

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Waldensianism Before Waldo: The Myth of Apostolic Proto-Protestantism in Antebellum American Anti-Catholicism

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Between 1820 and 1850, American presses generated an enormous amount of literature devoted to the myth of apostolic Waldensianism. Though the Waldenses began as a lay reform movement in the twelfth century, speculations about their apostolic origin were popularized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This historical construction gave American Protestants a versatile rhetorical weapon against an increasingly encroaching Roman Catholicism. The apostolicity of Waldensianism allowed Protestants to trace their teachings not only to scripture but through the middle ages and the early church, providing a ready answer to Catholic accusations of Protestant novelty. Additionally, re-narrating the history of Waldensian persecution at the hand of Catholics reinforced nativist conceptions of Catholicism as a violently tyrannical religion, and became a call to action for Protestants to resist Rome's attempt to gain power in the United States. Though the myth of apostolic Waldensianism was widely held by American Protestants, by 1850 it became largely untenable. Historians on both side of the Atlantic contextualized the group as a medieval phenomenon, rather than the remnant of apostolic Protestantism.

## I. Introduction

In 1845, a German Reformed minister from Philadelphia named Joseph Berg published a work entitled *The Old Paths; A Sketch of the Order and Discipline of the Reformed Church Before the Reformation*.<sup>1</sup> The book was not meant as an exhaustive historical survey of Reformed Protestantism, but simply argued that Protestants could claim a kind of apostolic succession over and against the Roman Catholic Church. Berg maintained that Protestantism was founded on a lineage of proto-Reformation groups like the Waldenses of the Italian Piedmont, disparate communities of true Christians that had been persecuted by Roman Catholic authorities. In his judgment, the Waldenses were founded in apostolic times, endured through the Middle Ages, and influenced

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<sup>1</sup>Joseph Berg, *The Old Paths, or A Sketch of the Order and Discipline of the Reformed Church, Before the Reformation, as Maintained by the Waldenses Prior to That Epoch, and by the Church of the Palatinate, in the Sixteenth Century* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1845).

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the teaching of the Protestant Reformers. Berg's historical construction was fraught with urgency: if a Protestant tradition or denomination could not trace its origins to the apostles, it was not a true church. Berg challenged the Catholic claim to apostolic succession by encouraging Protestants to find their own in the Waldenses.<sup>2</sup>

Berg's little book and its subject were hardly an oddity in antebellum America. From 1830–1860, the Waldenses were an unusually common topic in the American press. Newspapers across the country detailed the history of the group, especially its persecution by Roman Catholic inquisitors. Reports from foreign correspondents and missionaries living among then present-day Waldenses gave readers a sense of how these original Protestant martyrs continued to live in nineteenth-century Italy.<sup>3</sup> Interested readers could find reflections on Waldensianism in women's journals,<sup>4</sup> children's books,<sup>5</sup> romance novels,<sup>6</sup> and hymnals.<sup>7</sup> Angelina Grimké, Frederick Douglass, and other abolitionists referenced the suffering of the Waldenses in their criticisms of

<sup>2</sup>"If we admit that the Church of Rome has ever been the church of Christ, you concede the entire ground for the occupation of which, the controversy is waged. If the church of Rome was the spouse of Christ at the period of the reformation, she is and must remain the Lamb's bride to this very day. . . if the Protestant Church dates its existence from the sixteenth century, it must be a schism. The doctrines and order of the Reformed Church have either been always maintained by the church of Christ, or they have never been owned by the Head of the Church as the teachings of his Spirit. . . The primary object of this sketch is to show the apostolic origin, and in a qualified sense, the apostolic succession of the Reformed Church. . . every recent phase of Protestantism is a branch of the old Waldensians stem, whose roots are imbedded in apostolic ground." Ibid., viii–x.

<sup>3</sup>See "Scrap of History," *New Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene, NH), September 14, 1822; "The Waldenses and Albigenes," *Independent Patriot* (Jackson, MO), August 13, 1825; "The Waldenses," *Farmer's Cabinet* (Amherst, NH), December 31, 1825; "The Waldenses," *Haverhill Gazette* (Haverhill, MA), March 11, 1826; "The Waldenses," *Boston Recorder*, May 12, 1826; "An Excursion to the Springs," *Visitor and Telegraph* (Richmond, VA), December 5, 1829; "A Sketch: Of the History of the Vaudois or Waldenses, Including an Account of the Albigenes," *Philadelphia Recorder*, March 6, 1830; "Pierre and His Family," *Rhode-Island American* (Providence), June 18, 1830; "Religious State of the Waldenses of Piedmont," *New York Observer*, May 4, 1833; "From the Scottish Guardian," *Watchman of the South* (Richmond, VA), April 4, 1839; "The Waldenses in 1837," *Greensboro Patriot* (Greensboro, NC), October 8, 1839; "Cave of the Waldenses," *Connecticut Observer* (Hartford, CT), March 21, 1840; "Oakland College," *Southern Reformer* (Jackson, MS), April 20, 1844; "Jones' Church History," *Alabama Beacon* (Greensboro), March 15, 1845; "Taverns and the Ancient Waldenses," *Anti-Slavery Bugle* (Lisbon, OH), May 1, 1846; "News from the Waldenses," *Ohio Observer* (Hudson), October 13, 1847; "History of the Vaudois," *Evening Post* (New York), June 7, 1849; "Religious Intelligence," *New Orleans Crescent*, January 24, 1852; "Martyrs," *Northern Islander* (St. James, MI), November 11, 1852; "The Waldensian Bible Pedler," *Wisconsin State Journal* (Madison), April 7, 1853; "Romanism," *Moulton Democrat* (Moulton, AL), August 9, 1855; "Waldenses Coming to Virginia," *Spirit of Jefferson* (Charleston, VA), July 21, 1857; "A Colony of Waldenses," *Quad-City Times* (Davenport, IA), April 6, 1858; "Waldenses in Illinois," *Cass County Republican* (Dowagiac, MI), May 6, 1858; "A Waldensian Church," *Cleveland Daily Leader* (Cleveland, OH), August 21, 1858; "The Weather," *Weekly Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock), December 10, 1859; "The Waldenses," *The Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), February 22, 1860.

<sup>4</sup>"Human Instrumentality," *The Mother's Magazine* 4, no. 1 (January 1836): 27–29; "The Vaudois Teacher," *The Ladies' Garland* 1, no. 11 (December 1837): 169–170; Lemuel Porter, "The Alps," *The Ladies' Pearl* 2, no. 7 (July 1842): 19.

<sup>5</sup>*Pierre and His Family: or, A Story of the Waldenses* (Philadelphia: American Sunday School Union, 1832).

<sup>6</sup>Mary J. Windle, *A Legend of the Waldenses, and Other Tales* (Philadelphia: J. W. Moore, 1852).

<sup>7</sup>Jacob Knapp, *The Evangelical Harp: A New Collection of Hymns and Tunes* (Utica, NY: Bennett, Backus & Hawley, 1845), 211.

slaveowners and their calls to end chattel slavery.<sup>8</sup> Though scholars today chart the beginning of the Waldensian movement to the twelfth century—with Valdes (later Waldo, or Peter Waldo) and the Poor of Lyons—the theory of the group’s apostolic origin was widely held and propagated in antebellum America.<sup>9</sup>

This article examines the development of the apostolic Waldensian myth in the United States and specifically its use as a rhetorical weapon in the anti-Catholic press.<sup>10</sup> Though always present in the American historical imagination, American enthusiasm for apostolic Waldensianism peaked in the wake of rising Catholic immigration in the 1830s and 1840s but waned under historiographical scrutiny in the 1850s and 1860s. The apostolic Waldensian myth confirmed Protestants’ worst fears about the violent, impious, and subversive nature of Catholicism. As apostolic Protestants, the Waldenses had suffered at Catholic hands since the time of Christ. In combatting the forces of the Pope, American Protestants could appeal to this heritage of persecution and suffering. Like their Waldensian brethren, they would stand against the powers of anti-Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Theories of apostolic origin for the Waldenses developed in the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestant and Catholic polemics. Accusations of Protestant novelty and concern over Jesus’s promise to never abandon the Church (Matt 28:10)

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<sup>8</sup>See for example, Angelina Emily Grimké, *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (New York: 1836), 20–21; S. C. Edgarton, “Hymn to the Waldenses,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (New York), December 17, 1840; Henry Wright, “Letter from Henry C. Wright,” *The Liberator* (Boston), July 28, 1848; “Journal of Mary Powell,” *The North Star* (Rochester, NY), August 24, 1849; “The Waldenses,” *Frederick Douglass Paper* (Rochester, NY), March 11, 1852.

<sup>9</sup>For the current scholarly consensus on Waldensian history and origins, see Gabriel Audisio, *The Waldensian Dissent: Persecution and Survival, c. 1170—c. 1570*, trans. Claire Davidson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Euan Cameron, *Waldenses: Rejections of Holy Church in Medieval Europe* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000); Peter Biller, *The Waldenses, 1170–1530: Between a Religious Order and a Church* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2001).

