Abstract: This article takes up the question of how the Poor Waldensians of Lyon, a predecessor of the medieval Franciscan movement, managed to become one of the main Reformed ecclesiastical bodies starting from the sixteenth century. The Italian Waldensians are an interesting ecclesiological case since during the time of the Protestant Reformation they underwent a significant transformation, from a nomadic and sectarian heterodox group to an ordered Reformed church body inserted within the broader international network of Reformed churches. This meant their survival through the support of Protestant diplomacy and public opinion, opening a door for Protestantism in the stronghold of Roman Catholicism. Their ideological move was not without changes on many ecclesiological points (Scriptures, sacraments, justification, etc.), in addition to the abandonment of their former pauperistic roots. The study shows how struggling religious minorities can at times undergo essential changes in order to guarantee their survival.

Keywords: church; Italy; Protestantism; Reformation; Waldensians

1. Introduction and Methodology

The following paper is intended to ascertain the way and degree in which the Waldensians moved from being a Franciscan movement ante littera during the Middle Ages to gradually becoming a Calvinistic church body after the Protestant Reformation. As the Waldensians received news of the Reformation taking place throughout Europe, it became clear that this would have a significant impact on the structure of the Waldensian movement. I argue here that the adherence of the Waldensian movement to the Reformation meant a radical transformation that had far-reaching implications even beyond theology. For the Waldensians to embrace the Reformation, particularly in the form of Calvinism, meant a complete structural reorganization of the movement. This ideological move also changed the Waldensian's view of the relationship between church and governmental authorities in the following centuries.

While the Waldensians might not have been necessarily aware of this at the time, such a major change, from being a secluded and largely unregulated grassroots movement to a synodic and organized church body after the Reformation, guaranteed their survival as a church as well as their involvement in the international Protestant landscape. The Waldensians are significant in this sense since they became the only heretical movement that survived the Middle Ages. They were also one of the only pauperistic movements that did not end up being assimilated by the official Catholic church. The Waldensians after the Reformation also became the key door for the introduction of Calvinism to the Italian Peninsula. Embracing a Protestant and Reformed church structure meant that the Waldensians began to be directly involved in international Protestant diplomacy as a religious minority to be protected (Tedeschi and Biondi 1987). These were not minor changes, and, as I will point out, they were not void of consequences. Given the drastic nature of these changes, scholars have begun wondering whether it is even legitimate to speak of the Waldensians as a unified religious entity. In other words, should the Medieval Waldensians and the Reformed Waldensians be treated as two very different entities?
Before analyzing in detail the primary and secondary literature around the Waldensians during the Reformation, it is important to make a methodological note. It is not the intent of this paper to provide a full recollection of all the states of the art on the Waldensians during the Reformation but only to utilize certain literature with the aim to point out the nature and the degree of some of the major changes that took place within the Waldensians as a result of the Reformation. Recent scholars, particularly Gabriel Audisio and later Euan Cameron, have gone back to the advent of the Protestant Reformation among the Waldensians, demonstrating that embracing the Protestant Reformation took more time for the Waldensians than previous scholarship has suggested. More recent studies seemed to have followed in their own ways this trajectory of interpretation (Zwierlein 2014) therefore an assessment of its consistency becomes necessary. The paper will also engage with further scholarly contributions from the Catholic side, such as Gustavo Cantini, exploring other connections with the Waldensian movement beyond Protestantism, especially when dealing with the changes brought about by the Reformation. The purpose here is to engage with these more recent views and ascertain to what level the change in the Waldensians, from a proto-Franciscan movement to a Calvinistic church body, was gradual and still significant. Beyond these more recent findings, the literature on the subject it is outdated and was written from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. It ranges from idealistic and, at times, fictional representations of the matter by Protestant writers to condemning and denigrating depictions by Catholic writers on the other side of the spectrum. In between these extremes, it is not always easy to distinguish the historical accuracy of the reception of the Reformation among the Waldensians. Therefore, many analyses that I will refer to throughout this paper relied on indirect and, at times, questionable documents. Specific details based on speculations and chronological imprecisions also present a difficulty in being able to draw a line between history and fictitious recollections. This is also aggravated by the fact that talking about clandestine groups such as the Medieval Waldensians implies that little documentary evidence survived persecution. Therefore, many analyses end up relying on indirect and, at times, questionable documents.

Regardless, it is still possible to trace, with a degree of sufficiency, the general changes that took place among the Waldensians after the Reformation and to draw some conclusions on the nature and degree of such changes. It must be emphasized that the aim of this paper, in analyzing such literature, is not just historical accuracy but also to trace, with a degree of sufficiency, certain arguments surrounding the Waldensians’ relationship with the Reformation and to also make some reflections on the relationship between the Waldensians and the Protestant Reformation. While much has been written on the theology and ideas of the Reformation (particularly as it relates to the Waldensians the Synod of Chanforan), the political and structural impact of the Reformation on the Waldensians is an element neglected so far in scholarly discussions (Tedeschi 1977). While the study of the political dimensions that were involved in the Waldensians’ decision to embrace Calvinism are more elusive, they are still worthwhile to explore (Cameron 1984). Rather than just focusing on the religious component, this paper will mostly narrow its scope to the transformation of the structural, political, and social features of the Waldensians before and after the Reformation. The ultimate aim, once again, will be to determine the nature and degree of those changes brought about among the Waldensians after the Reformation. The conclusions will also reflect on the implications of those changes, especially for how the relationships between different phases of Waldensian history should be conceived today.

