

The re-awakening of Waldensianism at the time of the Risorgimento

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Abstract

Far from being just a secular project, the Italian Risorgimento had deep spiritual foundations. The project of “resurrection” of freedom of religion in modern Italy became an anti-clerical project though not necessarily anti-Christian. Radical Free Church Protestants generally supported the Republican ideals of Mazzini and Garibaldi, while Waldensians sided with the liberal Cavour. A spiritual awakening preceded the political awakening that led to the emancipation of the Waldensians, an event embodying the ideals of the Risorgimento. Indeed, Waldensians played a major role in the Risorgimento, contributing soldiers, parliamentary representatives, educators, writers, entrepreneurs, missionaries, and most of all, individuals who fought for religious freedom.

Keywords Catholicism, Italy, nationalism, Protestantism, réveil, Risorgimento, Waldensian.

The word ‘Risorgimento’ refers to the period in Italian history when Italy achieved its national unity. Formally, Italian unity was achieved on 17 March 1861, when the kingdom of Sardinia annexed the majority of the other kingdoms in the Italian peninsula. ‘Risorgimento’ literally means “resurgence”, “re-birth”, “regeneration”, or “resurrection.” In 1861, in many ways, Italy was an unhappy land, a “land of the dead” to use a common expression, a land whose people were oppressed by repressive powers both within and without. What made Italy’s situation even worse was the fact that the Catholic Church, as Macchiavelli had diagnosed long before this era, worked hard to keep the land divided, effectively impeding the development of civil society by its demand that individual Catholics allow their consciences to be subjected to the church’s spiritual authority. This strategy passed on over centuries in the Catholic Church. It kept the political tissue fragmented under the subjection to the spiritual authority of the Pope. This was a strategy inherited from the time of the counter-Reformation. It was symbolic under these circumstances to

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give a political-national interpretation to the resurrection of Christ. The problem of religious freedom was therefore an essential aspect in the formation of the Italian nation whether through its liberal or democratic positions.²

While the Catholic Church by and large opposed the unification of Italy, the much smaller Protestant churches took a more democratic stand with many of their members joining dissident groups or secret societies or a more radical political party. They supported the establishment of a democracy that would replace the absolutist kingdoms into which the Italian peninsula was then divided.³ This, for example, was the position of Mazzini who through his “Giovine Italia” pursued a more radical, revolutionary approach to unifying Italy.⁴

At the same time, other factions, even though their members were mostly Catholic, (we think here of “Giuseppinisti” or the “giurisdizionalisti”), took a more liberal and progressive approach. They recognized the right of the state to exercise civic power without interference from church authorities. Camillo Benso, the count of Cavour and the first prime minister of a united Italy was a supporter of the separation between church and state. Differently from Garibaldi and Mazzini, he still considered himself as Catholic and held to a more middle ground solution, trying to reach an agreement with the papacy. What is interesting is that the principle of “a free church in a free state” (*Ecclesia libera in libera patria*) was first suggested to Cavour by the Swiss Calvinist theologian Alexandre Vinet, who was himself an ardent supporter of freedom of conscience.

Vinet came to the understanding that freedom is necessary for the proper exercise of faith.⁵ The state must recognize its essential inability to address religious matters and therefore avoid any restrictions on religious freedom.⁶ Vinet believed that, by recognizing freedom of thought, all religious groups would be free to serve humanity in the best way they could, thereby setting off a virtuous cycle of competitiveness that would serve the wellbeing of all.⁷ Vinet expressed his attitude toward religious freedom in vivid terms:

A minister of the Gospel is strong solely on the base of moral authority... In a democratic country, where a state church is present, there is a contrast that will

² Bruno Di Porto, “Valdesi ed Ebrei, le Due Storiche Minoranze Religiose dal Risorgimento alla Repubblica.” *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 64, no. 1 (April 1998), 7.

³ Filippo Ambrosini, *L'ombra della Restaurazione. Cospiratori, Riformisti e Reazionari in Piemonte e Liguria (1814-1831)* (Torino, IT: Editrice Il Punto, 2002), 73.