<sup>10</sup>Ray Allen Billington’s *The Protestant Crusade 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York: Macmillan, 1938) remains the foundational study for American anti-Catholicism. Several recent works, however, have broadened the scholarship considerably. See Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*, *The New Historical Criticism: Studies in Cultural Poetics* 28 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Mark S. Massa, S.J., *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: Crossroad, 2003); Philip Jenkins, *The New Anti-Catholicism: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Elizabeth Fenton, *Religious Liberties: Anti-Catholicism and Liberal Democracy in Nineteenth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jon Gjerde, *Catholicism and the Shaping of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. S. Deborah Kang (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Cassandra L. Yacovazzi, *Escaped Nuns: True Womanhood and the Campaign Against Convents in Antebellum America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Maura Jane Farrelly, *Anti-Catholicism in America, 1620–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Evan Haefeli, *Against Popery: Britain, Empire, and Anti-Catholicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2020); Luke Ritter, *Inventing America’s First Immigration Crisis: Political Nativism in the Antebellum West* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

<sup>11</sup>In this regard, the obsession with Waldensianism corresponded with the larger phenomenon of American preoccupation with martyrdom and persecution. Heike Joblanski has argued that this emphasis on righteous suffering, as exemplified by Protestant reception of John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, was essential in the creation of Protestant identity over and against Catholic neighbors in the nineteenth century. See her *John Foxe in America: Discourses of Martyrdom in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century United States*, *Beiträge zur Englischen und Amerikanischen Literatur* 36 (Paderborn, DE: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2017).

led apologists to search for proto-Protestant “witnesses to the truth” in the patristic and medieval eras.<sup>12</sup> Though this apologetic impulse remained prominent as Protestants migrated to North America, the nineteenth-century American enthusiasm for proto-Protestantism has gained only scant attention from scholars.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, many scholars of early American religion have argued that North American Protestantism was marked by a profound indifference to the past, characterized instead by a biblicist evangelicalism.<sup>14</sup> Exploring the foundational myths of anti-Catholicism demonstrates that a creative historical imagination and a fervent biblicism were not mutually exclusive phenomena in antebellum Protestantism.<sup>15</sup>

In tracing the rise and fall of a particular facet of anti-Catholic historiography, I suggest that historical myths like apostolic Waldensianism held a certain utility to their American proponents. Catholic immigration to eastern cities and to the wide plains of the Midwest caused widespread concern among Protestants over the future of the United States. In Protestant responses to this political and demographic upheaval, the Waldenses legitimized the existence of a purely Protestant country while also revealing the allegedly anti-Christian nature of Catholicism. Most significantly, Waldensianism served as a powerful rhetorical weapon because it allowed American Protestants to embrace the exclusive claims of the Roman Catholic Church for themselves: true apostolic succession, true doctrinal purity, and true moral excellence.

Jenny Franchot judged that the conflict with immigrant Catholicism allowed American Protestants to develop a historiography of progress, contrasting Catholic

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<sup>12</sup>S. J. Barnett, “Where Was Your Church Before Luther? Claims for the Antiquity of Protestantism Examined,” *Church History* 68 (March 1999): 14–41; Euan Cameron, *Waldenses*, 285–296.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Homer has examined the nineteenth-century efforts of American missionaries among Waldensian communities in Northern Italy, showing that the claims of apostolic origin invigorated Protestant mission organizations to evangelize Italian Catholics. See Michael W. Homer, “Seeking Primitive Christianity in the Waldensian Valleys: Protestants, Mormons, Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses in Italy,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9 (May 2006): 5–33. Additionally, scholarship concerning the Mercersburg Theology of Philip Schaff and John Williamson Nevin has long recognized the currency of the Waldensian theory among American Protestants, but has not yet addressed the origin or function of the theory, only that it was held by many, and that Schaff and Nevin opposed it. On the Mercersburg opposition to the Waldensian theory, see George Shriver, *American Religious Heretics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 24–25; Linden J. Debie, *Speculative Theology and Common-Sense Religion: Mercersburg and the Conservative Roots of American Religion* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2008), 29n57.

<sup>14</sup>See Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 167–170, 179; Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 230–231, 370–376; Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen refer to this phenomenon as “historylessness” in their *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630–1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 206–208. The terms “primitivism” and “restorationism” and their relationship to each other has stimulated much research over the differing degrees of the primitivist impulse within different American churches. See Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The American Quest for the Primitive Church* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1988); Richard T. Hughes, ed., *The Primitive Church in the Modern World* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1995); Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

<sup>15</sup>Paul Gutacker’s recent work is a welcome intervention on this subject. See his “Remembering the Old Faith in the New Nation: American Protestants and the Christian Past,” PhD diss. (Baylor University, 2019); and “Seventeen Centuries of Sin: The Christian Past in Antebellum Slavery Debates,” *Church History* 89, no. 2 (June 2020): 307–332.

coercion and power with evangelical freedom: a stagnant, ahistorical authority against a dynamic, living body.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Clark, in her study of early American seminaries, has shown how some American Protestants began appealing to a Hegelian-development paradigm in order to resolve the tension between Protestant theological claims and modern historical scholarship. The pervasiveness of the Waldensian theory in anti-Catholic rhetoric indicates that the historiographies of progress discussed by these scholars were largely minority positions in the antebellum period. The new historiographies of development would gain widespread appeal only after the dissemination of historical scholarship and the debunking of proto-Protestant myths.<sup>17</sup> Though historical scholarship forced American Protestants to largely abandon their myth, apostolic Waldensianism proved a malleable, powerful, and comforting narrative for those Protestants coping with unprecedented religious tumult.

## II. Origins of the Waldensian Myth in America

Questions concerning Waldensian history began stirring in the sixteenth century. Indeed, debates over the relationship between Protestant doctrine and patristic or medieval antecedents occurred often in the beginning years of the Reformation. As early as the indulgence crisis, Martin Luther was accused by his opponents of resurrecting the heresies of John Hus, John Wycliffe, and the Albigensians. Catholic polemicists frequently likened Protestant reformers to heretics of past ages, including arch-heretics like Marcion, Sabellius, Arius, and Mani. These attacks were combined with accusations of novelty: where had Protestantism existed before Luther? Aside from their appeals to Scripture, Protestants responded to these charges of heresy and novelty by mining patristic and medieval writings to support their teachings. These “witnesses” to the truth of Protestant doctrine legitimated dissent from Catholic teaching and authority. Christ had not abandoned his church until the Reformation but had preserved the truth of the gospel throughout the ages.<sup>18</sup> After centuries of persecution, the dispersed Waldenses began to identify with the Reformed churches of Switzerland and southern Germany. Protestants became fascinated with the group’s history and saw in the Waldenses a convenient answer to their Catholic critics. They had found the perfect forerunners to the Reformation, men and women scorned by the Roman church just as papal authority had begun to tighten its tyrannical grip around Europe. From

<sup>16</sup>Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome*, 3–14, esp. 12: “The Protestant historical vision, then, claimed a virtually redemptive function precisely by defining history as Protestant, as a dynamic that cleansed the spiritual of its material dross by separating out the entangled strands of sanctity and corruption.” For Franchot, the ahistorical and stagnant nature of Roman Catholicism stimulated Protestants to see themselves and their churches as agents of progress.”

<sup>17</sup>A fact recognized by Clark, but not explicitly by Franchot. See Elizabeth Clark, *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 5–6.

<sup>18</sup>For Catholic comparisons between Protestants and heretics, see Jared Wicks, “Opponents, Roman Catholic,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, vol. 3, eds. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinliky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). On the role of church history in early Protestantism, see Irena Backus, *Historical Method and Confessional Identity in the Era of the Reformation (1378–1615)*, Studies in Medieval & Reformation Thought (Leiden: Brill, 2003); and Bruce Gordon, ed., *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History (Brookfield, VT: Scolar, 1996).

these interactions, Protestant leaders like Genevan theologian Theodore Beza began to speculate about the group's apostolic origins.<sup>19</sup>

Against Catholic critiques of Protestant novelty and Waldensian heresy, Protestant historians construed Waldensianism as a pure, medieval strain of proto-Protestantism. The apostolicity of the Waldenses was fundamental for the Irish Calvinist bishop James Ussher's rendering of church history. In his *De Christianarum Ecclesiarum succesione et statu Historica Explicatio* (1613), Ussher dismissed the accusations of heresy put forward by Catholic historians against the proto-reformers as biased fabrications. Instead, Ussher established Waldensianism as the pure "paradigm" for interpreting all of the other anti-papal dissent movements, conflating the Albigensians, Berengarians, Lollards, Petrobrussians, Henricans, Cathars, and Hussites as localized instantiations of the same proto-Protestantism.<sup>20</sup> While skeptical of Ussher's apostolic claims for the Waldenses, Huguenot pastor Jean-Paul Perrin joined the bishop in treating all medieval dissenting groups as a united front. Perrin's history of the Waldenses was translated into English in 1624, urging readers to consider the medieval Waldenses (as well as the Albigensians) as their Protestant forefathers.<sup>21</sup> This view would be reinforced by Oliver Cromwell's diplomat to Italy, Samuel Morland. Gaining access to Waldensian confessional documents, Morland's history erroneously dated the works as originating previous to Waldo's conversion in 1170, bolstering Protestant claims to an apostolic and pre-Waldo Waldensianism.<sup>22</sup>

The most popular Catholic critique of Protestant novelty came from seventeenth-century divine Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, court preacher to the King of France and the Bishop of Meaux. In his *History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches*, Bossuet examined the formulation of the various Protestant confessions, systematically showing their development over time and inconsistencies with one another.<sup>23</sup> On the Waldenses, Bossuet skewered those who would construe them as proto-Protestants, demonstrating that the group began with Waldo (not the apostles), that they had for many years subscribed to Catholic teachings on the Eucharist and on the papacy (before

<sup>19</sup>The Waldenses themselves had long been unsure about their past, and disagreements about the origins of the movement took place in the fourteenth century as the movement gained followers throughout Europe. See Cameron, *Waldenses*, 118–121. On the reception of the Waldenses into the Reformed churches, see Barnett, "Where Was Your Church," 20–21; Cameron, 209–284.

<sup>20</sup>James Ussher, "De Christianarum Ecclesiarum succesione et statu Historica Explicatio" in *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher*, vol. 2 (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1847), 1–413; On these various dissenting groups, see Kevin Madigan, *Medieval Christianity: A New History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 174–210; and Jennifer Kolpacoff Deane, *A History of Medieval Heresy and Inquisition* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011).

<sup>21</sup>Perrin's book was published under two titles, *The Bloudy Rage of that Great Antechrist of Rome. . . Declared at Large in the Historie of the Waldenses and Albigenses*, trans. Samson Lennard (London: Nathanael Newbery, 1624); and *Luthers Fore-Runners; Or, A Cloud of Witnesses Depositing for the Protestant Faith*, trans. Samson Lennard (London, Nathanael Newbery, 1624).

<sup>22</sup>Samuel Morland, *The History of the Evangelical Churches in the Valleys of Piedmont* (London: Adoniram Byfield, 1658). On Ussher, Perrin, and Morland, see Cameron, *Waldenses*, 290–293; Barnett, "Where Was Your Church," 24–25.