2. The Advent of the Protestant Reformation and the Waldensians

Given the context of cultural and geographical isolation, as well as the risk of extermination, the Waldensians were led to see the advent of Protestantism as their only hope of survival. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, in fact, Waldensian communities were almost completely extinguished (Vinay 1975). In this sense, the advent of Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and others represented for the Waldensian church a “Reformation within the reformation” or a second Reformation. When the issue of Sola Scriptura was brought to
the attention of western Christianity as a whole, one could say that the Waldensians cheered for this tenet since such a belief was already there among the medieval Waldensians in seed form since their beginnings. The only real link between the medieval Waldensian movement and the Waldensians after the Reformation is, therefore, to be found in their common acknowledgment of the supreme authority of Scripture in matters of faith and practice (Vinay 1975).

Witnesses of early connections between the Waldensians and the Reformation are scarce. Allegedly, in 1517, some Waldensians had given expression to their dissent toward the sermon of the Archbishop of Turin on the indulgences by saying, “we don’t know what to do with indulgences of the Pope; to us Christ is enough.” (Jahier 1927). However, Luther’s initial model of Reformation as a whole, in reality, sounded perhaps still too close to Rome for some Waldensians in favor of the Reformation, or it was seen as a potential enemy by other Waldensians holding on to their medieval tradition. We must also remember Luther’s initial suspicion of the Waldensians, as well as the Hussites, given the Papal charge of heresy over Jan Hus. One thing was sure: the advent of the Reformation required some change even within the Waldensian movement.

The ecclesiastical structure of the Waldensians up to the time immediately before the Protestant Reformation was rather informal. The Waldensian movement, up to that point in fact offered little occasion toward institutionalization (Benedetti 2009). While the Waldensians were widespread throughout the continent during the early Middle Ages, just prior to the Reformation, they had been mostly relegated to the Cottian Alps of northwest Italy and southern France. The valleys only counted around 8000 professing Waldensians. Their leaders had historically been itinerant preachers. In this sense, their communities were transient, clandestine, and unable, so far, to organize themselves around a clear and unified structure.

What became clear in the mind of many Waldensian leaders at the time, as an aspect in need of change, was the issue of church polity, and by implication, the believer’s relation to the magistrate. A major difference between the medieval Waldensians and the Waldensian Calvinist church body that developed in the following centuries consisted in a change in relations between the church and governmental authorities. Governmental authorities were to be acknowledged. While the medieval Waldensians kept themselves removed from secular authorities, the Calvinistic Waldensians acknowledged the Jus Reformandi.

3. The Reality behind the Myth of Chanforan

Recent scholars such as Euan Cameron have sought to dismantle the myth of characterizing Chanforan as a Reformed synod where the Waldensians officially and drastically embraced the Reformation in toto. This argument among other critics is brought as far as denying that Chanforan took place at all. While it is true that embracing the Reformation among the Waldensians happened gradually, Chanforan still represented a real turning point. What today has come to be known as the Synod of Chanforan—which was held in 1532 in the Angrogna valley—witnessed a gathering of leaders from the Waldensian movement (barba) coming together with several Swiss Reformers. While it is true that the Waldensians and a Reformed contingent of people, allegedly led by William Farel, issued a new Confession of Faith there, the general atmosphere of this assembly was of discussion and reservation rather than the full embrace of the Reformed and Protestant faith (Ferrario 2016). Chanforan, however, remains the first significant move for the purposes of this paper. The Waldensians, in a gradual and yet profound way, transformed their church structure. This had implications even for their future understanding of what the relationship of the church should be toward governmental authorities and society in general. From a small rural movement of dissidents, the Waldensians became a Reformed church according to the model of Calvin’s Geneva (Muston 1978). This, however, took place gradually and not all at once at Chanforan.

The gradual alteration of the Waldensian movement after Chanforan into a Reformed church, in the direction, at this point in time, of the Consensus Tigurinus, could be consid-
ered, a posteriori, something unexpected. Many of the features of the early Waldensian movement were in fact closer, if not even forerunners, to the Lollards, the Hussites, or, later, the Anabaptists (DeWind 1952). This organizational shift was surprising also in light of the existing connection between the Waldensians and the Hussites. The Waldensians one century earlier had strong ties with the Hussite movement and translated some Hussite literature into Provençal (MacCulloch 2004).

