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The European Wars of Religion

An Interdisciplinary Reassessment
of Sources, Interpretations, and Myths

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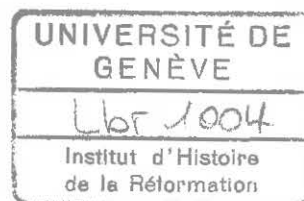
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Chapter 3

Were the French Wars of Religion Really Wars of Religion?¹

Philip Benedict

Even to ask the question posed in the title of this essay might seem unnecessary, since no other conflict in late medieval or early modern history includes the phrase 'wars of religion' in the label conventionally affixed to it. In fact, however, historians from the sixteenth century to the present day have debated whether the civil wars that roiled France from c.1560 to 1598 arose primarily from religious differences or aristocratic ambition. Consider these two quotations from the years 1579–81, the first from a Catholic historian and the second from a Protestant:

Those who have considered things closely have known that neither religion alone nor the oppression of the Protestants caused the kingdom's troubles, but also the hatreds that existed among the great nobles because of their ambitions and rivalries.²

Those who, in speaking generally of the true sources of the strange tumults that our fathers began but have not yet finished, attribute the source only to the difference in religion, are immediately contradicted by those most clairvoyant in affairs of state, who find only human passions. ... For my part I will suspend judgment on these questions.³

These quotations show clearly that by 1580 historians already felt compelled to address the question of the relative importance of religious and political causes, even if they believed, as did the author of the second quotation, the Protestant La Popelinière, that 'human and divine passions follow so closely and intermix so

¹ The author would like to thank Barbara Diefendorf and Mark Greengrass for helpful comments on an earlier, very different version of this essay and Harriet Rudolph for her editorial suggestions about this version.

² François de Belleforest, *Les grandes annales et histoire générale de France* (Paris, 1579), vol. 2, fo. 1617v.

³ Lancelot Voisin de La Popelinière, *Histoire de France* ([La Rochelle], 1581), vol. 1, p. 286.

often that even the best informed can scarcely say which is the cause.⁴ Historians today are more likely to speak of religious, political or social 'factors' than of 'human and divine passions', but the same basic question still engages them.

That the broad terms of debate for understanding a past event should already have been set at the time of the event itself is a common phenomenon. Historians have similarly argued about the role of the Enlightenment in causing the French Revolution and about the importance of slavery in the American Civil War ever since those events took place. That late sixteenth-century Frenchmen disagreed about the importance of religion in sparking their troubles nonetheless deserves to be stressed, for William T. Cavanaugh's stimulating but misguided recent contribution to this centuries old debate has claimed that it is both anachronistic and erroneous to categorize the violence that shook sixteenth-century France as religiously motivated, since the very idea of religion in its modern sense as an organized set of practices and beliefs distinguishable from the secular realm was not yet well formed.⁵

When a scholar who is not a specialist in the history of sixteenth-century France can construct and gain wide hearing for an argument that is so plainly contradicted by contemporary texts, it is an indication that those who are specialists in the period have inadequately explored the subject. That is what the first part of this essay will attempt to do. Examining how people at the time understood the troubles they lived through, the paper will show that contemporaries could and did distinguish between religious and non-religious matters. Both powerful political considerations and the very way in which contemporaries understood the word religion led some to downplay its centrality to the conflicts. Others insisted upon its importance and spoke of the conflicts as 'wars of religion', if not usually in those precise three words.

The essay will then go on to sketch quickly the broad contours of interpretation of the civil wars from 1600 to the past generation, when the general trend has been to 'put religion back into the Wars of Religion'.⁶ After outlining why this approach has gained the upper hand among historians from different countries, part two will ask how the question posed in the title of this essay may best be answered today. The goal here will be to specify just how and how fully religion sparked and prolonged violence in later sixteenth-century France, and in what senses the term 'wars of religion' can usefully be applied to this period.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford, 2009), esp. pp. 159–60.

⁶ Mack P. Holt, 'Putting Religion back into the Wars of Religion', *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 524–51.

Contemporary Perceptions and Conceptions

Although some recent historians extend accounts of the Wars of Religion to a further cycle of uprisings and conflicts during the 1620s, attention will be focused here on the civil wars that followed one another in close succession during the last four decades of the sixteenth century.⁷ Isolated incidents of disorder began shortly after growing numbers of those already drawn to evangelical or Protestant ideas withdrew from 1555 onward from the Church of Rome to join illegal, newly founded Reformed churches whose establishment was in significant measure directed from Geneva. Eight months after the sudden death of King Henry II in a jousting accident, royal authority was badly shaken in early 1560 in an episode known as the conspiracy of Amboise, when armed conspirators tried to separate the young king Francis II from his most trusted councillors, the cardinal of Lorraine and the Duke of Guise, and to kill the latter or bring them to trial. Around the same time, armed bands of Protestants and Catholics began to clash in several portions of southeastern France. In January 1562, the crown sought to calm matters by granting the Reformed full freedom of worship, but this provoked a hostile reaction from many leading Catholics, most notably the first prince of the blood Anthony of Navarre, who had previously inclined toward Protestantism. New episodes of anti-Protestant violence and the return to court in force of the leading Catholic noblemen convinced the Huguenots that they had to take up arms to protect themselves and to defend their newly-granted rights. So began the first of eight formally declared civil wars over the subsequent 36 years. For the first two thirds of this period, the most fundamental issue at stake was always that of the extent of freedom of worship extended to the Reformed, a question regularly linked to that of whose advice the crown would follow. Following the death of the last of the king's brothers and the consequent emergence of the Protestant Henry of Navarre as the heir apparent in 1584, struggle focused on whether or not a Protestant – or, after Henry's conversion in 1593, an ex-Protestant who had already relapsed once after a prior conversion to Catholicism – could be allowed to succeed to the throne. The intermittent periods of nominal peace and toleration between these eight civil wars were also troubled by episodes of crowd violence and massacre, the largest and most notorious of which was the Saint Bartholomew's massacre of 1572.

The claim that it is anachronistic to attribute sixteenth-century conflicts to religious as opposed to secular motives derives largely from a line of argument

⁷ Histories that adopt the longer chronology include Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (Cambridge, 1995) and Nicolas Le Roux, *Les guerres de religion, 1559–1629* (Paris, 2010). Other up-to-date syntheses are Olivia Carpi, *Les Guerres de Religion (1559–1598): Un conflit franco-français* (Paris, 2012) and the especially outstanding Arlette Jouanna, et al., *Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion* (Paris, 1998).

initiated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith in his important book of 1962, *The Meaning and End of Religion*.⁸ Cantwell Smith highlighted the difficulty of arriving at an adequate definition of religion that can be deployed as a fixed category across cultures and epochs by tracing the changing meanings of the word in the West. He showed that, after initially connoting something akin to 'worship' or 'true piety' in ancient Rome, *religio* became largely synonymous with clerical status or a way of life bound by monastic vows for the better part of the Middle Ages. The ancient connotation was also recovered with the Renaissance, while between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries the word additionally took on haltingly what we now consider its basic meaning, designating a system of beliefs and rituals concerning the divine. A generation after Cantwell Smith, Foucauldian and post-colonial anthropologists and religious studies scholars globalized and radicalized his insight by suggesting that the application of the word in this last sense to non-Western belief systems or practices only came in the wake of colonial expansion, extending a Western concept to an alien reality that it often fit awkwardly. Only with the Enlightenment did the dichotomy between religious matters and a secular sphere come to be firmly established.⁹

French sources of the mid-sixteenth century reveal, however, that the word 'religion' was used to designate the two rival ecclesiastical communities that formed within the kingdom as soon as dissident evangelicals began to withdraw from the Church of Rome to hold their own assemblies. The documents are full of talk of 'ceux de la nouvelle religion', of the presence of 'deux religions' in the country, and of 'seditions qui semblent nous menacer pour le fait de la religion'.¹⁰ The word 'religion' retained other connotations as well. Many people continued to have difficulty entertaining the notion that more than one religion could have adherents who believed it out of sincere conviction rather than wilful ignorance

⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York, 1962).

⁹ Important expressions of this view include Talal Asad, 'The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category' in his *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge and Ideology* (Baltimore, 2003); and Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity. A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (Oxford, 2007). Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation* (Chicago, 2010), offers a cogent critique.