<sup>23</sup>"If Protestants knew thoroughly how their religion was formed; with how many variations and with what inconstancy their confessions of faith were drawn up. . . [it] would afford them but little satisfaction. . . only feelings of contempt. . . All that varies, all that is overlaid with doubtful or studiously ambiguous terms, has always appeared suspicious, and not only fraudulent, but even absolutely false, because it betrays an embarrassment with which truth is unacquainted." James Benign Bossuet, *The History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches* (New York: John Doyle, 1842), 3–4.



descending into outright schism), and that many of the proto-Protestant groups like the Albigensians subscribed to a dualistic Manicheism.<sup>24</sup>

English Protestants formed two kinds of responses to the attacks of Bossuet. The first was to double down on the apostolicity of proto-Reformation groups. Peter Allix, an Anglican minister serving among the French Huguenots, directed several apologetic works at Bossuet, further substantiating the arguments of Perrin and Morland. In his *History of the Ancient Churches of the Piedmont* (1690) and *History of the Antient Churches of the Albigenses* (1692), Allix judged that the Waldenses and Albigensians were both descended from Northern Italian churches planted by Saint Barnabas, the companion of the Apostle Paul. Taking for granted the misdated confessional documents from Morland, Allix traced the history of these “Vaudois” Christians through Saint Ambrose in the fourth century and Claude of Turin in the ninth century. From here, the Waldenses and the Albigensians then inspired like-minded movements in the Peterbrusians, Lollards, Henricans, and Hussites. Allix’s attempts to exonerate the Waldenses from the charges of schism, and the Albigensians from Manicheism rested upon this unbroken chain from the apostles to the Reformation. As the medieval Roman Church attempted to consolidate its power in Italy, these Vaudois communities came under threat of persecution.<sup>25</sup> The other Protestant response to Bossuet’s criticisms was to emphasize the antiquity of English Christianity. As early as 1623, Richard Bernard’s *Looke Beyond Luther* argued that Christianity in England had existed for hundreds of years outside of papal control, and therefore could claim a similar antiquity as the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>26</sup> Both Simon Brickbek’s *Protestant Evidence* (1657) and Edmund Gibson’s influential *Preservative Against Popery* (1738) briefly mentioned Waldo as a rare call for reform in the Middle Ages, but the majority of their historical arguments came from anti-papal medieval antecedents to British Protestantism.<sup>27</sup>

When defending their Protestantism against the attacks of Catholics, early Americans most often turned to the works of renowned preacher and historian Johann Lorenz von Mosheim. A professor at the University of Göttingen, Mosheim

<sup>24</sup>James Benign Bossuet, *The History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches*, trans. Levinus Brown (Antwerp: 1742), 110–157.

<sup>25</sup>P. Allix, *Some Remarks Upon the Ecclesiastical History of the Ancient Churches of Piedmont* (London: Richard Chiswell, 1690); Pierre Allix, *Remarks Upon the Ecclesiastical History of the Ancient Churches of the Albigenses* (London: Richard Chiswell, 1692). Besides Allix, another favorite of later American writers would be the Baptist scholar Robert Robinson. Robinson came to many of the same conclusions as Allix but contended that the Waldenses and proto-Reformation groups had been Baptist in their theology. See Robert Robinson, *Ecclesiastical Researches* (Cambridge: Francis Hodson, 1742).

<sup>26</sup>Richard Bernard, *Looke Beyond Luther* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1623), 22–34.

<sup>27</sup>Simon Brickbek, *The Protestants Evidence: Taken Out of Good Records* (London: John Streater, 1657), 306–317; Edmund Gibson, ed., *A Preservative Against Popery, in Several Select Discourses upon the Principal Heads of Controversy between Protestants and Papists* (London: H. Knaplock, 1738). While American Protestants largely abandoned arguments from British antiquity in their polemics with Catholics, this apologetic tradition still remained popular throughout the nineteenth century through the proliferation of British apologetic tracts by the American Tract Society. See Thomas Burgess, *Tracts on the Origin and Independence of the Ancient British Church* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1815); Thomas Burgess, *The Protestant’s Catechism on the Origin of Popery* (London: Hughes & Baynes, 1818); Thomas Hartwell Horne, “Romanism Contradictory to the Bible,” in *Publications of the American Tract Society*, vol. 9 (New York: American Tract Society, [1840–49?]), 21–56. On the history of the American Tract Society, see David Paul Nord, *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

had first published his multi-volume *Ecclesiastical History* in the 1740s and 1750s.<sup>28</sup> Written originally in Latin, the entire *Ecclesiastical History* was translated into English by Archibald Maclaine, minister of an English-speaking congregation in The Hague, and published in London in 1765.<sup>29</sup> The translation would prove popular in the United States with the first American edition printed in 1798 and many subsequent reprints and epitomes published throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> American readers praised Mosheim's piety and evenhanded treatment of his sources.<sup>31</sup> The translation would become the standard church history text in early nineteenth-century seminary curricula, establishing Mosheim as the "infallible authority" on Christian history for Americans.<sup>32</sup> On the proto-Reformation groups, Mosheim exhibited a hearty skepticism toward their apostolicity. He admitted that many of the medieval dissent movements (the Cathars, Bogomils, and Albigenses) had actively taught a Manichean dualism, but reasoned that it was the corruption of the papacy that gave credence to heretical alternatives. For Mosheim, the Waldenses were the most noble and orthodox of these movements, known by all for their "purity" and "simplicity" of life. Their inability to reform the church, however—and their subsequent divisions in the wake of persecution—underscored for Mosheim the need for a more thorough reformation.<sup>33</sup> In a footnote, he remarked on the opinions of some who attempted to identify the Waldenses with a previously existing group of Piedmont Christians. "But," he wrote, "these writers have no authority to support this assertion, and, besides this, they are refuted amply by the best historians."<sup>34</sup> In severing the Waldenses from an apostolic source, Mosheim also reduced their importance as direct sources for later Protestant

<sup>28</sup>C. Augustijn, "Das Bild der Reformation bei Daniel Gerdes und Johann Lorenz von Mosheim," *Dutch Review of Church History* 64, no. 1 (1984): 84. While an ardent advocate for Lutheran confessionalism, Mosheim's approach to the Church's past has been understood by scholars as the beginning of a "modern" interpretation of Church History. His work considers heresies as historically contingent phenomena (rather than as occasions to affirm the truth of orthodoxy), and he encouraged historical inquiry outside of the bounds of confessional commitment. On the place of Mosheim in Enlightenment Historiography, see the essays in *Johann Lorenz Mosheim, 1692–1755. Theologie im Spannungsfeld von Philosophie, Philologie und Geschichte*, ed. Martin Mulso, Ralph Häfner, Florian Neumann, and Helmut Zedelmaier (Wiesbaden, DE: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1997); and John Stroup, "Mosheim, Johann Lorenz," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, ed. Alan Charles Kors (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup>John Lawrence Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History, Antient and Modern*, trans. and ed. Archibald Maclaine (London: A. Millar, 1765). Maclaine's translation went through multiple printings, including a five-volume edition in 1768 and a six-volume edition in 1782.

<sup>30</sup>Maclaine's translation appears in American book-seller lists by 1771 and Philadelphia's Library Company by 1775. See *A Catalogue of Books Sold by Noel and Hazard* (New York: Inslee and Car, 1771), 5; *The Second Part of the Catalogue of Books, of the Library Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: R. Atken, 1775), 40.

<sup>31</sup>In a 1798 editorial, a reader encouraged all curious Christians to support the publication of the *Ecclesiastical History*. See "For this Gazette," *New York Gazette*, April 28, 1798.

<sup>32</sup>For the use of Mosheim's work in American seminaries, see Clark, *Founding the Fathers*, 75–77. The "infallible authority" remark was made by Swiss-born, German-educated historian Philip Schaff in his 1846 appraisal of America's lack of historical knowledge. See his "What is Church History? A Vindication of the Idea of Historical Development," in *The Development of the Church: "The Principle of Protestantism" and other Historical Writings of Philip Schaff (Mercersburg Theology Study Series*, eds. David Bains and Theodore Trost (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 235, 271.

<sup>33</sup>John Lawrence Mosheim, *Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern, From the Birth of Christ, to the Beginning of the Present Century*, vol. 3, trans. and ed. Archibald Maclaine (Philadelphia: Stephen C. Ustick, 1798), 104–126.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.



theologians. Mosheim's view would be echoed by the well-regarded scientist and Unitarian divine Joseph Priestley in the first survey of Christian history written in America. Refusing to give credit to the Waldenses, Albigenses, Lollards, or Hussites, Priestley argued that Luther's Reformation impulses originated entirely from his monasticism.<sup>35</sup>

If Mosheim was skeptical of apostolic Waldensianism, his editor and translator Archibald Maclaine certainly was not. Throughout the *Ecclesiastical History*, Maclaine interjected his own comments into the footnotes, at times challenging Mosheim's conclusions. On the Waldenses, Maclaine directly refuted Mosheim's dismissal of their apostolicity. Repeating the arguments made by Allix and Morland, Maclaine maintained that the Waldenses had existed well before Waldo in the "Vallies of the Piedmont" as "Voidois" Christians. Responding to the accusations of Bossuet and other Catholics, Maclaine concluded his remarks with a nod to Protestant apologetics: "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 Vallies of Piedmont.*"<sup>36</sup>

As Mosheim's popularity in America grew in the early nineteenth century, so did the sentiments of his editor. American periodicals began printing excerpts from Waldensian confessional documents, noting the early, pre-Waldo dates of their creation.<sup>37</sup> Textbooks for schoolchildren on the history of Christianity began conflating (and extolling) the Cathars, Albigenses, and Waldenses as proto-Protestant exemplars, all deriving from an apostolic source. In her *Church History* (1817), Massachusetts schoolteacher Rebecca Eaton described the entire "history of the Waldenses" to her pupils and readers as little else "than a series of persecution." Eaton included graphic descriptions of various executions of Waldensian children, their suffering a "repetition of enormities. . . which equally shows the influence of the prince of darkness, and the enmity of the carnal mind against God."<sup>38</sup> The proto-Protestants, as a united and apostolic church, stood together against the harassment of Roman Catholic officials.