⁴ Istituto per La Storia del Risorgimento Italiano. *Mazzini e il Mazzinianesimo. Atti del XIV Congresso di Storia del Risorgimento Italiano (Genova, 24–28 settembre 1972)* (Roma, IT: ISRI, 1974), 200.

⁵ Maghenzani, Platone, *Riforma, Risorgimento e Risveglio*, 120-121.

⁶ Maghenzani, Platone, *Riforma, Risorgimento e Risveglio*, 129.

⁷ Simone Maghenzani, *Il Protestantismo Italiano nel Risorgimento*, 98.

necessarily frustrate a lot of people... It is our interest and duty in every occasion to solemnly declare and defend religious freedom and the rights of the dissident brothers repudiating religious monopoly... Woe to those who scatter minority religious assemblies pretending to follow the interests of the national church...⁸

Significantly, Vinet lived just before the advent of the Italian Risorgimento during the time of a spiritual awakening (Réveil) that took place among Reformed churches in Switzerland and the south of France as well as among Italian Waldensians.⁹ That awakening brought spiritual fervor in the political battles that were to come.

There were significant differences between Waldensians and the other Protestant groups active in Italy at the time in their attitude toward the king of Savoy's role in reuniting Italy. While the contribution of other Protestant groups to the cause of Italian unity should not be minimized, the Waldensians were the only Protestant group that had been present in Italy and fighting for their religious freedom for many centuries.¹⁰ (They had been present in the Piedmont as a little Calvinist *enclave*.) Moreover, in contrast to the so-called free churches ("Le Chiese Libere"), the Waldensians were better at making converts among the bourgeoisie. They were royalists, supporters of the political objectives of the Kingdom of Sardinia and its prime minister, the count of Cavour, and took an active part in the Risorgimento.¹¹

Turin, the capital of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, was in fact the center of political debates concerning the possibility of a unified Italy.¹² Cavour understood that the enthusiasm of foreign evangelicals for Italian Protestants could help advance his political goals.¹³ Cavour also thought that the British model for the relationship between church and state could be a model for the church-state relationships that his own country might choose. In fact, Cavour had a long history of contacts with the Protestant world that was only strengthened by his agreement with Lord Shaftesbury on the necessity for freedom of worship for Protestants in Italy.¹⁴ Cavour was able to utilize international public opinion without ever giving

⁸ A. Vinet, *Liberté Religieuse et Questions Ecclésiastiques* (Paris, FR: Chez les Editeurs, 1854), 371-374.

⁹ Augusto Armand Hugon, *Storia dei Valdesi/2. Dal Sinodo di Chanforan all'Emancipazione* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 1989), 277.

¹⁰ For a detailed treatment on the history of the persecution of the Waldenses and their developments in the struggle for religious freedom see: Tourn, *The Waldensians: the First 800 Years*, Turin, Italy: Claudiana, 1980.

¹¹ Tourn, *Risorgimento e Chiese Cristiane*, 129.

¹² Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, 276.

¹³ Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l'Unità d'Italia*, 107.

¹⁴ Francesca Sofia, "Stato Moderno e Minoranze Religiose in Italia." *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 64, no. 1 (April 1998), 42.

the impression that he was pursuing a pro-Protestant policy.¹⁵ Cavour stated that, if the Protestants wanted to guarantee religious freedom to their co-religionists, they would need to support his liberal politics. While the Waldensians' support for Cavour and the King of Savoy could be written off as just an act of *realpolitik*, that support nevertheless resulted in the Waldensians having an active voice in the Italian ruling class.¹⁶

It is significant that right at the time of the Italian Risorgimento, after so many centuries of segregation and open persecution, the Waldensian church received its first social recognition. This long journey had already started during the years right after the French revolution.¹⁷ For a long time, Carlo Alberto, the king of Sardinia-Piedmont, afraid of disappointing the Holy See, opposed any effective concessions to the Waldensians. Later, however, in order to get the support of the European Protestant powers, he was forced to make some concessions. Six hundred political leaders in Piedmont, led by Roberto D'Azeglio, presented a petition to the king asking for the emancipation of the Waldensians. Around the same time, Roberto D'Azeglio gave a much-quoted speech demanding that the "Patria" (by which he meant the Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont) become a true mother and not just a stepmother by emancipating its Waldensian subjects. (To quote D'Azeglio: "Hurray for the emancipation of the Waldensians!")¹⁸ His desire was "to be useful to the Patria and to let the Kingdom of God advance."¹⁹

