

# A Difference in Sixteenth-Century French Violence

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## Abstract

This article considers the implications of both Catholic and Calvinist types of violence during the Reformation of mid- Sixteenth-Century France. Historical texts and academic discourses exhibit the extent to which French Catholics tended to enact physical torment on their Huguenot victims, whereas French Huguenots typically assaulted their Christian counterparts through iconoclasm and symbolic desecration of sacred objects. From these perspectives, my interest is in the multiple violent acts, which were not sadistic or pathological attempts to inflict agony on religious opponents, but were initially fundamental concerns for establishing and maintaining religious uniformity and orthodoxy through purgative actions. Analysis of such historical violence through individual Christian writings at this time is conducive to understanding attempts at Church reform in France, especially with consideration of the religious dynamics on the part of both Catholics and Protestants. These actions culminated in political, social and religious transformations and confrontations that have come to designate the European Reformations.



## I. Introduction

In John Calvin's first Latin edition of *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536 CE), he attached a dedicatory epistle to the French king, Francis I, with the request of a fair investigation into the cause of the French evangelicals. In the

first paragraphs Calvin wrote: “For this reason, most invincible King, I not unjustly ask you to take a full inquiry into this cause, which until now has been handled with no order of law and with violent heat rather than judicial gravity.”<sup>1</sup> While it is well known Calvin strove to convince Francis I of the movement’s Christian legitimacy in France, the passage quoted above specifically demonstrates Calvin’s concern for political and legal justice during the onset of rampant violence in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The violence Calvin refers to emphasizes religious animus—on the part of political authorities and lay communities—against early reformers in France. This animus largely involved persecutions and bodily inflictions often resulting in death or various forms of physical maltreatment towards perished evangelicals. For Calvin and the reformers the duty of the king of France was to endure toleration of reform groups and protect them in the face of harsh enmity because they were valid Christian subjects submitting to legal rule under the king. As such, membership in the kingdom included defense against criminal acts (i.e. persecution). In view of what Calvin would call “villainy” on the part of violent anti-reform fomenters, historical accounts attest to the multiple massacres and seemingly savage persecution of French Calvinists, also known as Huguenots, taking place during the French Reformation. For example, the slaughtering of Huguenots at Vassy and on St Bartholomew’s Day are fairly infamous events attesting to incidents of brutality at this time. Yet, the violence suffused in French society was not as one-sided as it may have seemed.

Calvinist iconoclasm in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was also prominently violent and comparable to the killings enacted by Catholic crowds and authorities in France. The pervasive destruction of religious property included burning,

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1. John Calvin, *Institution of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Atlanta: John Know Press, 1975), Dedicatory Epistle #2, p. 2. I use this quote to exhibit an initial Protestant/Calvinist awareness of violence against those who would later be labeled “Huguenots” in France. The epistle predates the French Wars of Religion, but importantly displays what developed into a common idea of legal justice for their cause. Calvin is referring specifically to the “Affair of the Placards” (discussed below) and his fears of further Catholic violence.

urinating, defecating, smashing, and ripping as well as the annihilation of sacred relics, statues, the Eucharist, paintings and churches. Moreover, French Protestants targeted Catholic priests with aggression as key Catholic figures perpetuating Roman Catholic rituals. These actions incorporated symbolic (and physical) attacks on Gallican (French Roman Catholic) communities entrenched in the beliefs and practices of the medieval church. In one instance, a Huguenot was said to have, “just as the priest was holding up the precious body of Christ to show it to the people, grabbed it [the Host] and crushed it under his feet.”<sup>2</sup> Through modern eyes, such an example might evoke understandings of milder violence in comparison with corporal assaults, but early modern society—those vehemently devoted to the precepts of the medieval church—recognized these acts as sacrilege against the Christian God as well as the body of believers as a whole. That is to say, iconoclasm, from a 16<sup>th</sup> century Catholic’s point of view, was often emphasized as more detrimental to one’s Christian eschatological existence because it was believed such an assault might provoke the wrath of God. In addition, the monarch represented an authoritative station reflecting divine sanction and uniform values with the French Church of the Middle Ages. Therefore, nobles, ecclesiastics, Catholics and the king considered iconoclastic behavior an affront against the Church and the unique relationship between the kingship and the kingdom as one Catholic body.

From these perspectives, I wish to consider the implications of both Catholic and Reformed types of violence. In particular, my interest is in the multiple violent acts, which were not sadistic or pathological attempts to inflict agony on religious opponents, but were initially fundamental concerns for maintaining religious uniformity and orthodoxy through purgative actions. Analysis of such historical violence is conducive to understanding attempts at reform in France, especially with consideration of the religious dynamics from both Catholics and Protestants. Furthermore, these actions also accentuate the

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2. Quoted in David Potter, ed. and trans., *The French Wars of Religion: Selected Documents* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 64.

eventual development of two disparate perspectives: the duty of the king to uphold legal rights (for the Huguenots) and the king's promise to extinguish heretical challenges (for the Catholics); both of which culminated in political, social and religious transformations and confrontations. Put another way, while both kinds of violence exhibit religious concerns for the health and institution of Christian beliefs and practices, an important difference emerges between Catholic unease over the state of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis the body politic and Calvinist calls for a criminal justice system under the existing political authorities.

In order to interpret the scope of Christian violence at this time I begin this paper with a general examination of religious and political power, values and authority during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Thereafter I look at the correlation between mainstream Roman Catholic and Reformed viewpoints concerning physical and symbolic violence before and during the French Wars of Religion. The final impetus of my work will then broadly consider the performance of ritualistic violence during the multiple massacres from 1562-1572. Such horrific events, I argue, exemplified the pinnacle of hostile demonstrations for Catholics endeavoring to unify French society, but were representative of an influential change in Calvinist notions of civil justice taking precedence over religious differences. This was a result, in particular, of Huguenot expectations that the French king should have acted legally on their behalf, despite Catholic/Calvinist differences. In other words, Calvinists tended to voice concerns over social membership after Vassy and St. Bartholomew's Day as an alternative outlook in early modern conceptions of conventional political unity, instead of solely proffering oppositional theological perspectives.

