

**Mihai-Bogdan Atanasiu • Anca-Diana Bibiri •
Emanuel Grosu • Alina Moroşanu •
Constantin Răchită**
(Editors)

CULTURAL DYNAMICS OF VALUES



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Scientific Reviewers:

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Language revision of texts in English:

Senior Researcher Anca-Diana Bibiri, PhD

Book editor:

Emanuel Grosu

Marius-Nicușor Grigore

Coverage: Manuela Oboroceanu

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700539 – Iași, Str. Munteni nr. 34, tel. (0232) 314947; editura@uaic.ro

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Mihai-Bogdan Atanasiu is a senior researcher, director of the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. He has a PhD in History, awarded in 2012 at the same university. His research activity focuses on the political, social and cultural history of Moldavia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most of his scholarly contributions have focused on social history, genealogy, prosopography, history of the Church, history of mentalities, as well as on editing documentary sources.

Anca-Diana Bibiri is a senior researcher at the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. She has a PhD in Philology, and a postdoctoral fellowship in linguistics from the same University, and her main areas of research are: prosody, phonetics and dialectology, computational linguistics, natural language processing, lexicography, and sociolinguistics. Co-editor of the PHSS Proceedings (2014-2019).

Emanuel Grosu is a senior researcher at the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. He has a PhD in Philology. He published studies, exegesis and translations from medieval Latin authors (Paulus Diaconus, Dungalus Reclusus, Anselm of Canterbury, Marcus of Regensburg, Marco Polo), the diachronic evolution of central literary themes and motifs of medieval Latin culture constituting the main research direction. Co-editor of the PHSS Proceedings (2014-2019).

Alina Moroșanu is a senior researcher at the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. She has a PhD in in Cybernetics and Economic Statistics, awarded in 2011 at the same university. Her research interest include: questionnaires development, healthcare management analytics, project management, statistical analysis, statistical software (R, SPSS), surveys, human resources analytics.

Constantin Răchită is a research assistant in the Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași. He has a PhD in Philology. His primary research focuses on the translation and interpretation of ancient texts in Old Greek and Latin. Throughout his career, he has participated in various translation and editing projects. Currently, his research interests encompass interdisciplinary approaches to biblical and patristic texts, exploring issues related to translation, transmission, and their influence on contemporary society.

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Conflicting Values during the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598): Loyalty to the King and Loyalty to God

ANDREI CONSTANTIN SĂLĂVĂSTRU*

Abstract: *The sixteenth-century Reformation presented the French elites and the French people with a terrible dilemma: as good subjects and good Christians, they were supposed to submit both to the earthly authority – following the injunction of Saint Paul in the epistle to the Romans and the Church. However, in the context of the troubles caused by the Reformation, that was no longer possible. Of course, the pre-Reformation period did not lack for moments when monarchs and popes came into conflict and the subjects had to make a choice: but such decisions were easier to make because the respective conflicts involved competing jurisdictions and not the religious dogma per se. It was not very difficult even for an excommunicated prince to reconcile with the pope who issued the excommunication – or, if not, then with his successor. The Reformation changed this situation: the Protestants identified the Catholic Church with a new Babylon and the pope with the Antichrist – and a Catholic monarch who persecuted them in the name of Catholicism had to be resisted as an enemy of God. For many Catholics, a king who did not try to suppress heresy and, worse, attempted to reach an accommodation with the heretics posed a similar problem of conscience. This paper attempts to analyse the disruptions in French society that arose from this conundrum and their outcome, from open rebellion to the development of a new political mindset that separated politics from religion.*

Keywords: *France; Wars of religion; Sixteenth century; Huguenots; Kingship; Catholics.*

Introduction

Before the Reformation, the political theory of Christian Europe insisted upon two fundamental duties, namely obedience to the monarch – whom

* Senior Researcher, PhD, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Institute of Interdisciplinary Research, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, Romania; andrei_salavastru@yahoo.com.

the Church consecrated – and obedience to God, which meant, first and foremost, conforming to the established religious dogma and accepting the authority of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, whose supreme head was the Roman pontiff. Of course, the harmony between these two obligations was not always perfect, and the Church never hesitated to remind the faithful of the statement of Saint Peter, that obedience to the will of God always came first. Until the sixteenth-century Reformation, though, these two essential values of a loyal Christian could cohabitate without too many difficulties, as this coexistence had never been fundamentally tested. True, there were many conflicts between the papacy and secular monarchs during the Middle Ages, but they were either jurisdictional, or were the result of the personal ambitions and susceptibilities of individual popes and princes: the fact that these conflicts had never involved issues of dogma (because the many heretical groups who questioned Catholic dogmas never gained sufficient traction amongst the higher classes of the society, but instead they always represented a minority, and had never managed to gain the formal adhesion of any sovereign ruler) made a reconciliation always possible, even in those cases when a pope excommunicated a recalcitrant monarch. Even when the quarrelling pope and monarch proved themselves intractable, the conflict could be solved by the natural disappearance of one of the sides, because the struggle was not confessional. In this context, a subject could choose a side without this option being regarded as irremediable.