Perhaps the best barometer for the growing acceptance for apostolic Waldensianism can be found in the religious encyclopedias of Hannah Adams, the first professional female author in America.<sup>39</sup> In the first edition of her work, *An Alphabetical*

<sup>35</sup>Joseph Priestley, *General History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3 (Northumberland, PA: A. Kennedy, 1805), 139. For a complete appraisal of Priestley's life and significance, see the essays in Isabel Rivers and David L. Wykes, eds. *Joseph Priestley, Scientist, Philosopher, and Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For his religious writing, see especially Stephen Bygrave, "Conviction and Apocalypse in Joseph Priestley's Writing," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 2018): 303–319; George Hunston Williams, "Joseph Priestley on Luther," in *Interpreters of Luther: Essays in Honor of Wilhelm Pauck*, ed. Jarsolav Pelikan (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), 123–140.

<sup>36</sup>Archibald Maclaine, in Mosheim, *Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 3, 118–119.

<sup>37</sup>See for example, "An Ancient Confession of Faith of the Waldenses," *Connecticut Evangelical Magazine and Religious Intelligencer* 3, no. 10 (October 1810): 367–368.

<sup>38</sup>Rebecca Eaton, *An Abridgment of Milner's Church History for the Use of Schools and Private Families* (Andover, MA: Flagg and Gould, 1817), 155–156; 178–179; 185–194. Joseph Milner, a British evangelical, wrote a very popular survey of church history that, like Mosheim, was reprinted and adapted multiple times in the nineteenth-century American press. On Milner's historiography and reception of his writings, see Paul Gutacker, "Joseph Milner and his Editors: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Evangelicals and the Christian Past," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 69, no. 1 (January 2018): 86–104.

<sup>39</sup>For a brief description her life and writings, see Sarah Howard, "Hannah Adams," in *Companion to Women's Historical Writings*, ed. Mary Spongberg, Barbara Caine, Ann Curthoys (New York: Palgrave

*Compendium of the Various Sects* (1784), Adams included a portion of the Waldensian confessional documents and added a clarification that “Many of the authors of note make the antiquity of this denomination coeval with the apostolic age.” In a footnote to the entry, she explained the evidence behind the apostolic theory, noting Allix’s and Perrin’s works on the Piedmont Vaudois Christians. Ever the evenhanded scholar, Adams also included the contention of the Catholics, marking “On the other hand, the Papists derive their origin from Peter Waldo.”<sup>40</sup> In the 1801 edition of the work, she appended the entry with another common contention that supported apostolic Waldensianism, noting that “Many Protestants” believe that Waldo derived his name from the Vaudois, rather than the group from its leader. She also appended the title entry from “Waldenses” to “Waldenses, or Vaudois.”<sup>41</sup> In the final 1817 edition, Adams only presented the apostolic view, cutting out completely the Catholic (or skeptical Protestant) view that they derived from Waldo, and moving Allix’s explanation of their apostolicity from the footnotes to the main entry.<sup>42</sup>

The 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s saw an increased tension between American Catholics and Protestants, a dramatic shift from the relatively irenic decades of the Early Republic.<sup>43</sup> The Protestant press continued to perpetuate the myth of apostolic Waldensianism with the publication of many new works summarizing the older arguments of Perrin, Allix, and Morland.<sup>44</sup> American Catholics took their apologetic cues from Bossuet, recycling his arguments in their periodicals and newspapers. As Catholics printed attacks on the Protestant reformers and exposés on Reformation history, many could not help but apply Bossuet’s principles of variation to the multitudes of novel American denominations.<sup>45</sup> A new edition of Bossuet’s *History of Variations*

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Macmillan, 2005), 3. On her significance to the field of religious studies, see Toni Wall Jaudon, “The Compiler’s Art: Hannah Adams, the *Dictionary of All Religions*, and the religious World,” *American Literary History* 26, no. 1 (January 2014): 28–41; and Thomas A. Tweed’s introduction to Hannah Adams, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religions Denominations Jewish, Heathen, Mahometan, Christian, Ancient and Modern*, Classics in Religions Studies, no. 8 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), i–xxxiv.

<sup>40</sup>Hannah Adams, *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Various Sects Which Have Appeared from the Beginning of the Christian Æra to the Present Day* (Boston: B. Edes & Sons, 1784), 200–201.

<sup>41</sup>Hannah Adams, *A View of Religions, In Two Parts* (Boston: Manning & Loring, 1801), 303–305.

<sup>42</sup>Hannah Adams, *A Dictionary of All Religions and Religions Denominations* (Boston: James Eastburn and Company, 1817), 318–319.

<sup>43</sup>On Early Republic Protestant-Catholic relations, see Robert Gorman, “Catholic Apologetical Literature in the United States (1784–1858),” Phd diss. (Catholic University of America, 1939); Joseph Agonito, “Ecumenical Stirrings: Catholic-Protestant Relations During the Episcopacy of John Carroll,” *Church History* 45, no. 3 (September 1976): 358–373; Joseph P. Chinnici, “American Catholics and Religious Pluralism, 1775–1820,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 16, no. 4 (Fall 1979): 727–746; Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 91–124;

<sup>44</sup>Works published or heavily cited in the American press during these decades include George Stanley Faber, *An Inquiry into the History and Theology of the Ancient Vallenses and Albigenses* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1838); William Jones, *The History of the Waldenses: Connected with a Sketch of the Christian Church from the Birth of Christ to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Gale and Fenner, 1816); J. C. L. Sismondi, *History of the Crusades Against the Albigenses in the Thirteenth Century* (Boston: B. B. Mussey, 1833); William Jones, *The History of the Christian Church, From the Birth of Christ to the Eighteenth Century, Including the Very Interesting Account of the Waldenses and Albigenses* (New York: S. H. Cone, 1824); William Stephen Gilly, *Our Protestant Forefathers* (London: Rivingtons, 1835).

<sup>45</sup>For accusations of Reformation and proto-Reformation theological inconsistency relying heavily on Bossuet, see “Travels of an Irish Gentleman: In Search of a Religion,” *United States Catholic Miscellany* 13 (June 21, 1834): 401–402; “The Albigenses,” *The Catholic Telegraph* 7, no. 47 (November 1, 1838):

was prepared for the press in 1842, while a new translation of Mosheim began publication in 1832.<sup>46</sup> Mosheim's new translator and editor—the noted Connecticut linguist James Murdock—was personally ambivalent about proto-Reformation apostolicity, but in his notes he included an overwhelming amount of sources and argumentation from Maclaine and others who saw in the Vaudois an apostolic Protestantism.<sup>47</sup> Like appeals to Waldensianism, Mosheim was pervasive throughout anti-Catholic literature, particularly in works attempting to give an account of the endurance of Protestant doctrines throughout the church's history.<sup>48</sup> His work gave American Protestants a historical framework with which to combat their Bossuet-citing Catholic critics (his skepticism on the Vaudois supplemented with references to Maclaine or the other historians noted above). Anti-Catholic articles and books exploring Waldensian history were often paraphrases or direct quotes from these previous histories; indeed, Joseph Berg's 1845 *Old Paths* could aptly be described as a paraphrase of Jean Paul Perrin's work.<sup>49</sup>

### III. Weaponizing the Myth

Once American Protestants had an established body of apologetical literature advocating apostolic Waldensianism, the myth proved to be a versatile weapon in their rhetorical battles with Catholic neighbors. In response to Catholic claims at antiquity, American Protestants could go on the offensive and claim an ancient source for their own religiosity.<sup>50</sup> Every mark of Protestant doctrine and piety could be drawn out of Waldensian confessional documents, including a commitment to the authority of Scripture,<sup>51</sup> "liberty of conscience,"<sup>52</sup> and an anti-clerical church government.<sup>53</sup> In responding to Catholic critics, it was important to show that the beliefs that distinguished Protestants from Catholics predated the Reformation, and that the proto-Reformation groups were the source of these teachings. Protestants, to the extent that they emulated the Waldenses (and Scripture), marked a return to the apostolic purity of the Church.<sup>54</sup> The Waldenses were also elevated to the status of moral

372. For an extension of Bossuet's work, accusing American Protestantism of variation and sectarianism, see "My Doubts: The Variations and Metamorphoses of Protestantism," *The Catholic Telegraph* 11, no. 14 (April 2, 1842): 105–107. Many Protestants in the Early Republic held Bossuet in relatively high regard, despite his Roman Catholicism. See "Bossuet's Account of the Reformers," *The Christian Disciple* 4, no. 8 (August 1816): 236–238; no. 9 (September 1816): 269–270.

<sup>46</sup>James Benign Bossuet, *The History of the Variations of the Protestant Churches* (New York: John Doyle, 1842); John Laurence von Mosheim, *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History, Ancient and Modern, in Four Books, much corrected, enlarged and improved, from the primary authorities*, trans. James Murdock (New Haven: A. H. Maltby, 1832).

<sup>47</sup>Mosheim, *Institutes*, vol. 2, 313–320.

<sup>48</sup>For a paradigmatic example of Mosheim's authority in this area, see J. J. Janeway, *Antidote to the Poison of Popery In the Writings and Conduct of Professors Nevin & Schaff, Professors in the German Reformed Church in the U.S. of America In Three Parts* (New Brunswick, NJ: J. Terhune, 1856). Janeway quotes or references Mosheim extensively to construct a "catholic" Christianity outside of the Roman Church.

<sup>49</sup>Berg, *Old Paths*, 25, 32–76, 81, 106, 158.

<sup>50</sup>See for example, "Letter of Peyrani, a Waldensian Pastor, on Bossuet," *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 5, no. 2 (February 1839): 55–63.

<sup>51</sup>Berg, *Old Paths*, 29–32.

<sup>52</sup>"The Waldenses," *American Baptist Magazine* 15, no. 4 (April 1835): 121–130.

<sup>53</sup>"Religious Communications: The Waldenses," *Christian Spectator* 5, no. 7 (July 1, 1823): 337–343.