¹⁰ For just some appearances: Loris Petris, *La plume et la tribune: Michel de L'Hospital et ses discours (1559-1562)* (Geneva, 2002), pp. 361, 397-403, 433-9; 'L'édit de Nantes et ses antécédents (1562-1598)': <http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/editsdepacification> (accessed 16 April 2014), *passim*; 'Exhortation aux princes et seigneurs du Conseil privé du Roy pour obvier aux seditions qui semblent nous menacer pour le fait de la religion' in *Mémoires de Condé* (London, 1743), vol. 1, p. 892; Étienne Pasquier, *Lettres historiques pour les années 1556-1594*, (ed.) D. Thickett (Geneva, 1966), p. 78; Jean Philippi, 'Histoire des troubles de Languedoc' in Louise Guiraud (ed.), *La Réforme à Montpellier: Preuves* (Montpellier, 1918), p. 57.

or base passion. That there were multiple sets of beliefs and practices called religions was nonetheless most definitely an idea in common currency by 1560.

Furthermore, contemporaries could and did distinguish between religious and other motives or concerns in two ways. The first is suggested in the quotation from La Popelinière in the first paragraph of this essay, where the historian structures his reflections about the causes of the conflicts around the dichotomy between religion and the human passions. This connects to the continuing strength within the vocabulary of the time of the connotation of 'religion' as 'true piety'. Learned sixteenth-century men and women generally believed that knowledge of the divine was engraved at least faintly in every person's conscience, where the divine passions warred with the baser, human ones. Given that knowledge of true piety was inscribed within each person's heart, whenever a person embraced false or heretical beliefs, he or she was clearly not heeding religion's call, but had succumbed to the pull of some base passion. La Popelinière was exceptional among the late sixteenth-century historians of France's civil wars in that, even though he himself was a Protestant, he sought to write impartially 'as the good historiographer should'.¹¹ His refusal to pick apart the divine and the human in the motives of the different actors was a function of this quest for impartiality. The great majority of more partisan authors consistently refused to accept that those on the other side acted out of religious motives. Instead, so the diagnosis always ran, they acted 'under the cloak of religion' moved by ambition, greed, or lust. Only within one's own party was true religious motivation ever to be found. Even there partisans of the cause had to work actively to hold their baser passions in check to ensure the primacy of true piety and move God to reward the cause with victory. Hence, the oath of association for those rallying to the banner of the Protestant Prince of Condé in 1562 required all to swear, 'we bring no private passions to this alliance and are concerned only with the honour of God, deliverance of the king, conservation of the royal edicts and ordinances, and punishment of those who disobey them'.¹² The war that was supposed to be raging within each human breast between true religion or the love of God and private or base passions, together with the concomitant refusal of most belligerents to accept the religious *bona fides* of the

¹¹ 'La Popelinière to Theodore Beza, La Rochelle?, 15 January 1581' in Henri Meylan, Alain Dufour, et al. (eds), *Correspondance de Théodore de Bèze* (Geneva, 1960–), vol. 22, p. 19. See also George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History* (Urbana, 1970), ch. 8; G. W. Sypher, 'La Popelinière's "Histoire de France": A Case of Historical Objectivity and Religious Censorship', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24 (1963): 41–54; Kevin Robbins, 'Rewriting Protestant History: Printing, Censorship by Pastors, and the Dimensions of Dissent among the Huguenots – the La Popelinière Case at La Rochelle, 1581–85' in A. Pettegree, et al. (eds), *The Sixteenth Century French Religious Book* (Aldershot, 2001), pp. 239–55.

¹² *Mémoires de Condé*, vol. 3, p. 259.

enemy, was one reason why the question of whether or not the conflicts were truly wars of religion was already debated at the time.

Another way in which contemporaries separated religious and non-religious concerns was through the distinction they regularly made between matters of religion and matters of state or the secular order. A second reason why they debated whether the civil wars were really about religion was that the programmes of the warring parties regularly mentioned concerns of both kinds. Those who took the oath of association of the Prince of Condé, for instance, not only swore to uphold the 'honour of God', by which they meant protecting Reformed rights of worship and defending the true faith against a feared Catholic conspiracy to annihilate it. They also vowed to deliver the king, to defend his laws, and to punish those who violated them. Their claim was that the king had been taken under the wing of the great Catholic noblemen and forced to act against his will, that these noblemen intended to undo the royal edict of January, and that the Duke of Guise was responsible for the recent, illegal massacre of Vassy.¹³ The 1560 conspiracy of Amboise provides another example of an initiative with multiple goals. It sought at once the moderation of the persecution of heresy, the removal of the leading members of the Guise family from their place of pre-eminence within the king's councils, which they were said to have usurped illegally, and their punishment for maladministration. The Catholic League formed in 1585 provides a third example. While seeking to prevent a heretic from ever acceding to the throne of France, it also protested against recent tax increases and the excessive authority bestowed on certain royal favourites. How such a range of concerns might lead to uncertainty and debate about what really moved those involved in these causes is revealed by a 1585 letter of the jurist and political observer Etienne Pasquier. After noting the complaints expressed in an early League manifesto, he wrote: 'the most careful men cannot well judge whether the movement is directed against the state or the new religion.'¹⁴ The distinction between religious and political matters was made not only by observers but also by participants. A manifesto of the Amboise conspirators posted on walls in Paris in 1560 declared: 'While some of those who have risen against [the Guises] wish to live according to the reformation of the Gospel, ... this cause alone would never have led them to take arms, were there not the civil and political cause of their oppression of your Majesty, your Estates and the laws and customs of France.'¹⁵

¹³ Philip Benedict, 'Pour quoi luttaient les protestants en 1562? Sur la dissémination et réception des "Déclarations" du prince de Condé' in Gabriele Haug-Moritz and Lothar Schilling (ed.), *Médialité et interprétation contemporaine des premières guerres de Religion* (Berlin, 2014), pp. 24–36.

¹⁴ Pasquier, *Lettres historiques*, p. 252.

¹⁵ 'Les Estats de France opprimez par la tyrannie de Guise' in *Mémoires de Condé*, vol. 1, p. 410.

If contemporaries were thus able to distinguish between affairs of religion and 'civil and political' matters, but if both kinds of concerns were mixed in the manifestos of the time, which did they judge more important? Were France's 'wars, massacres and troubles' principally civil wars or religious wars in their eyes? Opinions were divided. In the titles that they chose for their works, early chroniclers of these events most often spoke simply of 'troubles' or 'wars'.¹⁶ When they added modifiers, some used the term 'civil wars'.¹⁷ Others chose the labels 'the troubles stirred up by the Calvinists' or 'the troubles and civil wars of our time on grounds of religion'.¹⁸ The first known occurrence of the exact three-word phrase 'wars of religion' appears in 1593 in the manifesto of a Catholic nobleman explaining why he abandoned the League and rallied to the banner of Henry IV after the king's conversion: had he continued to fight, he asserted, his combat could 'no longer be called a war of religion (*guerre de Religion*) but one of State, of ambition and of usurpation'.¹⁹ But longer circumlocutions amounting to the same thing had become common decades earlier. A portion of the municipal chronicle of Montpellier probably written in 1574 speaks of 'that most bloody and pernicious civil war on grounds of religion (*celle tant sanguynolente et perniciieuse guerre civile pour le faict de la relligion*)' that began in 1562.²⁰ A 1573 Protestant treatise specifically distinguishes between, on the one hand, wars fought for the possession of territory, for honour, or to avenge an insult, and, on the other hand, 'wars for religion' (*guerres ... pour la religion*)

¹⁶ E.g. Loys de Perussiis, *Discours des guerres de la Comté de Venayscin et de la Provence: ensemble quelques incidantz* (Avignon, 1563); Philippi, 'Histoire des troubles de Languedoc'; [Nicolas Regnault], *Discours veritable des guerres et troubles venus au pays de Provence* (Lyon, 1564); Gabriel de Saconay, *Discours des premiers troubles venus à Lyon* (Lyon, 1569); Pierre Matthieu, *Histoire des dernières troubles de France sous Henri III et Henri IV* (Lyon, 1594).

¹⁷ *Memoires de la troisieme guerre civile, et des derniers troubles de France* ([Geneva], 1571); Pierre Brisson, *Histoire et vray discours des guerres civiles es pays de Poictou, Aulnis ... Xaintonge et Angoumois* (Paris, 1578).

¹⁸ 'Relation des troubles excités par les calvinistes dans la ville de Rouen depuis l'an 1537 jusqu'en l'an 1582', a chronicle of c.1581 published in the *Revue Rétrospective Normande* (1837); Jean Le Frère de Laval, *La vraye et entiere histoire des troubles et guerres civiles, venues de nostre temps pour le faict de la religion, tant en France, Allemagne que païs bas* (Paris, 1573). This last was the most frequently republished and influential Catholic history of the era, with subsequent editions in 1574, 1575, 1576, 1578, and 1582, so its choice of terms is particularly significant.

¹⁹ Louis de L'Hospital, *Manifeste à la noblesse de France*, quoted in Arlette Jouanna et al., *Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion* (Paris, 1998), p. 396.

²⁰ 'Chronique du Petit Thalamus' in Guiraud, *La Réforme à Montpellier. Preuves*, p. 221; see also p. 208 (for the date when these words were written), p. 218.

