to the common people and, especially whenever natural disasters or other situations made life even more difficult, the common people could easily resent a life style they had to support but couldn't enjoy. Further, the clergy used Latin, little understood by the common people, and their training inclined them to philosophy and entangled logic in interpreting the Bible, which, again, the common people did not understand.

What Valdès was teaching gave the people the chance to contrast their typically indifferent and sometimes indolent priests and bishops with these poor but fervent preachers who quoted the

Bible in their own language, preachers who could relate to their own personal struggles. It is not difficult to see how Valdès and his followers won their allegiance and attracted many followers.

From about 1190 to 1198, the Poor put their preaching appeal to use in southern France, the center of another widespread, older heresy, Catharism. For the same reasons as just noted, the Waldensians were far more effective in public debate with the Cathars (also called Albigensians, after their center at Albi) than were the Catholic clergy. At this early time, these preachers preferred population centers, where there were larger numbers to preach to, and they appealed widely to the upper classes.

Attempt at Internal Adjustment

But Valdès was not trying to establish a different church. He had no interest in having a religious title, nor in heading up even his own group. Instead, he was trying to get the Catholic clergy to return to the model of Christ, as shown in the New Testament. This is convincingly indicated by a document called Valdès' "Profession of Faith," which is thoroughly Catholic and orthodox.

In 1179, two unnamed Waldensians went to the Third Lateran Council. The pope was impressed enough that he supported their emphasis on poverty and gave oral permission for them to preach, subject to the approval of local authorities.

Clerical Reactions

The new archbishop of Lyons, however, was not anxious to have Valdès and his group put the local clergy in a bad light, nor was he willing to share the prestige and power that always accompanied preaching in a day when few could read and few were authorized to speak in public. Those two forms of communication, reading and speaking, provided genuine power—then and now.

Rather than stop preaching, which they felt was a divine injunction, Valdès and his followers were driven from Lyons. They went, naturally, where they were allowed to preach: southern France, northern Italy, Burgundy, and Lotharingia. They established followers in all these and other locations.

But because he refused to bow to local authorities' restrictions against preaching, in 1184-1185 Valdès and his followers were excommunicated as "schismatics" (disobedient), rather than as "heretics." Thus, the church hoped to have them change their views and return, and on the other hand Valdès and his followers hoped to have the excommunication overturned. They continued preaching and, despite the excommunication, some Catholic bishops still debated publicly with them as late as 1207. And the Poor men of Lyons still preached in public, at least in some places, as late as 1228.

After the Council of Pamiers in 1207, some of the Poor men of Lyons returned to the Catholic Church, which authorized a new order, the "Poor Catholics." The leader of this returning group was Durand of Huesca, who had been one of Valdès' associates. But not many Waldensians followed Durand's example.

Persecution Begins

In 1208, a systematic crusade began against the Cathars, and it lasted some twenty years. This crusade destroyed many of the Poor of Lyons in the area as well.

In 1215, “anathema” (condemnation) was pronounced upon them by the Fourth Lateran Council. They were now officially considered heretics. Yet the Roman Church had learned a useful lesson from these early dealings with the Poor men of Lyons, and dealt differently with later calls for poverty, such as that of St. Francis of Assisi.

Expansion

By about this time, the missionary efforts of the Poor had reached eastward into Provence (southeastern France), the comtat Venaissin, Burgundy, Franche-comté, the borders of Lorraine and Alsace (all in eastern France), and Lombardy. Although there was as yet no national language (French), these areas spoke a form of French that posed few problems to the preachers.

A Poor men of Lyons document of 1218, related to a discussion held at Bergamo, shows a split between two groups of the Poor, one in northern Italy and the other the “Lyons” group. The group in Lombardy (northeastern Italy) had proceeded more toward a formal organization, and there were eight other items of disagreement between the two groups. Six representatives from each group met together and came to agreement on seven of the nine dividing issues.