The Protestant Reformation, though, radically changed this situation, because it questioned the very dogmas of Catholicism: for the Protestants, the pope became Antichrist, the Roman Church was the new Babylon, and essential aspects of Catholicism, such as the Roman Mass and the cult of the saints, were declared to be idolatrous. It became obvious that adherence to Protestantism meant a complete break with the Roman Catholic Church. For French Protestants, this situation created a dilemma whose resolution was extremely difficult: how could their faith be reconciled with a monarchy that not only remained Catholic but carried out a policy of active persecution? This question was raised from the very first years of the Reformation and both Luther and Calvin tended, initially, to answer by advising a behaviour similar to that of the first Christians versus the Roman authorities: because every legitimate authority had its origins in God, according to Saint Paul's assertion from his Epistle to the Romans, an armed rebellion was not allowed

and passive resistance, whose end was emigration to a realm more friendly towards the Reformation, was the only solution.

Under the pressure of events, though, both Luther and Calvin partially changed their opinions, accepting some armed resistance against persecuting tyrants, as long as this resistance could be legally justified. In several letters from 1530 and 1531, Luther admitted that resistance was legitimate if it was allowed by the laws of the Empire, a conclusion he had certainly reached at the behest of the German princes who had joined the Reformation and who could argue that the autonomy they enjoyed concerning the imperial authority allowed them to oppose it by force¹. Several decades later, in the context of a Huguenot conspiracy that aimed to remove the Guise family, who had taken control of France after the ascent of Francis II in 1559, from power, and consulted on its legality, Calvin asserted, in a letter addressed to Admiral Coligny, that any armed action was legitimate only if it was led by the princes of the blood and was approved by the kingdom's Parlements².

The Huguenot Dilemma: Loyalty or Rebellion?

Solving the problem of whether resistance could be permitted was essential for the Protestants because their Catholic enemies always used the accusation of rebellion to discredit the Reformed movement – and such an accusation was all the more plausible since there was, indeed, a seditious aspect in the Calvinist doctrine. After all, the Reformation was indeed a movement of revolt against the authorities of the Catholic Church, and in a society where ecclesiastical and governmental structures were linked so

¹ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought: The Age of the Reformation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2004, pp. 199-206.

² Hugues Daussy, *Le Parti huguenot: chronique d'une désillusion (1557-1572)*, Librairie Droz, Genève, 2015, pp. 134-136. Philip Benedict, on the other hand, argues that Calvin was much more supportive of the Huguenot conspiracy than he was willing to admit after the fact and that he distanced himself from it only because it failed. See Benedict, Philip, *Season of Conspiracy: Calvin, the French Reformed Churches, and Protestant Plotting in the Reign of Francis II (1559-60)*, American Philosophical Society Press, Philadelphia, 2020.

much as in sixteenth-century Europe, attacking the Church also meant attacking the secular authorities. For the sixteenth-century mindset, it was difficult to imagine how a subject could have a different faith than that of his sovereign, without being at the same time a rebel. Consequently, the main argument the Huguenots tried to build their relationship with the French monarchy (and which they tried to impose on a Catholic public opinion that was both hostile and sceptical) was that loyalty to the Crown and the person of the king did not depend upon adherence to Catholicism: someone could be a good subject of the king of France without necessarily being a Catholic.

When it came to open revolt, in 1562, as a result of the tensions between Catholics and Huguenots, the political elites of the French Protestants, first and foremost Prince Louis de Condé and Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, preferred to conceal the truth of the rebellion directed against the French monarchy: all the proclamations and justificative manifestos which they issued in the name of the Huguenot movement always asserted the idea that their actions were supportive of the royal authority, which, in their opinion, had been usurped by their Catholic adversaries. During the first religious war, in 1562-1563, this argument was, even, quite plausible, because the leadership of the war, on the Catholic side, had been assumed by the so-called Triumvirate, constituted by the most important Catholic nobles of the period: François de Guise, the constable Anne de Montmorency, and the Marshall of Saint-André. With a king, Charles IX, under age, only 12 years old, with a regent, Catherine de Medici, whose authority was insufficiently consolidated, Condé and Coligny could argue that the king and the queen-regent were, in fact, the prisoners of the „triumvirs”, because, at the beginning of the hostilities, François de Guise had taken physical control of the royal family, whom he brought from Fontainebleau into the ultra-Catholic Paris. For the Protestant leaders, another evidence in favour of this fact was that, during the previous year, 1561, a gradual decriminalization of Protestantism had occurred, the harsh repressive measures taken during the reign of Henry II having been cancelled. This policy had been inspired by no other than Catherine de Medici and had culminated in the colloquium of Poissy, from September 1561, where a Protestant delegation led by Theodore Beza had been invited for a theological debate, together with Catholic theologians, with the hope