'where the glory of God, the welfare of his Church, and the peace and salvation of the souls and consciences of the faithful are at stake'.²¹

Some patterns stand out clearly in the relative importance that different observers accorded religious and political considerations in these troubles. The first is that, while Protestants and Catholics both consistently denied the religious motivation of the other side, Huguenot historians also frequently downplayed their own camp's religious motivation and sought insofar as possible to separate the institutions of the Reformed churches from the political action of the Protestant party, especially when writing about events from 1560 to 1570. They had good reason to do so. At the very moment when Calvin wrote the first version of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* in 1534–35, the Anabaptist kingdom of Munster seemed to confirm the worst fears of princes about the possibility that the spread of heresy would unleash the demons of rebellion, sexual license, and social levelling. The French Protestant movement was under permanent pressure thereafter to deny that it was by nature seditious, pressure that became especially intense in the wake of the failed conspiracy of Amboise, for if the Reformed churches could be linked to this attempt to seize the king's person, the accusation gained considerable plausibility. Even though the conspiracy recruited men and money through the network of churches, involved a number of French pastors, and went ahead with the knowledge, if not the approval, of Geneva's ministers, *The History of the Tumult of Amboise*, a printed work that appeared shortly after the movement's failure and that would be the first of many histories of the event written by Protestants over the subsequent years, cast the enterprise as a purely political cause, a campaign by noblemen of both faiths alarmed by Guise tyranny.²² This interpretation of the event became standard in Protestant histories for centuries.²³ Similarly, a Protestant historian who wrote in 1576 about the reign of Francis II (1559–60), Louis Regnier de La Planche,

²¹ 'Question, asavoir s'il est licite sauver la vie aux massacreurs et bourreaux prins en guerre par ceux de la Religion assiegez en ceste ville' in *Mémoires de l'Etat de France sous Charles IX* ([Geneva], 1578), vol. 2, p. 257.

²² The text is reproduced in *Mémoires de Condé*, vol. 1, pp. 6–20. On the details of the conspiracy see Henri Nacé, *La Conjuraison d'Amboise et Genève* (Geneva/Paris, 1922); Lucien Romier, *La conjuration d'Amboise* (Paris, 1923); Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France 1555–1563* (Geneva, 1956), ch. 7; Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte: La noblesse française et la gestation de l'Etat moderne, 1559–1661* (Paris, 1989), ch. 5.

²³ Philip Benedict, *Graphic History: The Wars, Massacres and Troubles of Tortorel and Perrissin* (Geneva, 2007), p. 133; *idem*, 'La conviction plus forte que la critique: La Réforme et les guerres de religion vues par les historiens protestants à l'époque de la Révocation', in *idem*, Hugues Daussy, and Pierre-Olivier Léchoy (eds), *L'identité huguenote: Faire mémoire et écrire l'histoire (XVIe–XXIe siècles)* (Geneva, 2013), p. 221–39; Henri Lutteroth, *La Réformation en France pendant sa première période* (Paris, 1859), pp. 191–8.

asserted that the fundamental causes of France's calamities during that period were political: the corruption of the political system under the preceding kings Francis I and Henry II, who had allowed themselves to be led by the nose by their counsellors; the division of the political elite into the Guise and Montmorency factions; the monopolization of power under Francis II by the former; and the passivity of the Third Estate.²⁴ Protestant historiography cast the outbreak of the first civil war in 1562 as a sequence of events that began with the Duke of Guise's incitation of the massacre of Vassy and continued with his voyage to court, where he and his fellow 'Triumvirs' took the king and queen mother hostage against their will, in response to which the Huguenots mobilized at the appeal of the Prince of Condé.²⁵ In fact, men and money were also raised through the network of Reformed churches at the behest of its leading pastors.²⁶ However, to suggest that the Huguenot party acted at the call of a prince of the blood to rescue the king and oppose the illegal violence of the Duke of Guise was to position the Protestants as the defenders of the crown as well as to counter the accusation that heresy necessarily involved sedition. In pamphlets written amid the events, it also was a strategy to appeal to Catholic malcontents. The strategy worked to cast the wars as conflicts between rival noble factions fighting for the king's ear.

While early Protestant historians tended to downplay the religious component of the conflicts from 1560 to 1570, government officials caught in the middle of the storm initially saw things differently. As incidents of disorder multiplied in the wake of the early public Protestant assemblies, the royal prosecutor (*procureur du roi*) of Cognac wrote to the governor of the Angoumois as early as April 1559: 'We are in great combustion in this city because of the situations recurring daily arising from this new doctrine, with even husbands repudiating their wives and wives separating from their husbands because of the diversity in religion.'²⁷ The 1563 edict of pacification ending the first nationwide civil war began: 'All are aware how it has pleased Our Lord to permit this our kingdom to be afflicted and troubled for several years now by many troubles, seditions and tumults among our subjects arising from the diversity of opinions in the matter

²⁴ *Histoire de l'estat de France tant de la république que de la Religion sous le règne de François II* (n.p., 1576), pp. 5–6.

²⁵ See for instance Jean Crespin, *Histoire des martyrs*, (ed.) D. Benoit (Toulouse, 1889), vol. 3, pp. 264–5; [Theodore Beza], *Histoire ecclésiastique des Églises réformées au royaume de France*, (ed.) G. Baum and E. Cunitz (Paris, 1883–89), vol. 1, pp. 803–11, vol. 2, pp. 1–38.

²⁶ Pierre-Hyacinthe Morice, *Mémoires pour servir de preuves à l'histoire ecclésiastique et civile de Bretagne* (Paris, 1742–46), vol. 3, pp. 1302–3; *Correspondance de Bèze*, vol. 4, pp. 71–2, 254–60; Ann H. Guggenheim, 'Beza, Viret and the Church of Nîmes: National Leadership and Local Initiative in the Outbreak of the Religious Wars', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 37 (1975): 33–47.

²⁷ Daniel Touzaud, 'Histoire de la Réforme en Angoumois', *Bulletin et Mémoires de la Société Archéologique et Historique de la Charente* 8th ser., 6 (1915), p. 174.

of religion and from their scruples of conscience'.²⁸ A neutral party observing the same conflict from abroad argued the same case even more forcefully. Writing from Basel, the pioneering defender of freedom of conscience and opponent of capital punishment for heresy, Sebastian Castellio, asserted:

I recognize that some Evangelicals say they did not take up arms for religion but to maintain the edict [of pacification]. Let them cover up as much as much as they want. Since the edict itself concerned religion, since the killings at Vassy on account of which the Evangelicals rose up happened because of religion, and since they subsequently seized and sacked churches and destroyed statuary, it is better to state the truth openly: no matter how many other things may be mixed into the affair, the principal cause of this war is the desire to uphold religion.²⁹

On the other hand, at least one irenic administrator at court came with time to put the blame on aristocratic rivalries. The chancellor Michel de l'Hospital, who may have had a hand in drafting the preamble to the 1563 edict of pacification, wrote on his deathbed in 1573 that the wars began when 'the faction and league that ran things in the time of the late king François [i.e. the Guises] could not abide that others governed [and] induced the king of Navarre and other lords at court . . . to take up arms on the pretext of piety and religion'.³⁰

Meanwhile, all important Catholic historians whose works were published during the later sixteenth century judged the principal cause of the civil wars to be the destabilization of the political order by the incorrigibly factious and violent Huguenots. Since the Huguenots were heretics, their motives could not be truly religious. Their embrace of heresy had led them to throw off Christian obedience. Still, incited by their ministers and their false beliefs, they had initiated the cycle of civil wars by attempting to seize the king at Amboise in 1560, by taking control of many of the kingdom's leading cities in April 1562 and immediately desecrating hundreds of churches and savagely attacking priests and nuns, and by attempting again to seize the king at Meaux in 1567. Even the Fourth Civil War, sparked by the Saint Bartholomew's massacre, revealed the Protestants' persistent refusal to respect the royal will. According to a raft of Catholic histories, the slaying of thousands of Huguenots in the days following 24 August 1572 was a just and long overdue punishment of those who already had caused so much devastation and who had once again threatened the person and authority of the king in the aftermath of the failed assassination attempt against the admiral Coligny two

²⁸ 'L'édit de Nantes et ses antécédents (1562–1598)': <http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/editsdepacification>, 2 Édit d'Amboise, preamble (accessed 16 April 2013).

²⁹ Sebastian Castellio, *Conseil à la France désolée* (Geneva, 1967), p. 20.