This paper is historiographically positioned as a survey and culmination of various scholarly works. Following Natalie Zemon Davis' article, "The Rites of Violence" (1973), I intend to exhibit the extent to which the French Wars of Religion were significantly about religion, among a wide array of other factors. While Davis was the first to emphasize the role of religion—rather than solely economic and political concerns veiled by

religion—in the French Wars of Religion, academics, such as Barbara Diefendorf, Philip Benedict, Mack Holt, Denis Crouzet and David Potter, have since underscored the interplay of religious actors in their own contexts struggling to maintain the kingdom of France and its relation to the “sacred” therein. To this end, my intentions in this paper are to introduce readers to many of the scholarly understandings of the civil wars in France during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, we shall see a range of responses to Davis’ famous work that extend her ritual perspective of religious violence to legal “rights of violence”, as labeled by Mark Greengrass. Examination of such historical perspectives on Catholic and Calvinist conflicts at this time considerably contributes to our body of knowledge concerning the rise of Protestantism in early modern France. More importantly, the arguments presented below usher understandings that take seriously the role of religious dynamics in conjunction with political and economic factors during this period.

## II. Gallicanism and the French body politic

The political and religious atmosphere of France in the High Middle Ages through the 16<sup>th</sup> century represented an absolutist government tied to the regional ecclesiastic authorities within the Roman Catholic Church. The term “Gallicanism” is often attributed to the unity between the French church and state, which the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2005) defines as: “The collective name for the body of doctrine which asserted the more or less complete freedom of the RC [Roman Catholic] Church, esp. in France, from the ecclesiastical authority of the Papacy.”<sup>3</sup> On the whole, Gallicanism consisted of a privileged position of the French king in relation to the papacy, as well as a Church government that collectively minimized the authority of the pope. The basis of religious, legal and political power and authority in France was located primarily in the station of the king and partially in his

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3. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. “Gallicanism.”

subsidiaries.<sup>4</sup> It is relevant that within the Gallican political framework, religion—French Catholicism specifically—interacted directly with the monarch in a symbiotic relationship wherein both the religious and political spheres mutually benefited from their authority and legitimacy. As Frederic Baumgartner, a professor of History at Virginia Tech, affirms: “The adage ‘One Faith! One Law! One King!’ sums up the essence of late medieval French kingship: the king was both head of the French Church and the embodiment of French law.”<sup>5</sup> Medieval and early modern French monarchy was for all intents and purposes a divine office ruling the temporal and spiritual orders as one combined unit.

A good example of the spiritual investment bestowed upon the French kingship is seen in the royal rituals and ceremonial procedures performed during coronation. The king was required to swear an ecclesiastical oath attesting to the monarch’s “holy” station: “I shall protect the canonical privilege, due law, and justice, and I shall exercise defense of each bishop and of each church committed to him.” Continuing on, the sovereign finally pledged:

To this Christian populace subject to me, I promise in the name of Christ: First, that by our authority the whole Christian populace will preserve at all times true peace for the Church of God. . . Also, that in good faith to all men I shall be diligent to expel from my land and also from the

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4. France’s other authorities, including members of the nobility and ecclesiastics, who were often one and the same, generally swore fealty to the king. The papal treaty known as the Concordat of Bologna (1516) significantly granted the French king the right to levy tithes on clergy and appoint church leadership. Therefore, the Concordat assured, to a considerable extent, the fidelity of nobles, bishops, clergy, etc. See Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations, 2nd Edition* (UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 261.

5. Frederic Baumgartner, *France in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 9.

jurisdiction subject to me all heretics designated by the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Towards the end of the oaths and ceremony the archbishop also anointed the new king with consecrated oil and adorned him with the expected royal vestments, scepter and crown. Thereafter the king finally partook of the Eucharist—both the host and wine—which publically established his priestly nature over that of an ordinary layman.<sup>7</sup> The significance of the monarch's contribution and participation in both the body and blood of Christ cannot be stressed enough. This eminent gesture exemplified the unique stature of the king as holier than any individual in the kingdom, thereby emphasizing the importance of the Eucharist as the ritual sanctifying the king. In this way, French kings were both consecrated and crowned in their ascension to the throne where “the ceremony itself was called a *sacre* in France, emphasizing consecration rather than coronation.”<sup>8</sup>

The examples of oaths and ceremonies serve to highlight the deliberate collection of language, symbols and gestures directed to honouring the French king. The royal ceremony gave prominence to a sacred monarchy and also represented the relationship between the king and his subjects. On one hand, the political sovereign's authority was asserted over all other figures in which law and justice were understood as instruments for maintaining peace in the kingdom. The law and right to enforce punishments or measures in the interest of France culminated in the recognition of the king as the supreme ruler. On the other hand, the entirety of the coronation paid homage to the new earthly lord whose promises to defend the Gallican Church from heretics were officiated in the mass. If the Church and its members felt threatened by “acts of heresy,” it was the political (and religious) duty of the monarch to protect the body politic. Therefore, the subjects of France

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6. Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 8. The preceding citation is included.

7. *Ibid.*, 9.

8. *Ibid.*, 8.

legitimated the crown's political and divine status through their participation in the coronation and religious investment in the king as a protector of the people.