<sup>54</sup>Berg, *Old Paths*, 15.

exemplars for American Christians. One 1842 article used the group to condemn the lack of biblical knowledge among American youth, while another, printed in 1847, appealed to the Waldenses to definitively prove that dancing had demonic origins.<sup>55</sup>

Besides embodying Protestant doctrine and practice, early Waldensianism was portrayed by American authors as inherently anti-Catholic.<sup>56</sup> Roman Catholicism was understood as fundamentally anti-Christian, its beliefs and practices completely novel to the gospel preached by Christ and the apostles.<sup>57</sup> W. C. Brownlee, a leader of the anti-Catholic movement in New York City, published a series of letters throughout the 1830s on the nature of true Christianity and the apostasy of Rome.<sup>58</sup> Throughout the series, he contended that Roman Catholicism was a false church, but that throughout time, true Christians (in the East, Africa, and elsewhere) had kept to the true faith by opposing Rome. Singling out the apostolic Waldenses, he likened them to the seven thousand priests of Yahweh described in the Old Testament book of 1 Kings who maintained true worship while in hiding from the bloodthirsty king Ahab. The Waldenses were also kept hidden from tyrannical leaders, preserving pure worship for hundreds of years.<sup>59</sup> Another article series describing the history of Waldensian persecutions portrayed the group as a more obedient Israel, wandering in the desert of suffering on their way to the promised land. These articles reasoned that if the Waldenses had indeed been the transmitter of true Christianity, faithfully opposing the false church of Rome, then American Christians had a duty to do so as well.<sup>60</sup>

This argument against Rome depended on the historical constructions of Ussher, Allix, and others, which traced Protestant doctrines from the apostles through every era of the Church. Protestant periodicals rehearsed every aspect of the Waldensian myth: 1) Waldo derived his name, “Valdes,” from a preexisting, apostolic group in the Vaudois region of Italy;<sup>61</sup> 2) Christianity was brought to the Italian Piedmont in either the first or second century, and, persecuted by Roman officials, existed in isolation from the Church of Rome;<sup>62</sup> 3) their anti-Christian Roman Catholic opponents affirmed their claim of apostolic origin,<sup>63</sup> and 4) various medieval dissenters against papal authority, especially Claude of Turin, proved the existence of an enduring strain

<sup>55</sup>“Bible Among the Waldenses,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 20, no. 5 (January 29, 1842): 17; “Opinion of the Waldenses on Dancing,” *Zion’s Herald and Wesleyan Journal* 18, no. 16 (April 21, 1847): 64.

<sup>56</sup>“The Waldenses: Sketch of the Religious Character and Sentiments of the Waldenses,” *Christian Secretary* 1, no. 51 (January 18, 1825): 201; Jacob Helfenstein, “A Perverted Gospel; Or the Romanizing Tendency of the Mercersburg Theology” in *Protestant Quarterly Review* 10 (1853), 177–189.

<sup>57</sup>“The Testimony of an Enemy,” *New York Evangelist* 11, no. 4 (January 25, 1840): 14.

<sup>58</sup>For an overview of Brownlee’s mobilizing of anti-Catholic forces in New York, see Billington, *Protestant Crusade*, 63–64, 93, 96, 244–245.

<sup>59</sup>William Craig Brownlee, “The Roman Catholic Controversy, Letter V,” *New York Observer and Chronicle* 11, no. 15 (April 13, 1833): 58.

<sup>60</sup>“Where was your Religion Before Luther?” *New York Evangelist* 9, no. 24 (June 16, 1838): 93.

<sup>61</sup>“Defection of the Waldenses,” *Christian Watchman* 14, no. 19 (May 10, 1833): 74; “Waldenses of Piedmont, Before the Period of the Reformation,” *Weekly Messenger* 7, no. 18 (January 19, 1842): 1317.

<sup>62</sup>“Dr. Cheever’s Letters on the Waldenses: Their History from the Earliest Times (no. 6)” *New York Evangelist* 18, no. 20 (May 20, 1847): 80; Berg, *Old Paths*, 20–21. Cheever entertained the notion that the apostle Paul himself founded the community on his way to Spain, while Berg cites Irenaeus as the founder of Christianity in the region.

<sup>63</sup>See “The Testimony of an Enemy,” 14; Samuel M. Janney, “An Historical Sketch of the Christian Church During the Middle Ages: History of the Waldenses previous to the Reformation,” *Friends’ Weekly Intelligencer* 4, no. 11 (June 12, 1847) 81–84.

of Protestantism, continuing on through the Paulicians, Albigensians, Peter Waldo, the Lollards, and the Hussites to the Reformation.<sup>64</sup> This re-narration of proto-Protestant history gave the impression that dissent against Rome was a common thread throughout Christian history. All true Christians throughout time had rebelled against the impieties of the Roman church.

Though this construction of Christian history varied among anti-Catholic polemicists, establishing the apostolic origin of Protestantism was a necessity. Joseph Berg captured the sense of urgency in this way: “Christianity is a system of divinely revealed truth, which is perfect, and consequently admits of no improvement. The truth as it is in Jesus, is the same, yesterday, to-day, and for ever. . . it is immutable and eternal.”<sup>65</sup> Protestant doctrine had either been the teaching of the Church from the beginning, or it was a false gospel. In this vein, American Protestants hoped to justify the existence of their particular churches by claiming an apostolic Waldensian heritage. Baptist,<sup>66</sup> Presbyterian,<sup>67</sup> Episcopalian,<sup>68</sup> Restorationist,<sup>69</sup> and even Unitarian<sup>70</sup> publications portrayed their denominations as present-day Waldenses, thereby legitimizing themselves as true—or the truest—Christians.

In the same way that the Waldenses represented the eternal and immutable Protestant gospel, the historical impieties of Rome were understood as equally ubiquitous. Catholicism, like the gospel, never changed; its history was ever marked with the pursuit of power and the persecution of the truly pious.<sup>71</sup> Anti-Catholic authors went to great lengths to share historical accounts of Catholic despotism and violence with their

<sup>64</sup>This historical narration could include quite a few variations. See “Dr. Cheever’s Letters on the Waldenses: Their History from the Earliest Times (no. 6),” 80; Berg, *Old Paths*, 22–23; “The Antiquity of the Protestant Faith” *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 1, no. 9 (September 1835): 261–264; W. C. Brownlee, “The Roman Catholic Controversy, Letter V,” 58; T. “The Waldenses,” *Methodist Quarterly Review* 28, no. 4 (October 1846): 502–507. American Baptists were also willing to include noted heretics Arians, Novatians, and Donatists as forerunners of Protestantism. See “The Waldenses,” *American Baptist Magazine*, 121–123.

<sup>65</sup>Berg, *Old Paths*, 14.

<sup>66</sup>“Infant Baptism Not Taught in the New Testament,” *Christian Watchman* 17, no. 16 (April 15, 1836), 61; “The Waldenses, the Descendants of Baptists,” *Christian Mirror* (Portland, ME), November 18, 1840; Honestus, “The Waldenses,” *Christian Secretary* 25, no. 23 (August 14, 1846): 2; Western Watchman, “The Antiquity of the Baptists,” *Christian Secretary* 30, no. 7 (April 18, 1851): 1.

<sup>67</sup>Berg, *Old Paths*, 158.

<sup>68</sup>“Our Obligations to the Waldenses,” *Episcopal Recorder* 28, no. 43 (January 18, 1851): 169.

<sup>69</sup>“Parallel: Between the Waldenses and Ourselves, in Relation to the Religion of Jesus,” *Apostolic Advocate* 1, no. 10 (February 1, 1835): 223–228.

<sup>70</sup>“Believers in Endless Misery,” *Trumpet and Universalist Magazine* 20, no. 22 (November 13, 1847): 86.

<sup>71</sup>Berg gives his defense for holding contemporary Catholics accountable to the violence of the past: “Why revive the memory of these ancient grievances? May we not, as Christians, forgive and forget the past? Shall we cherish these ancient feuds, and separate friends and brethren on account of religious differences? Again we answer, If the Church of Rome has repented of this murder—if she has ever confessed her sin, and with tears of humble penitence forsaken it, then I say, let the massacre of St. Bartholomew be for ever forgotten! But has she done so? Has she told the world *ex cathedra*, and from her high places of authority, that she has sinned in betraying innocent blood? Never!—but thus she has done:—In the year 1830, another medal was struck at Rome, under the eye of the Pope commemorating the massacre of the Huguenots on the eve of St. Bartholomew—a fac simile of which I have seen! Oh! cruel, cruel Rome! Thy sins are remembered by the God of heaven. The blood of his elect cries out against thee—and he will avenge it.” *Old Paths*, 128. For similar graphic descriptions, see also A Native American, “The Fatal Mistake,” *The Religious Intelligencer* 20, no. 36 (February 6, 1836): 566.

readers. The descriptions were graphic, and the figures far-fetched.<sup>72</sup> One periodical reported upwards of 68 million Waldenses and Albigenses—“the purest and best people” of their time—to have been “butchered by the bigoted, blood-thirsty minions of his holiness in Rome.”<sup>73</sup> The martyrdom of the Waldenses at the hands of the Catholics further legitimized their apostolic purity, and Protestant periodicals claimed that their suffering was the genesis of Protestant notions of religious freedom.<sup>74</sup>

While many of the articles noted above attempted to shock their readers with vivid descriptions of torture and death (a well-worn strategy among Protestant polemicists), editors were also willing to employ more inventive means to malign their Catholic enemies. The creativity of anti-Catholic writers was eminently displayed in a series of 1836 articles entitled “The Trial of Anti-Christ,” which ran in the *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*. Each week, readers were treated to a dramatic courtroom scene, where various historical figures (including several Waldenses) would take the stand to testify against the evils of Rome.<sup>75</sup> In a mind-bending twist, toward the end of the trial, the prosecution calls a surprise witness to the stand. Personifying the plain historical record, a “Mr. Historical Truth” deals the deathblow to Catholicism, testifying to its persecution of the saints, corruption of the gospel, and thirst for political power.<sup>76</sup>

These articles reveal the widespread Protestant conviction that history was a potent and unassailable weapon against Roman Catholicism. Appeals to the historical excesses of Catholic violence served to support the argument that brutality and despotism were woven into the very nature of Catholicism. Whereas Early Republic Protestants were willing to distinguish between their Catholic neighbors and the Pope in Rome, anti-Catholic writers in the 1830s and 1840s warned their readers not to be deceived by Catholics who seemed to Americanize and embrace democratic ideals.<sup>77</sup> Convinced that their nation’s civic virtues (religious liberty, limited government, and freedom of conscience) derived from Protestantism, American Protestants re-narrated the history of the Middle Ages and the Protestant Reformation to make the Waldenses, Luther, and Calvin proto-American heroes for both religious and political

<sup>72</sup>Berg claimed four million Waldenses were killed in a twenty-year period by Catholic France. Berg, *Old Paths*, 106. W.C. Brownlee held the papacy responsible for the deaths of 50 million. See “Martyrs” *The Religious Intelligencer* 20, no. 50 (May 14, 1836): 788. In a sermon printed in the *Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review*, New England Methodist minister S.W. Coggeshill cited three million Waldensian martyrs. S.W. Coggeshill, “Present State and Future Prospects of the Papal Church,” *Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* 19, no. 2 (April 1837): 173, 183–184.