³⁰ Michel de L'Hospital, *Discours et correspondance. La plume et la tribune II*, (ed.) Loris Petris (Geneva, 2013), p. 273 (Latin original), 280–81 (French translation).

days previously. The subsequent civil war stemmed from the Huguenots' refusal to obey the king's subsequent orders to cease assembling for worship and to open the gates of their principal strongholds to the crown's lieutenants.³¹ The Catholic historian François de Belleforest, cited in the first paragraph of this essay, granted that aristocratic rivalries also contributed to the strife, yet he constructed the lion's share of his narrative around successive Protestant risings, highlighting 'the fury with which these new Goth-Vandals attacked poor churchmen and put them to death.'³² The especially influential history of Jean Le Frère de Laval placed its account of French events from 1560 to 1572 within a longer narrative running from the Hussite wars through Luther's emergence as a reformer to the Peasants' War of 1525, the Anabaptist kingdom of Munster, and the Schmalkaldic wars, a choice of subjects clearly meant to illustrate the recurring link between heresy, sedition, and violence. All of these events, Le Frère asserted, were attributable to wicked ministers who stirred up revolt in the name of reform, the worst being 'those werewolves, those succubi, those *Empuses*, those *Lucifuges*' who rose out of Lake Geneva.³³

Many contemporary observers and historians also recognized that the relative importance of religious and political issues varied from conflict to conflict. In the aftermath of the Saint Bartholomew's massacre, for which the king publicly assumed responsibility and after which he ordered an end to Reformed assemblies, it was impossible for the Protestants to claim that their latest mobilization sought to defend the crown and its edicts. The already-mentioned 1573 treatise that distinguishes between wars for religion and wars for territory or honour unhesitatingly classifies this Fourth Civil War as a war for religion. Even while acknowledging that religion was also at stake in the earlier conflicts, it asserts that this war was different, since it arose in reaction to cruelties of unparalleled scope and was more purely a campaign for justice against those with the blood of the faithful on their hands than had been the prior conflicts.³⁴ Not long thereafter, however, the Huguenots allied with a number

³¹ Henri Hauser, 'Un récit catholique des trois premières guerres de religion: les *Acta Tumultuum Gallicanorum*', *Revue Historique* 108 (1911): 59–74, 294–318, and 109 (1912): 75–84; Thomas de Beauxamis, *La marmite renversée et fondue de laquelle nostre dieu parle par les saints Prophetes* (Paris, 1572), ff. 20–22; Gabriel de Saconay, *Genealogie et la fin des Huguenaux et decouverts du Calvinism* (Lyon, 1572), *passim*; 'Relation des troubles excités par les calvinistes dans la ville de Rouen', *passim*, esp. pp. 35–6, 45–6; Le Frère de Laval, *Vraye et entiere histoire des troubles et guerres civiles*, esp. pp. 510 et *passim*; François de Belleforest, *Les grandes annales et histoire générale de France* (Paris, 1579), vol. 2, ff. 1602–87; L. Cailhava (ed.), *De Tristibus Franciae Libri Quatuor* (Lyon, 1840), *passim*.

³² Belleforest, *Grandes annales et histoire générale de France* esp. fos 1631, 1686.

³³ Le Frère de Laval, *Vraye et entiere histoire des troubles et guerres civiles*, 'épître au lecteur', unpaginated.

³⁴ 'Question, asavoir s'il est licite sauver la vie aux massacreurs', pp. 257, 259.

of discontented Catholic noblemen willing to advocate toleration for both faiths. The pamphlets and manifestos of this period emphasized their shared grievances about royal misgovernment. 'They speak but little of religion, which only plays a secondary role,' the Venetian ambassador wrote about the Fifth Civil War (1574–76).³⁵ 'Nobody even thought of speaking of religion,' echoed the Catholic historian Claude Haton. 'All that was set out was the liberation of the duke of Alençon, ... the king's tyranny in taxing his subjects so ... and the need to call the Estates-General to subject the king to its laws and ordinances.'³⁶

When Henry of Navarre became the heir apparent, the cards were completely reshuffled. The supporters of the Catholic League insisted that their chief concern was to preserve the Roman faith. When a Breton nobleman left home to fight for the cause in October 1589, he left a document for his family asserting that he fought only for 'the glory of God and the defense of religion.'³⁷ Oaths and manifestos of the League say the same thing.³⁸ But the many Catholics who supported Henry of Navarre's claim to the throne could hardly concede that true Catholic piety obliged one to support the League. As its first important historian, Pierre Palma Cayet, insisted, the long and particularly devastating Eighth Civil War (1585–98) that followed its creation was 'a war for the state and not a war for religion.'³⁹ In his view and that of the other so-called *politiques*, the League was primarily a vehicle for its noble leaders, led once again by the house of Guise, to seek to usurp power. It gained support with the help of Spanish doubloons and lowborn fanatics animated by resentment against their social superiors. To the extent that Catholic zeal entered into the equation, it was a false zeal.⁴⁰

The long war for the Bourbon succession also differed from the earlier Protestant–Catholic conflicts in a second important way. Whereas every civil war ended with an edict of pacification that preserved the rights of both faiths to exist within the kingdom, the League was decisively defeated and discredited. As a result, the *politique* version of the history of the League shaped perception of the movement for centuries to come, while each side in the Protestant–Catholic conflict had descendants concerned to uphold its view of what

³⁵ Niccolò Tommaseo (ed.), *Relations des ambassadeurs vénitiens sur les affaires de France au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 1838), vol. 2, p. 227.

³⁶ Claude Haton, *Mémoires*, (ed.) Laurent Bourquin (Paris, 2001–07), vol. 3, p. 139.

³⁷ Hervé Le Goff, *La Ligue en Bretagne. Guerre civile et conflit international (1588–1598)* (Rennes, 2010), p. 66.

³⁸ *Dialogue d'entre le mabeustre et le manant*, esp. p. 122; [Simon Goulard], *Mémoires de la Ligue* (Amsterdam, 1758), vol. 3, p. 285.

³⁹ Pierre-Victor Palma Cayet, *Chronologie novenaire* (Clermont-Ferrand, 2007, first published Paris, 1608), p. 23.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

happened.⁴¹ Furthermore, while both Protestant and Catholic historians had rapidly published partisan accounts of the earlier phases of conflict blaming the other side for the violence and stressing their own innocence and suffering, the Protestant histories were consistently more amply documented and less partisan in tone.⁴² As a result, they would be used more extensively by later historians. The history of the League would be written by the winners. The same would not be true of the earlier Protestant–Catholic conflicts.

I have begun to explore elsewhere how historians of the subsequent centuries assessed religion's role in the civil wars.⁴³ In its most basic outline, the story runs as follows. No work did more to fix perceptions of this era for centuries to come than Jacques-Auguste de Thou's massive and deeply researched *History of His Own Time*, published in instalments and steadily revised between 1604 and 1620. This eminent jurist and early supporter of Henry IV drew the ire of his fellow Catholics for his reliance on previous Protestant histories, which he appreciated for their ample documentation.⁴⁴ In sharp contrast to virtually all prior Catholic histories, he devoted more attention to massacres of which the Protestants were victims than to incidents of Huguenot iconoclasm or anti-Catholic violence. Although he rarely accepted the explanations of important events proffered by the bulk of Huguenot historians, he followed them in stigmatizing the members of the house of Guise as largely responsible for the initial hostilities, a view that prior Catholic historians had rarely shared, but that now seemed plausible to *politiques* in light of the role played by the second Duke of Guise in the insurrections of the League. Although he noted instances in which both Protestant ministers and Catholic preachers fanned the flames of war, his complex and extraordinarily detailed telling of the conflicts cast them above all as a chain of events driven forward chiefly by Guise ambition, the duplicity of Catherine de Medici, and the inability of her flawed sons to rule effectively – in short, as more the product of aristocratic rivalry, court intrigue,

⁴¹ Marco Penzi, "Damnatio memoriae": La "Ligue catholique française" e la storiografia, tra "politiques", rivoluzionari, mistici e liberali, *Quaderni Storici* 118 (2005): 263–84.

⁴² Henri Hauser, *Les sources de l'histoire de France: XVI^e siècle (1494–1610)* (Paris, 1906–15), vol. 3, p. 14.

⁴³ Philip Benedict, 'Shaping the Memory of the French Wars of Religion: The First Centuries', in Erika Kuijpers, et al. (eds), *Memory before Modernity: Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 112–25. I expect to explore this subject further in the future.

⁴⁴ Much evidence about the reception of de Thou's history is provided in the two great editions of the work: De Thou, *Historiarum sui temporis libri CXXXVIII* (London, 1733), 7 vols and *Histoire universelle* (The Hague, 1740), 11 vols.

and poor government than religious disagreement.⁴⁵ To present the conflicts in this manner, of course, was also to suggest that two religions could coexist in one kingdom without necessarily destroying public order so long as wiser leadership and fuller commitment to the general interest prevailed. This was an apt story at a time when the crown wished to bind up nearly forty years of civil strife.