D'Azeglio's second visit to the valleys west of Turin, in which many Waldensians lived with King Carlo Alberto, for the consecration of a Catholic church was also very interesting. The warm welcome from the king's Waldensian subjects transformed what would have been just a routine Catholic festivity into a memorable meeting between the king and the Waldensian community.²⁰

Another central figure for the fate of the Waldensians was Luigi Amedeo Melegari who was elected to the subalpine parliament in 1848. Melegari had Protestant Reformed family members and like Cavour was profoundly influenced by the teaching of the Calvinist theologian Alexandre Vinet.²¹

The "Patent letters" signed by the King Carlo Alberto on 17 February 1848 were idealistically praised as a declaration of their long-hoped for freedom by the 20,000 Waldensians who for centuries had been confined and isolated in their Alpine val-

¹⁵ Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, 288.

¹⁶ Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, 283.

¹⁷ Giorgio Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 2008), 48-49.

¹⁸ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 76.

¹⁹ Simone Maghenzani, ed. *Il Protestantismo Italiano nel Risorgimento. Influenze, Miti, Identità* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 2012), 49.

²⁰ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 46.

²¹ Fabbri, *I Valdesi e l'Unità d'Italia*, 97.

leys.²² However, since Article 1 of King Carlo Alberto's new statute still affirmed the Roman Catholic Church as the one true legitimate religion of the state, its logical consequence was that other religious traditions could be tolerated only as personal opinions and not in their public expressions. On the other hand, some participation by Protestants in civic life was still possible since the right to vote was granted to all subjects independently from their religious identity. This compromise did not lead to any official recognition to Waldensian worship. In particular, proselytism by Waldensians and other Protestants was still a ground for legal charges. So, while the private exercise of religious beliefs other than Catholicism was allowed, the public exercise of non-Catholic religious beliefs was still subject to restrictions. Such ambiguity becomes more evident as one looks to the Article 28. While it says that "the press will be free" it also specifies that "the law will punish abuses of free expression. Bibles, catechisms, liturgical books, and prayer books will not be printed without prior authorization from the local bishop."²³ Nevertheless, the act of emancipation allowed for "more ample facilities" for the Waldensians.²⁴ The text of the Patent Letters in a major break from three centuries of open repression said:

Taking into consideration the faithfulness and the good sentiments of the Waldensian people [...] we concede to our Waldensian subjects more opportunities to observe the tenets of their faith, and we have granted them frequent and important dispensations from the strict observance of our laws about religious observance. Now, given that the reasons for those restrictions are no longer valid, we have resolved to make them partakers of all the advantages that our laws provide for recognized religious groups... Accordingly, the Waldensians are hereby admitted to partake of all the civic and political rights of our subjects; to attend the schools inside and outside of the universities; and to receive academic degrees. Nothing, however, is hereby changed concerning the exercise of their worship and the schools directed by them.²⁵

For the Waldensian people, this document meant an end of marginalization. The journal "Eco di Savonarola" saw this event as a sign that God was bringing a religious reformation to Italy.²⁶

²² Giorgio Tourn, *I Valdesi. La Singolare Vicenda di Un Popolo-Chiesa* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 1977), 184.

²³ Jean-Pierre Viallet, *Les Vaudois d'Italie de Giolitti a Mussolini (1911-1945)* (Thèse de Doctorat Faculté de Lettre et Sciences Humaines de l'Université d'Aix - Marseille, 1970), 40.

²⁴ Giovanni Luzzi, *1848-1898. The Waldensian Church and the Edict of Her Emancipation* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 1998), 19.

²⁵ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 77.

²⁶ Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, 217.

Between 1843 and 1847, just before the Risorgimento, many intellectual and political figures defended the rights of the Waldensians. Cavour himself hoped this foment would open the road to religious freedom. As word of the issuing of the “Regie Patenti” began to spread, many Waldensians gathered in the house of the pastor in Turin to celebrate.