<sup>73</sup>“Expense of Popery,” *New York Evangelist* 15, no. 18 (May 2, 1844): 70.

<sup>74</sup>Zethar, “The Waldenses: Sketch of the Religious Character and Sentiments of the Waldenses,” *Christian Secretary* 1, no. 51 (January 18, 1825): 201; For a typical description of Waldensian persecution at the hands of Rome, see “Popish Persecution,” *Episcopal Recorder* 12, no. 17 (July 26, 1834): 65.

<sup>75</sup>“The Trial of Anti-Christ,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 2, no. 7 (July 1836): 253.

<sup>76</sup>“The Trial of Anti-Christ,” *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine* 2, no. 8 (August 1836): 303.

<sup>77</sup>“The difference between the crisis in our country, at the present time, and the position of the protestants of the thirteenth century, is to be found in the simple fact, that the civil power, in this land, is not held by the Romanists. The doctrines held by the Waldenses and those maintained by protestants, in this age, are the same, the oaths of the Roman bishops and the discipline and doctrines of the church of Rome are unchanged, they are identical with the decrees which were put in force against the martyrs of France and Piedmont, six hundred years ago. We owe our present freedom from papal tyranny, to the diffusion of the principles of the reformed church of the second, of the twelfth, and the seventeenth century—to the prevalence, in short, of the principles of the gospel, as preserved in the precious book which contains the revelation of God’s holy will.” Berg, *Old Paths*, 29. See also Berg, *Lectures on Romanism* (Philadelphia: D. Weidner, 1840), 253.



freedom. In fighting against the tyranny of Rome, Waldenses laid the ground work for American Independence, free markets, and modern republican forms of government.<sup>78</sup>

The blending of national and theological identities coincided in the 1847 publication of the American edition of Jean Paul Perrin's *History of the Antient Christians*. Presbyterians Samuel Miller and Robert Baird—the former a professor at Princeton Seminary, the latter an historian and leader of the American Sunday School Union—edited and wrote introductions to the book. While Miller construed the Vaudois Christians as aligning with Presbyterians in polity and sacraments, he noted especially their universal appeal for all American Protestants. He desired “a copy of [Perrin] in every Christian family in America,” so that the Waldenses might be exonerated from the delusions of Catholics and skeptical Protestants. Only then could Americans truly begin to emulate these saints.<sup>79</sup> In his dedication and introduction, Robert Baird established more clearly the connection he observed between American Protestants and their Waldensian forebears. He traced the influence of the Waldenses through the Huguenots to the settling of North America. All true Protestants around the world—Baird used “Waldensian” and Protestant interchangeably—were united against the corruptions of Rome. The Waldenses and Albigenses had stood like the two witnesses in John's *Revelation*, testifying to the violence and power of anti-Christ.<sup>80</sup> Now it was America's turn to stand against the forces of evil:

Hence, the ensuing valuable history will be very acceptable to all American citizens, and especially to every Christian, because, from its authentic documents, it is manifest, that during the protracted continuance of the feudal tyranny and the ecclesiastical despotism throughout the ten kingdoms of the Roman empire, the Christians who resided in the valleys of Piedmont and their immediate vicinity, were the only people who either understood or enjoyed the privileges of civil and religious freedom. In truth, the Waldenses, when divine Providence did not mysteriously permit their ruthless persecutors to ravage their country, exemplified, as the cardinal principles of their social organization in civic affairs, the self-evident truths upon which the primitive Puritans of New England established their commonwealth, and which, in the Declaration of the Fourth day of July, 1776, became the chief corner-stone of the American Federal Republic.<sup>81</sup>

By construing the Waldenses as proto-Americans struggling for religious liberty and self-government, Baird solidified the contemporary import of Waldensian history: anti-Christ was threatening again, and, unless Protestants resisted, they could expect the same fate as the proto-Protestant martyrs.

<sup>78</sup>John McLeod, *Protestantism the Parent Guardian of Civil and Religious Liberty* (New York: Robert Carter, 1843), 20–21; referenced in Ryan C. McIlhenny, *To Preach Deliverance to the Captives: Freedom and Slavery in the Protestant Mind of George Bourne, 1780–1845* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2020), 163, 225n58. For the debates between American Protestants and Catholics on the relationship between the Reformation and the United States, see Samuel L. Young, “An Agent of Anarchy and Tyranny: Martin Luther and American Democracy in Antebellum Catholic Apologetics,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2021): 1–24.

<sup>79</sup>Samuel Miller, “Introduction,” in Jean Paul Perrin, *History of the Ancient Christians Inhabiting the Valleys of the Piedmont* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Simon, 1847), 1–7.

<sup>80</sup>Robert Baird, “Letter of Dedication” and “Introduction,” in Jean Paul Perrin, *History of the Antient Christians Inhabiting the Vallies of the Piedmont* (Philadelphia: Griffith & Simon), i–xii.

<sup>81</sup>Baird, “Introduction,” 12.

In the decades of rising Catholic immigration, various plots and conspiracies implicated all Catholics as anti-American insurrectionists.<sup>82</sup> The details of these plots were wide-ranging and diverse but included the Jesuits fomenting a crusade to kill all Protestants and establishing America as a Catholic kingdom;<sup>83</sup> the Pope's uniting of Catholic Europe against Protestant America by joining forces with France and Austria;<sup>84</sup> papal encyclicals encouraging faithful Catholics everywhere to kill their Protestant neighbors;<sup>85</sup> and Catholic seminaries inculcating violent hatred of Americans through the recitation of Reformation anathemas against Protestants.<sup>86</sup> Protestants appealed to the Waldenses as evidence for all of these conspiracies. If the present-day brutality of Catholicism was in doubt or seemed far-fetched, the persistent suffering of the Waldenses throughout their history was understood as sufficient evidence, revealing the true, unchanging nature of Rome.<sup>87</sup>

The rhetorical utility of the Waldenses was not simply confined to their past. Beginning in the early 1840s, American publications began running stories about a contemporary group of Waldenses tucked away in northwestern Italy. Foreign correspondents would report back to American readers about the continued injustices that the group faced from the Catholic authorities.<sup>88</sup> Evangelism outlawed, Bibles and property confiscated, the Protestant press called for donations to be taken up for the Waldensian cause.<sup>89</sup> A suffering church of martyrs, the Waldenses were viewed by their American brothers and sisters as the gospel's best hope in Catholic Italy. Many stories reported on various conversions of Italian Catholics, especially priests, to Waldensianism.<sup>90</sup> The American fixation on contemporary Waldensianism reached its zenith in the spring

<sup>82</sup>On these conspiracies, see Jody Roy, *Rhetorical Campaigns of the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Catholics and Catholics in America* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2000), 55–87.

<sup>83</sup>"Jesuits on the United States," *New York Observer and Chronicle* 34, no. 6 (February 7, 1856): 41; A Native American, "The Fatal Mistake," 566.

<sup>84</sup>Ephorus, "The Unholy Alliance of Europe," *New York Observer and Chronicle* 30, no. 52 (January 15, 1852): 18.

<sup>85</sup>"Philadelphia," *New York Evangelist* 23, no. 3 (July 4, 1844): 106; Berg, *Lectures on Romanism*, 257.

<sup>86</sup>Frederic Shoberl, *Persecutions of Popery: Historical Narratives of the Most Remarkable Persecutions Occasioned by the Intolerance of the Church of Rome* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844), 159.

<sup>87</sup>Though it does not mention the Waldenses by name, a popular Protestant tract captures the utility of history in appealing to nationalized Protestant fear: "Remember too, that civil freedom and ecclesiastical tyranny cannot exist together, and that you are doing what in you lies to subvert the institutions of your country, and to plant upon their ruins that tyranny which Europe in convulsive agony is trying to expel from her shores. Remember, popery has not been content with the blood of manhood, but that mothers have died at the stake rather than relinquish the consolations and the promises of that faith, which (must I say it) you esteem so lightly. Open the historic page, and when you shudder at the massacre of St. Bartholomew, when you think of the Netherlands drenched with blood, and your heart sickens at the annals of the Inquisition, O remember, were all mothers influenced by your example, a few years might present a repetition of similar scenes in our own land." "Roman Catholic Female Schools," in *Publications of the American Tract Society*, vol. 10 (New York: American Tract Society, [1840–49?]), 216.

<sup>88</sup>"Sufferings of the Waldenses," *Weekly Messenger* 7, no. 31 (April 20, 1842): 1369.

<sup>89</sup>"Persecution of the Waldenses," *Episcopal Recorder* 20, no. 50 (March 4, 1843): 3; "The Waldenses," *Boston Recorder* 30, no. 9 (February 27, 1845): 34; "The Waldenses," *Dwight's American Magazine and Family Newspaper, for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge and Moral and Religious Principles* 2, no. 19 (June 13, 1846): 303; "Dr. Cheever's Letters on the Waldenses: Some of the Persecutions Under Which The Waldenses Still Labor," *Boston Recorder* 32, no. 7 (February 18, 1847): 25.