Furthermore, French historian, R. J. Knecht has also shown "By virtue of his [the archbishop's] anointing the king of France, who bore the title of 'Most Christian King', was deemed to possess thaumaturgical powers, that is to say powers of healing the sick."<sup>9</sup> The king would touch victim's sores or visible maladies with his bare hands, make the sign of the cross and say: "The king touches you and God cures you."<sup>10</sup> Again, religious belief bolstered the king's "divine" authority through his elevated status, which was considered close to godly. The power of healing accentuated the sacrality of the king's body and royal position. It is of course difficult to say definitively how many of the king's subjects believed in his ability to heal.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, this ritual was practiced periodically throughout each king's reign and large numbers of French subjects turned to the monarch in hopes of curing ailments.<sup>12</sup> These factors are relevant to interpreting the religious legitimacy attributed to the king's already powerful status, but also in comprehending Christian devotion to the king. From these perspectives, the anointing from the archbishop, the king's consecration in his coronation, the partaking in both the blood and body of Christ in the mass and his thaumaturgical powers all strengthened the crown's influence within his kingdom and served as a bulwark for Christian

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9. R. J. Knecht, *The Rise and Fall of Renaissance France: 1483–1610* (London, Fontana Press, 1996), 14–15.

10. *Ibid.*, 15.

11. The religious and political uniformity outlined here is not meant to essentialize the lived realities of all French communities at this time. There were religious movements, such as the Waldensians (and the Cathars before them), who sought alternative modes of religious expression. Likewise, it is impossible to state all nobles and laity completely supported the Gallican system. It is, after all, within this context that Reform ideas clashed with Gallicanism, and reformers and Catholics disputed notions of religious and political conformity. I am only pointing out that the codified political and religious framework tended towards immense degrees of uniformity.

12. Mack P. Holt, "The Kingdom of France in the sixteenth century" In *Renaissance and Reformation: 1500–1648*, ed. Mack P. Holt, 5–26 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.

unity under the monarch. These rituals were all significantly indicative of a dynamic relationship between the church and the state led by the king, as well as the kingdom's support of the monarchical institution. We can thus see how French monarchs were a combination of emperor and pope as the embodiment of a religious and political leader.

This survey of the nature and influence of Gallicanism within early modern France exhibits notions of authority and legitimacy, both political and religious, which were substantially rooted in the establishment of the monarch, as well as in society's support of the king's eminent status. It should not be altogether surprising then that the advent of Reformist, Calvinist and Lutheran ideas in France "threatened the perception of nation forged by both king and subjects, because the king's own coronation oath required him to protect and defend his realm and subjects from heresy."<sup>13</sup> The station of the king had been sanctified and officiated through the Gallican Church; and its members constituted the majority of French subjects in the kingdom. In turn, the monarch's coronation ensured that "other faiths" were to be viewed as heretical if they did not strictly adhere to French Roman Catholic notions of orthodoxy. What this meant for early Protestantism was that Catholics generally labeled Huguenots, or Christians performing Reformed rituals, heretical; indicating that their beliefs and practices were perilous and to be extinguished immediately. Importantly, "labeling" or "othering" Calvinists as "heretics" resulted in extremely violent persecution.

### III. Interpreting "Rites of Violence" for French Catholics

The history of early Reformed, Calvinist and Lutheran ideas in France is dispersed sporadically throughout the first decades of the 16<sup>th</sup> century without overly extravagant displays of public violence. It was not until 1562 that civil war had begun and raged in France as late as 1598. The massacre at Vassy (1562) was the first of many mass executions in which numerous Catholic

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13. *Ibid*, 23.

authorities brutally persecuted Huguenot communities.<sup>14</sup> Social historian Philip Benedict elucidates that in the period from 1560 to 1572 “Such Catholic-controlled towns as Sens and Gaillac [also] witnessed further massacres of Protestants.”<sup>15</sup> One of the most infamous events worth mentioning was the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre (1572). On that occasion, the Catholic Duke of Guise reportedly instigated the murder of Admiral Coligny (a Protestant leader) by dispatching his body from a building and instructing his royal guard to kill all Calvinists in the city. Thereafter, numerous Parisians mutilated Coligny’s body, hung it from the gallows and proceeded for days to butcher Huguenots throughout Paris and surrounding cities. Benedict writes that “from Paris, the violence spread to at least a dozen provincial cities over the next days and weeks. Perhaps 10,000 victims died in all.”<sup>16</sup>

The methods of violence used against Huguenot populations are just as shocking as the numbers. Catholic mobs mocked, stoned, hanged, burned, drowned, dismembered and paraded dead Protestant bodies. In the case of Admiral Coligny, his dead body was “quickly mutilated. . . [by] cutting off the admiral’s head, hands, and genitals. The corpse was then dragged through the streets, set afire as a heretic, and then thrown into the Seine,”<sup>17</sup> showing that such physical violence was not limited to the living. Other sites of violence include the massacre of Sens (1562). A Catholic preacher, Claude Haton, recalls that a Protestant captain:

half dead, was dragged through the streets by the children of Sens by a rope from one of his feet. . . raising the hue and

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14. At Vassy, a group of Huguenots congregated to worship in a barn and some thirty of which were slaughtered by Catholic authorities claiming the Calvinists had thrown rocks at the Catholic Duke of Guise, although scholars still debate who started the quarrel. See Potter, *The French Wars of Religion*, 50.

15. Philip Benedict, “The Wars of Religion, 1562–1598” In *Renaissance and Reformation: 1500–1648*, ed. Mack P. Holt, 147–175 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 153.

16. *Ibid*, 156.

17. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion*, 87.

cry: ‘Guard your pigs, here we have the pigman’ and at each crossroad they burned his body with oven spits. . . The children, having dragged the captain through the streets, went and threw him, with his other pigs, into the river Yonne. By this time night had fallen and imposed a silence on the fury, and the morrow there was no man so bold as to appear in the streets of Sens and declare himself a Huguenot.<sup>18</sup>

Comparably, an anonymous Protestant wrote of riots in Toulouse (1562) where many Huguenots “were stripped to the shirt, killed, dragged along and thrown in the river. . . men, women and children were thrown out of windows into the river. If, by chance, they got to the bank they were shot or stoned to death.”<sup>19</sup>

These examples illustrate a pervasive sense of physical violence on the part of Catholics against Protestants, both living and dead.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, we see frequent methods of force that included Catholics, and children in many cases, burning their victims with fire in various forms or drowning them in rivers and other large bodies of water. In this essay, therefore, I would like to examine precisely such issues of: why these methods (Catholic, as well as Protestant) were employed and to what end were they performed in this way? Were these communal Catholic attempts to harm Huguenots or communities more specifically? In addition, I wish to consider any impetuses—in purview of my initial discussion of Gallicanism above—that may have given rise to the violence that destructively separated much of French society at this time.

In light of these questions, Natalie Zemon Davis’ seminal article “The Rites of Violence” developed an original argument for interpreting a ritual

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18. Potter, *The French Wars of Religion*, 53.

19. *Ibid*, 55.

20. This is not to say that Protestants did not kill Catholics. Catholics enacted iconoclastic violence, such as the burning of Protestant books and Bibles, just as Calvinists killed Catholics. However, the massacres and riots of the Wars of Religion exhibit predominant Catholic physical violence and Protestant iconoclastic violence.

element in the violence of the French Wars of Religion. Davis, a scholar at the University of Toronto, coins Christian violence during the 16<sup>th</sup> century as “rites of violence” in which communities sought ritual purification through violent performance. She writes: “we may see their [both Catholic and Protestant] violence, however cruel, not as random and limitless but as aimed at defined targets. . . a goal akin to preaching: the defense of true doctrine and the refutation of false doctrine through dramatic challenges and tests” in order to ultimately rid “the community of dreaded pollution.”<sup>21</sup> This perspective is particularly insightful because it points out the extent to which Christian communities viewed other Christians as “pollution” within the structures of Gallicanism. That is, they dehumanized their brethren by means of constructing religious values that posited their opponents as objects needing evacuation because they were “polluting” the community. Furthermore, Davis argues that Christians imitated “the roles of priests, pastor and magistrate” in their ritual attempts to purify the disparate communities.<sup>22</sup> According to Davis then, analysis of religious violence at this time entails comprehending a performative aspect of Christian action that was directed towards emulation of Christian and monarchical values as a communal whole. That is to say that this contextual violence was generally directed towards displays of authoritative and religious values, from magistrates and priests for example, in order to didactically reaffirm values to the Christian body of believers. Working from Davis’ article, I thus wish to examine and interpret what is meant by “pollution” and “imitation” in the context of early modern French violence.

Firstly, it is important to notice that the ideas of “pollution” were not necessarily novel conceptions arising solely after 1562. Rather, rising apocalyptic notions, in conjunction with the oaths and coronation of the French king, contributed to perceptions of certain Christians as “diabolical contaminants.” With the gradual manifestation of Protestantism throughout

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21. Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays*, 152–188 (London: Duckworth Limited, 1975), 154–157. The article was first published in 1973, then republished in 1975 and another in 1986.

22. Davis, “The Rites of Violence,” 164.

the 1540s and 1550s, French Catholic writings—concerning ideas of Reform—stressed the imminent coming of God and the preceding apocalypse. Certainly, eschatological themes were prevalent before the European Reformations, but as Cunningham and Grell, of Cambridge University and the Open University respectively, affirm: “More than any other period of European history the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were characterized by apocalyptic expectations, eschatological speculations and millenarian dreams. . . it felt as though they were living through the Last Days. . . it was an age of crisis.”<sup>23</sup> The point these authors raise demonstrates early modern concerns for one’s Christian salvation. In France many Catholics related their ominous fears to Protestant behavior.

One example of an anonymous French Catholic in 1550 is revealing of such apocalyptic anxiety: “Since God created the world, never was seen so strange a time in which famine, war and pestilence reigned. . . daughters denying the holy sacrament to their mothers. . . God’s blood flowing in the street. . . stones cast at the cross.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, another Catholic invective at this time worries: “Now heresy is the sign of the end of this mortal world. . . filthy people will overthrow through their malice the pure Host and the daily sacrifice. . . everything on earth will be consumed by fire from heaven.”<sup>25</sup> An apocalyptic mood is present in these Catholic accounts and also an attitude in which these events were the result of impious behavior. That Christians questioned and rejected traditional sacramental rites struck Catholic communities (in the examples above) as a sign of immoral and sinful action on

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23. Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: religion, war, famine and death in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1. The authors show that the Black Death (plague) and natural disasters in general contributed to inflation, as well as other social problems, which were instrumental in a rising sense of crisis and eschatological anxiety (pp. 200–295). Moreover, floods, specifically in France, killed harvests and people in their wake, thereby adding to notions of anxiety. See Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 25.

24. Potter, *The French Wars of Religion*, 38.

25. *Ibid*, 38–39.

the part of reformers. Catholics targeted Calvinists as polluting agents (not human individuals) directly causing earthly catastrophes such as war, disease and famine. More importantly, many Catholics perceived Reform acts and beliefs as a “disease” producing further infection in the body of believers.

I would distinguish that words like “disease” and “infection” were tropes employed, not only by laity, but also by French kings in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century. In 1534, Francis I stated that French evangelicals “were vile and had to be dealt with like a disease”<sup>26</sup> after the Affair of the Placards.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Henry II (Francis’ son and successor) spoke in 1551 of the “common malady of this contagious pestilence [heretics or Protestants] that has infected many noble towns.”<sup>28</sup> These pejorative terms (pollution, contamination, disease, etc.) and language broach the idea of theological issues and alternate Christian “faiths” endangering or infecting the socio-political body as a whole. A Catholic fear existed that if part of the Christian community or body became “infected” or “polluted” with heretical beliefs and practices—whether it was the church, the king or the laity—the whole society was in danger of utter destruction and damnation. For this reason, many Catholics vehemently sought to eradicate what they deemed “heretical” as quickly as possible.

