The Failure of the Protestant Reformation in Italy: Through the Eyes of the Waldensian Experience

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In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, the experience of many countries across Europe was the complete overturning of traditional institutions, whereby religious dissidence became a widespread phenomenon. Yet the focus on Reformation history has rarely been given to countries like Italy, where a strong Catholic presence continued to persist throughout the sixteenth century. In this regard, it is necessary to draw attention to the ‘Italian Reformation’ and to determine whether or not the ideas of the Reformation in Western Europe had any effect on the religious and political landscape of the Italian peninsula. In extension, there is also the task to understand why the Reformation did not ‘succeed’ in Italy in contrast to the great achievements it made throughout most other parts of Western Europe. In order for these questions to be addressed, it is necessary to narrow the discussion to a particular ‘Protestant’ movement in Italy, that being the Waldensians. In an attempt to provide a general thesis for the ‘failure’ of the Protestant movement throughout Italy, a particular look will be taken at the Waldensian case, first by examining its historical origins as a minority movement pre-dating the European Reformation, then by clarifying the Waldensian experience under the sixteenth century Italian Inquisition, and finally, by highlighting the influence of the Counter-Reformation as pivotal for the future of Waldensian survival.

Perhaps one of the reasons why the Waldensian experience differed so greatly from mainstream European reactions has to do with its historical development, since in many cases it pre-dated the rapid changes of the sixteenth century. Salvatore Caponetto clarifies the particularity of the Reformation in his work entitled The Protestant Reformation in Sixteenth
Century Italy, when he writes that, “It was a revolution of ideas, a revolution of basic feelings, not a question of cold theological formulae, but of new sentiments destined to spread quickly throughout Christian Europe… Febvre summed up the phenomenon, ‘at the beginning of the sixteenth century, at a particularly interesting moment in the evolution of human societies, the Reformation was the sign and the product of a profound revolution in religious sentiment.”1 In contrast to this, the Waldensian movement, also known as the Poor of Lyons, traces its origins back to the year 1170, named after a Valdesius or Valdensis. The medieval inquisitor Bernard Gui, in his Manuel de l’inquisiteur, informs the discussion by reporting that Valdensis, after reading the vernacular translation of the Bible, began to preach the gospel and founded a movement of followers who, as Gui states, were “taking upon themselves what had been said to the apostles, [and] even having the audacity to declare themselves their imitators and successors on the grounds of their false profession of poverty and disguised by a mark of saintliness.”2 Characteristic of the Waldensian communities was a peasantry, for these reformers were neither scholars nor men of influence. In stark contrast to the reformers of the sixteenth century, their religious dissent was intended to pass unnoticed. 3

In the diaspora of these communities, particularly throughout the Italian peninsula, the Waldensian heresy persisted, and was characterized by a passive dissidence towards the institutional establishment of the Church in Italy. Caponetto cites the example of the communities in Calabria, who in the sixteenth century, secretly maintained the ancient traditions of their fathers, yet were fully integrated with local life, actively participating in the religious

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rites of the Roman Church. Nonetheless, it can be argued that a sharp turn in the experience of the Waldensian heresy emerged in 1532, and thus indicates one of earliest attempts to rally what is cited as the ‘Italian Protestant Reformation’. In the midst of the Swiss Reformation, Caponetto explains that, “the consilium generale, composed of ‘barbs’ [elders] from Piedmont, Dauphinee, Provence, and even from as far away as Puglia and Calabria, joined by all the family heads of the Piedmontese Waldensians, met at Chanforan in the valley of Angrogna from 12 to 18 September 1532.” The synod served as both a clarification of the doctrinal points between the Waldensian and Zwinglian tradition, and also as an opportunity for the Waldenses to inherit the Protestant movement and bring back a new religiosity into the Italian regions.

The decision of the Waldenses to accept the Swiss Reformation had a mixed impact on their survival within the Italian peninsula. On one hand, a newfound fascination with the reformed ideas over the Alps had emerged particularly in the northern Italian region of Piedmont. The introduction to notions regarding the justification of faith provided a long-awaited alternative for newly-emerging heresies. On the other hand, “the efforts of the Church of Rome and of the dukes of Savoy to prevent the valleys of the Pellice, the Chisone, and the Germanasca, along with the marquisate of Saluzzo, from becoming the Italian gateway for the introduction of heresy, suggests the real danger represented by this Protestant bridgehead on the soil of Catholic Italy.” In many respects, the Waldensian communities became the overnight gateway to Italian Protestantism.