This was also a surprising change in light of the previous theological emphasis of the medieval Waldensians, which focused on the Sermon on the Mount. Such emphasis was more akin to the Czech Brethren, Bohemian Brethren–Taborites, and, later on, the separatistic branches of the Anabaptists (Lochman 1975). The Czech Brethren, also known as Unitas Fratrum, was the first late medieval group to be recognized by both Lutherans and Reformed churches. At times, the Brethren were identified as Waldensians even by other Reformers. The Brethren also wrote a catechism for the Waldensians in Italy. A Hussite letter commenting on Chanforan invited the Waldensians to be cautious, mentioning how the Swiss delegates had “shocked the Waldensians on various points, caused divisions” and only brought about an increase in persecutions (Molnar 1974). After Chanforan, the assembly of Prali on 15 August 1533 (Pra Daval), became a witness to this Hussite influence. A split occurred there between the Waldensians Daniele da Valenza and Giovanni da Molines. This is evidence of how some Waldensians were still unwilling at the time to fully join the Reformation. They were particularly afraid of mixing politics and religion in the way the medieval Roman Catholic Church had done until then. Such mixing was in some ways perceived as an unwanted feature within the pattern of Reformed churches.

Beyond this gradual component by which the Reformation took root among the Waldensians, it is still important to reflect on why the Waldensians after Chanforan, in time, joined the stream of Calvinism. While not initially in contact with Luther himself, interactions between Waldensians and other important Reformers were already taking place prior to Chanforan. Martin Bucer addressed once how the piety typical of the medieval Waldensian was something that, in his view, made living in society almost impossible. He rightly feared that such a radical ethic would lead the Waldensians toward Anabaptism (Vinay 1975). William Farel and Johannes Oecolampadius were also consistently interacting with Waldensian delegates who asked them for theological opinions. In Strasbourg, Waldensian delegates also met with Martin Bucer and Wolfgang Capito. Many Reformers understood the importance of the Waldensian valleys and sought to utilize their presence for the advancement of the Reformation in the Italian Peninsula, the stronghold of Roman Catholicism (Caponetto 1992, p. 158). The Waldensian Morel desired that Oecolampadius would act as a “shepherd of our [Waldensian] sheep” and wanted the Reformer to clarify several ecclesiastical points (the nature and number of sacraments, the legitimacy of swearing, the role of the magistrate, etc.). Oecolampadius and Bucer, for their part, insisted that the Waldensians needed to enact a complete separation from the Church of Rome (Gonnet 1960, p. 46). Geneva also became strategic for the Waldensians geographically, being just above Piedmont where their valleys were located. Piedmont after this era, therefore, maintained strict relations with the Swiss Cantons and became the door for Protestantism to spread to the rest of the peninsula. Piedmont was also connected with southern France, which was likewise witnessing the rise of the Huguenots in territories that were traditionally inhabited by Waldensians.

Therefore, it must be pointed out that what came to be known as the Synod of Chanforan was part of the broader progressive exposure of the Waldensians to the Reformation, both prior to and after the meeting itself. In 1526, a Waldensian gathering had met at Laus in the Chisone valley. There, 140 Waldensian leaders convened to discuss whether they should join the continental Reformation. In 1530, the Waldensians from Dauphiné also sent delegates to visit the Reformers. Furthermore, a questionnaire of controversial points of church polity was brought forward at the gathering of Waldensians at Merindol in Provenç that same year. The report from the delegates, however, did not satisfy everyone at first.
For the purposes of this article, it is worth noting that a fundamental point that was difficult to accept for the Waldensians, all the way back to Chanforan, had to do with whether believers should acknowledge the government as an organization established by God (Caponetto 1992, p. 148). The first point on the agenda at Chanforan was, in this sense, strictly organizational: “whether the orders of bishop, priest and deacon ought to be used in ordaining ministers, as they were not among the Waldenses; and whether such ordained ministers might pass judgement.” (Cameron 2000, p. 234). The early Waldensians who, at the beginning of the movement, had rejected ecclesiastical structures were now challenged by the Reformers to reconsider the place of church government, the power of the keys, ordained ministers, sacraments, etc. The medieval Waldensians needed to embrace a Presbyterian form of rule (Bertuzzi 1998, p. 125). Throughout these interactions, catholicity was stressed, seeing each other as members of the same universal church, as well as an appreciation for the alleged ancient heritage of the Waldensians. Among the Waldensians, Morel stressed the need for unity with the reformers: “O utinam inter nos firma essemus unitate conjuncti!” (Comba 1932, p. 11). The pro-reformers, for their part, were particularly concerned with some of the sectarian tendencies among medieval Waldensians. Repeated interchanges followed Chanforan. Waldensian leaders were struggling to come to an agreement over what relationship to have with the Reformation: whether assimilation or simple acknowledgment (Wylie 1985, p. 146).