that a confessional compromise could be reached. This colloquium had been a failure, due to the intransigence of both sides in matters of dogma, and, consequently, Catherine de Medici had to resign herself with the option of a political coexistence, which would ignore the confessional differences between Catholics and Protestants: this option materialized itself in the so-called Edict of Saint-Germain, from January 1562, which, for the first time, granted legal recognition to the Protestant faith. In these circumstances, Condé and his allies could claim that the Edict of Saint-Germain was inviolable and that, by breaking it, the radical Catholics were themselves in opposition to royal authority³.

However, if, in 1562, it had been easy to invoke this argument, for the reasons mentioned above, the situation became much more complicated for the Huguenots during the next two religious wars, between 1567 and 1570, because the circumstances had radically changed: Charles IX had been proclaimed of age in 1563, and the Catholic triumvirate that had led the military operations during the previous war had fallen apart due to demise of two of its members, François de Guise and the Marshall of Saint-André, killed during the war. Consequently, the Protestants could no longer invoke the argument that the king was the prisoner of some ill-intentioned advisers. The Protestant propaganda tried to find a solution to this problem, referring to a so-called „moral captivity” of the king, who, albeit theoretically free, was now misled by such evil advisers, first and foremost, by the members of the same Guise family and, in particular, by the Cardinal of Lorraine. The logic of the Huguenot argumentation, both in 1562 and now, was that their proclaimed goals, restoring peace and justice in France, were in accord with the wishes of the king – therefore, their actions could not be rebellious. According to traditional political theory, the harmonious relationship between the king and his subjects was the natural state of things and could be disrupted only if one side broke natural order. Because the Protestant justification that argued for the necessity of restoring order and justice could not be a breach of the natural order, the restoration of the

³ For a detailed analysis of the Huguenot propaganda during the first war of religion (1562-1563), see Andrei Constantin Sălăvăstru, „Calvinist Notions of Resistance and Huguenot Noble Propaganda: The Justificative Texts of Louis de Condé during the First War of Religion”, *Chrétiens et Sociétés XVI^e-XXI^e siècles* 29, 2022, pp. 165-194.

mutual trust between the king and his subjects was to be expected. The security of the Protestant community against possible Catholic persecution was, of course, a concern, but it was included in the general concern for the observation of the laws of the kingdom⁴.

This type of argument, which denied the reality of the Protestant rebellion, persisted until the end of the reign of Henry III: they can be found in the justification of Henry of Navarre, future Henry IV⁵, from 1585, when the Catholic pressures on the king to make him cancel (again) the concessions granted to the Protestants in the last peace agreement from 1580 determined the latter to take up arms again, thus triggering the last war from this series of conflicts, which would not end until 1598, with the Edict of Nantes. These arguments had some plausibility because what characterized the attitude of the monarchy during that period (and was a constant throughout the wars of religion) was ambiguity, both Charles IX and Henry III vacillated between a policy of war against the Huguenots and granting them rights in the hope of a long-lasting peace. However, even in this last case, if it had to accept the existence of a significant Protestant community in France and abandon the attempts to repress it, the monarchy kept reasserting its Catholicism, insisting that it had never recognized the existence of two religions in France and that all the edicts of pacification were temporary while waiting for a providential solution to restore the religious unity of the kingdom⁶. The Crown, even when it issued edicts favourable to the Protestants, had never formally repudiated the obligation to repress heresy, but only acknowledged the impossibility of carrying out this policy without causing irreparable harm to the kingdom. This lack of enthusiasm of the monarchy for the policy of pacification was one of the

⁴ Andrei Constantin Sălăvăstru, „The Justificative Discourse of Louis de Condé during the Second and Third Wars of Religion (1567-1568)”, *Argumentum: Journal of the Seminar of Discursive Logic, Argumentation Theory & Rhetoric*, 20 (1), 2022, pp. 33-58.