The next morning the first free public Protestant worship service in Italy was led by Pastor Bert at the chapel of the Prussian embassy in Turin. Afterwards the first national rally for religious freedom proceeded to the central square of the city (the Piazza Castello) as people shouted, “Hurray for the Waldensian brothers! Hurray for the emancipation of the Waldensians!”²⁷ Since then, every 17 February, the Waldensian community has celebrated its anniversary by lighting fires in their valleys, full of gratefulness for the freedom they received through the Risorgimento.²⁸

In the same year, after the Patent Letters, the Waldensian synod met to reflect on the consequences of their recent liberation on society and evangelism.²⁹ In this new climate the missionary urgency was the first channel through which the Waldensians sought to contribute to the unification of Italy. At the Waldensian synod meeting Pastor Meille gave a missionary challenge:

And now, gentlemen, consider the work with which we are charged. There's no need any more to preach to mountain men, to humble farmers. No, we are going to be launched in the great cities of Italy, in the breasts of a society among the most ignorant, if you will, from the religious point of view. But many of those we encounter will be highly educated, intellectually skeptical, many will be full of popish ideas which paradoxically they do not believe anymore... The wind blows, we must set sail. We must not stay in the mountains anymore. We must flow to the plains and encounter those millions of our fellow citizens... If events have a meaning, if Providence speaks of its dispensations, if history shows us its will, we will understand that our part is to bring Italy the flames of Truth.³⁰

The preaching of Meille in Turin drew many eager hearers. One of them was G. Gajani, a member of the parliament of the Roman Republic who became a Protestant. Together with B. Malan, B. Tron, E. Gay, and Paolo Geymonat, Meille went to Florence with the goal of evangelizing people in that city.

²⁷ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 77-79.

²⁸ Giovanni Rostagno, *I Valdesi Italiani. Le loro Lotte e la Loro Fede* (Torre Pellice, IT: Società di Studi Valdesi, 1938), 10.

²⁹ Giorgio Tourn, *Risorgimento e Chiese Cristiane* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 2011), 86-87.

³⁰ Jean-Pierre Viallet, *Les Vaudois d'Italie de Giolitti a Mussolini (1911-1945)* (Thèse de Doctorat Faculté de Lettre et Sciences Humaines de l'Université d'Aix - Marseille, 1970), 38.

During the time of the Risorgimento, Waldensians also pursued education for the masses. Wherever a new church was planted, the Waldensians also sought to open a school.³¹ With the help of Anglicans such as Stephen Gilly, the Waldensians founded a high school named the “Collegium Sanctae Trinitatis apud Valdenses.” Gilly also re-started the financial assistance that British Christians had previously given to the Waldensians.³² John Charles Beckwith, who was also an Anglican, found a book written by Gilly in the library of the Duke of Wellington. This book aroused his interest in the Waldensians. While gathering military and political intelligence for the British government, Beckwith came to the Waldensian valleys in 1827. Beckwith tried to provide sufficient funds to build elementary schools in each village in the Waldensian valleys. He created thereby an efficient school system and brought nearly universal literacy to the communities of the valleys. He also distributed Bibles and Christian literature in the valleys. Beckwith helped the Waldensians recognize the need for the social, political and religious emancipation that would come, partly with the Waldensian’s help, in the Risorgimento. In his famous statement to the community he declared, “from now on you will either be missionaries or you will cease to exist!” He was aware that Italy was facing what might turn out to be an historical turning point and he believed that the Waldensians might soon play a crucial role in bringing about that change.³³ The valleys were not the only “Patria” of the Waldensians anymore. Instead, Italy as a whole would now be the Waldensians’ homeland.³⁴

Also, with funds coming from the Russian Tsar, Alexander I, a new hospital was built in Torre Pellice.³⁵ The construction of a Waldensian hospital was a way to avoid the often coercive pressure to convert to Catholicism that non-Catholics often experienced in Catholic hospitals. Beckwith’s schools and the new Waldensian hospital worked together to increase the independence and sustainability of the Waldensian valleys.³⁶

In trying to evangelize Italy, the Waldensians were not tempted to turn all Italians into Protestants. Rather they wanted to help their fellow citizens rediscover the Scripture, a book which had been effectively kept hidden by the official church.³⁷ Indeed,

³¹ Tourn, *Risorgimento e Chiese Cristiane*, 176.