Chanforan took place from 12 to 18 September 1532. This date is still characterized today as an important milestone in the history of the Waldensians. One can witness the perceived immortality of such an event by visiting the monument dedicated to it in the Angrogna Valley today. At Chanforan, the assembly discussed several ecclesiastical points and a short confession of faith, made of twenty-four articles (with two of them lost), was written. This assembly, however, was more of an “extraordinary” assembly rather than a Protestant synod per se (Neuser 2002). While not necessarily embracing a synodic form of church government at Chanforan, the Waldensians nevertheless effectively entered into strict contact and cooperation with the broader European Protestant landscape (Foresta 2015). The main aim of the gathering was originally to allow pro-reformers to present their case.

In the mind of the reformers, doctrines, liturgical uses, and discipline needed to be brought to bear while abandoning a perennial state of organizational uncertainty. Among the delegates, allegedly, William Farel and Antoine Saunier were present. The Waldensians as a movement were brought there to consider which direction to take: either joining the Reformation or gradually finding their own specific path (Tourn 1980, p. 74). While there is uncertainty about whether Farel attended the meeting, he and the group at Neuchâtel nevertheless fervently desired that the Reformation could reach France, so Farel’s interest in the Waldensians as a direct bridge to his projects remains well-founded (Caponetto 1992, p. 147).

The majority of Waldensian religious leaders, a bit intimidated as the modest, learned men that they were, signed a statement of faith, later confirmed at Prali. It must be kept in mind that just two years earlier the Augsburg Confession had been completed, Ulrich Zwingli had died, and the young John Calvin was yet to take his place in Geneva. While Calvin was still in Noyon, he was nevertheless already acquainted with the Waldensians prior to escaping France. His close friend, the merchant and landlord Etienne de la Forge, had died a martyr (Cantimore 1959, p. 315). More important is Calvin’s connection to his cousin, Pierre Robert Olivétan who, at Chanforan, was commissioned with writing a French translation of the Bible. Even more interesting, and little explored by scholars, is the claim that Olivétan was himself a Waldensian. At the second Synod of Chanforan a few years later (1535), a translation based on the Hebrew and Greek texts was presented to the Waldensians, this time with a preface by John Calvin himself. By this time, Calvin was in Geneva, which gradually became a place of refuge for the Waldensians (Comba 1894, p. 26). At the end of the translation, Olivétan allegedly commented, “The Waldensians, evangelical people, have made this treasure public.” (Caponetto 1992, p. 150). In one sense,
therefore, the Waldensians were not founding a new church or joining Protestantism at Chanforan since Protestant churches as we understand them today did not yet exist in 1530. Two movements met at Chanforan: the ancient Waldensians in the role of Mater Reformationis encountered the young, international movement of Reformation that was still in progress (Janni 1931, p. 8). In the long run, however, the Waldensian movement indeed became a Calvinistic church body and even though such dynamic was only in seed form at Chanforan, one cannot read the articles of the assembly without acknowledging that it indeed was intended to lead the Waldensians toward that same direction: embracing the Reformation.

4. Significant Changes among the Waldensians after Chanforan

One of the first issues for the Waldensians after Chanforan was the recovery of the visible and institutional aspects of the church. While caves and cottages had often been their informal places of worship, now public “temples” were to be built (Art. 8). The aim was, eventually, for churches and pastors to be established in every village, creating a church model which in time will become close to that of Reformed churches around Geneva. This began to happen, however, only much later, after 1555. Ministers of the Word were now compelled to be stationary in their parishes (Art. 15). The itinerant ministry of Waldensian religious leaders and communion of goods needed to give way to regular ministry in local churches through married pastors who would later be sent to Geneva for their training (Art. 22–23). Some of these doctrinal stands can also be traced to the inquisitorial acts of 1532 against Pierre Griot. He was a Waldensian who had been arrested after Chanforan and had undergone cross-examination concerning “all the barba and preachers of such sect that assembled at the mountains in the country of Piedmont.” (Lentolo 1984; Gonnet 1974b, p. 83). The impression one gets even from their Catholic opponents is that the Waldensians had dangerously agreed with the Reformers to take part in the plans to reform the church.

Another issue that the Reformers dealt with, as they interacted more with the Waldensians, concerned the sacraments and, in particular, the partaking of the Mass in order to flee persecution, a practice widespread among the medieval Waldensians and labeled at the time of the Reformation as Nicodemism. If the Waldensian church was to be reformed in the mind of the pro-reformers, these same Waldensians needed to be restored to sacramental purity away from compromises. The visible component of the church needed to be recovered even if it resulted in martyrdom. Up to that point, the movement of Waldo accepted, by and large, the Church’s sacramental system while still attacking the worldliness of the medieval church. It was not uncommon for the Waldensian believer to confess his sins to his spiritual leaders before the Reformation. In agreement with the pro-reformers, at this point, the Waldensians at Chanforan acknowledged the existence of only two sacraments (Baptism and Lord’s Supper) (Gonnet 1991, p. 61). No room was given for transubstantiation, or even consubstantiation, concerning the elements in the Lord’s Supper (Pascal 1920, p. 36).