⁵ Idem, „Righteous Rebels: The Language of Peace and Justice in the Aristocratic Propaganda during the French Wars of Religion”, in *Power, Aristocracies and Propaganda: Forms of Legitimizing and Challenging Rulership in France and Moldavia (16th - 17th Centuries)*, Hartung Gorre Publishers, Konstanz, 2023, pp. 28-34.

⁶ Denis Crouzet, *Dieu en ses royaumes: une histoire des guerres de religion*, Seyssel Champ Vallon, 2008, p. 350. Lloyd, Howell A., *The State, France and the Sixteenth Century*, George Allen & Unwin, London and Boston, 1983, p. 78.

causes of its failure because it created a mood of mutual suspicion between the Protestants and the Crown. However, for a significant part of the Protestants there was no alternative but to attempt to maintain this fiction – namely, that the Huguenot rebellion was not aimed at the king himself. In their opinion, the restoration of the relationship between the king and his Huguenot subjects was always a possibility, and all the proclamations of the Huguenots included appeals to the king to follow this path.

If this solution was the one embraced by the political leadership of the French Protestant movement, an alternative path developed simultaneously, much more radical, which culminated after the massacre of Saint Bartholomew in the proclamation of a right to openly assume rebellion against a king turned tyrant. These trends emerged even during the 1560s: thus, in 1563, a tract called *The Civil and Military Defence of the Innocents of the Church of Christ* appeared at Lyon, arguing for a right to armed resistance⁷. However, the mood within the Protestant movement had not yet become so radicalized for such opinions to be openly embraced, the respective tract being banned by the Protestant governor of Lyon, the prince of Soubise⁸. After 1567, the attempts to criticize the monarchy directly became more numerous: two tracts called *Discours par dialogue sur l'édit de la révocation de la paix* and *Question politique: s'il est licite aux subjects de capituler avec leur prince* put forward the idea of a mutual contract between the king and the people, by which the obedience of the latter was conditioned by the quality of the governance⁹. This contractual nature of the monarchy also implied a division of sovereignty, between the king, the Estates General, the Parlements and a council of peers. These theories gained maximum traction after Saint Bartholomew because the Protestants regarded this event as a breach of the fairness that subjects were entitled to expect from a just monarchy. The outcome was that in the circumstances where the aristocratic leadership of the Huguenots had been decimated, with Coligny killed during the massacre

⁷ John Hearsay MacMillan Salmon, *Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century*, Ernest Benn, London and Tonbridge, 1975, p. 181.

⁸ Arlette Jouanna, *La France du XVI^e siècle 1483-1598*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2009, p. 410.

⁹ John Hearsay MacMillan Salmon, *Society in Crisis...*, ed. cit., p. 181; Arlette Jouanna, *La Saint-Barthélemy. Les mystères d'un crime d'État*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007, p. 332; Arlette Jouanna, *La France du XVI^e siècle...*, ed. cit., pp. 453-454.

and Henry of Navarre and Condé kept prisoners at Court, the more radical elements, recruited especially from the ranks of the university intellectuals, of the pastors and of the low aristocracy, gained, at least for a while, a free hand: they abandoned the traditional deference towards the monarchy and, in turn, they pushed forward arguments in favour of open resistance against the monarchs turned tyrants and in favour of a proto-constitutionalism where the monarch yielded his most important attributes to representative institutions such as the Estates General. Practically, what happened during the 1570s was that the idea of a limited monarchy moved from the periphery of Huguenot political thought towards its centre stage. These theories, developed in several political texts published between 1573 and 1579, like *Francogallia*, *Du Droits de magistrat*, *Vindiciae contra tyrannos*, or *Le Reveille-Matin des françois*, and others with lesser impact, argued in favour of resistance against the abusive actions of kings, developed even a constitutional mechanism for the dethronement of an incorrigible tyrant, through the Estates General, but, at the same time, they refused to embrace the option of tyrannicide. To create a viable political mechanism, which could function in practice, the Huguenot monarchomachs devised thus an aristocratic system, where the so-called „inferior magistrates” possessed extensive powers at a local level and a right of consultation and even control over the sovereign: consequently, only they were entitled to exercise that right of resistance against tyranny, which was denied to private individuals¹⁰.

