

## OUR CONTRIBUTORS.

### THE WALDENSES.

#### WHO ARE THEY? WHAT WAS THEIR ORIGIN?

"The Waldensian Church has occupied the high places of the field in the past, and is fitted to lead the van in the future," so wrote the Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, no mean authority on a question of Church history.

"It is now five years since I left the Romish Church, and during the whole of that period my desires have ever turned to the Church of the Valleys, because I recognize in it the true, primitive, apostolic Italian Church." So wrote Dr. Desanctis, who shortly after became a distinguished Professor in the college at Florence. Who then are the Waldenses? What is their origin? I have met some intelligent persons who thought they came from the Canton de Vaud in Switzerland; and others who supposed they were French. And yet few people have had so many historians as these same Waldenses. The French historian Michelet says: "C'est une belle singularité de ce petit peuple d'occuper par l'histoire une place si haute en Europe." Another proof that they are not now regarded an insignificant people, is that Cardinal Perrone, principal of the Roman College, printed a volume of 300 pages, only a few years ago, against them. "To see them spread over Italy and even enter into Rome through the breach of Porta Pia," he says, "whilst it grieved my spirit, it has spurred me to take the pen to fight as well as I may be able to do in my old age, against the enemies of the Roman Church, and to die, if it please God, sword in hand."

If then these few "Valley-men" are of such importance in the estimation of Rome, as to cause this aged cardinal to concentrate the remaining strength of his life to combat them, it cannot be regarded superfluous, I hope, if I should spend a few hours in collecting and connecting some of the facts which are known with any certainty regarding their origin, so that such of your readers as may take the trouble to read this letter, may be able to answer the question asked above, so far at least as those who have studied the subject, are able to tell. Regarding the

#### ORIGIN OF THE WALDENSES.

one supposition is that they are the descendants of those early Italian Christian refugees, who, after Paul had preached the Gospel in Rome, abandoned their homes to escape persecution, and fled to the deep mountain recesses of the Cottian Alps, amidst which a remnant, notwithstanding the thirty-three persecutions to which they were subjected, has yet remained faithful adherents to their primitive faith.

Some have even thought that St. Paul himself may have visited these valleys on his way to Spain, if he ever made the journey which he at one time contemplated, and that the present Waldenses are the successors of converts made by that apostle of the Gentiles.

Others again think that the Church of the Vaudois may have been planted by some zealous missionaries who, in the early years of Christianity, passed between Italy and France and who, "warmed by that love which made no labour excessive, no recesses out of the way, may have turned aside to tell to those secluded, hardy mountaineers, the message of salvation."

Some date their origin from the time of Vigilantius (fourth century), or of Claude, Bishop of Turin (ninth century); but modern historians who have taken pains to examine the subject critically, think that they can only be traced back to the twelfth century, when, under the influence of Peter Waldo, the inhabitants of the valleys of Pellice, Chisone and Germanasca separated themselves from the Church of Rome in order to remain faithful to Christ and His Gospel. Dr. Herzog, of Erlangen, who made a very extensive and minute study of the most ancient Waldensian literature, found in all the great libraries of Europe, is the chief representative of those who hold the last-named opinion. And this well-known German writer, both as regards his religious and ecclesiastical sympathies, is entirely on the side of the Waldenses; and his views are endorsed by Dieckhoff, Schmidt and others. Professor Emilio Comba of the Waldensian College of Florence, after elaborate research, conducted with the greatest care and most scrupulous fairness, has arrived at the same conclusions as these friendly German critics. In the course of last summer I had many opportunities of conversing with him on this subject, and he explained to me at length the grounds on which he

was compelled to admit that he could find no trace of the Waldenses prior to the time of

#### PETER WALDO, OF LYONS.

and these were substantially such as the following: The oldest writers on the subject belonged to the two classes, the Catholics and the Waldenses, according to early Catholic testimony, the origin of the Waldenses goes back to Peter Waldo, who lived in the twelfth century; and this opinion remains almost unchanged with their successors down to the present day. Now Prof. Comba holds that this testimony, although borne by adversaries, still possesses a certain weight in a question of this kind. But ancient Waldensian documents recently discovered, and which relate partly to the Italian branch in Lombardy, and partly to the Gallic branch that had penetrated into the Cottian Alps, accept the opinions of their enemies concerning their origin.

#### THEOLOGICAL CONTROVERSIES

were not long, however, in creating opinions at variance with these. The Roman Church was constantly boasting of its apostolic succession; it was natural, therefore, that the Waldenses who were church reformers, should recall the people to the traditions lost at the time of Constantine. In consequence they were truly enough said to be the successors of the apostles in spirit and in truth. This statement which had reference only to the antiquity of their faith, was soon construed as referring also to their origin, and tended to modify the views previously prevailing. This was particularly the case with polemical writers who wished to contrast the Waldenses with the adherents of the Roman Church. Prof. Comba quotes the following sentence from Maclaine's notes to his edition of Mosheim, as illustrative of a certain method of writing history: "When the Papists ask us *where our religion was before Luther*, we generally answer: *In the Bible*, and we answer well. But to gratify their taste for *tradition and human authority*, we may add to this answer: *And in the valleys of Piedmont.*"