For the Waldensians, in subsequent years (1555–1560), Chanforan still meant the drastic abandonment of the medieval religious pillars of the Poor Men of Lyon, rotating around the Sermon on the Mount. This also was accompanied with the unimaginable progressive “Calvinization” of what had originally been, in all respects, a proto-Franciscan movement. Therefore, the Waldensians, as a medieval movement inside the one and only—though corrupt—church ceased to exist at Chanforan, and it became a church in all effects independent from Rome, but the way to blend together the medieval and Reformed Waldensian identities remained a question mark (Platone 1997, p. 26). While the rest of the pauperistic movements were either extinguished through persecution or assimilated by the Roman Church, the Waldensians survived as an independent and Reformed church body. This however implied the end of the medieval Waldensians. While the medieval Waldensians were an international movement above specific regional distinctions, it is only in the sixteenth-century Reformation era that the Waldensians were brought to territorial identity, being loyal to the specific political authority of the House of Savoy. Art. 11 of
the declaration of Chanforan in fact mentions that the Christian can legitimately take up the practice of a magistrate (Vinay 1975, p. 141). These changes, seen by some as an “ecclesiological betrayal”, were indeed a radical departure from a polity that had been kept over 250 years, rejecting the legacy of Waldo and progressively embracing the theological vision of John Calvin (Molnar 1965, p. 423).

The embracement of the Reformation is, however, interpreted by other scholars as an act of providential wisdom rather than a mistake. Chanforan was still not so black and white on the issue. The charge against the Waldensians of being still anchored to medieval Catholicism was still alive as Calvin lamented their “Popish remnants”, particularly the fact of not giving enough attention to Sola Fide (Gonnet 1976, p. 163).

Although the relationship between faith and good works was central to the discussion (Art. 2), it is surprising in fact that Chanforan made no explicit statement on Sola Fide but instead made some concession to good works. Sola Fide was a central aspect of the Reformation so such soft attitude toward it at Chanforan is indeed revealing of how matters were not so clear cut. This was due to the impossibility of reaching an agreement between the Waldensian religious leaders in this regard. Many of them were still agitated over this issue of justification by faith. There was instead essential agreement with the pro-reformers on predestination (Art. 19). This possibly paved the way for the Waldensians in time becoming Calvinists. As mentioned before, inquisitorial acts testify to the fact that the initial reaction of the Waldensian leadership to many of the teachings of the reformers, such as Sola Fide, was of surprise. That is why recent scholarship has emphasized how the reception of the Reformation by the Waldensians happened slowly, between the 1530s and the 1550s (Merlo 2000, p. 27). The idea that the Waldensians joined the Reformation in a single meeting at Chanforan, perceived as a watershed in Waldensian history, has, therefore, been open to question. It took one generation before the Waldensians were able to interiorize the Reformation at a grassroots level. Only by the mid-1550s did pastors begin to be sent from Geneva, and only by the synods of 1563–64 did the Waldensian churches take the clear shape of Genevan Calvinism (Cameron 1984). For example, in following centuries, the myth of Chanforan as a coherent and organized event where the Waldensians embraced the Reformation was idealized by Waldensian historiographers, such as Emilio Comba and his work on Waldensian history, written between 1876 and 1896. The studies of Comba on Waldensian history and the Italian Reformation framed this past within an idealized connotation.

Likewise, English and American books around the nineteenth century represented the Waldensian past under such optimistic light. Chanforan instead was more a meeting in the shape of a disputation, characterized by confrontation rather than reconciliation between the Waldensians and the Reformers. Calvin himself long after Chanforan came to feel quite at odds with the Waldensians due to their emphasis on merit as a factor in justification (ibid., p. 178). It is only in the long run that Calvin became satisfied with their transformation to his liturgy and ecclesiastical order. The Waldensians of Provençe and Dauphiné, were also absorbed by the Reformed French Huguenot communities. The Waldensians of the Alps instead were those who kept their outward identity as Waldensians. Yet they gradually embraced the same ecclesiology as what in subsequent centuries will come to be known as Calvinist Protestant parishes with their synodic–Presbyterian form of church government. While this happened gradually it was still a radical change. The Waldensians, as they were known during the Middle Ages, ceased to exist. While this past identity faded away, the Waldensians were born as a territorial people at this time. The Reformation in time created a historical conscience among the Waldensians (Merlo 2000, p. 35). The sectarian, decentralized, and poli-nuclear church structure was lost in favor of a far wider European, international Protestant network (Audisio 2000).