These theories were abandoned during the 1580s, for two reasons: first, out of simple political opportunism, because Henry de Navarre became heir to the throne of France in 1584 and the Huguenots could see the possibility of gaining the support of the monarchy opening up before them, if Navarre managed to make use of his dynastic rights. Second, because of the return of the two princes of the blood, Henry de Navarre and Henri de Condé, to the leadership of the Huguenot movement, as they had managed to escape from their captivity at the court of France in 1574 and 1576, respectively, and gradually extended their political influence over their coreligionists. If there was a full agreement over the fact that resistance had

¹⁰ For a thorough analysis of the monarchomach literature, see Paul-Alexis Mellet, *Les Traités monarchomaques: confusion des temps, résistance armée et monarchie parfaite (1560-1600)*, Librairie Droz, Genève, 2007.

to meet certain legal standards, however, there was no such agreement over what these standards were: the Monarchomachs determined the lawfulness of resistance independently of the king's position, according to natural and divine law. From their point of view, the king was only a piece in the constitutional structure of the kingdom and, consequently, could be depicted as the main antagonist in their resistance theories. But this was a step which the princes of the blood who were at the head of the Huguenot movement were not prepared to take: at no single point did they ever admit that they were in rebellion against the king of France. Louis de Condé during the 1560s, Henry of Navarre and Henry de Condé at the end of the 1570s and during the 1580s, chose to operate ideologically within a political structure that had the king at its apex and where the king was the primary source of legitimacy. Calvin and Beza at the beginning of the 1560s and the Monarchomachs during the 1570s could regard the Huguenot rebellions as a defiance addressed to the monarchy in the name of God and in the name of the religion which the Crown persecuted, but for the two Condés and Henry de Navarre, these rebellions were, first and foremost, a way to re-establish a privileged relationship with the monarchy, relationship that had been disrupted by external factors, and religious concerns, without being absent, were only an aspect of their demands.

The Radical Catholic Option: The Request for Persecution

Just like the Huguenots, the French Catholics were confronted during this period with similar problems of conscience, namely if they could remain loyal to a monarchy that no longer corresponded to their religious hopes. The king of France continued to be a Catholic, but, for a significant part of the Catholic population, that was not enough, if it was not accompanied by active persecution of heresy. For a short while, in 1561, most Catholics were near panic, because the way the royal family seemed to indulge the Protestants during that period might have even hinted at a possible conversion to the Reformation. At least, that was the hope of the Protestants and the volte-face of the royal government, which went from intending, two years before, to wage total war on heresy to turning a blind eye to Protestant worship, could have certainly made the more pessimistic Catholics fear the worst. Such fears were unfounded – Catherine de Medici

had no intention to convert to the Reformation, but the mere fact that she seemed to accept the idea of tolerating heresy for the sake of peace was still regarded as unacceptable by many Catholics. After 1561, popular preachers waged an intensive propaganda campaign against the edicts of pacification favourable to the Huguenots, stoking the hatred of the population against the „heretics” and constantly warning the king, Charles IX, and the queen-mother against their policy, with hints at the punishment which God might mete out to those, royals or subjects alike, who failed to obey divine commands¹¹. At the same time, these preachers also engaged in refuting the Huguenots’ professions of loyalty, reiterating the accusations that the „heretics” were seditious by definition: a king who would tolerate them in his realm would destroy his own rule, due to God’s inevitable punishment and because the Huguenots would actively undermine it. Both the Huguenot iconoclasm (although discouraged by the political and religious leadership of the movement) and those resistance tracts which appeared during the 1560s reinforced these opinions. For the radical Catholics, the Huguenots disrupted the traditional order of the society and, worse, „corrupted the kingdom which risked to draw God’s ire”, therefore, any peace agreement was a disgrace and the policy of amnesty involved in such agreements was a „betrayal of the faith”¹². Many Catholics would not limit themselves to criticism: anticipating the developments from the late 1570s and the 1580s, and without rebelling openly against the king, they would form „leagues” for the ostensible purpose of defending the Catholic faith. However, there was an ominous caveat: they would submit to the king only as long as he still professed the Catholic faith¹³. While the kings of France, be it Charles IX or Henry III, remained devout Catholics, this stipulation undermined the loyalty owed by their Catholic subjects, because it would not have been hard for a monarch who failed to repress heresy to be himself equated with a heretic. There were such precedents in the history of the Catholic Church where the so-called „favourers of heresy” were treated as

¹¹ Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1991, pp. 145-158.

¹² Arlette Jouanna, *La Saint-Barthélemy...*, ed. cit., pp. 34-36.

¹³ Idem, *La France du XVI^e siècle...*, ed. cit., pp. 385-386. Denise Turrel, *Le Blanc de France: la construction des signes identitaires pendant les guerres de Religion (1562-1629)*, Librairie Droz, Genève, 2005, p. 139.

harshly as any heretic and their subjects were released from their duty of obedience by the pope. The radical Catholic propaganda made frequent references to the Albigensian crusade of the thirteenth century, the Huguenots being equated with the ancient Cathars¹⁴. However, this comparison was a double-edged sword: it could be used to flatter the king by comparing him with his crusading ancestors and to urge him to wage war against the Huguenots but could have also been a reminder of the fate of the Counts of Toulouse, deprived by the pope of their lands because of their lack of interest in destroying their Cathar subjects.