Following Davis, David Potter of the University of Kent contends that “religious violence was meant both to restore divine order and to allay divine anger. This is why Catholics were so concerned to purify society of heretical pollution through fire and water.”<sup>29</sup> The use of fire and water against Huguenots were means of disposing of Calvinists in order to appease God by ridding the community of the heretical contaminant. Likewise, Catholics often

26. Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christendom: Christianity in the Sixteenth Century* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2007), 322.

27. The Affair of the Placards (1534) was an incident in which anonymous evangelicals posted handbills throughout various French towns denouncing Catholic doctrine and the Mass. Significantly, one of the placards reached the king’s habitation and thereafter ten individuals were martyred for the outburst of Reformed public expression against Gallicanism. See Knecht, *The Rise and Fall of Renaissance France*, 170.

28. Hillerbrand, *The Division of Christendom*, 323.

29. Potter, *The French Wars of Religion*, 37.

used children as the epitome of innocence in ritually cleansing their communities of harmful “pollutants.”<sup>30</sup> Where fire and water were tools in washing away the sins of Protestants, children were the “most pure of cleaners” utilizing earthly elements as “cleansing instruments” to purify Protestantism and restore Gallican order. It was believed that the reasons disasters, such as war and mass hunger, occurred were due to Calvinist refusal of Catholic oblation to God. These were perceived as heretical actions jeopardizing Christian society; it was the duty of the monarch, authorities and even the community to rid France of this heresy, according to many Catholics, because Protestant impious behavior would incur the wrath of God and destruction of the Church. These issues exhibit Catholic views of Protestants and their dramatic performances against them, which were meant to demonstrate “orthodox” values, as French kings and authorities had previously maintained. However, French Calvinists also applied the idea of Christian “pollution” to Catholics.

#### **IV. French Calvinist theological perspectives and violence**

Before examining Huguenot views of “Catholic contamination” and “ritualistic performance”, it is necessary to briefly qualify French Protestant theology and beliefs. An appropriate understanding of the French Calvinist position displays in what ways their theology clashed not only with Catholic doctrine, but also with Gallicanism as a whole. With this in mind, the fundamental theological beliefs of Huguenots encompassed ideas of corruption and lies in their Christian history, which had been instigated by the institution of the papal Church. In opposition to Catholic ideals, reformers often voiced their critical opinions of the mass, purgatory, the role of clergy,

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30. This idea of from French historian Denis Crouzet found in William Beik, “The Violence of the French Crowd from Charivari to Revolution” *Past and Present* 197 (November 2007), p. 89.

sacraments and other Catholic doctrines. A description of Calvinist self-image written in the French town of Millau in 1560 shows their cause:

In this present year 1560, the Gospel started to be revealed everywhere in this kingdom; for it had been hidden almost since the time of the Apostles until now, resulting in tyrannies and cruelties that had been exercised throughout Christendom by princes, kings and great lords, fed by lies, and by false prophets against God, who had weakened the Church. . . by idolatry, had wood, stone and the Mass god worshipped. . . Thus he had seduced the people and did not allow them to understand divine scripture. . . brought great persecution on those of the Religion, who then started to be called Huguenots. . . conveying the idea that they were traitors (as was, once, Hugues Capet traitor to France).<sup>31</sup>

The French reformers (labeled Huguenots) sought to read and interpret scripture, to reform the corruption of clergy and the pope in the mass and to relinquish the idolatrous behaviour of venerating sacred objects. That is, Calvinists in France desired reform of Church sacraments and authority, as well as the sacrality attributed to earthly objects. For the Huguenots, like other reformers throughout Europe, Scripture was the ultimate spiritual authority, not the Gallican or Romanist Church. The Bible was to be made available to all Christians to read and interpret. In accordance with their interpretation of the Bible and the Ten Commandments, the Reformed churches affirmed strict prohibition of graven images and denied the Catholic doctrine of

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31. Potter, *The French Wars of Religion*, 40. In this quote we see the possible origins of the derogatory label “Huguenot.” Capet was the first French king in the 10th century, though I could not find why he is considered a traitor. Another source indicates that “Huguenot” is derived from the legend of the ghost Huguot or Hugon reputed to haunt the vicinity of Tours at night, and thus applied to Protestants because they were required to hold nighttime gatherings to worship, as they were not a legally sanctioned “faith”. See Philip Benedict and Virginia Reinburg, “Religion and the Sacred” In *Renaissance and Reformation: 1500–1648*, ed. Mack P. Holt, 119–146 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 140–141.

transubstantiation; meaning Christ was not corporeally present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, as Catholics ritually celebrated it.

Working from the French Protestant perspective, we can endeavor to interpret why Calvinists strove to expunge Catholic contaminants. Davis maintains that two primary pollutants needed purification for French Protestants: the clergy and “defilement of the sacred by Catholic ritual life, from the diabolic magic of the mass to the idolatrous worship of images.”<sup>32</sup> The clergy were viewed as detrimental agents, because they were the officials enacting what Davis describes as the “defilement of the sacred.” Likewise, Protestants detested the idea of Catholic laity worshipping “idolatrous images” for the reason that this kind of veneration perpetuated the institution of the Roman Catholic Church and its false doctrines. For Protestants then, Catholics were dirtying the House of the Lord through the spiritual authority afforded to the clergy and their priestly mediation in sacred rituals, but also by means of their veneration of icons. Remembering that Catholics viewed Protestants as the pollutants, Calvinists generally believed priests and the rituals of the mass, along with “sacred” relics, were the contaminants, because they were unchristian “lies” dividing the true Christian community of believers. Huguenots thus threw out, destroyed and attempted to remove all forms of clerical influence and sacred objects from their congregations. In more aggressive instances (for example the first quote appearing in the introduction of a Protestant stealing the Host from the priest) this entailed publically desecrating Catholic relics or symbols. While the majority of Protestant hostility was overwhelmingly iconoclastic, physical violence against Catholics, especially priests, did occur. In this way, recognizing the extent to which Protestants engaged in dehumanizing their Catholic brethren by means of desecrating and profaning sacred objects and symbols of the Gallican Church can be as challenging as interpreting Catholic violence.