This theological change was also driven by sociopolitical considerations. This is where the principle of soft power will prove crucial for granting help to the Waldensians throughout the following centuries. From this time forward, the Swiss Cantons, as well as many other Protestant players in Germany, England, the Netherlands, southern France,
and elsewhere, will exercise political pressure upon their governments whenever the religious situation in Piedmont became critical (Felici 2010, p. 40). Geneva became a shield against invasions from French and Savoyard armies for centuries. The embrace of the Reformation was in this sense a necessary step for the very survival of the Waldensians. While the Waldensians themselves might not have been aware of this at the time, without embracing the Reformation the Waldensians would have remained an isolated, nomadic, and hidden group, soon to be exterminated by the coming heavy measures of the Counter-Reformation on Catholic soil. If they had not bound themselves to the rising Reformation, they would have almost certainly been destroyed. In many ways, such a move was decisive for the future mission of the Waldensians as a whole. With Chanforan, the Waldensians also changed their stance on the rights of the civil government, which would also influence their future for generations. The attitude of the Christian toward civil powers was now to be positive, and the taking of oaths was no longer forbidden. The clear separation among early Waldensians between civil power and religion was now reversed. Article 10 of the Confession now said, in the opposite direction, that “a Christian may exercise the office of a magistrate over Christians.” (Morland 1658, p. 40) Following the Jus Reformandi, the Waldensians changed their policies toward the role of the state and their involvement in society, which later on led to their involvement in war to secure their religious independence.

Chiefly relevant to this paper is, therefore, the fact that the reception of the Protestant Reformation involved, by default, turning away from the political stances of the medieval Waldensians as well as the implementation of several significant changes to their beliefs, practices, and organization. Among them was their decision to abandon their initial pacifist tendencies and their intention to resort to violent guerrilla warfare for self-defense purposes. In the Middle Ages, isolated cases of revolt had taken place among the Waldensians, but the movement officially forbade taking up arms, partaking in military combat, or holding public political offices. Here, instead, military resistance for the cause of the people’s right to reform the church became legitimate (Tourn 1989). Their decision to embrace arms in their understanding did not constitute rebellion against God-appointed political authorities such as the Duke of Savoy but a legitimate defense against the tyrannical opposition of the Pope to their Reformed faith. This had happened, for example, during Cattaneo’s crusade of 1488, ordered by Pope Innocent VIII, in the Cottian Alps or, later, as I pointed out in another study on the Waldensians during the Puritan era, under the leadership of Henri Arnaud (1641–1721). Most important for the purposes of this paper therefore is the fact that the Waldensians after the Reformation changed their attitude toward public and ecclesiastical authorities (Treesh 1986).

5. Results of the Waldensians Becoming Reformed

Though still important, Chanforan was only one step forward on the road to a church government that was fully Reformed (Stephens 1998, p. 125). Between 1550 and 1560, the Reformation made its roots in the valleys through a solid ecclesiastical organization of worship; visible temples; the singing of the Genevan psalter; a consistory in each church with decisional power; a residential regional body of elected pastors and deacons; visitations each year in every church to control the respect of the ecclesiastical discipline; periodical colloquies in the pattern of the Genevan Ordonnances (implemented between 1563 and 1564 at the assembly of Angronga); a meeting to be held twice each year; a monthly assembly of ministers; and the organizational headquarters of a synod that was to direct ecclesiastical affairs as a whole. Now the valleys were directly dependent on Geneva and Lausanne for logistics, financial offerings, pastors, teachers, Bibles, catechisms, and literature. For the first time, this created among the Waldensians a juridical awareness of their nature. As the valleys gradually were brought into the cause of the Reformation, Calvin was settling in Geneva. He ministered directly to the many Waldensians who came to the city while fleeing persecution. The Waldensian pastor Humbert Artus, writing in Geneva in 1556, greeted his “good father in the Lord, Mr. Calvin,” recommending himself
and the poor church of God in the valleys to his prayers (De Lange 2009, p. 3). While their relation was not void of controversies, as mentioned before, it was at least characterized by mutual acknowledgement.

Most importantly, by 1550, Calvin started influencing the establishment of official doctrinal standards for the Waldensian church. The majority of the Waldensian religious leaders in the valleys (about 25–30 around this time), were now to be trained at the Academy of Geneva. It is fascinating to consider the missional force that Calvin sent to the Waldensians in the following years. From 1555 to 1558, almost all of the missionaries trained in Geneva were sent to Piedmont and Turin, given the urgent need for ministers in the context of heavy persecutions (Vernou, Lauvergeat, Barnot, Noel, Brevin, etc.) (Lindberg 2010, p. 257). The first ecclesiastical discipline, written in 1558, was the most ancient example among all the Reformed churches. Calvin’s *Institutes*, together with the Genevan Company of Pastors, became the organizational model to be followed by the Waldensian leaders, standing as an arbiter in case of disciplinary divergences. Future synods always called back to the assembly to follow the Genevan order for specific matters, and, in the case of problems relating to the provision, dislocation, and concession of pastors, the Company in Geneva managed the matter through direct correspondence. By this time, there was not a single village in Piedmont, even at a great distance from the Waldensian mountains, where there was not a Reformed church. Not even a decade later, the Venetian ambassador witnessed 28 castles where preaching “a la Huguenote” was held throughout the Duchy of Savoy, as Calvin’s *Institutes* were found even inside convents.