<sup>90</sup>"The Gospel Among Romanists," *New York Evangelist* 17, no. 32 (August 6, 1846): 126; "The Waldenses," *Christian Secretary* 23, no. 30 (October 4, 1844): 2; "The Waldenses," *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal* 21, no. 17 (April 24, 1850): 65.

and summer of 1853 when the leader of the Waldensian Synod, J. P. Revel, went on a speaking tour of major East Coast cities to raise money for a Waldensian seminary.<sup>91</sup> Following his visit, New York City leaders from twelve different denominations called for all Christians to financially support their suffering brethren in Italy.<sup>92</sup>

For these anti-Catholic writers, Waldensian history disclosed for them the true nature of Christianity and Roman Catholicism. The true Church had always been a persecuted Protestantism, crying out against the impieties and corruptions of Rome. This approach to the Christian past gave American Protestants new rhetorical tools to use against an encroaching Catholic population. The apostolic origin of the Waldenses, along with their enduring virtue and faith under perpetual persecution, meant that the idyllic church of the New Testament had endured outside of Rome for hundreds of years, safely tucked away, waiting for the Reformation. In the face of demographic turmoil, it legitimated the increasingly threatened notion of a purely Protestant nation and American Protestants adopting a special role in God's battle with anti-Christ.

#### IV. Debunking the Waldensian Myth

As the nineteenth century unfolded, the historiographical foundations of anti-Catholicism would be challenged by historical scholarship. Studies, mostly from German historians, began to illuminate the distinctive beliefs of certain anti-papal groups such as the Albigensians, or Cathars, showing that they were far more dualistic and Manichean than orthodox. The first of these studies to be published in the United States was Johann Gieseler's *Text-book of Ecclesiastical History* in 1836, with five more editions published throughout the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s. Gieseler surveyed the evidences of Perrin and Morland, ultimately concluding that the early dating of the Waldensian confessional documents was completely arbitrary and inaccurate. He deemed the evidences drawn from Catholic Inquisitors as obscure and conflicting with early Waldensian accounts of their origins. The Waldensians began with the ministry of Peter Waldo, not before in an isolated group of Vaudois.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>91</sup>For the announcement of Revel's visit, see "Waldenses Coming," *New York Evangelist* 24, no. 4 (January 27, 1853): 14; "The Waldenses," *New York Observer and Chronicle* 31, no. 17 (April 28, 1853): 130.

<sup>92</sup>"Appeal in Behalf of Waldenses," *New York Evangelist* 24, no. 25 (June 23, 1853): 98; After the visit, *The New York Observer and Chronicle* continued to update their readers on Dr. Revel's achievements. The Waldensian leader would periodically write articles clearing up common misconceptions on Waldensian history and theology. See "Dr. Revel and the Waldensian Church," *New York Observer and Chronicle* 31, no. 29 (July 21, 1853): 226; In one article, Revel declared to American readers that, despite Baptist writings to the contrary, the Waldenses had always practiced infant baptism. See JP Revel, "Baptism by Waldenses," *New York Observer and Chronicle* 37, no. 23 (June 9, 1859): 177.

<sup>93</sup>John Carl Ludwig Giesler, *Text-book of Ecclesiastical History*, vol. 2, trans. Francis Cunningham (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea, and Blanchard, 1836), 376–382. The Anglican minister and historian Samuel R. Maitland anticipated many of Giesler's arguments in his *Facts and Documents Illustrative of the History, Doctrine and Rites of the Ancient Albigenses & Waldenses* (London: C. J. G. and F. Rivington, 1832). This work indicted the historical writings of George Faber and Joseph Milner on the conflation of Albigensianism and Waldensianism. Faber responded to Maitland's criticisms in his *Provincial Letters from the County-Palatine of Durham* (London: William Edward Painter, 1842). Though Maitland's arguments would ultimately persuade Americans in the 1850s, his work and the debate with Faber went largely unnoticed by the American press (Maitland's research on eschatology generated a far greater response in the United States). One notice of the Maitland/Faber disagreement over the Waldenses did appear in Boston's *Christian Review*. However, the editor's vague praise of both authors' "scholarship" and "researches into old authorities" discloses an ignorance on the substance of the dispute and the thrust

The greatest opponent to the Waldensian myth in America was church historian Philip Schaff.<sup>94</sup> Educated at Tübingen, Halle, and Berlin, he arrived in the United States at the age of twenty-five, having received a call to teach at the German Reformed seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania.<sup>95</sup> His first two publications in the United States targeted various components of anti-Catholic historiography and reflected the growing criticism of apostolic Waldensianism in German scholarship. In his 1845 *Principle of Protestantism*, Schaff argued that Protestantism emerged from within Catholicism itself.<sup>96</sup> His contention that the Reformation was the fruit of Catholicism's better impulses simultaneously downplayed the significance of a Waldensian source for Protestant doctrine while also legitimizing Catholicism as the bearer of true Christianity for a thousand years.<sup>97</sup> Published a year later in 1846, his *What is Church History?* continued to chip away at the historiographical presuppositions of American anti-Catholics. Schaff cast aside as methodologically suspect the historical authorities of American Protestants, particularly those who advocated an apostolic origin of the Waldenses or conflated them with the Albigensians.<sup>98</sup> While he gave praise to Mosheim and his methods, Schaff could not understand why American and British Christians remained convinced that his was the final word for Christian history.<sup>99</sup> Perhaps the most damning criticism of anti-Catholic historiography

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of Maitland's argument. See "Miscellaneous Intelligence: England," *Christian Review* 5, no. 17 (March 1, 1840): 152–153. At least one bookshop in Charleston, South Carolina imported Maitland's *Facts and Documents*, as it was included among a list of 1846 book purchases by the planter and bibliophile Mitchell King. Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860*, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 481–482.

<sup>94</sup>For an overview of Schaff's life, work, and significance, see George Shriver, *Philip Schaff: Christian Scholar and Ecumenical Prophet* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003); Stephen Graham, *Cosmos in the Chaos: Philip Schaff's Interpretation of Nineteenth-Century American Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995); Klaus Penzel, ed., *Philip Schaff: Historian and Ambassador of the Universal Church* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2001).

<sup>95</sup>On Schaff's German education, see Klaus Penzel, *The German Education of Christian Scholar Philip Schaff: The Formative Years, 1819–1844* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon, 2004).

<sup>96</sup>Philip Schaff, "The Principle of Protestantism," in *The Development of the Church: "The Principle of Protestantism" and other Historical Writings of Philip Schaff (Mercersburg Theology Study Series)*, eds. David Bains and Theodore Trost (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 119–141.

<sup>97</sup>"The entire Catholic Church as such, so far as it might be considered the legitimate bearer of the Christian faith and life, pressed with inward necessary impulse towards Protestantism, just as Judaism—not in its character of Pharisaism and Sadduceism indeed, but as a divinely appointed preparatory institute, and viewed in its true historical import—rolled with steady powerful stream, in its interior legal, symbolical and prophetic principle, directly towards Christianity as the fulfillment of the law, the prototype of all its symbols, and the accomplishment of all its prophecies." *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>98</sup>A large proportion of the sects which existed before the Reformation were further removed in a number of points from the Protestant orthodoxy, than the errors even of the Church of Rome itself. Zealous Reformed theologians spared no pains, indeed, to clear the anti-hierarchic bodies of the Middle Ages from all reproach of heresy. Anti-papistic and evangelical were taken to be almost interchangeable terms.

Thus, for instance, James Usher and John Paul Perrin would force the world to believe, at every cost, that the Albigenses were entirely pure and sound in their faith, and that the accusation of Manicheism must be considered a groundless slander brought against them by the papists. . . . For these documents clearly distinguish the Albigenses from the Waldenses, and attribute to the first, the error of the Manichean dualism." Schaff, "What is Church History?," 269–270.

<sup>99</sup>"Surely however he [Mosheim] would himself be surprised, and as a historian especially must be filled even with displeasure, if he should not return again to the earth and find the English and Americans, after the lapse of a full century, not a step advanced beyond his position and contenting themselves, in their

was found in Schaff's equating of Catholic and American Protestant historical methodology with one another. Like Catholic historians before them,<sup>100</sup> Schaff reasoned that anti-Catholic thinkers understood the Church as "something complete in its nature from the beginning, not needing nor admitting any proper development."<sup>101</sup> For this theory to hold, anti-Catholic historians had to connect their churches to the apostles by bypassing "the whole intermediate history" of the Catholic Middle Ages, making this period "sink in fact into the character of an unmeaning and useless episode."<sup>102</sup>

The response to Schaff's work was swift, revealing how significant the Waldensian theory had become to American Protestant identity. Various factions within Schaff's denomination moved to accuse him of heresy.<sup>103</sup> Joseph Berg, anti-Catholic leader in Philadelphia, wrote his *Old Paths* in response to Schaff's discrediting of the Waldensian theory. Even a decade later, figures within the Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian denominations understood Schaff's views as a threat, accusing him of acting as a Catholic agent and encouraging mass conversions to Rome.<sup>104</sup>

Ultimately, Schaff's views would gain support from the publication of other German scholars. The works of Johann Herzog and August Dieckhoff continued to cast doubt on apostolic Waldensianism, as did the researches of the immensely popular August Neander, a mentor of Schaff's at Berlin.<sup>105</sup> New editions of Gieseler began adding footnotes describing the errors that led to the apostolic myth.<sup>106</sup> As this research became widespread, periodicals and authors appealing to the history of the Waldenses began softening their language when discussing their origins, saying that their history before Waldo was "clouded in mystery," or "murky."<sup>107</sup> Even Joseph Berg had to modify his

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seminaries, to commit his textbook to memory in a mere mechanical way, so far as practical purposes may require. He would bestow, beyond doubt, far greater praise on his German countrymen, who have placed his immortal labours at large interest, and would be able thus to show him his capital doubled and tripled in its amount." *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>100</sup>"If the Roman Catholic doctrine and discipline have been at all times the same, they must remain the same also for all time to come. . . the historical theory now before us reserves to the Catholic, that is to the Roman Church, the *exclusive* possession of God's truth and Spirit, as being invested in fact with the attribute of infallibility." *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>102</sup>*Ibid.*, 267–268. Schaff understood the ecclesial authoritarianism of medieval Christianity to be a good and necessary dispensation of the church in order to pacify and convert barbarian Europe.