The massacre from the night of Saint Bartholomew seemed, for a moment, to give satisfaction to these radicals: the decision taken by the king and his council likely aimed to eliminate only the Huguenot leadership, but the government of Charles IX did not take into account the religious fervour and the anti-Protestant feelings of the Paris population, constantly fuelled by the popular preachers already mentioned. This hatred towards the Huguenots practically exploded on 23-24 August 1572, when the king's order to kill the leaders of the Huguenot faction was interpreted as a signal for a general slaughter of all the Protestants who were in Paris at that time – slaughter which spread out during the next days in the other French provinces as well. "It is the king's command" was the word in the streets of Paris on 24 August 1572 and, for a population frustrated by the previous policy of agreements with the Huguenots, it seemed that their prayers were answered. According to Denis Crouzet, the royal decision to launch the massacre was a reaction to the desacralization of the monarchy in the context of the civil wars and due to the revolutionary potential of the Reformation¹⁵. Jean-Louis Bourgeon, on the other hand, argues that Charles IX was pushed into agreeing with the massacre by popular pressure and the Guise family, supported by Spain and the papacy¹⁶. Whatever the reasons, though, for a brief moment in August 1572, an apparent convergence between the Crown and the Catholic supporters of war seemed to have

¹⁴ Luc Racaut, *Hatred in Print: Catholic Propaganda and Protestant Identity during the French Wars of Religion*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002, pp. 99-114.

¹⁵ Denis Crouzet, *Les Guerriers de Dieu: la violence au temps des troubles de religion vers 1525 – vers 1610*, Champ Vallon, Seyssel, 1990, vol. 2, pp. 15-62.

¹⁶ Jean-Louis Bourgeon, *Charles IX devant la Saint-Barthélemy*, Librairie Droz, Genève, 1995, pp. 27-184.

been reached: these fanatical Catholics could see, thus, the king obeying God's dictates to fight against heresy and, in turn, they could also submit to the king without any qualms about being at odds with their religious beliefs.

The enthusiasm of the extremists was quickly followed by disillusion, especially since the massacre had the opposite effect of what they hoped for: instead of becoming the first step towards the total extermination of heresy in France, it managed to push several Catholics, out of disgust at what had happened, to side with the Huguenots. Many of these Catholics were nobles motivated by aristocratic solidarity with the Huguenot victims who also belonged to the nobility. Arlette Jouanna identifies a „crisis of confidence” between parts of the nobility and the Crown, up to the point that some suspected that the king intended to exterminate the great noble lineages¹⁷. This Catholic nobility remained known in history as „les Malcontents”, their most prominent members being the king's brother, François d'Alençon, and the Montmorency brothers, especially François and Henry, and allied itself with the Huguenots from 1574 onwards. „Les Malcontents” did not share the monarchomachs' radicalism and were more in tune with Condé's views from the 1560s, seeking a sort of limited monarchy, where power was divided between the king, an aristocratic council and the Estates General. This coalition became so threatening that, in 1576, managed to wrest from Henry III the edict (known as „edict of Beaulieu”) most favourable to the Huguenots in the entire history of the wars of religion. The consequence was that the radical part of the French Catholics started to have more and more doubts about the monarchy's commitment to Catholicism. The opposition to the edict of Beaulieu was immediate, taking the form of new Catholic leagues whose main goal was to prevent the execution of the edict: although they would give birth to the future Holy League (or „Sainte Union”), in 1576, according to Mack Holt, „the League was just a loose confederation of local associations”¹⁸. However, this opposition was still strong enough to determine the cancellation of the Edict of Beaulieu at the

¹⁷ Arlette Jouanna, *Le Devoir de révolte: la noblesse française et la gestation de l'État moderne (1559-1561)*, Fayard, Paris, 1989, pp. 154-161.