The Inquisition: Intensified Persecution

The Inquisition and Clandestinity

The Inquisition began in 1230. At first it targeted only the preachers, not their followers. The feeling was that the followers would return to the Roman church if they were taught properly, so the effort was to remove those who raised questions in the people’s minds. The centers of the Poor in southwestern France were abandoned, and the movement changed from public preaching and from an urban society to a rural one. Because they could no longer safely preach where the titled and wealthy were, the Poor stopped attracting the upper classes. After 1250, there are no signs of the Poor living in the towns of Burgundy, Gascony, and Rouergue, previously among their centers.

Intense persecution led to clandestinity, very different from the fervent feeling of Valdès that the gospel should be preached openly, as the apostles had done. But the group faced a choice: continue preaching and all die, or accommodate to circumstances and perpetuate the movement. A few remained preachers, but not openly so, while most settled into a regular lifestyle, marrying and working as craftsmen, farmers, and herdsmen to support their families. The focus became to perpetuate the group, rather than to increase it through converts.

Beliefs of the Poor

The documents of their persecutors show them to have been staunchly against telling falsehoods or taking oaths, and indicate that the Poor believed in confession and Donatism (the idea that the validity of the sacraments hinges on the worthiness of the priest; that is, an unworthy priest cannot perform a valid sacrament). This also led them to reject belief in the intercession of saints, as some of these had been canonized by “unworthy” popes.

Except for these items—and of course the persistent beliefs about poverty, preaching, using the Bible in the popular tongue—the group “acted” Catholic.

The Question of Authority

But charges of "newness," raised by the clergy, and by the Inquisition in particular, were unsettling. In that day, antiquity was considered evidence of being the “correct” church. Those charges gave rise to attempts by the preachers to link the Poor to earlier dissents and, finally, to the apostles themselves. But much of this claim depended upon a document, the “donation of Constantine,” which was shown much later to have been falsified. There is today no evidence to push the Waldensian movement beyond Valdès himself. Even if some of his early converts had previously been, or descended from, earlier dissenters, these dissents did not reach beyond the previous century. But that does not diminish their devotion to trying to live as they understood the Bible intended them to live.

Another Crusade

In 1487, Cattaneo began his two-year crusade against the Poor in Dauphiné. Cameron provides convincing evidence that Cattaneo and his assistants were not motivated by religious convictions, but rather by greed. They confiscated lands and then charged illegal fees for the Poor to avoid penalties or to have those penalties already imposed reversed. But the result was that the area was devastated. Many of the Poor fled to Provence, and groups also went to southern Italy.

The Reformation

Contact with the Reformation

The first evidence of contact with the Reformation appears about 1523. Some of the preachers, called *barbas* by then in the Alpes and Provençe, wondered if the transmission of their beliefs over centuries, their adherence to the Bible message, was still accurate. The first inquiries revealed substantial differences on such key matters as Calvinistic ideas of predestination, the role of preachers or ministers, and clandestinity. The Poor had always felt that works were an essential part of living the gospel, but predestination rejected the value of works.

The Reformation had ministers marrying, settling down and owning land, in contrast to the original and still-maintained value among the Poor of having the preachers remain unmarried

and landless. This had permitted the preachers to devote all their time and energy to their itinerant ministry. And the Reformers were shocked at what they considered the hypocrisy of the Poor in keeping their worship hidden from the authorities so as to avoid persecution as much as possible. How could they be “the light of the world” if they remained clandestine?

In 1532, a synod of barbas decided to adhere to the Reformation, although the decision was not unanimous. Two barbas even traveled to Bohemia in hopes of getting support from that branch of the Poor to resist the change, but their effort had no effect on the decision.

Change

The formal decision did not, however, result in immediate adherence to the Reformation in everyday life. Not until 1555-1560 does evidence of the Reformation appear in the personal lives of the Poor. In essence, a whole generation passed before the change started to be widely evident in practice.

It would be interesting to know how the Poor, those who had been among the group for generations, reacted to the conversion of most of their neighbors in the Alpine Valleys. And how did they feel about the erection of formal buildings of worship, in place of the traditional secret meetings in the open or, for smaller groups, in homes? The openness increased their numbers, but being more visible also made them seem more of a threat and therefore substantially increased their persecution.