<sup>103</sup>Shriver, *American Religious Heretics*, 14–51. Also at issue was a paper that Schaff wrote while a graduate student, where he contemplated the existence of a "middle state" for those who could potentially convert to Christ after death. This paper was loosely translated into English and was used as fodder for his heresy trial.

<sup>104</sup>Compare Jacob Helfenstein, "A Perverted Gospel," 177–189; J. J. Janeway, *Antidote to the Poison of Popery In the Writings and Conduct of Professors Nevin & Schaff, Professors in the German Reformed Church in the U.S. of America In Three Parts* (New Brunswick, NJ: J. Terhune, 1856).

<sup>105</sup>Joannes Jacobus Herzog, *De Origine et Pristino Statu Waldensium* (Halle: E. Anton, 1848); A. Wilh. Dieckhoff, *Die Waldense rim Mittelalter: Zwei Historische Untersuchungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1851); August Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church*, vol. 4, trans. Joseph Torrey (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1851), 605–616.

<sup>106</sup>John C. L. Gieseler, *A Text-Book of Church History*, vol. 2, trans. Samuel Davidson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1857), 549–556.

<sup>107</sup>See "The Waldenses: And Their New Ecclesiastical Constitution," *New York Observer and Chronicle* 33, no. 47 (November 22, 1855): 372; "Is the Church Historical," *German Reformed Messenger* 21, no. 42 (June 18, 1856): 4325; "Early History and Literature of the Waldenses," *New Englander* 10, no. 38 (May 1852): 277–300; Fredrika Bremer, *Life in the Old World: or, Two Years in Switzerland and Italy*, trans. Mary Howitt (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson and Brothers, 1860), 405.

accounts of pre-Reformation history. By 1850, his speeches retained the vivid descriptions of Catholic violence but ambiguously elided any discussion of Waldensian beginnings.<sup>108</sup>

Under these growing criticisms, defenders of apostolic Waldensianism received support from Alexis Muston's *Israel of the Alps* (1852). Muston, a French Protestant minister, sought to write the definitive history of Waldensianism, opposing the German scholars who cast doubt on the group's apostolic origin. Following Allix, Muston traced the Waldenses to the patristic and medieval Vaudois churches, led by anti-Roman bishops.<sup>109</sup> Bookstores in New York carried the London edition, advertising the work as a "highly interesting account of those sturdy non-conformists."<sup>110</sup> A few periodicals positively reviewed Muston's conclusions, asserting that, while steeped in mystery, the early Waldenses were "undoubtedly inheritors of the institutions of the primitive church. . . though at what time the divergence [with Rome] occurred it is impossible to say."<sup>111</sup> The Presbyterian Board of Publication in Philadelphia produced an 1853 paraphrase of Muston's narrative, and a new unabridged translation appeared in New York in 1857.<sup>112</sup>

On the whole, however, Americans were noticeably cautious in their engagement with Muston's conclusions. A brief notice in the *Princeton Review* simply stated that the book was "severe, dramatic, and terrible." The review in the *Evening Post* offered a more thoughtful engagement, praising Muston's command of the sources and his writing style. They also noted glaring imperfections, particularly, a lack of "judicial impartiality" and a "strong bias against the Roman Catholics."<sup>113</sup> By the end of the 1850s, many Waldensian-related publications were refuting outright the claim of pre-Waldo origins.<sup>114</sup> History books for children still mentioned Waldo and other

<sup>108</sup>Joseph Berg, *A Lecture: Delivered in the Musical Fund Hall. . . In Answer to Bishop Hughes on the Decline of Protestantism* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1850), 9–10. A similar hedging on Waldensian origins can be found in J.T. Headley, *History of the Persecutions and Battles of the Waldenses* (New York: John S. Taylor, 1850).

<sup>109</sup>Alexis Muston, *The Israel of the Alps: A History of the Persecutions of the Waldenses*, trans. William Hazlitt (London: Ingram, Cooke, & Co., 1852).

<sup>110</sup>"Notices of New Publications," *New York Daily Times*, November 10, 1852; compare with "Literary Miscellanies," *Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature* 27, no. 3 (November 1852): 429; "New English Books," *Albany Evening Journal*, October 26, 1852.

<sup>111</sup>"Notices of New Publications," *The Christian Review* 18, no. 71 (January 1, 1853): 151–152. See also the affirming of Muston (though with some criticisms) in "The Israel of the Alps," *International Monthly Magazine of Literature, Science and Art* 5, no. 1 (January 1, 1852): 128–130.

<sup>112</sup>*The Waldenses: Sketches of the Evangelical Christians of the Valleys of Piedmont* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1853); Alexis Muston, *The Israel of the Alps: A Complete History of the Waldenses of Piedmont, and their Colonies*, trans. John Montgomery (New York: Blackie and Son, 1857). For notices of these editions, see "New Publications," *New York Observer and Chronicle* 32, no. 1 (January 5, 1854): 3; "The Martyrs of the Alps," *New York Observer*, January 14, 1858; "Just Published," *The Independent* (New York), July 1, 1858.

<sup>113</sup>"Literary Intelligence," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 24, no. 4 (October 1852): 721; "New Publications," *Evening Post* (New York), October 11, 1852.

<sup>114</sup>"There is no reason to think that this interesting sect is older than Peter Waldo, who founded it about A.D. 1170. The pretence of a higher antiquity is sustained by no valid proof, and is refuted by the best contemporary evience. How this pretence probably arose Gieseler well explains." "Review of Punchard's *History of Congregationalism*," *New Englander* 25, no. 97 (October 1866): 239. See also, "The Waldenses in the Middle Ages," *Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church South* 7, no. 1 (January 1853): 139–140.



proto-Reformers, but made clear that the Waldenses were distinct from the more heretical groups like the Albigensians.<sup>115</sup> By 1859, J. P. Revel, the leader of the Waldensian Synod who visited America in 1853, defended the historic Waldensian church as founded by Waldo by separating them from the Manichean extremism of the other medieval sects.<sup>116</sup>

Though the Waldensian myth still lingered in corners of American Protestantism through the twentieth century (often appealing to Muston's research as the "definitive" word on the subject), the consensus view of a post-Waldo origin was established by 1870.<sup>117</sup> Emile Comba, a professor of theology at the Waldensian college in Florence, continued to lament the allure that the apostolic myth offered Protestants. The history of the Waldenses, once "disentangled from a confused mass of legends," was still "grand and venerable" without the presumption of apostolicity.<sup>118</sup>

## V. Conclusion

The rise and fall of apostolic Waldensianism in the Protestant press demonstrates a phenomenon that both Jenny Franchot and Jon Gjerde have perceived in antebellum Catholic-Protestant relations: the contradictory reactions of fascination with, and repulsion of, the "other." As Philip Schaff discerned, anti-Catholic historiography ironically adopted decidedly Catholic approaches to the church's past. Both sides asserted that Christianity—as founded by Christ and the apostles—never changed or developed. Compare the following quotes from Joseph Berg, ever the quintessential anti-Catholic, and Bossuet:

It is altogether a mistaken idea to suppose that religion and divine truth constitute a science which may be improved. The gospel system has long since developed its principles. Revelation is not a science which is progressive in character. It is complete and perfect. There are no correct views. . . which were not offered by the inspired teachings of God's book to our fathers before us. . . the truth, like its author, is the same yesterday—to-day and forever. Pure and undefiled religion is as unchanging as the holiness of God from whom it emanates.<sup>119</sup>

The Church's doctrine is always the same. . . . The Gospel is never different from what it was before. Hence, if at any time someone says the faith includes something which yesterday was not said to be of the faith, it is always *heterodoxy*. . .

<sup>115</sup>[J.H. Crosse], *Historical Tales for Young Protestants* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, [1857]); Catherine Beecher, *Religious Training of Children in the School, the Family and the Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1864), 80.

<sup>116</sup>JP Revel, "Baptism by Waldenses," 177.

<sup>117</sup>The most popular hits for a "waldenses" search on Amazon books leads to many modern reprints of Perrin and other advocates of their apostolicity. Indeed, some fundamentalist and certain strains of Evangelical Protestants still hold to the endurance of an apostolic Protestantism completely outside the influence of Roman Catholicism.

<sup>118</sup>Emilio Comba, *History of the Waldensians of Italy: From their Origin to the Reformation*, trans. Teofilo E. Comba (London: Truslove & Shirley, 1889), v–vi. Emilio Comba, *Waldo and the Waldensians Before the Reformation* (New York: Robert Carter, 1880).

<sup>119</sup>Joseph Berg, "A Sermon," *Weekly Messenger* 10, no. 10 (November 20, 1844): 1; quoted in Henry Bowden, *Church History in the Age of Science* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1971), 33.

There is no difficulty about recognizing false doctrine: . . . it is recognized at once, whenever it appears, merely because it is new.<sup>120</sup>

Apostolic Waldensianism was the perfect rhetorical weapon against Catholic opponents because it allowed Protestants to take on Catholic claims of historical and doctrinal uniformity, universality, and apostolicity for themselves. The pride of Catholicism became the glory of American Protestants. In the end, the logic of anti-Catholic historiography could not stand up to its own scrutiny. Since the sixteenth century, Protestants had labored to reveal the many innovations Catholic theology had adopted over the centuries. But the historiographical impulse to justify the existence of Protestant churches would cut both ways. Proto-Protestants were just as likely as popes and monks to espouse heresy. As nineteenth-century Catholics came to terms with this historiography in their debates over doctrinal development, a similar tension was building in American Protestantism.

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<sup>120</sup>Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Première Instruction Pastorale sur les promesses de l'Église* 28, *Oeuvres complètes de Bossuet* 22 (Besançon, 1815), 419; quoted in Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 17.

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