¹⁸ Mack P. Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Politique Struggle during the Wars of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and London, 2002, p. 72.

subsequent Estates General from Blois (November 1576 - February 1577): the Estates, dominated by Catholics, decided in favour of maintaining religious uniformity, although a minority opposed the idea of enforcing this decision by restarting the war against the Huguenots. Although the Catholic League was not yet ready to openly rebel against the king, its mere existence was a challenge to the royal authority, something that Henry III understood very well. During the Estates, partisans of the League argued, even in printed documents, passed amongst the delegates, that the monarchy had become „too weak to defend the Catholic faith” and that „it needed the assistance of its natural defenders (the nobility) who must swear an oath to restore it, if necessary with their lives”: these nobles would normally obey the king’s „provincial governors and lieutenants”, but they could remove them „if they proved complicit with the king’s enemies”¹⁹. Even though formal deference was still shown to the king, the encroachment upon the royal authority in the name of the superior religious obligations was unmistakable. This would be the tenor of the radical Catholics’ relationship with Henry III during the next eleven years: as pointed out by Frederic Baumgartner, „the greater part of the League before 1589 was conservative, monarchist and even reactionary, unable to accept changes in the Church or the state”, seeing themselves as defending the monarchy and the traditional social structures against the Huguenots²⁰.

The events started to precipitate in 1584, when the brother of Henry III, François, the last Valois heir, died and left the king without a direct successor: the next in line would have been Henry de Navarre, but the thought of a Huguenot on the throne was unbearable for a large part of the Catholic population. As a result, the Catholic League, which had languished inactive for several years, came back to life with a vengeance, with two separate poles of power being formed: an aristocratic one, led by the Guise family, and a bourgeois one, centred in Paris, the so-called “Seize”. They cooperated to pursue their common goal, preventing Henry de Navarre’s ascension to the throne of France, and both sought and received the support of Spain. As pointed out by Sophie Nicholls, the League „determined the

¹⁹ Mark Greengrass, *Governing Passions: Peace and Reform in the French Kingdom, 1576-1585*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2007, pp. 85-86.

²⁰ Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Radical Reactionaries: The Political Thought of the French Catholic League*, Librairie Droz, Genève, 1975, pp. 79-81.

«ancient» Catholic religion of France to be the strongest bond of the commonwealth, binding subject to the monarch in a contractual relationship of mutual obligation”²¹. This conception also shaped their attitudes towards Spain and towards the possibility of accepting, after 1590, a foreign prince as king of France, because the implication was that a Catholic could not be considered a true foreigner by another Catholic community²². In 1585, the League took up arms and managed to force upon the weakened Henry III the edict of Nemours, which cancelled all the previous concessions to the Huguenots, thus pushing them into a new rebellion and triggering the final and the longest war of this troubled period. While Frederic Baumgartner argues that, at least until December 1588, the League continued to advocate legal or quasi-legal means to achieve their ends²³, there were elements within the organization willing to go further: there were several plots in 1587 and 1588 to seize the king and the Sorbonne passed on 16 December 1587 a secret resolution that „government should be removed from princes who do not act correctly”²⁴.

The repeated attempts from the Catholic League to pressure and even to put Henry III under their tutelage culminated in the Paris Rebellion on 12 May 1588, which forced the king to flee his capital. Unable to resist the Catholic League, Henry III was forced to sign a new anti-Huguenot edict, the so-called „Edict of Union”, in July 1588. To solve the crisis, Henry III summoned the Estates General at Blois in October 1588 – but the outcome was an assembly dominated by the Catholic League, on the brink of turning the king into a mere puppet of the League. Henry III’s answer was to assassinate the leaders of the League, Henry de Guise and his brother, the Cardinal de Guise. The League’s reaction to this event was a general uprising against the king: from its perspective, the masks had fallen²⁵ and the formal deference that the League showed Henry III until

²¹ Sophie Nicholls, *Political Thought in the French Wars of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge and New York, 2021, p. 18.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 185-198.

²³ Frederic J. Baumgartner, *Radical Reactionaries...*, ed. cit., pp. 99-100.

²⁴ Nicole M. Sutherland, *Henry IV of France and the Politics of Religion, 1572-1596*, Elm Bank, Bristol and Portland, 2002, pp. 171-179.

²⁵ The League propaganda insisted in particular on the deceitful nature of Henry III, whose Catholic piety was therefore declared a sham. See David A. Bell,

then was no longer necessary. For the Catholics who had placed all their hopes in Henry de Guise, whom they regarded as the potential leader of a crusade against the Huguenots, Henry III had proven himself a bloody tyrant and, at the same time, because he had murdered a cardinal, the king also became *ipso facto* excommunicated. The Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris proclaimed the king's deposition on 7 January 1589: consequently, Henry III became only Henry de Valois, not a king, but a new Herod or Nero²⁶. Because he had proven himself an enemy of the Catholic faith, observing the oath to Henry III became impossible, as it was in contradiction with the obedience owed to God. What followed was a demonization of Henry III by the League's propaganda without precedent in the history of France, which, unlike even the most radical Huguenot texts, included allusions to regicide – a desirable goal from the perspective of the League. Nicolas Le Roux argues that „actual calls for the murder of Henry III were rather rare, because, for several Catholics, it was up to God to punish the evil king” and the legitimacy of the regicide was not openly proclaimed by the authorities of the League until after it happened²⁷. However, the propaganda of the league was creating an atmosphere favourable to such an action: by depicting the king as a demonic being, a tool of Satan and an enemy of the Church, it was tacitly pushing would-be assassins to attempt the king's life²⁸. In Paris in the year 1589, there had already occurred symbolic acts of regicide, where representations of Henry III and objects associated with him were ritually destroyed: in the words of