A counter-current of Catholic historical writing attributing the civil wars chiefly to Protestant aggression persisted from the seventeenth through the nineteenth century, but it grew increasingly marginal. Other prominent historians of the seventeenth century, notably the Italian military man and administrator Enrico Caterina Davila and the royal historiographer of Louis XIV François Eudes de Mézeray, reinforced the essentially political narrative of events offered by de Thou.⁴⁶ The multiplication of source publications and the opening of public archives over the subsequent two centuries transformed the understanding of many specific episodes of the wars, but the overall vision of the conflicts established by de Thou and Mézeray endured into the twentieth century with remarkable little change, for the leading historians of the first half of the nineteenth century, Guizot and Michelet, drew on their work and were sympathetic to the Protestant cause, while the university historians who shaped the vision of the national past under the Third Republic were locked in a struggle with conservative Catholic historians and little sympathetic to their view of the wars as the product of Huguenot sedition.⁴⁷ The most important historian of the Wars of Religion of the first part of the twentieth century, Lucien Romier, still interpreted the conflicts as growing chiefly out of the factional rivalries at the court of Henry II.⁴⁸ To the extent that new interpretations emerged in the first two thirds of the twentieth century, they came from secular historians on

⁴⁵ Estelle Grouas, 'Aux origines de la légende noire des derniers Valois: l'*Histoire universelle* de Jacques-Auguste de Thou' in Hugues Daussy and Frédérique Pitou (eds), *Hommes de loi et politique (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Rennes, 2007), pp. 75–88.

⁴⁶ Enrico Caterina Davila, *Historia delle guerre civili di Francia, 1559–1598* (Venice, 1630); François de Mézeray, *Histoire de France*, 2nd edition (Paris, 1685), vol. 3.

⁴⁷ Herbert Butterfield, 'Lord Acton and the Massacre of St Bartholomew', in *idem*, *Man on his Past: The Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 171–201; Charles-Olivier Carbonnel, *Histoire et historiens: une mutation idéologique des historiens français 1865–1885* (Toulouse, 1976), *passim*; David Nicholls, 'Social History of the French Reformation: Ideology, Confession and Culture', *Social History* 9 (1984): 25–43.

⁴⁸ Romier, *Les origines politiques des guerres de religion*, 2 vols (Paris, 1914); *La conjuration d'Amboise* (Paris, 1923); *Catholiques et huguenots à la cour de Charles IX* (Paris, 1924); *Le royaume de Catherine de Médicis: La France à la veille des guerres de religion*, 2 vols (Paris, 1925); Nicholls, 'Social History of the Reformation', pp. 32–3.

the left inclined to see religion as false consciousness masking class or economic interests, the true wellsprings of action.⁴⁹

The pendulum swing of interpretation that has put religion back into the Wars of Religion began in 1973 with the publication of Natalie Zemon Davis's influential article 'The Rites of Violence'.⁵⁰ Denis Crouzet's ambitious two-volume *Les guerriers de Dieu*⁵¹ furthered it, as did a raft of histories of the civil wars in particular cities or provinces initiated by my *Rouen during the Wars of Religion*.⁵² In line with broader currents within the historical profession, these works shifted the focus of research from high politics to crowd violence and the experience of ordinary people. Putting the political and economic explanations of the conflicts proposed by historians of the first two thirds of the twentieth century to the test, they found them wanting. When they examined closely the numerous incidents of insurgency, massacre, and iconoclasm that were an important element of the troubles of the time, they found that it was simply not accurate to assert that those who composed the rival faiths were drawn from urban social groups with conflicting economic interests, as Henri Hauser had suggested at the dawn of the twentieth century; or that the Catholic League was consistently led by a *bourgeoisie seconde* disempowered by the growth of venality of office, as Henri Drouot had argued in 1937; or that massacres and waves of iconoclasm were particularly likely to occur in periods of high grain prices, as Janine Garrisson-Estèbe had asserted in 1968.⁵³ The importance of Davis's 'Rites

⁴⁹ Henri Hauser, 'The French Reformation and the French People in the Sixteenth Century', *American Historical Review* 4 (1899): 217–27; *idem*, *Études sur la Réforme française* (Paris, 1909); Henri Drouot, *Mayenne et la Bourgogne: 1587–1596, contribution à l'histoire des provinces françaises pendant la ligue* (Paris, 1937); Janine Estèbe, *Tocsin pour un massacre. La saison des Saint-Barthélemy* (Paris, 1968); Nicholls, 'Social History of the Reformation', pp. 33–5.

⁵⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France', *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 51–91; reprinted in Alfred Soman (ed.), *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew: Reappraisals and Documents* (The Hague, 1974) and in Davis's much-translated volume of essays, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975). For testimony to its importance, see John Bossy, 'Unrethinking the Sixteenth-Century Wars of Religion' in Thomas Kselman (ed.), *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion* (Notre Dame, 1991), pp. 267–85, esp. pp. 280–82; Graeme Murdock, Penny Roberts, and Andrew Spicer (eds), *Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France*, *Past and Present Supplement* 7 (Oxford, 2012).

⁵¹ Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion (vers 1525–vers 1610)*, 2 vols (Seyssel, 1990).

⁵² Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 1981). Carpi, *Guerres de Religion*, pp. 688–9, offers the most up-to-date list of the many local and regional studies.

⁵³ Davis, *Society and Culture*, pp. 1–16, 169–70; *idem* and Janine Estèbe, 'Debate. The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France', *Past and Present* 67 (1975):

of Violence' lay in its demonstration of how well the forms, gestures, and targets of different forms of religious violence could be illuminated by attending to the core moral and religious values of those involved.⁵⁴ As local studies tried to make sense of the pattern of conflict over time, they observed that the breakdown of order locally often preceded the outbreak of formal civil war; France came apart locality by locality as much as it did as a result of divisions at the centre.⁵⁵ When historians tried to determine the extent to which ties of clientage or factional rivalry within the aristocracy determined party affiliation in 1562 or 1588, they found that these considerations did not take them very far. In 1562, Montmorency and Guise, the great rivals for power at the court of Henry II, joined hands in the anti-Protestant coalition. The Protestants were led by younger sons or collateral branches of two rival houses, the Bourbons and the Montmorencys, both of whose *capo di capo* fought against them.⁵⁶

The Problem Today

In light of the vast amount of research devoted to this era in the past generation, how can we now best answer the question: were the French Wars of Religion truly wars of religion? In 1987 a German historian of the Thirty Years War, Konrad Repgen, did all early modern historians a service by asking the necessary

127–35; Benedict, *Rouen during Wars*, pp. 71–94, 180–86, 245–6; Crouzet, *Guerriers de Dieu*, vol. 1, pp. 61–75.

⁵⁴ Subsequent studies vindicated and extended this approach, notably Crouzet, *Guerriers de Dieu*; Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford, 1991); Olivier Christin, *Une révolution symbolique: L'iconoclasme huguenot et la reconstruction catholique* (Paris, 1991).

⁵⁵ Benedict, *Rouen*, pp. 237–8; Denis Crouzet, *Le genèse de la Réforme française 1520–1562* (Paris, 1996), pp. 572–92.

⁵⁶ Important studies of the force and limits of clan rivalries, family networks, and ties of clientage as determinants of political affiliation include Kristen Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, 1989); Stuart Carroll, *Noble Power during the French Wars of Religion: The Guise Affinity and the Catholic Cause in Normandy* (Cambridge, 1998); Mark W. Konnert, *Local Politics in the French Wars of Religion: The Towns of Champagne, the Duc de Guise and the Catholic League, 1560–95* (Aldershot, 2006); David Potter, 'Alliance', 'Clientèle' and Political Action in Early Modern France: 'The Prince de Condé's Association in 1562', in David Bates, et al. (eds), *Liens personnels, réseaux, solidarités en France et dans les Îles Britanniques (XIe–XXe siècle)* (Paris, 2006), pp. 199–219; Michel Nassiet, *Parenté, noblesse et États dynastiques XVe–XVIe siècles* (Paris, 2000), pp. 64–5; and *idem*, *La violence, une histoire sociale: France, XVIe–XVIIIe siècles* (Seyssel, 2011), ch. 9.

preliminary question 'What is a "religious war"?' and offering a new reply.⁵⁷ He pointed out that for virtually every conflict of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that has been labelled a religious war, historians have debated whether the paramount motives of the key actors were religious or political. Repgen's chief focus was on inter-state wars. In such cases, a range of considerations including competing dynastic claims, security concerns, and treaty obligations also regularly shaped the decision to go to war. It is often impossible to determine in the final analysis whether these concerns or religious aims were the most important, not just because human motivation is often complex, but also because the evidence often does not permit a confident answer. Repgen therefore proposed that historians think of the label 'religious war' as a 'legitimization type', not a 'motivation type'. A regular feature of early modern wars was that rulers declaring war issued written declarations explaining why they did so. Studying numerous such justifications, Repgen found that the reasons offered to legitimate going to war could be classified into twelve recurring categories. One of these he labelled 'religious war'; this was when recourse to arms was declared necessary to prevent the true religion from being exterminated, to defend or extend legally recognized rights of worship of co-religionists, or to eliminate a dangerous heresy. Formulated with regard to wars between states, Repgen's proposal that we think of the category 'religious war' as a legitimization category can be applied to civil wars as well, for as we have already seen it was also conventional at the time for a party raising the banner of revolt to justify its actions in a formal declaration.