For Protestants, “the purging of priestly ‘vermin’ promised the creation of a new kind of unity within the body social, all the tighter because

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32. Davis, “Rites of Violence,” 159.

false gods and monkish sects would no longer divide it.”<sup>33</sup> The clergy of the Gallican Church, whose role officiated the “diabolic lies” promulgating false religious practices and beliefs, was often the prime target of Huguenot aggression. To cut off clerical prevarication meant easing the path for reform. It follows that priests were often threatened, as is seen in this account of iconoclasm and riot at Issoire, Auvergne in 1562:

Things had come to such a point that monks and priests in the street were jeered at so they could not go out: ‘Look at the fox, the sneak, the Papist! Furthermore, they [Calvinists] beat on their shutters with stones, hammers and staves so that they drowned out the noise of everything else, adding horrible yowls. . . so that the clergy could only go into the streets with fear.’<sup>34</sup>

Some Protestants verbally assaulted their opponents and clergy with such menace by imposing fear, just as others called them worshippers of a “Pastry God” or a “God of dough”, in reference to the primacy of the Eucharist in the Catholic mass.<sup>35</sup> This was a crucial blow to Catholic notions of orthodoxy in which a pejorative remark to the bread of the Host denoted a false god consisting of pastry or dough, and not the body of Christ. This is not to say that Protestants and Catholics did not believe in the same God. Instead, I am asserting that they staunchly disagreed over the nature of Christ’s or any sacred presence on earth, including a presence in the Host of the Eucharist. These blatant rejections of Catholic ritual added resentment to an already increasing hatred of Protestant denials of religious authenticity for Catholics. Other drastic incidents, inclusive to those discussed above, were “throwing the sacred host to the dogs. . . roasting the crucifix upon a spit. . . using holy

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33. *Ibid*, 160.

34. Potter, *The French Wars of Religion*, 59.

35. *Ibid*, 42.

oil to grease one's boots [and]. . . leaving human excrement on holy-water basins."<sup>36</sup> These were all performances intended to persuade Catholics that their sacred objects contained no magical power or presence. Yet, as Davis distinguishes, such actions can be construed as symbolically violent means for attaining religious ends. Stated differently, Protestant iconoclasm and threats towards priests were deliberate demonstrations to convince the body social of their (Reformed) faith and its supremacy over Catholic ignorance and debauchery.

In assessing Christian differences in terms of violence and religious values, it is important to underscore the considerable weight afforded to the issue of Catholic rituals and their relationship to the French monarchy. Catholic sacraments and doctrines of the Church were vital to Gallican notions of eschatological existence. The Eucharist especially "was the most important sacrament, and the Eucharistic liturgy, or mass, was the heart of Christian life. It was key to the economy of salvation, and the most essential and familiar rite of the faith."<sup>37</sup> Carter Lindberg, professor of Church History at Boston University, acutely highlights the profundity of the dynamics at work here by writing: "an attack on the eucharist was an attack on the very foundation of the French kingship."<sup>38</sup> It should be understood that denying Christ's bodily presence in the Host, as many French Calvinists did, was interpreted as a sacrilegious abandonment of the pervasive values Catholics attributed to their Christian life, salvation, king and God. In other words, the differences outlined throughout this examination culminate in Christian identities (to be understood as one body of believers) struggling to reveal or display their own purpose and existence through the political, social and religious institutions that had been in place since the Middle Ages. Not unexpectedly, dismissing or contesting history, identity and religious beliefs is dangerous business with historically violent results. The French Reformation,

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36. Davis, "The Rites of Violence," 180.

37. Benedict and Reinburg, "Religion and the Sacred," 123–124.

38. Lindberg, *The European Reformations*, 263.

like the wider European Reformations, exhibits the vital importance of theological issues sparking tumultuous displays of conflicting religious values. The monarchy of France shared its power with the Gallican Church, as well as Catholic rituals, to the extent that to assault one meant the other was likewise threatened. Therefore, Protestant theology was dubiously viewed as a menace to the livelihood of the Church, the king, the monarchy itself and the entirety of the Catholic kingdom supporting these socio-political structures and rituals. Conversely, Protestants were arguing for their own Christian unity through the kingship, but their struggle was against a long historical institution rooted in medieval Catholic ideals oppositional to their own.

## **V. Problematizing the performance of Rites of Violence**

In the background of my analysis of Christian violence during the French Reformation are the particular methods employed in ridding Christian communities of their “pollutants”. Indeed, I have examined several accounts of physical and symbolic violence against various Christian communities, discussing the use of fire, water, children and iconoclasm. Of particular interest is that, according to Natalie Zemon Davis, Protestants and Catholics often ritualistically imitated the roles of priest and magistrate in order to purify their Christian communities.<sup>39</sup> This is an important distinction and I would further argue that “imitation” could likewise be interpreted as a type of religious performance in reaffirming the ideals of one’s religious “faith”. For Davis, both Protestants and Catholics believed their theological values were politically and religiously sanctioned and, therefore, acted violently as they thought authorities (i.e. priests/pastors and magistrates) would have similarly done. They were, in other words, performing the duties of authorities based upon and demonstrated through their own religious values.