This reveals the consolidation of an institutional phase for the Italian Reformed movement, as part of the nobility, as well as other segments of the Italian society, started to show strong reception to and real enactment of the Genevan well-ordered church structure observed among the Waldensians. Chieri, next to Turin, had been defined by some as “little Geneva”. Many families and refugees arrived from Chieri in Geneva between 1568 and 1597. This was also connected to the fact that Chieri and Turin were part of the same region where the Waldensians were present. Pastor Domenico Vignaux, writing to the ministers in Geneva, made mention of the zeal to hear the Word of God in the Waldensian valleys, where the “heavenly Father had hidden these treasures between the Alpine mountains”, and yet, they were “sheep destined to the slaughter” of persecution (Felici 2010, p. 42). This was the case of the well-known Waldensian Goffredo Varaglia of Busca, an ex-Franciscan who was among the first Italians to study at Geneva and sent back to the Angrogna Valley as a Waldensian minister. He however remained a minister to the valleys only for a few months. After being arrested in 1558, Varaglia faced his martyrdom. He was hanged and burned at the stake in the main square of Turin.

Prior to this event, the Waldensian leaders had tried to send their confession of faith to the parliament (1544–1547, 1556) and to Duke Emanuele Filiberto of Savoy (1560) in order to persuade them that they were not rebels and that they wanted to submit to the king except on matters concerning obedience to God. The tenor of these confessions displays a strong loyalist spirit. The Waldensians recognized public authorities as ordained by God (Vinay 1975, p. 153). The attitude of the Waldensians toward public authorities had, therefore, drastically changed. Regardless of these effort, the sixties opened a decade of military expeditions to the valleys, imprisonments, galleys, and death at the hands of the Inquisition. The Edict of Nice had said in 1860 that hearing Lutheran preaching in the valley of Luserna or elsewhere could result in being fined or sent to the galleys (Cameron 1984). The Waldensian southern Italian colonies—in existence since the thirteenth century at Guardia Piemontese in Calabria—and those in Puglia were massacred in 1561 in the episode remembered as the “Italian St. Bartholomew.” Despite this difficult situation, Calvin, Beza, and Viret were aware of the vital need to maintain and strenghten a solid ecclesiastical structure in the Waldensian valleys as well as among the sympathizers across other Italic regions (Caponetto 2006, p. 30). The Italian mission was later provided by Calvin in 1564 with new reinforcements through ministers for the diffusion of the Scriptures. Calvin himself had visited Renée, the Duchess of Ferrara, at the end of March 1536 with
the hope of winning the Italian aristocracy over to the Reformation. The efforts, however, failed given the high rate of Nicodemites among the Italian nobles, who often turned away from Protestant convictions under persecution (Caponetto 1999, p. 129).

Therefore, the only area left in which Calvinism succeeded in the Italian peninsula on a large scale was among the Waldensians (Hamilton 2011). The Waldensians in fact asked Calvin for suggestions in 1545 as they were writing their confession of faith. Calvin personally consulted often with his Protestant allies in Frankfurt, the Swiss Churches of Bern and Basle, and even Heinrich Bullinger, to offer diplomatic aid to the Waldensians. Calvin’s thoughts went especially to the Waldensians persecuted in France. He and Philip Melanchthon for example once wrote to king Francis I, requesting, through a Swiss legation, the release of those Waldensians unjustly kept in prison (Accardy 2001). Nevertheless, persecutions continued for the Waldensians, especially after the Treaty of Cateau-Cambresis (1559) and the restitution of Piedmont to the Duke of Savoy, who, after several edicts, sent an army to the valleys in order to extirpate the heresy.

Yet, after six months of disastrous military campaigns the Duke of Savoy Emanuele Filiberto, under the influence of his wife Margaret of Valois, who had Reformed leanings, granted forgiveness to the Waldensian rebels and established a peace treaty with their leaders and delegates, signed at the town of Cavour on 5 June 1561. This treaty was another milestone in the Waldensian struggle for what would be interpreted in following centuries as a fight for religious freedom, since it granted freedom of worship within the Waldensian valleys (Art. 1–11). The Waldensians were granted pardon for having taken up arms, allowed to not attend Catholic Mass, prevented from being harmed by Catholic neighbors, allowed to trade outside their boundaries. The Waldensians, therefore, as a minority group, were granted the right to defend their Reformed religion. It was one of the first times that a Catholic ruler recognized the religious rights of a Reformed minority in his own territory. It was labeled by some as the first act of religious tolerance in European history, granting existence and jurisdictional voice to a minority (Caponetto 1992, p. 163).