Whereas they had always previously resisted organizing as a “church,” in 1558 they adopted a church organization based on the Genevan model. Later they modified it to conform more to the French-style synodal system. And they came to accept being called Waldensians, which the Reformation turned from an aspersion to a compliment.

The Counter-Reformation: Turbulent Times

The Counter-Reformation

But let us continue our survey of their history. For a century after 1560, the Waldensians experienced severe pressure from the Catholic Counter-Reformation. From 1540 on, persecution of Waldensians in Provence intensified, leading to the infamous massacre at Merindol in 1545. In 1560, the Waldensian settlements in Calabria were destroyed. Many of these families had fled Dauphiné during Cattaneo's crusade some seventy years earlier.

In 1561, the Agreement of Cavour granted the Waldensians the right to worship. But the duke later claimed that the agreement had not been properly ratified, thus providing a loophole the clergy used without end to try to force their will on the people.

The Plague

Beginning in 1630, the plague decimated their population, especially in the summers, for about two years. The notarial records provide evidence of the devastating effect on families. And the plague took eleven of their thirteen pastors as well and many of their notaries. They had to call upon Geneva for more ministers, and this appears finally to have completed their transition to the Reformation camp.

The "Piedmont Easter"

In April 1655, the Waldensians were ordered to quarter the ducal troops as evidence of their allegiance to the duke. Early on Easter morning, at a given signal, these troops arose and brutally murdered and pillaged their hosts. This became known as the Piedmont Easter, and led the English poet Milton to write his famous sonnet, "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont," about the “slaughtered saints.”

A small band, under the leadership of Josuè Janavel, a local farmer, began guerilla raids that kept the people from total annihilation and absorption into Catholicism. In August, the duke was compelled to treat for peace, but hostilities continued for years and ultimately one price was that Janavel and his band were exiled.

Revocation of the Edict of Nantes

In 1685, Louis XIV of France, who wanted to be called the "Sun King" (to outdo the ancient pharaohs, who were only "sons of the sun"), revoked the Edict of Nantes. That edict, established in 1598, had guaranteed French Protestants the right of worship. The revocation decreed that it was illegal for Protestants to live within the country but also forbade them from leaving, another attempt at forced conversion to Catholicism. Many fled to exile, despite the law.

The Duke of Savoy at the time, Victor Amadeus II, was the nephew of Louis XIV. In January 1686, he succumbed to his uncle's pressure and issued a decree paralleling the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. The Waldensian pastors were expelled, Waldensian worship was forbidden, and all children were to be baptized Catholics.

Waldensian Response

On March 6, the Waldensians defied the order and, on the basis of Acts 4:19 (it is better to obey God than man), resumed worship services. The duke, of course, was not pleased. Six days later, the Waldensians met at Roccapiatta. The pastors, with the Swiss delegates who had come to plead their cause before the duke (unsuccessfully), tried to persuade the people to accept exile. This time, except for the small Swiss delegation, the Protestant nations were not intervening with the duke. The people had all but decided to accept his counsel. But one of the pastors, Henri Arnaud, gave such an impassioned appeal that they changed their minds. He convinced them that God would be with them and would use them to bring about the final destruction of their tormentors.

Death and Imprisonment

Arnaud meant well, but it seems in retrospect to have been a poor decision. Without substantial Protestant pressure on the duke, military action lasted just three days. Tourn estimates that more than 2000 Waldensians were killed in those three days. Some capitulated and became, in name, Catholic, later to revert to their Waldensian roots after the Glorious Return. About 8500 were herded off to fifteen detention centers. These consisted of fortresses, prisons, and old castles. They were not provided food, water, or shelter, for the intent was their entire extermination. Tourn reports that of 1400 in the dungeon at Carmagnola, only 400 survived; of some 1000 at Trino, only forty-six survived.