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4 Caponetto, *The Protestant Reformation*, 331.
6 Caponetto, *The Protestant Reformation*, 121.
7 Caponetto, *The Protestant Reformation*, 123.
Nonetheless, the underlying tension that remained dormant was the question about whether or not the Waldenses could give up their medieval existence in place of a modern and Reformed conception of Christian religiosity. This tension is articulated by Klaus van der Grijp in his article ‘The Development of Protestant Theologies in Italy’, which asserts:

It was certainly not a smooth transition, but it was of great importance to the Waldenses to legitimize themselves in their struggle for life over against the Reformation. Thus there has always been a tension between the history of the Waldenses, as it must have been experienced by contemporaries, and the history of the Protestant self-image in its relation to the early Christian church, to the councils, to medieval movements which, as far as it is possible to say so, were ‘predecessors’ of Protestantism.\textsuperscript{10}

With this consideration, in light of the historical development of the Waldensians, it is clear that in the wake of the 1540’s, the struggle for self-definition was one such factor that obstructed the Italian medieval heresies from undergoing the vast scope of reform that had been so successful elsewhere during the Reformation.

In the following decades of the sixteenth century, the Waldensian ‘Protestants’ throughout Italy faced the subsequent challenge of suppression, predominantly in light of the emergence of the Italian Inquisition. Michael W. Homer describes that in the centuries prior to the spread of Protestantism, the Waldensians lived in isolated rural communities and were rarely subjected to religious persecution. In stark contrast, after the start of the Reformation, the Waldensians became the targets of political and religious persecution on a much larger scale.\textsuperscript{11}

The growing enthusiasm for the Protestant model had drawn the attention of the Papacy, and as Christopher F. Black explains in this work \textit{The Italian Inquisition}, “Throughout the Middle Ages inquisitors had been periodically appointed to deal with particular heresies in confined areas of

Europe. In 1542 Pope Paul III (Alessandro Farnese) decided to have a centrally organised, permanent institution based in Rome, the Holy Office of the Inquisition, to coordinate activity against the growing threat of Protestant heresies within Italy.\textsuperscript{12} In effect, the survival of the Waldenses was once again threatened, and for the first time, by the direct and widespread initiatives taken against them by the Church.

The outcome of this new threat is clearly marked in history. In Piedmont, attempts to replicate a Genevan Reformed Church in the city of Chieri were only initially successful.\textsuperscript{13} In spite of the Treaty of Cavour of 1561, which promised religious toleration throughout the entire region, the Waldenses suffered under the persecution of Emanuel Philibert, Duke of Savoy, who organized the systematic destruction of the Protestant communities. During this period, Caponetto writes that, “these dispositions resulted in the serious reductions of persons committed to the pursuit of their freedom of conscience, as a notable increase in the flow of Piedmontese emigres to Geneva developed from the 1550s forward.”\textsuperscript{14} In light of these political provisions, by the latter decades of the sixteenth century the remaining Waldensian peasants found themselves confined to their valleys.\textsuperscript{15}

The experience of the Waldenses in the south was equally repressive. Black describes that at the root of the Inquisition, there was the impending fear from Rome of a Waldensian revival.\textsuperscript{16} In the region of Calabria, techniques to suppress heresy were twofold. Caponetto describes that, “the Waldensians had to decide, the inquisitor wrote, ‘to come forward and openly and freely acknowledge the truth; or, otherwise, after we have employed gentle means

\textsuperscript{12} Christopher G. Black, \textit{The Italian Inquisition} (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 1.
\textsuperscript{13} Caponetto, \textit{The Protestant Reformation}, 130.
\textsuperscript{14} Caponetto, \textit{The Protestant Reformation}, 140.
\textsuperscript{15} Caponetto, \textit{The Protestant Reformation}, 140.
\textsuperscript{16} Black, \textit{The Italian Inquisition}, 132.
and see that they do not work, we shall apply rigorous measures exterminating that city and the entire generation.”¹⁷ The results of this initiative were detrimental to the Protestant communities in the south, since it completely eradicated the Calabrian Waldensian communities while simultaneously severing the bond made with those in the Piedmontese valleys.¹⁸ In many ways, the localized nature of these Protestant colonies had provided an ideal landscape for the centralized efforts of the Church and the state to invoke preventative measures.

