CHAPTER ONE

THE DAWN OF A SECT

My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways my ways.
Isaiah 55, 8

Birth

First and foremost, the historian must be capable of succumbing to astonishment. There is nothing so very banal or so self-evident about being astonished by the events of the past, for this presupposes not being fatalistic, not presuming that because a particular event happened, it necessarily had to be so. How did it happen? Why? Mulling over such questions, giving in to such curiosity, is the guiding principle of historical inquiry. It was not preordained that the Waldensians should appear. Later, nothing destined them to form what we call a dissent at the heart of Christianity, or to last so very long. For this first stage in our reflection, let us therefore ponder awhile on these first, hesitant, tentative beginnings, the possible repercussions of which no one then could have suspected, not even the instigator, in fact him least of all.

A Man called Vaudès

In the beginning, we find Vaudès. If it is quite usual to find one founding figure at the origin of a sect, what is striking in the case of the Waldensians is that the founder remains in the shadows, despite enquiry and research intended to bring him to light. Even his first name is unknown to us, for it was not until the 14th century that he is first referred to as “Peter”. Since the considerable vagueness surrounding the man dates back so far, doubtless he himself wished things this way. This can be understood better by turning to the source of the initial inspiration, which gave a first overall sense to the initiative. Everything began in Lyons in around 1170. A rich
inhabitant of the city on the river Rhône, a certain Valdès or Vaudès who may or may not have been a merchant, was struck by passages from the Gospels which spoke out in favour of poverty. The words of Christ are indeed powerful, and even today should prompt many a Christian to stop and think, and even to change their lifestyle. On the other hand, it is equally possible that having been interpreted and adapted for one thousand years, the Word of God was quite simply distorted beyond recognition. Whatever the case, Vaudès decided to apply Christ’s words to the letter. He commissioned translations into Franco-Provençal of certain books from the New Testament, became a beggar and began preaching and reading the Scriptures in the local tongue.

Before going any further, it is worth bearing in mind what this first Waldensian initiative really meant, for it proved both the well-head and the bedrock of the movement to come.¹ For years, specialists clashed swords trying to establish which came first, poverty or preaching. Some, doubtless the more conciliatory wing, tried to find a compromise suggesting both came together. My own belief is that Vaudès’ first step, which was later taken up by his disciples, was to return quite simply to the Word of God, which was heard and applied stricte sensu. I believe it was the contrast, and even the contradiction, between what the Gospels said and the way it was put into practice, by the clergy in particular, that triggered the reaction, used here in both senses of the term: a reply and a return to the past. This would imply that the basis of the “Waldensian protest” was, as was the case for Christianity innumerable times over the centuries, a form of “evangelism”.

It is a fact that most dissenting Christian movements justified their objections to and their protests against the Church of Rome by calling up the Scriptures, so as to stigmatise the deviations and distortions that had come about over the centuries, compared to the simple purity of the original message and the first community of believers, the ideal “primitive Church”. Thus, from the beginning, Vaudès and his adepts claimed that the Word should be applied to the letter.