The Unconquerables

The duke's forces felt they had taken care of the Waldensian problem because they had combed the mountains, routing out those who resisted or were found hiding. Soon, however, a few they had missed began guerilla raids again. They became known as the "Unconquerables." The duke had intended to repopulate the Waldensian areas with Catholics, but found that difficult to achieve. The Waldensians had proven so durable over the centuries that many Catholics doubted they could permanently hold the land. And wresting a living from the mountainous terrain was more arduous than most, from lower elevations, were willing to sustain.

Exile

The cruelty of the affair again aroused international indignation. Under intense pressure from the Protestant nations, the duke finally agreed in January, 1687 to perpetual exile for the survivors. But he wanted them moved far beyond his borders, to northern Germany.

Thirteen groups of survivors were released from their prisons, the first leaving Piedmont on 17 January and the last reaching Geneva on 10 March. That is not an easy time of year for someone in good health to cross the Alps, and those surviving the imprisonment were not at all robust. Tourn reports that of 2700 who began the trek into exile, only 2490 actually reached Geneva. This means that, on average, one person died per mile. In addition, many children were kidnapped, to be placed in Catholic families.

Once in exile, the Swiss were unable to convince the Waldensians to make permanent settlements. In addition, they needed much care and the burden of providing food and lodging for so many was heavy. Some were sent into Germany, easing the load somewhat.

From the "Glorious Return" to the Present

The "Glorious Return"

On 17 August 1689 a commando force began what has become known as the "Glorious Return." The troop lost 30% of its thousand-man force just in making the 130-mile return to their homeland. They had to move quickly, yet many were still weak. This time, they used Janavel's

military manual, based on his 1655 experience, which had been disregarded at such high cost in 1685.

By 2 May 1690 only 300 Waldensian troops remained and they were cornered on a high peak, called the Balziglia. Arrayed against them were 4000 French troops with cannons. The final assault, however, was delayed by a storm and then by dense fog. The French commander was so confident, he sent a message to Paris that the Waldensian force had been destroyed. But when the French prepared for their final assault the next morning, the Waldensians were nowhere to be found. During the night, guided by one of their number familiar with the Balziglia, and under cover of the dense fog, they had made a completely impossible descent and were miles away.

A few days later, with the Waldensian force still in most dangerous circumstances, the duke suddenly severed his alliance with France and joined with England and Austria. For political reasons, the exiles were invited to come home. The vacillating duke needed these intrepid mountain folk to help protect his borders against the French.

Devastation

But even for the non-French inhabitants of the Valleys, life was terribly difficult. The land was a wilderness. The area had not yet recovered from the military action in 1685. The villages were still essentially destroyed. Further, the duke's representatives soon found ways of harassing the Waldensians again. In hopes of enticing Waldensians to convert, Catholics were not taxed, while Waldensian taxes were greatly increased to make up the difference. The duke and his entourage and agents were determined to maintain their lifestyles, regardless of a several diminished population to sustain them.

Waldensians could not purchase land outside their three restricted, traditional valleys. A fund was set up to help Catholics purchase the Waldensian lands in default because of the heavy tax burden. As the population grew, all this created enormous economic pressure.

Napoleonic Influence

The French Revolution resulted in the Napoleonic Empire (1804-1815), and Napoleon granted some relief to the Waldensians. He closed the infamous "home for Waldensian children," in which kidnapped or enticed children had been raised as Catholics, their parents not even permitted to visit them. And a Waldensian church was built in San Giovanni, a town previously outside the approved area. But Napoleon also made the Waldensian Church a part of the French Protestant movement.

The Waldensian Ghetto

When Napoleon fell in 1815, the King of Sardinia—formerly the Duke of Savoy, given a new title in a peace agreement—returned and so did the repressive laws. Charles Beckwith, an English officer who had lost a leg at Waterloo, retired to the Valleys and wielded enormous influence in helping the Waldensians rise above their "ghetto" status. His primary contribution

was the building of local schools. As a result, illiteracy was almost completely eliminated in the Valleys.