It is also worth noting that even the presence of the Inquisition served as an indication of the distinct identity of the Waldensians from the Protestant persecutions across European borders. Euan Cameron argues that, “The Protestant ideal… was of the believer who admitted his beliefs openly before his judges, and faced punishment bravely; the medieval custom was to deny heresy as far as possible to save one’s skin, if one had not first succeeded in escaping capture. In the late sixteenth century, defence and not martyrdom was still the norm for the Waldenses.”¹⁹ Even from the level of repression, it is clear that the Waldensian spirit, while dissident to the Church, had not fully assimilated into the broad movement of Protestantism. In this manner, the pursuit of an Italian Protestant Reformation was inhibited by the competing models of heresy in early modern Italy.

Beyond Italian efforts to preclude the spread of ‘Protestant’ heresy, in many respects the halt of the Waldensian movement can largely be attributed to the positive call for reform expressed within the Counter Reformation. In the midst of large religious disunity across European soil, the Counter Reformation served not only to respond to the emergence of heresy,

¹⁷ Caponetto, *The Protestant Reformation*, 337
¹⁸ Caponetto, *The Protestant Reformation*, 336
but to provide definite pronouncements for moral reform.\textsuperscript{20} The echo of this mission was most clearly expressed in Contarini and Carafa’s \textit{Consilium de emendanda ecclesiae} (1536), which stated that, “The most fundamental abuse in need of reformation is that bishops and priests must not be absent from their churches, but must be resident for they are entrusted with their care. What sight can be more piteous than deserted churches? Almost all the shepherds have deserted their flocks or abandoned them to the hirelings.”\textsuperscript{21} By pinpointing the problems at the diocesan level, the Church could prescribe a method to dually manage the problems of local heresy. Thus, in many respects, the Counter Reformation reflected the attempt of the Church to provide a restoration of the basic tenants of the faith in order to combat heresy from the bottom up.

The need to renew the church at a local level was an ideal heavily influenced by the work of Charles Borromeo. John B. Tomaro clarifies Borromeo’s position when he writes that, “Only the pastor knew the problems of his flock, and only he was qualified to deal with them. Rome was obligated to see that good men were appointed, and to remind each of his duties; she was not, however, to interfere in diocesan operations.”\textsuperscript{22} In light of the Waldensian experience, the effectiveness of diocesan reform not only indicates the moral firmness of the Church’s presence in the Italian region, but also suggests that the proper response to local heresy, like that of the Waldensians, was to address it from a local perspective. Caponetto points to the Italian landscape in the midst of the Counter Reformation and suggests that, “After painful and humiliating trials, imprisonment, suspension from teaching and preaching, anguished by the rift in the body of Christ, almost all dropped their quest for doctrinal reforms outside the church, submitted to

\textsuperscript{20} Caponetto, \textit{The Protestant Reformation}, 309
Roman obedience, and placed their hopes in the pending council desired by all, Protestant and Catholic alike.”  

In the absence of the freedom of conscience, the Counter Reformation provided a compromise for many fringe religious movements, including the Waldensians.  

In reflection of the failure of the Waldensian movement to spread beyond the rural confines from which it began, a number of important insights have been made in order to adequately give reasons for the absence of a ‘Protestant success’ throughout the Italian peninsula. In the midst of the Protestant Reformation, a tumultuous period of religious upheaval, Black gives a reminder of the alternate paradigm in sixteenth century Italy:  

Italian Protestantism was a ‘non-event’ and ‘marginal phenomenon’, to which no state committed itself, whether under a prince or corporate elite (unlike in many German states, England or Scotland). Even in the cities most affected by the new ideas, like Venice or Lucca, only about 0.2 per cent of the population might be fully committed, and only 2 per cent inclined toward Protestantism.  

The reasons for this phenomenon have been made quite clear. Through the lens of the Waldensian movement in Italy, the evidence suggests that the historical discrepancy between the medieval heresies that persisted as rural communities against the backdrop of the sixteenth century Reform movement proved too vast in order for a successful coalition to exist. In addition, the Waldensian spread was subdued by means of the immediate and centralized response of the Church in Rome, which reacted to the spread of heresy with the formation of a state Inquisition for the purpose of massive religious suppression. Finally, through the emergence of the Counter Reformation, the Waldensian heresy was overlooked by initiatives promulgating a restoration of faith. In effect, it is clear that the failure of the ‘Protestant Reformation’ in Italy  

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24 Caponetto, The Protestant Reformation, 15.  
25 Black, The Italian Inquisition, 17.
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originated out of the failure of reformers to address the alternate conditions to which the Italian nation faced.
Works Cited