Repgen's suggestion that we think about 'religious war' as a legitimization category rather than a motivation category has the advantage of simplicity, since it enables historians to pin the label 'religious war' on a conflict on the basis of a clear, easily verifiable criterion, without having to sound the depths of the human psyche. But its heuristic payoff is greater than that. It also serves to highlight that religious war may be defined in terms of the issues at stake in a conflict as well as in light of their participants' motivation. Furthermore, Repgen and historians working in his wake have made the interesting discovery that the formal justification for declaring war on a neighbouring state that involved citing the need to come to the aid of true Christians threatened with persecution only appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, shortly after the Reformed theologians Peter Martyr Vermigli and Heinrich Bullinger first began to include the defence of endangered foreign co-religionists among the legitimate grounds for war

⁵⁷ Konrad Repgen, 'What is a "Religious War"?', in E. I. Kouri and Tom Scott (eds), *Politics and Society in Reformation Europe: Essays for Sir Geoffrey Elton on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (London, 1987), pp. 311–28.

in their discussions of the just war.⁵⁸ The famous 'monarchomach' treatise *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos* of 1579 was an important expression of this point of view. Its fourth, often overlooked chapter asked 'Whether neighbouring princes may by right, or ought, to render assistance to subjects of other princes who are being persecuted on account of pure religion, or oppressed by manifest tyranny?' and answered in the affirmative.⁵⁹ In a Europe marked by a series of structural features that already encouraged frequent warfare – conflicting dynastic claims to many territories, high mortality rates that regularly engendered succession crises in ruling families for lack of a direct heir, an aristocratic culture that valorized feats of war and rewarded conquest, Machiavellian calculations of domestic security – the belief of certain rulers that they had an obligation to come to the aid of the true religion when it was threatened added still another cause for conflict. It rarely trumped all of the others. It nevertheless made an already unstable international system yet more unstable and increased both the scale and duration of conflicts that had a religious component. Calvinist and Catholic court preachers and confessors seem to have been more inclined than their Lutheran counterparts to support this point of view.

While thinking of religious war as a legitimization type has significant heuristic value, it also has its limits. First, the formal justification offered by a ruler for going to war may mask rather than reveal the true nature of the war. At the outset of the Schmalkaldic war, Charles V publicly declared that the purpose of the war was to punish the electors of Hesse and Saxony as violators of the peace of the empire for their recent aggression against the Duke of Brunswick, but he wrote to his sister Mary of Hungary that his true goal was to roll back Protestantism.⁶⁰ Surely there is a loss of understanding if we exclude this conflict from the category of religious wars because it was not formally justified on religious grounds. Second, it is not always the case that evidence about the motivation of different actors is lacking. Where such evidence is available,

⁵⁸ Repgen, 'Religious War', pp. 318–23; Cornel Zwierlein, 'La loi de Dieu et l'obligation à la défense: de Florence à Magdeburg (1494–1550)', in Paul-Alexis Meller (ed.), *Et de sa bouche sortait un glaive: Les monarchomaques au XVI^e siècle* (Geneva, 2006), pp. 70–72; *idem*, 'The Thirty Years' War a Religious War? Religion and Machiavellism at the Turning Point of 1635', in Peter Schröder and Olaf Asbach (eds), *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Thirty Years War* (Aldershot, 2013), pp. 232–3.

⁵⁹ Stephanus Junius Brutus, *Vindiciae, contra tyrannos* (ed.) George Garnett (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 173–85. A recent history of humanitarian intervention has located here the origins of foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of another nation in the name of trans-national justice. Brendan Simms and D. J. B. Trim (eds), *Humanitarian Intervention: A History* (Cambridge, 2011).

⁶⁰ Repgen, 'Religious War', pp. 318–20; Daniel Nexon, *The Struggle for Power in Early Modern Europe: Religious Conflict, Dynastic Empires and International Change* (Princeton, 2009), pp. 173–4.

understanding the precise motivations that moved actors in the conflict is clearly a worthwhile goal of investigation, even if to do so we must not content ourselves by saying that they acted out of religious belief, but must specify the specific doctrines or arguments that sparked their actions.⁶¹ Third, in the case of domestic conflicts such as those in later sixteenth-century France, conflict took the form not only of formally declared civil wars, but also of crowd violence, massacres, and skirmishes between armed bands – the kind of incidents that led contemporary histories to speak of ‘troubles’ as often as they did of ‘wars’. Here, formal legitimizing statements are often lacking, yet the past generation’s work on French religious violence has shown how much can be inferred about the values and concerns that prompted different forms of crowd violence through close attention to the actions and targets of the crowd, juxtaposed against the legitimizing discourses offered by contemporaries.⁶² It would be an unfortunate step backward to forfeit the benefits of these insights by adopting an excessively rigid criterion for defining a religious war.

Employing the term ‘religious war’, then, either as a legitimization or a motivation type, were the French Wars of Religion truly religious wars, and if so just how did religious motivations or issues generate or contribute to the conflicts? Using the term ‘religious war’ as a legitimization type, the eight successive civil wars from 1562 to 1598 were unquestionably all wars of religion, even if religion was rarely the sole issue at stake in every one. The Protestant party recurrently legitimated the taking up of arms as necessary to protect Reformed rights of worship and even the very survival of the true Christian faith and its adherents. Leading Catholic noblemen and important Catholic associations or leagues recurrently declared that they fought to prevent the toleration of heresy in the Most Christian Kingdom, which they saw as antithetical to the very nature of the kingdom and ruinous to its welfare. The chief aim of the Catholic League of 1585 was to ensure that the French throne was occupied by a Catholic; other declared goals of the movement included ensuring that the decrees of the Council of Trent were published in France and that the country cease allying with infidels and heretics. At every set of peace negotiations that brought to an end the eight successive nationwide civil wars, the question of the terms under which the Reformed religion was to be permitted within the kingdom was at the heart of the negotiations. Most simply and fundamentally, the later sixteenth century was a period of wars of religion in France because, once Reformed Protestants began setting up churches of their own and gained enough strength to meet in public in many localities across the kingdom, the most important

⁶¹ Philip Benedict, ‘Religion and Politics in the European Struggle for Stability, 1500–1700’, in *idem* and Myron P. Gutmann (eds), *Early Modern Europe: From Crisis to Stability* (Newark, DE., 2005), pp. 126–9.

⁶² See especially Davis, ‘Rites of Violence’ and the studies cited in note 53.

question with which the kingdom's governing authorities had to grapple, and the one that sparked the most intense passion and the most recurrent conflict on all sides, was that of whether or not to tolerate two religions within the same kingdom, and if so, on what terms.

Using the terms religious war or religious violence as motivation types, we can also label the troubles that roiled France from c.1560 to 1598 as instances of religious violence since deeply held and hotly contested theological convictions sparked much of the crowd violence and even certain actions undertaken by armies in wartime. Recent historians disagree about which specific beliefs of the two rival confessions particularly encouraged violence, but at the very least the following assertions seem tenable.⁶³ The initial establishment of Reformed churches sprang from the conviction of Calvin and his followers that: (1) many features of contemporary Catholic worship were so profoundly idolatrous and contrary to divine precept that true Christians were duty bound to abstain from them; (2) the correct forms of Christian worship and proper institutions of a Christian church were clearly stated in the Bible; and (3) believers could legitimately establish churches following the Gospel model despite any governmental prohibitions to the contrary, because, in matters of the spirit one must obey God not man. Once the Reformed began to gather in assemblies of their own that they believed to be legitimate, it was but a short step, that many churches took quickly, to placing armed guards around the assemblies for self-defence or to freeing arrested co-religionists from jail. Conversion to Protestantism also unleashed a psychological dynamic of rejection of the old faith that many converts felt moved to express publicly in acts of iconoclasm or sacrilege. Having been duped for too long by false claims about Christ's physical presence in the Eucharist or the favours saints might do for supplicants who addressed their shrines and relics with respect, converts now wanted to show their neighbours that the statues they worshipped were just pieces of wood, that the relics might well be animal bones, and that the Blessed Sacrament was a little circle of baked dough. When they consequently defaced statues or tore the consecrated host from the hands of a priest to trample on it, those who remained convinced of the sacredness of these objects were scandalized. They feared for the safety of the entire community unless proper expiation was done. That expiation could take the form of demonstrating renewed veneration for the desecrated object via public processions, or of having self-appointed guardians take up posts near a street-corner image to make sure that those who passed it showed the proper respect and beat them up if they did not. At the same time they expected

⁶³ See on this the overlapping but not fully congruent interpretations of Davis, 'Rites of Violence'; Crouzet, *Guerriers de Dieu*; and Philip Benedict, 'The Dynamics of Protestant Militancy: France, 1555–1563', in *idem* et al. (eds), *Reformation, Revolt and Civil War in France and the Netherlands 1555–1585* (Amsterdam, 1999), pp. 35–44.

the civil authorities to purge the most offensive heretics from the community by banishment or fire; when the authorities ceased to do this, numerous preachers asserted that it was the community's responsibility to do it in their stead. This is the dynamic that bred the multiplication of riots and massacres from 1560 onward that made the regulation of religious practice question number one for the civil authorities seeking to maintain public order. The Protestant antipathy to what they believed to be false idols and clerical fraud also led the Huguenot armies to engage in iconoclasm and target Catholic clergymen during wartime. Castellio, we may recall, cited this behaviour as evidence that the First Civil War was a war of religion.