Freedom at Last

The political scene was changing, particularly at the grass-roots level. Responding to the political pressure, the king issued a declaration on 17 February 1848, granting Waldensians full rights of citizenship. For the first time in centuries, Waldensians could acquire land, hold public office, and choose the profession they wished; and their children could qualify for higher education. But the declaration failed to provide greater religious freedom. Still, it was the beginning of that process. At receiving the news, the Waldensian villages celebrated by building bonfires, visible all up the mountainside.

Later, with religious liberty decreed for Italy, Beckwith urged Waldensian leaders toward a renewal of missionary efforts, which had been essentially dormant for centuries. The pastors, and then the people, learned Italian—and became Italian. But Italy continued to suffer from political struggles, and it wasn't until 1870 that papal political control was eliminated by regulation, and longer still before it was a practical reality.

Emigration

Early emigration resulted almost entirely from persecution and the pressures of an expanding population. Except when prohibited by ducal decree, expansion was at first into southeastern France and other areas in Italy. When intense persecution decimated the Waldensian populations in those areas, survivors fled to the Valleys, Switzerland, England, and Germany. Some later went to Holland, and some of these joined the Dutch settlements in South Africa.

During the last half of the 1800s, the Waldensians suffered serious economic difficulties. The cause was the increasing population, combined with crop failures from drought and plant diseases. That led to emigration. From the 1840s, young men had found work on the French Riviera, returning to the Valleys in the off-season. Others then went to Lyons, Geneva, and other localities and, over time, they settled permanently into these areas. In many cases, they became assimilated into the local Protestant group.

Starting in 1856, small groups began emigrating to Uruguay and, later, to Argentina. Widely dispersed with few pastors, they had difficulty maintaining their identity at first. By the turn of the century, there were several thousand Waldensians in South America.

According to family tradition passed down through the generations, a group of Waldensian descent left Uruguay and went to New York, and from there to Monett, Missouri. A later group of Waldensians established a Waldensian settlement in North Carolina. A book has been published about them. According to their family traditions, smaller groups went to Texas and Illinois. And in the mid-1850s, Waldensians who had joined the LDS Church emigrated to Utah, and were joined in the 1880s and 1890s by other Waldensians from the Valleys and from the North Carolina settlement.

Developments in the Valleys

In the meantime, Waldensians in the Valleys expanded their work, focusing on service activities. They built schools, including a junior college in Torre Pellice. Here, a group of teachers started the Société d'Histoire Vaudoise (Waldensian History Society) and published the *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire Vaudoise.* The group later changed their name to the Italian form, Società di Studi Valdesi (Society for Waldensian Studies) and the name of the periodical to *Bollettino della Società di Studi Valdesi.* The *Bulletin/Bollettino* is a helpful resource for genealogical and historical research.

The Twentieth Century

But Waldensian troubles were not over. In 1911, new government rules caused some schools to close and the effort to build new ones was set aside. In 1915, Italy joined World War I, which was disastrous for the country, for it permitted Fascism to become established. A major war between two Protestant countries, Great Britain and Germany, significantly reduced Protestant influence in Italy.

In 1929, Mussolini and the Catholic Church signed a Concordat which repudiated the notion of a free state. The Waldensian Church was only "permitted," and all Protestants were suspect because they had contacts abroad and were known for their passion for liberty and their spirit of autonomy.

In 1979, the Waldensian and Methodist Churches in Italy became federated, with one synod and one constitution. They exist as separate churches, but cooperate on a number of efforts.

Conclusion

The Waldensians thus represent a remarkable history. Gabriel Audisio cites a statement that John of Salisbury attributed to Bernard of Chartres in the Twelfth Century. Neither of them was speaking of Waldensians, of course; but the idea well conveys our debt to, and our gratitude for, our Waldensian ancestors:

> "We are dwarfs, set upon giants' shoulders."

Recommended Reading

In addition to the works described at the beginning of this history, the following works may be of interest. Titles no longer in print may be available through libraries participating in the Interlibrary Loan program.

Aubéry, Jacques. *Histoire de l'exécution de Chabrières et de Mérindol et d'autres lieux de Provence*. (Mérindol: Association d'études vaudoises et historiques du Lubéron, 1982).

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