6. Conclusions

After having analyzed these elements, it is now possible to come to some conclusions. For what seen so far, Chanforan indeed was only part of a broader and gradual acquaintance and alignment of the Waldensian movement with the teachings of the Reformation. Chanforan in itself was, therefore, not the ultimate and decisive step toward a drastic embracement of the Reformation. While some of the features of this meeting are part of a myth and still under historical scrutiny, it is nevertheless true that Chanforan did indeed take place, and the meeting was not the fruit of an a posteriori myth. Primary sources should be given their right place as the many articles of Chanforan, while not witnessing conformity with the teachings of the Reformation, at last prove the intention of alignment with them. The medieval Waldensians and the post-Reformation Waldensians indeed differed greatly. However, their differences did not imply an absolute differentiation between the two. Relevant to this research, as mentioned above, is the fact that the reception of the Protestant Reformation involved, by default, the turning away from certain political stances and the implementation of several significant changes in the beliefs, practices, and organization of what came to be known as the Calvinistic Waldensians. The transformation was political as well as theological. Given their change of perspective, the Waldensians, for example, decided to make a Covenant of Unity among themselves and take up arms in October 1560 to defend themselves (Gonnet 1974a). Calvin personally disapproved due to his fear of these actions passing from legitimate defense to offense, then into open rebellion against government. In a letter to a persecuted Waldensian church on April 1556, Calvin showed his disappointment in their military initiative, while at the same time condemning the Catholic “wolves” that the Waldensians were facing. In the later part of his life, due to disappointments as he dealt with broken promises from governors, Calvin began to take into consideration the possibility of active resistance for the Waldensians.
However, it was Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor, who provided the first open justification for the armed resistance of the Waldensians (Fiume 2008). Beza, unlike Calvin, openly expressed his approval of their military engagement and presented to the international Protestant public opinion the Waldensian resistance was a miracle or a blessing from God (ibid., p. 26). If the magistrate abused his power and violates God’s law, then his authority falls, as he was not anymore invested with political authority, and from this perspective, unlike Calvin’s, the Waldensians could legitimately rebel (Malandrino and Savarino 2011). No greater change within the Waldensian movement after the Reformation could stand out as this one: from the pre-Reformation proto-Franciscan semi-pacifism of the medieval Waldensians to the Calvinistic military resistance of the post-Reformation Waldensians. While Chanforan was just a piece in the puzzle it nevertheless contributed to such change. It can be argued that Calvin would have never anticipated how his followers would later adapt his views to support revolt. The Waldensians, in this sense, under these Calvinistic influences in time began to see themselves as a political entity, a people, in the theological sense of the word, in a covenant with the Almighty and, therefore, holding rights of legitimate defense due to their position of being under threat from their Catholic sovereigns. These connections between faith and politics that characterized international Calvinism were also shared by the Waldensians during the Reformation and impacted them greatly in their battle for religious freedom in the following centuries.

This call to arms turned out to be advantageous since it granted their survival and led to the peace agreement of Cavour. The toleration of reformed worship was temporarily granted to the Waldensians, but only in their territorial limits of the Alps. This, in any case, was the first act of religious tolerance and a small recognition of freedom of conscience for all of Europe. It was a Magna Carta for the Waldensians, and they always sought to go back to it, as the agreement was often violated in the future.

While embracing the Reformation meant entering into an international network of Protestant contacts, it also meant an increase in persecution from the Catholic Church, now perceiving them as a Protestant stronghold in Catholic territory. The Waldensians had long embraced the Reformation, and at the beginning of the seventeenth century, their Alpine Valleys had become a Calvinist stronghold in a remote corner of a predominantly Catholic peninsula. The Waldensians were therefore not isolated from the struggles and features characterizing the seventeenth-century era; instead, they displayed a consistent number of significant parallels so that while Chanforan could not be understood apart from prior and successive steps it still remained the most significant step for the Waldensian’s adherence to the Protestant Reformation, particularly in the direction of Calvinism. Future research should explore those connections further, for example Olivétan’s influence on Calvin as a Waldensian cousin, or the objective role that Farel and the group of Neuchâtel played at Chanforan, at least in connection with the French translation of the Bible. It must be also remembered that the Waldensians were at the center of the struggle to defend the antiquity of the Reformed doctrine against the pretenses of the Church of Rome during and after the Protestant Reformation. In Europe, with the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), Reformed churches such as the Huguenots of France, the Dutch Reformed, and the British Puritans all sought to use the alleged antiquity of the Waldensians as a historical weapon against the apostolic claims of the papacy. Chanforan therefore became an identity factor rather than just a piece of the broader puzzle of the Waldensians becoming a reformed church. In their own way, the Waldensian Calvinists were part of this international Protestant network (“Internazionale Protestante”). The Waldensians acted in partnership with other diplomatic Protestant allies seeking to advance the cause of the Reformation in the Italian Peninsula. This was Calvin’s dream, as he himself often had addressed the needs of the Italian Waldensians.

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Notes

1. Among many, the visit of Daniel de Valence and Jean de Molines to their “cousins,” the Bohemian Brethren who warned them of these Swiss intromissions concerning the doctrine of salvation and urged them not to abandon doctrines held for such a long time throughout previous centuries. In addition, the same Franciscans became a primary instrument to fight the Calvinist heresy in Italy, mainly the Waldensians. See (Cantini 1948, p. 25).


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