Recent historians have also paid new attention to the place of religion in the Catholic League, showing that cities under League domination witnessed a burst of processional activity and spiritual ferment mixing penitential, mystical, and crusading elements, and that for a number of figures central to the subsequent flowering of French Counter-Reformation piety, their spiritual experiences amid the League were decisive.⁶⁴ Engagement in these new forms of Catholic devotion did not inevitably lead to support for the *Sainte-Union*; some champions of penitential initiatives and new religious orders remained loyal to Henry III, who himself was an enthusiastic auto-flagellant.⁶⁵ Still, it is now clear that pious Catholics from the political elite faced a searing question of conscience when they had to decide whether or not to continue to serve this king who, for all his exterior manifestations of piety, ordered a cardinal of the church killed without trial, was consequently excommunicated by the pope, and then allied himself with the heretic Henry of Navarre after initially swearing that he would do all in his power to uphold the principle that only Catholics could occupy the throne. Few would maintain any longer that those who responded to this dilemma by supporting the League were moved chiefly by ambition and resentment.

If we think in terms neither of legitimization nor of motivation but of institutional dynamics, we can see that religion fed into the formal civil wars in another way too, albeit one that was less consistently present than the preceding elements. For certain conflicts, troops were raised through paramilitary structures

⁶⁴ Denis Richet, *De la Réforme à la Révolution: Études sur la France moderne* (Paris, 1991), pp. 69–96; Benedict, *Rouen*, pp. 190–208, 246–7; Robert Harding, 'Revolution and Reform in the Holy League: Angers, Rennes, Nantes', *Journal of Modern History* 53 (1981): 379–416; Crouzet, *Guerriers de Dieu*, vol. 2, chs 17–19; Jouanna, *Histoire et dictionnaire*, pp. 359–71; Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reform in Paris* (Oxford, 2004).

⁶⁵ See especially Ariane Boltanski, *Les ducs de Nevers et l'État Royal: Genèse d'un compromis (ca. 1550–ca. 1600)* (Geneva, 2006); Benoist Pierre, *La Bure et le Sceptre: La congrégation des Feuillants dans l'affirmation des États et des pouvoirs princiers (vers 1560–vers 1660)* (Paris, 2006), part 1.

attached to the rival churches. During the years 1560–62 both the synods of the French Reformed churches and the leading ministers in Geneva were more involved than early Protestant historians let on in raising money and troops for projected risings, in setting up a national network of military units attached to the church, and in mobilizing and deploying these units in the First Civil War.⁶⁶ With time, Huguenot military mobilization and decision-making passed more fully under the control of the high nobility, local captains, and political councils, but the Genevan pastors continued to raise money for military operations meant to allow disbanded churches to reassemble when proscribed, while the supra-regional political assemblies that coordinated the cause's military and political actions were linked to the churches at least through the presence of numerous ministers and church elders in these assemblies.⁶⁷ On the Catholic side, Holy Ghost confraternities in the towns of Burgundy that required their members to possess arms as well as to perform a range of devotional and charitable activities participated in the defence of the region against feared Protestant aggression between 1567 and 1571.⁶⁸ In these same years Toulouse's Catholics organized a sodality that received a crusading bull from Pope Pius V granting plenary indulgences to its members fighting for faith, king, and country.⁶⁹ If the Catholic Leagues of 1576 and 1585 were sworn associations of a non-confraternal type, the rising promoted by the second League following Henry III's extra-judicial targeted assassination of the duke and cardinal of Guise received the support of both the Faculty of Theology of Paris and Pope Sixtus V. By the right that they claimed to oversee temporal political affairs, both declared the French to

⁶⁶ *Correspondance de Bèze*, vol. 4, pp. 71–2, 254–5; 'Lettres adressées à Jean et Guy de Daillon comtes du Lude, gouverneurs du Poitou', *Archives Historiques du Poitou* 12 (1882): 112–13; Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France 1555–1563* (Geneva, 1956), pp. 68–113; Alain Dufour, 'L'affaire de Maligny vue à travers la correspondance de Calvin et de Bèze', *Cahiers d'Histoire* 8 (1963): 269–80; Benedict, 'Dynamics of Protestant Militancy', pp. 35–44; *idem*, 'Prophets in Arms? Ministers in War, Ministers on War: France, 1562–1574' in Murdock/Roberts/Spicer, *Ritual and Violence*, pp. 163–96; *idem* and Nicolas Fornerod, 'Les 2150 "églises" réformées de France de 1561–1562', *Revue Historique* 311 (2009): 529–60; *idem*, *L'organisation et l'action des églises réformées de France, 1557–1563: Synodes provinciaux et autres documents* (Geneva, 2012), pp. lxxxiv–cxii.

⁶⁷ Mark Greengrass, 'Financing the Cause: Protestant Mobilization and Accountability in France (1562–1589)', in Benedict, *Reformation, Revolt*, pp. 233–54; Janine Garrisson-Estèbe, *Protestants du Midi 1559–1598* (Toulouse, 1980), pp. 205–9; Scott Manetsch, *Theodore Beza and the Quest for Peace in France, 1572–1598* (Leiden, 2000), esp. pp. 73–91.

⁶⁸ Robert R. Harding, 'The Mobilization of Confraternities Against the Reformation in France', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 11 (1986): 85–107, esp. pp. 86–91.

⁶⁹ Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe 1400–1536* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 195–8; Pierre-Jean Souriac, *Une guerre civile: Affrontements religieux et militaires dans le Midi toulousain (1562–1598)* (Seyssel, 2008), pp. 117–27.

be absolved from their duty of allegiance to their king. The Faculty of Theology also resolved that clergymen and students could bear arms for the League and those who died doing so would be martyrs. The sacraments were refused laymen who did not support the cause.⁷⁰

Finally, the French Wars of Religion also had an international dimension; indeed, they were perhaps the first European civil wars whose duration was substantially amplified by the new legitimization of foreign intervention in support of threatened co-religionists. The Reformed electors Palatine were the German rulers who most fully embraced the ideas that Christian princes belonged to a supra-national community in Christ owing one another mutual aid, and that the Catholic powers were seeking collectively to eliminate the true faith throughout Europe and so had to be opposed by force. They sent troops into France five times to aid the beleaguered Huguenots. Without their aid, it is almost certain that the Protestants would have been crushed in several of the civil wars.⁷¹ The English also came to the aid of the Protestants in 1562–63 and of Henry of Navarre in 1591–94. The Spanish, the Savoyards, and the papacy all sent troops at different times to fight for the Catholic cause. Spanish intervention in the wars of the League was particularly important. It unquestionably prolonged that conflict by several years, and may have been decisive in sparking it.⁷²

The past generation's worth of research has emphatically not shown that political or other non-religious factors were irrelevant to the civil wars. It is perhaps clearer than ever now that after the elder Duke of Guise was killed in 1563 by a Protestant assassin believed by many to have been encouraged by the admiral Coligny, the rivalry between the houses of Guise and Châtillon became a bitter vendetta that had a significant effect on events.⁷³ A recent book

⁷⁰ Henri de L'Épinois, 'La légation du cardinal Caetani en France', *Revue des Questions historiques* 30 (1881): 460–525; Anne-Cécile Tizon-Germe, 'Juridiction spirituelle et action pastorale des légats et nonces en France pendant la Ligue (1589–1594)', *Archivum historiae pontificiae* 30 (1992): 159–230; Thierry Amalou, 'Le magistère de la Faculté de théologie de Paris pendant les guerres de religion', unpublished seminar paper, Geneva, 17 April 2013.