“Unmasking a King: The Political Uses of Popular Literature under the French Catholic League, 1588-89”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 20 (3), 1989, pp. 371-386.

²⁶ For an analysis of the League's references to Henry III as a new Herod, see Andrei Constantin Sălăvăstru, “From Ahab to ‘Vilain Herodes’: Biblical Models of Evil Kings in Catholic Anti-Royalist Propaganda during Charles IX (1560-1574) and Henry III (1574-1589)”, *Religions* 14, 344, 2023.

²⁷ Nicolas Le Roux, *Un Régicide au nom de Dieu: l'assassinat d'Henri III, 1^{er} août 1589*, Gallimard, Paris, 2006, pp. 98-99, 175-177, 255-257, 303-315.

²⁸ For an analysis of the issue of tyrannicide in the propaganda of the Wars of Religion, see Andrei Constantin Sălăvăstru, “The Problem of Tyrannicide in the Monarchomach and Leaguer Political Discourse During the Reigns of Charles IX (1560-1574) and Henry III (1574-1589)”, *Meta: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 14 (2), 2022, pp. 638-664.

Nicolas Le Roux, the false Christ-king was thus rejected and Paris, as a kind of chosen city, was placing itself under the protection of Christ Himself²⁹. The actual regicide occurred on 1 August 1589, which clarified for a while the situation of the League, because it no longer had to fight against a king whose legitimacy had been unquestionable, like Henry III: for the League, his successor, Henry IV, was nothing but an usurper and an intruder, all the more since, unlike Henry III, who had not been formally excommunicated by the pope, there was such a sentence of excommunication against Henry IV, issued in 1585 by Pope Sixt V. Henry IV's dynastic legitimacy was clear, but he lacked the traditional sacrality granted to the kings of France by anointment and coronation. For the Catholic League, choosing between loyalty to the king and loyalty to their faith was, therefore, no longer an issue.

Conclusions

Amongst the ranks of the French Catholic population, some did not accept the vision of the League on the relationship between the king and his Catholic subjects, or the obligation of a war of extermination against heresy. Instead, they focused on the option of political and civil unity, instead of religious unity, as a way of preventing the kingdom from disintegrating. A strong monarchy was the only one capable of imposing and preserving this unity, thus fulfilling the ideal voiced during the 1560s by Michel de l'Hôpital and other like-minded persons. The relationship between the Catholic king and his subjects had to be placed on a completely new basis – somehow prefiguring the seventeenth-century concept of „reason of state”, which would not take into account the religious policy. The popular radicalism of the League, which seemed to disrupt the established hierarchies these politically traditionalist Catholics held dear, pushed them away from it, the religious fervour displayed by the League failing to compensate, in the opinion of the moderate Catholics, the social danger it posed. In the opinion of the moderates, a right to renege on the oath of loyalty to Henry III, as the University of Paris proclaimed in January 1589 after it heard the news of the death of the leaders of the League, did not exist, and a right to tyrannicide, even less. The assassination of Henry III on 1 August 1589, the summary

²⁹ Nicolas Le Roux, *Un Régicide au nom de Dieu...*, ed. cit., p. 161.

execution of some members of the Parlement of Paris suspected of treason by the League extremists, in November 1591, and their project to offer the Crown of France to the daughter of Philip II were just as many reasons for the Catholic moderates to join Henry IV or, at least, to refuse to join the League. This attitude allowed many of them to find a common ground with the Huguenots supporting Henry IV and this alliance made the defeat of the League possible, especially since Henry's conversion to Catholicism in 1593 and, more than that, his absolution by the pope two years later, annihilated the main rhetorical weapon of the League. Henry IV could not be asked to persecute his former coreligionists, especially since the harmful futility of this policy had been amply demonstrated; at the same time, the cancellation of his excommunication by Pope Clement VIII in 1595 made the perpetuation of the Catholic League's vision of the conflict, as a struggle between the Catholic faith and heresy, impossible.

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