Recalling the words of Francis I and Henry II, both kings had applied terminology such as “vermin, disease and infection” towards Protestants.

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39. Davis, “The Rites of Violence,” 164.

Catholics thus believed their violence against Huguenots was in accordance with the Gallican oaths and ceremonies those kings had sworn. In confirmation of this idea, Barbara Diefendorf, a historian of early modern France, provides an account of public execution of a Protestant heretic in which a participatory element of the crowd “became so unruly that it threatened to take the prisoner out of the hands of the executioners and attend to the burning itself.”<sup>40</sup> Diefendorf also states, in the case of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre—quoting Claude Haton—that: “When youths from the crowd mutilated Coligny’s dead body. . . parodying the forms of royal justice. . . [they] conducted Coligny’s trial as they dragged him along, ‘just as if they were judges and officers of the court’.”<sup>41</sup> Those Catholics zealous enough to act against reform communities did so by means of emulating the notions of political justice and religious anti-heresy promised by the king in his coronation. The lay Catholic and his/her community assumed the role of the magistrate and executioner through their own perceived notions of Gallican justice, thereby slaughtering those deemed “heretical.” Likewise, they also took up the role of the priest whose purpose was to defend and venerate Catholic ritual and the Christian God in the Eucharist.

For Huguenots, however, their position was not explicitly, publically, or legally sanctioned. Until 1562, Protestantism in France had been very much a covert “faith” because the majority of laity and authorities supported Gallican ideals, which oppressed “heresy,” including Protestantism as a new religion (labeled as heresy). Yet during the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, ideas of Reform gradually manifested and contested traditional religious values. Davis thus maintains that Calvinist “imitation” was especially prescriptive, in that, “Calvinist crowds were using his sword as the king *ought* to have been using it and as some princes and city councils outside of France had already used it.”<sup>42</sup> The crux of this argument is that both “faiths” performed as they believed

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40. Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53.

41. *Ibid.*, 103.

42. Davis, “Rites of Violence,” 164.

authorities would or should have done—imitating magistrates and church leaders—but that Calvinists did not initially have a governmental system officially supporting their position. However, with the rise of conflicts over what was to be considered Christian orthodoxy, the regent monarch Catherine of Medici sought resolution through the Edict of Toleration<sup>43</sup> in 1562 (the year in which the French Wars of Religion began).

Interpreting the historical significance of the edict, French historian Denis Crouzet, contends “Many prominent Catholics immediately flew into a rage because of the edict while the Parlement of Paris reprimanded the king with prophecies of the inevitable desolation of the kingdom.”<sup>44</sup> In the opinion of Crouzet, the edict was a major break with the prior traditions of the French monarchy under Gallicanism. From a modern point of view, the edict “made France the first Western European kingdom to grant legal recognition to two forms of Christianity at once.”<sup>45</sup> However, these advances troubled Catholics and prompted—in conjunction with their eschatological fears—their rejection of the edict’s legitimacy, because of their belief in the supremacy of long-established Gallican ideals (i.e. one Catholic faith). As Crouzet puts it: “unfortunately, the massacre at Vassy. . . can be seen as a response to this edict.”<sup>46</sup> This “response” further encouraged Catholic imitation of the magistrate and priest (and executioner) in assuring religious and political order endured, as long as it was consistent with the majority of Catholic perspectives. Notwithstanding, for Protestants, the edict provided substantial legal proof that their faith was becoming gradually triumphant within France. We see then that issues of violence revolved around Christian perspectives of what they believed authorities *should* have sanctioned. The monarch had

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43. The edict, also known as the Edict of January or St Germain, is a major factor in the Wars of Religion because it exemplifies a legal shift allowing Huguenots the right to worship privately without fear of persecution. See Denis Crouzet, “A Law of Difference in the History of Difference: The First Edict of ‘Toleration’” in *Religious Differences in France: Past and Present*, ed. Kathleen Perry Long, (Missouri: Truman State University Press, 2006), 1–18.

44. Crouzet, “A Law of Difference,” 2.

45. Benedict, “The Wars of Religion,” 147.

46. Crouzet, “A Law of Difference,” 1.

historically bolstered Catholics and their views of “heresy.” Therefore, they expected the king to act as they had in purging Huguenots. But Protestants, especially after the Edict of Toleration, believed the monarch would protect their beliefs and adherents, because they were French Christians.

Several academics have highlighted a distinction in which Davis’ notion of “Rites of Violence” must be viewed in light of what has also been called “Rights of Violence” or “Rituals of Popular Justice”. Stuart Carroll, for one, indicates that many conflicts during the inception of the Wars of Religion were about *rights*, in addition to *rites*. For Carroll, who cites Mark Greengrass, Huguenot uprising “was a defensive response to the imminent suppression of their right to worship, which had been guaranteed by law.”<sup>47</sup> Greengrass and Carroll do not dismiss the religious motivations of Protestants in ritually destroying Catholic relics through iconoclastic behaviour, but they contend that Davis’ *rites* were only one part of a complex set of stimulants perpetuating Huguenot desires for reform of the Church in their tumultuous environments. William Monter also affirms: “Catholics understood very well that the most popular alternative to legal repression of Protestantism was not the policies of compromise or toleration. . . it was illegal repression.”<sup>48</sup> Monter’s argument is that Catholics (and Protestants in many cases) increasingly operated outside of France’s court system imitating magistrates through their own antagonistic methods. Catholics extralegally performed acts of physical violence (against what they perceived as heresy) and Protestants sought legal recognition of their faith by attacking those objects they saw as symbolic of their oppression. According to Monter, the religious conflicts in France eclipsed the kingdom’s court system: “It was caught between a growing, self-confident, fully confessionalized Protestant ‘cause’ and an increasingly angry and mobilized

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47. Stuart Carroll, *Noble Power during the French Wars of Religion: The Guise Affinity and the Catholic Cause in Normandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5. For the early discussion of Mark Greengrass concerning the Protestant *Rights of Violence* in accordance with *Rites of Violence*, see “The Anatomy of a Religious Riot in Toulouse in May 1562,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 34, No. 3 (1983), 389–391.