³² William S. F. Pickering, and Henry Appia. “La découverte des Vaudois de France par les Anglais au XIX e siècle.” *Bulletin de la Société de l’Histoire du Protestantisme Français* (1903-) 139 (October 1993), 655.

³³ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all’Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 81.

³⁴ Simone Maghenzani, *Il Protestantismo Italiano nel Risorgimento*, 61.

³⁵ Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l’Unità d’Italia*, 126.

³⁶ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all’Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 28-29.

³⁷ Tourn, *Risorgimento e Chiese Cristiane*, 95.

for many years Italians were not allowed to read the sacred writings without first getting approval from the local Catholic priest.³⁸ Already, as a result of the second war of independence, the Waldensians were able to expand their witness throughout the whole of Italy. A new organization (“Il Comitato per l’Evangelizzazione”) was established by the Waldensian Synod in 1860 and charged with facilitating and enhancing those missionary efforts.

The new emphasis on evangelism went side by side with political events.³⁹ Echoing the comments of liberal politicians, the Waldensian newspaper, the “Echo des Vallées” described the entrance of the Italian soldiers in Rome this way: “. . . the entrance of the Italian troops in Rome . . . is both putting an end to the temporal power of the popes and sealing our national unity..”⁴⁰

The “Eco della Verità” gave a spiritual interpretation to the breaching of what had been the former papal stronghold of Rome:

By crossing the pontifical border, our soldiers (sic!) are not engaging in a war of conquest but are executing a sentence that the entire world has already pronounced. . . The temporal power of the popes has fallen. This time there is reason to hope that its fall will be permanent and without appeal. Italians finally possess their own capital city; the unity and independence of the Patria are finally ours...⁴¹

At the same time, another Waldensian newspaper, the “Amico di Casa”, with a less idealistic approach, said that the conquest of Rome was only the beginning of what would be a hard task; centuries of papal domination had made Rome a poor, ignorant and corrupted city.

When the pope returned to the Vatican after the fall of the Roman Republic in 1849, papal guards had confiscated 3,000 copies of the New Testament written in the common Italian language.⁴² Another large shipment of Bibles and New Testaments in the Italian language that had been brought into Rome by the British and Foreign Bible Society after the breach of the Roman walls at Porta Pia was also confiscated.⁴³

³⁸ Wood J. Brown *An Italian Campaign; The Evangelical Movement in Italy. 1845-1887* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), 21.

³⁹ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all’Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 122.

⁴⁰ Fiorella Massel, *Contributo alla Storia del Giornalismo Valdese (da Roma Capitale all’Età Giolittiana)*. (Torino, IT: Università degli Studi, Thesis, 1980), 169.

⁴¹ Massel, *Contributo alla Storia del Giornalismo Valdese*, 170.

⁴² Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l’Unità d’Italia*, 22.

⁴³ Tourn, *Risorgimento e Chiese Cristiane*, 103.

The Waldensian minister Matteo Prochet was the first Protestant minister to preach in Rome right after the liberation of the city on 20 September 1848.⁴⁴

The Waldensian pastor Alexis Muston described these events with a good deal of hope.⁴⁵ Another Waldensian, Michel Pellegrin, a man of patriotic ideals, took part in the battles of Milan and died.⁴⁶ The first Waldensian church outside the Waldensian valleys was built in Turin and consecrated on 15 December 1853, in the presence of official representatives from England, Switzerland, the United States, and Prussia.⁴⁷

Between 1849 and 1859 Giuseppe Malan became the first Protestant member of the Italian Parliament. As a Waldensian, his political views were close to the moderate views of Cavour. He also supported, of course, the separation of Church and State.⁴⁸ Malan is remembered as a person of moral rigor who had a profound respect for freedom of conscience.⁴⁹ The voters in his district re-elected him repeatedly over a period of ten years. Due to the success of the “Destra storica” and to the fact that the Waldensian electorate kept a moderate political orientation, other Waldensian candidates were elected as members the Parliament.⁵⁰ Another political candidate was G. B. E. Geymet, a nephew of the Waldensian pastor Pierre Geymet who had taken part in the revolutionary governments between 1798 and 1800 and had been chosen sub-prefect of Pinerolo in 1802.⁵¹ After Malan, in 1886, another Waldensian, Giulio Peyrot, a businessman from Turin was elected to parliament. Later, the Waldensian pastor Enrico Soulier served in parliament until 1913.⁵²