The churches of France having decided to publish a

#### HISTORY OF THE WALDENSES,

the pastors of the Valleys entrusted to Dominique Vignaux, one of their seniors the task of collecting and connecting the original documents inherited from their fathers. These came into the hands of Perrin, the first historian of the Waldenses, who, after an examination of the documents, confirmed that which had been stated from the beginning, viz., that this people owed their origin to Peter Waldo. This first attempt not proving altogether satisfactory to the pastors of the Valleys, one of them, Gillio by name, wrote a second history (1560), in which, while apparently not departing from primitive tradition as to their origin, he states that the Waldenses on their arrival in the Italian valleys found "favourable surroundings." Next came Liger, who, quitting the region of historical fact, entered that of legends, and narrated marvellous stories which long continued to dominate Waldensian literature, and which were extensively copied abroad, especially by English writers, such as Sir S. Morland, Dr. Gilly and others. German criticism has now fully exposed the errors of the Liger school of writers, and Professor Comba, after a thorough investigation of the subject, has succeeded, he thinks, in bringing into view again the true tradition of this ancient and most interesting people. In his great work entitled "History of the Martyrs of the Reformation in Italy," is a chapter devoted to "Waldo and the Waldensians before the Reformation." He begins it by comparing the history of this people to the Nile, as well on account of its fructifying influence on the lands through which it passes, as the supposed mystery of its origin. He concludes the chapter by resuming the simile and says that "notwithstanding certain clouds, it is yet perceptible that it springs from the heights of Catholic tradition, from the rock of the Sacred Scriptures by means of Waldo. We see rivulets flowing into it on all sides; here, Christian doctrines mixed with Romish errors; there, ascetic customs and ecclesiastical forms already in use with the Cathari, but still free from the Pagan superstitions; farther on, new notions derived from the reactions of Huss and the brethren of Bohemia; finally it widens, and empties into the sea of the Reformation. And in its changeable course it was ever beneficent since it restored to honour the Word of God, obscured by tradition. It made the life, the liberty, the fellowship of believers to shine in contrast with a clergy, vulgar, despotic and sectarian. Between the degenerate Church of Rome and the

Reformation there was, in a dogmatic, moral and even ecclesiastical point of view, a period of transition, which reminds one of that between the synagogue and the apostolic Church. Entered upon by an apostle of the Sacred Scriptures, it enrolled a legion of masters in an age fruitful in illiterate people; and therefore at the dawn of new days it was ready to receive them with the aid of the Bible printed in their mother-tongue."

It is only fair to add that several of the pastors in the Valleys with whom I conversed on this subject

#### DIFFER IN OPINION

from that of Professor Comba. Professor Tron of Torre Pellice, who has published a monograph on "Peter Waldo and the Poor of Lyons," and with whom I had many interesting conversations, devotes a chapter of his book to "Waldo and the Vaudois." In this he says that the historical difficulty as to the relationship between Waldo and the Vaudois, does not seem to him to be so definitively settled one way or the other, as some appear to regard it. That the merchant of Lyons arrived at a knowledge of the Gospel without other aid than his Bible—that the zeal of this godly man and the arrival of bands of his first disciples in the valleys of the Alps, revived the Vaudois by communicating new life, Prof. Tron quite believes. But that the Vaudois owe absolutely everything to him—their origin and religious opinions, as well as their name, he thinks there are at least reasons strong enough to make him doubt. Neither does he consider the priority of the Vaudois to Peter Waldo to be of such importance as some regard it. This question interesting enough in a historical point of view, is not one of vital importance to the Vaudois. Even if there was the most unquestionable proof not only of their priority to Waldo, or even of their apostolic origin, there would be little cause for glorification, faith being not a property for transmission from father to son as a family heritage. And even as regards external profession, it is only too well proved that a church may have been founded by the apostles, without in consequence continuing to be the pillar and ground of the truth. What the Vaudois have to be thankful for, as a signal favour, is not their having preceded by some centuries the faithful Waldo, but that, notwithstanding their feebleness and long prior to the Reformation, they maintained in opposition to all the powers of Rome and of the world, the right of each individual to read his Bible, and to bow the knee only before Him who can kill or save.

If there ever was a time when they refused to be called Vaudes (sorcerers), an odious nickname applied to them by their adversaries, for the purpose of ruining them and making them ridiculous, it assuredly was not, Prof. Tron adds, because they were ashamed of Waldo, but because they held it to be more conformable to their principles to bear no other name than that of Christ—the acknowledged Chief Pastor of their "little flock"—their only Master and Saviour.

The ties which really connect the Vaudois with the followers of the Lyonese reformer, are, Prof. Tron thinks, briefly these: In the first place they both bear in early documents a common name, that of Valdenses or Vaudes. Again, bands of the disciples of Waldo, to escape persecution crossed, at a very early period—between 1185 and 1190 perhaps—into Italy and settled on the higher portion of the mountains, then unoccupied, and in time a fusion took place between them and the Vaudois who had long inhabited the Valleys. Farther, by the relations long existing between the Picards of Bohemia and the evangelical Christians of Piedmont, and entire conformity in religious sentiments the Vaudois of Lyons and those of the Cottian Alps have often been confounded the one with the other, at first by their enemies and later on by some of their most sincere friends. But whether they were brothers or children of the "poor of Lyons," the Vaudois of Italy, Prof. Tron says, may learn much from the faith and energy of these valiant witnesses for the truth. And Peter Waldo, when his life is carefully studied, may still, after the lapse of seven centuries, teach many salutary lessons.

Whatever view of the question then we may be disposed to take, and there is certainly ground for difference of opinion, one thing at least is clear that the origin of the Waldenses is to be attributed to the study of the Word of God. Even Cardinal Perrone admits this, for he says: "It must be remembered that the point of departure of the Waldensian sect was the study of the Bible." And history describes that true