48. William Monter, *Judging the French Reformation: Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 215.

majority loyal to the traditional faith, goaded by provocative Protestant actions.”<sup>49</sup> From this interpretation, there was a vicious cycle of religious rejection from both “faiths” sustaining pugnacious religious and political conflict.

These academic debates do not necessarily contradict one another. Rather, Carroll, Greengrass and Monter all work from Davis’ “Rites of Violence” to show that indeed, eschatological anxiety and religious concerns of purification prompted religious violence. Meanwhile, after the Edict of Toleration and the massacres at Vassy, Paris and elsewhere, Huguenots actively criticized the monarchical legal system under the king, rather than the Gallican Church and its theological doctrines alone. The point of contention is that anxiety over “pollution” and ritualistic performance of the magistrates’ or priests’ roles (by lay crowds) could not have been the only determining factor after 1562 and possibly before (recalling Calvin’s epistle to Francis I). The edict had officially reordered legal persecution in such a way that heresy and sin were no longer viable options for Catholics or authorities to punish Calvinists. Seditious was the only intolerable crime, which from the Protestant point of view, is exactly what the Catholics had committed in murdering those Christians in the massacres. It was, to state bluntly, a crime that needed retribution, because the Edict assured Protestant protection as legal subjects submitting to the kingship. When the monarch failed to reply to their protests,<sup>50</sup> Protestants generated a response of self-defense to Catholic abuses through iconoclastic violence and prohibition of the mass, which consequently led to harsh and long civil wars in France.

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49. *Ibid*, 216.

50. There were various reactions to Vassy and the St. Bartholomew’s day massacres—some more aggressive than others—but officially the crown’s response was to revoke the Edict of Toleration, because the king feared if Protestants continued to worship and respond with iconoclasm that further massacres would incur. Protestants thus felt betrayed after having had partial legal tolerance (even if it was not adhered to in practice). See Benedict, “The Wars of Religion,” 157.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The violence saturating the French Reformation, and more specifically the French Wars of Religion after 1562, is a complex phenomenon that has sparked the imagination of many scholars attempting to interpret why such events transpired. My analysis here is by no means exhaustive of the issues relating to French Catholic and Protestant turbulence during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, other academics have labored to explain the French Protestant massacres in terms of economic and class struggles, which are important to keep in perspective and are unfortunately not dealt with here. Be that as it may, I have found the religious, theological and eschatological motivations to be an extremely pervasive impetus for consideration. As we have seen, this period of early modern French history is suffused with political and religious tensions that are inextricably tied to theological issues established and continued from the Middle Ages.

I have endeavored throughout this paper to explicate conflicting notions of the one Gallican body of believers, including religious and political authorities (especially the king and his relationship to Catholic rituals), with the advent of a contesting Protestant theology and body of religious practitioners. Understanding the form of Reformation in early modern France entails consideration of the Gallican socio-political framework and in what ways reformers met their unique circumstances in order to establish their new “faith.” This is because the principal religious and political system of Gallicanism was not initially accommodating to an alternative “faith” when the majority of Catholics labeled its adherents heretical. Moreover, notions of religious “pollution”, in conjunction with apocalyptic anxiety and devotion to the king (and his godly station), culminated in both Catholics and Huguenots reacting to one another through varieties of violent action. On one hand, Catholics generally saw evangelicals as polluting agents (in themselves) that needed purification, even if dead, in order to eschatologically save the Catholic community. On the other hand, French Calvinists viewed Gallican priests and

relics or icons as contaminants requiring expungement because they perpetuated papal lies and false veneration thus dividing French Christians. Both Christian communities sought to cleanse their communities through violent performances in order to establish (in the case of the Protestants) and maintain (for Catholics) Christian uniformity under the monarch. However, these diverse attempts only added tensions to what was considered “orthodox” or “heretical” for nearly 40 years. As a result, civil war raged in France from 1562–1598 with the destruction of many lives and Church property.

These historical events and issues are particularly intriguing because when analyzed through a culturally contextualized lens, we are able to glimpse the violence as specifically oriented towards purification, rather than the infliction of pain or agony on individuals. The massacres at Vassy and on St Bartholomew’s Day are historic events that will not soon be forgotten. Yet, by investigating the stimulants behind these atrocities we might, in purview, arrive at subtle distinctions that would otherwise have been overlooked. In this way, 16<sup>th</sup> century French religious violence can be examined as ritualistic, instead of dismissively pathological. This means early modern Christian violence in France was predominantly concerned with didactic performances in which Catholics and Protestants sought to emulate political and religious authorities in order to maintain unity among the bodies of believers. At the same time, Calvinist performances after Vassy often emphasized the legal standing of their “faith” instead of the theological differences that had otherwise brought about violent persecution.

This notion of French Protestant *rights* is substantial because it exemplifies the extent to which theological conceptions gave rise to social, political and religious transformations that would affect the course of French history. Moreover, it specifically demonstrates a dynamic distinction in social tensions taking precedence over religious differences and definitions of French identity. This is not to say that Calvinists did not emphasize their Christian identity. Certainly, Huguenots were Christians arguing for their

legitimacy, even theologically after Vassy, but once Catholic mobs massacred and took up arms in the name of the king through ritual imitation or performance, French Protestants declared this an act of sedition, rather than stressing such action as sinful. More to the point, this was a profound moment for French Christian communities to identify themselves as subjects under the king, instead of as theologically opposed to Catholic doctrines.

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