As mentioned before, between 1825 and 1840, just before the Risorgimento, the Waldensian valleys experienced a religious awakening. The Réveil had started in Switzerland around 1815 as an attempt to bring the churches back to a lively spirituality.⁵³ Later on, this awakening spread to the Italian Waldensians.⁵⁴ The supporters of the Réveil wanted to awaken churches from their spiritual lethargy and were generally critical toward the rationalistic tendencies they believed they saw in the religious establishment. Proponents of the Réveil emphasized the need for a new birth and for a life of dedicated piety. These ideas spread to the Waldensian Valleys during a visit in 1825 by the Geneva evangelist, Felix Neff. As a result of his visit, Neff

⁴⁴ A. Muston, Bonnet G. and Meynier E. eds., *Riassunto Storico della Evangelizzazione Valdese durante I Primi Cinquant'Anni di Libertà. 1848-1898* (Pinerolo, IT: Tipografia Chiantore-Mascarelli, 1899), 15.

⁴⁵ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 75.

⁴⁶ Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l'Unità d'Italia*, 122.

⁴⁷ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 85.

⁴⁸ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 86.

⁴⁹ Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l'Unità d'Italia*, 99.

⁵⁰ Giorgio Spini, *Italia Liberale e Protestanti* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 2002), 359.

⁵¹ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 89.

⁵² Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l'Unità d'Italia*, 100.

⁵³ Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, 89.

⁵⁴ Maghenzani, Platone, *Riforma, Risorgimento e Risveglio*, 97.

reached a very negative judgment concerning the spiritual and religious conditions of the Waldensians at the time.⁵⁵ In fact, he believed that there was no true convert in the whole Waldensian church. Before visiting the Waldensians, Neff had already traveled through the south of France where he is reported as having ignited the Huguenot communities. There he met the Waldensian pastor Davide Mondon and decided to come to visit the Waldensian valleys as well. Some, like Antoine Blanc, were sympathetic to Neff's ideas and hosted his evangelistic meetings.⁵⁶

As a result, an underground group of Waldensian dissidents, called the *Mômiers* (or 'masked ones'), began to meet to study the Scripture. Those "Protestant bigots," as they were labeled, were characterized by an austere and extremist Calvinistic approach. They focused their attention on spiritual exercises rather than on just following the forms of the Reformed liturgy. Personal testimony, the assurance of salvation, opposition to the official church, the priesthood of all believers, and a strong missionary concern were common features of this pre-Risorgimento awakening among the Waldensians. Many controversies swirled around the *Mômiers* as the official authorities suspected them of trying to subvert the public order and the Waldensian elected leadership reprimanded them. The *Mômiers* were, in fact, undermining several organizational aspects of the traditional Reformed Waldensian church structure.

Most of the new elite of the Waldensian church had been inculcated in this new religious sensibility, as they studied theology in Lausanne or Geneva, bringing back to the valleys the desire for the spiritual transformation of the Waldensian community.⁵⁷ Some say that the new wind brought by the spiritual awakening of the Waldensian church foreshadowed and perhaps even ignited the fire of the political, social, and spiritual struggles that were about to break out in the Risorgimento.⁵⁸

The Waldensian Synod met just as Garibaldi was leading his military expedition for the unification of Italy. The floor opened with a sermon by Giorgio Appia, addressing the need for the Waldensian community to confront the religious indifference of the Italian nation.⁵⁹ In the meantime, many Waldensians volunteered as soldiers in the war for the independence. Appia was able to set a more spiritual example by moving to Sicily in order to start a mission post.⁶⁰ During the military

⁵⁵ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 30-31.

⁵⁶ Maghenzani, Platone, *Riforma, Risorgimento e Risveglio*, 100.

⁵⁷ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 34-35.

⁵⁸ Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, 135.

⁵⁹ Tourn, *Risorgimento e Chiese Cristiane*, 140.