⁷¹ Bernard Vogler, 'Le rôle des électeurs palatins dans les guerres de religion en France, 1559–1592', *Cahiers d'Histoire* 10 (1965): 51–85; Cornel Zwielerlein, 'Les saints de la communion avec le Christ: hybridation entre églises et états dans le monde calviniste dans les années 1560', in Florence Buttag and Axelle Guillausseau (eds), *Des saints d'État? Politique et sainteté au temps du concile de Trente* (Paris, 2012), p. 39.

⁷² Valentín Vázquez de Prada, *Felipe II y Francia (1559–1598). Política, Religión y Razón de Estado* (Pamplona, 2004); DeLamar Jensen, *Diplomacy and Dogmatism: Bernardino de Mendoza and the French Catholic League* (Cambridge, MA., 1964); Le Goff, *Ligue en Bretagne*.

⁷³ Nassiet, *La violence*, pp. 282–7; Arlette Jouanna, *La Saint-Barthélemy: Les mystères d'un crime d'État* (Paris, 2007), pp. 51 et *passim*.

by Hugues Daussy shows that the attempt of the leading Protestant nobles to take the king under their control in 1567 that sparked the Second Civil War did not recruit its participants through the network of church synods and may have arisen in good measure out of the aristocrats' pique at being marginalized at court.⁷⁴ In the Fifth Civil War, as has already been indicated, the Protestants made common cause with Catholic moderates and malcontents. Religious riots and massacres in peacetime became rare after 1572. International intervention in the wars was motivated by more than religious solidarity.⁷⁵

By emphasizing the religious component of the Wars of Religion, certain recent historians can even be said to have moved close to the viewpoint of those early modern Catholic historians who asserted that Calvinism was inherently seditious. The Dutch historian Judith Pollmann has observed that the model of religious violence constructed by historians of France links the emergence of religious rioting so closely to the core beliefs of each religion that it would seem to suggest that similar violence ought to have broken out wherever large Reformed minorities took shape in majority Catholic polities, yet in the Netherlands, where the emergence of a large Calvinist movement quickly gave rise to iconoclasm, no violent reaction by ordinary Catholics comparable to that in France ensued.⁷⁶ More broadly, harsh confessional polemic hardly led to civil war and crowd violence on anything like the French scale everywhere in post-Reformation Europe.⁷⁷ Additional considerations must clearly also be invoked to explain why the emergence of confessional differences sparked violence of such exceptional scale and duration in France.

Fortunately, the past generation's research has also suggested what these might be. First, as Colette Beaune has shown, by the close of the Middle Ages, France had developed a distinctive proto-national identity that identified the realm as the Most Christian Kingdom and linked its prosperity to its freedom from heresy. This was given ritual expression at each coronation when the new king swore to preserve the kingdom from this taint.⁷⁸ Such convictions made

⁷⁴ Hugues Daussy, *Le parti huguenot. Chronique d'une désillusion (1557-1572)* (Geneva, 2014), pp. 566, 570-83.

⁷⁵ The English sought to reclaim their lost continental footholds and demanded the cession of a Channel port in return for their aid in 1562. The Spanish Habsburgs were eager to weaken their longstanding French rivals and saw an opportunity to wrest the royal succession for the Infanta after 1590.

⁷⁶ Judith Pollmann, 'Countering the Reformation in France and the Netherlands: Clerical Leadership and Catholic Violence 1560-1585', *Past and Present* 190 (2006): 83-8.

⁷⁷ Mark Greengrass, 'Europe's "Wars of Religion" and Their Legacies', in John Wolffe (ed.), *Protestant-Catholic Conflict from the Reformation Era to the 21st Century* (Houndmills, 2013), pp. 28-9.

⁷⁸ Colette Beaune, *Naissance de la nation France* (Paris, 1985). See also Alain Tallon, *Conscience nationale et sentiment religieux en France au XVI^e siècle* (Paris, 2002).

the emergence of a powerful heretical movement appear particularly alarming in France, while the coronation oath appeared to legitimate Catholic crowd violence as a substitute for royal justice when the crown ceased to prosecute heresy as a crime. The peaceful coexistence of three, four or even one hundred religions was perfectly possible in the little territories of Germany 'where religion smells like nothing so much as wine,' one of the most important pamphlets of the Catholic League maintained; it was impossible in France 'where the State rests on the catholic religion which [the French] have naturally engraved in their heart, and which cannot be torn from it without toppling the crown.'⁷⁹ Catholic clerics in France also produced a substantial corpus of published defences of the faith against Protestant doctrine in the vernacular far earlier than their counterparts in the Netherlands, which may have encouraged lay anti-Protestantism.⁸⁰ Furthermore, Calvinism, with its capacity to generate underground counter-churches, was more disruptive of the status quo than Lutheranism, which looked to the secular authorities to institute religious change. France was among the first strong princely states where the Reformation emerged with Reformed hues. This occurred just before the sudden death of King Henry II left the country with a series of immature monarchs, while the end of the Italian Wars deprived a warrior nobility of other battles to fight, making the problems of order created by the creation of two rival churches within the kingdom particularly difficult to solve. The Reformed churches quickly grew to a size where they could never be eliminated by the degree of force that the crown was willing to use; yet they never became large enough or proved tactically clever enough to impose their practices throughout the kingdom. Finally, as so often in pre-modern European political history, the vagaries of royal demography contributed to the exceptional longevity of the wars. Had Henry III sired a son, the last, especially long and destructive phase, of the civil wars would probably not have come about.

These last considerations remind us once again that to speak of the conflicts that shook France from 1560 to 1598 as religious wars is not to say that they can be understood with reference to nothing but religion. Circumstances relating to France's national traditions and royal demography contributed to

⁷⁹ [Louis Dorléans], *Advertissement des Catholiques Anglois aux François Catholiques, du danger où ils sont de perdre leur Religion, et d'experimenter, comme en Angleterre, la cruauté des Ministres s'ils reçoivent à la Couronne un Roy qui soit Heretique* (1586), in L. Cimber and F. Danjou (eds), *Archives curieuses de l'histoire de France* (Paris, 1834–40), vol. 11, p. 171.

⁸⁰ This is emphasized by Pollmann, 'Countering the Reformation', pp. 96–111. On the French Catholic reaction, see also Crouzet, *Guerriers de Dieu*, vol. 1, part 1; Marc Venard, 'Catholicism and Resistance to the Reformation in France, 1555–1585' in Benedict, *Reformation, Revolt*, pp. 133–48; Barbara B. Diefendorf, 'Simon Vigor: A Radical Preacher in Sixteenth-Century Paris', *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18 (1987): 399–410; Larissa J. Taylor, *Heresy and Orthodoxy in Sixteenth-Century Paris: François Le Picart and the Beginnings of the Catholic Reformation* (Leiden, 1999).

making these religious troubles particularly severe. Aristocratic rivalry and vendetta played a part, as on the local level did social tensions and institutional rivalries. Nevertheless, it is with good reason that if there is one set of conflicts in early modern European history to which the label of religious war is most conventionally and most often fixed, it is the French Wars of Religion. No other set of conflicts of the time illustrates so clearly so many of the ways in which the emergence of religious differences in the wake of the Reformation contributed to civil strife and international war. Fuelled by the conviction that in matters of the spirit it was necessary to obey God rather than man, a network of Calvinist churches emerged between 1555 and 1561 that put the question of how to deal with the presence of two religions in one country front and centre for the ruling authorities. This was an explosive issue in any country at the time because it was widely accepted that religious uniformity was a precondition of political stability and that governments had a duty to defend God's honour and the true religion. It was particularly explosive in France because national myths tied the kingdom's prosperity to its purity from heresy. Conflicting doctrines about what was sacred and what was polluting, aggressively expressed in public spaces by deeds as well as words, gave rise to local disorders that were straightforward illustrations of how rival religious beliefs can engender violence when a new church suddenly challenges an old one. When the crown sought to resolve the growing disorder with a measure allowing Reformed worship, and when this in turn appeared to be challenged by Catholic violence, the Protestants took up arms to defend their rights of worship and to forestall what they feared to be a plot to eliminate them, a step that was easy for them to take since they had already put in place a paramilitary organization that they believed to be quite strong. All of the eight formal civil wars that followed in tragic sequence from this initial raising of the standard of revolt, even the fifth, were wars of religion in the sense that religious rights were at stake in the conflict and invoked in the justifications for taking up arms. In several of these conflicts troops were marshalled through church networks or confraternities. Foreign co-religionists entered the conflicts out of confessional solidarity in a manner typical of this and the next century, providing one of the reasons why neither side could decisively defeat the other and bring the cycle of civil wars to an end. Here are the most fundamental ways in which France's 'wars, troubles and massacres' were 'troubles on grounds of religion,' as many contemporaries recognized them to be.