⁶⁰ Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l'Unità d'Italia*, 58.

expedition in Sicily, Appia appointed many local evangelists while he transferred his activity to Naples.⁶¹

As the liberation of Italy proceeded, another Waldensian evangelist, Jean Daniel Turin, reached Milan while one of his co-workers took oversight of seventy Waldensian soldiers in Venice. Another contingent of one thousand Waldensian soldiers was sent in 1866 to take part in the Third War of Independence. Among them was the cavalry officer Enrico Gay, a son of a Waldensian pastor.⁶²

Though being few in number, Italian Protestants, and Italian Waldensians in particular, had their influence in the era of the Risorgimento. If in 1848 the Waldensian Church counted only fifteen congregations, all of which were located in the Waldensian valleys, in the next fifty years almost fifty new congregations were established throughout Italy.⁶³ Qualitatively the Waldensians' participation in the events leading to the unification of Italy was greater than their still small membership would make seem likely. For the Waldensians, the Risorgimento was inseparable from their previous history.⁶⁴ Contrary to their Catholic neighbors, the Waldensians took the Risorgimento as an opportunity to become politically active.⁶⁵ The concept of freedom, a core value of the Risorgimento, found in the Waldensians a leading champion. In particular, the case of this religious minority forced Italy to embrace the modern concept of religious pluralism. To grant political rights to the Waldensians was a symbol intended to operate as a foundational agreement on the way the nation should deal with religious differences. This was in harmony with the Waldensian idea of covenant theology.⁶⁶ However, in the end, Italy did not come to see itself as a religiously pluralistic society and the Roman Catholic Church remained the state church and Italian Protestants continued to suffer many difficulties.

The end of the temporal power of the papacy in Italy did not result in all the changes hoped for.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Waldensians, as well as other Protestants, contributed to the advancement of modern religious pluralism in the newborn Italian nation, even though after the unification, there was still tension inside the Italian Protestant community between ethnic Waldensians and converts from Catholicism.⁶⁸

⁶¹ Pasquale Danzi, *Presenze Protestanti a Napoli Durante il Risorgimento* (Napoli, IT: Tullio Pironti Editore, 2013), 43.

⁶² Fabbrini, *I Valdesi e l'Unità d'Italia*, 120.

⁶³ A. Muston, Bonnet G. and Meynier E. eds., *Riassunto Storico della Evangelizzazione Valdese durante I Primi Cinquant'Anni di Libertà. 1848-1898* (Pinerolo, IT: Tipografia Chiantore-Mascarelli, 1899), 18.

⁶⁴ Bellion, Cignoni, Romagnani, and Tron. *Dalle Valli all'Italia 1848-1998. I Valdesi nel Risorgimento*, 111.

⁶⁵ Giorgio Bouchard, *Una Minoranza Significativa* (Roma, IT: Cooperativa COM Nuovi Tempi, 1994), 178.

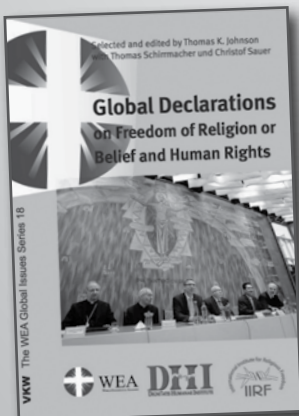
⁶⁶ Simone Maghenzani, *Il Protestantismo Italiano nel Risorgimento*, 91.

⁶⁷ Spini, *Risorgimento e Protestanti*, 345.

⁶⁸ Simone Maghenzani, and Giuseppe Platone, eds. *Riforma, Risorgimento e Risveglio* (Torino, IT: Claudiana, 2011), 78.

It is important to note that a lay state did not imply a complete rejection of beliefs but rather the rejection of the claims of any specific religious group to having more of a right to state support than other religious groups. Through their political contributions, the Waldensians were one of the leading minorities involved in shaping a united nation of Italy. With its successes and failures, back then as well as today, Waldensianism teaches us that the strength of any country's national identity is inextricably linked with the ability of its religious minorities to feel at home in that country. In that sense, a profound religious and cultural change in the direction of pluralism is a prerequisite for a strong national identity. Further studies on the role of religious minorities in the birth of national modern states are necessary to understand better the link between tolerance for religious pluralism and the development of a strong national identity.

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