Introduction

Like Michel de Montaigne, perhaps I too ought to have called this book an *essai* in the original sense; for an 'attempt' is about all one can manage in the face of the confusing morass of court factions, countless leading actors and bit players, a seemingly unending series of peace agreements followed by renewed warfare, and the bizarre diplomatic intrigues of nearly every state in western Europe that made up the French Wars of Religion. It is no small wonder, then, that even specialist historians have never found explaining this conflict a particularly easy task. What is a student to make of the problem? Thus, while this book is certainly a trial or attempt to 'make the crooked straight and the rough places plain' for the reader with little background to the French religious wars of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, I hope it is also more than that. Surely any reader who picks up a book claiming to offer 'new approaches to European history' has a right to expect as much. So, perhaps it is best to sketch out exactly what is so novel about this approach right at the start.

To begin with, the pages which follow will argue at some length that the series of French civil wars which began with the massacre at Vassy in 1562 and concluded with the Peace of Alais in 1629 was a conflict fought primarily over the issue of religion. This may startle some readers, used to the generations of historians and not a few sixteenth-century contemporaries who believed steadfastly that the main actors in the religious wars only used religion as a pretext, a 'cloak' in the words of the Parisian diarist Pierre de l'Estoile, to mask their political, dynastic, or personal power struggles. Moreover, other historians (and not just Marxist historians) have interpreted the civil wars as fomented mainly by socio-economic tensions rather than ideology, as urban, skilled, mainly literate, and prosperous merchants, professionals, and artisans turned to Calvinism as a means of combating the economic and political stranglehold of the landed elites of church and state. While I would be the first to agree that the politicization of religious issues played a significant role in shaping the course of the wars (especially during the wars of the League in the 1590s) and that socio-economic tensions were a permanent feature of early

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modern French society, occasionally bubbling over into popular violence, it seems to me that religion was nevertheless the fulcrum upon which the civil wars balanced.

I am not suggesting, however, that three generations of French men and women were willing to fight and die just over differences of religious doctrine, whether it be over how to get to heaven or over what actually transpired during the celebration of mass. What this book will propose is that the French Wars of Religion were fought primarily over the issue of religion as defined in contemporary terms: as a body of believers rather than the more modern definition of a body of beliefs.[1] Thus, the emphasis here is on the social rather than the theological. In these terms, Protestants and Catholics alike in the sixteenth century each viewed the other as pollutants of their own particular notion of the body social, as threats to their own conception of ordered society. When a mob of Catholic winegrowers set fire to a barn in Beaune where a clandestine group of Protestants had observed the Lord's Supper in both kinds on Easter Sunday of 1561, for example, their actions went far beyond an expression of discontent and intolerance of the Calvinist theology of the eucharist. Those winegrowers were cleansing the body social of the pollutant of Protestantism, and in the process, preventing a dangerous and threatening cancer from spreading. By setting ablaze the barn where that pollution had taken place, they were purifying by fire the social space those Protestants had desecrated.[2] Huguenots (as French Calvinists came to be called) did perceive Catholics as superstitious believers to be sure, just as French Catholics viewed them as heretics, but the resulting clash was one of cultures as much as theologies. This is hardly a novel approach to the Wars of Religion, as Lucien Febvre pioneered more than fifty years ago the study of what has today come to be called 'religious culture'. And the specialized research of more recent practitioners such as Philip Benedict, John Bossy, Denis Crouzet, Natalie Davis, Barbara Diefendorf, Jean Delumeau, and Robert Muchembled among others, has led to a far greater understanding of what religious difference meant in sixteenth-century France (see the 'Suggestions for further reading' for

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[1] For a discussion of this transformation of the definition of religion in the seventeenth century, see the perceptive comments of John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400–1700* (Oxford, 1985), passim, but especially pp. 170–1.

[2] This incident is recounted in Theodore Beza, *Histoire ecclésiastique des élises réformées au royaume de France*, ed. G. Baum and E. Cunitz, 3 vols. (Paris, 1883–89), I, 864, and III, 489. For other examples, see the classic interpretation of religious violence during the Wars of Religion, Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Rites of Violence' in her *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA, 1975), pp. 152–87.

bibliographic details). To date, however, no one has attempted to write a general history of the religious wars from quite this perspective.

I should point out, however, that by underscoring the religious nature of the Wars of Religion, as defined above in social terms, I am not implying that political, economic, intellectual or even other social factors ought to be de-emphasised. Not only did politics significantly matter in the sixteenth century, but as will become clear below, it was high politics that largely shaped the beginning and the end of the wars, not to mention how they were fought in between. My point is that there was a religious foundation to sixteenth-century French society that was shared by elites and popular classes alike, and it was the contestation of this essential religious fabric of both the body social and the body politic that led to the French civil wars taking the shape they did. In short, while civil war, popular revolt, and social violence were endemic to pre-modern society, it was the dynamic of religion that distinguished the sixteenth-century civil wars and resulted in the most serious crisis of French state and society before the Revolution.

Secondly, this particular attempt to explain the wars of religion will take a longer chronological perspective than most of its predecessors, which traditionally have depicted the Edict of Nantes in 1598 as the terminus of the wars. The older studies of J-H. Mariéjol, *La Réforme, la Ligue, l'Edit de Nantes, 1559–1598* (Paris, 1904) in the Lavisse series and of J. E. Neale, *The Age of Catherine de Medici* (London, 1943) as well as the more recent works of Georges Livet, *Les guerres de religion, 1559–1598* (Paris, 1962) in the *Que sais-je?* series; J. H. M. Salmon, *Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1975); and Michel Pernot, *Les guerres de religion en France 1559–1598* (Paris, 1987) all in various (and by no means similar) ways treat the Edict of Nantes as the *terminus ad quem* of the wars. Although this edict issued in 1598 is a convenient cutoff point, initiating an extended period of peace, it hardly marked the end of the fighting between Protestants and Catholics in France. More seriously, by ending the story in 1598 there is the implicit danger the reader might be persuaded that the Edict of Nantes was meant to establish a permanent settlement of co-existence between the two religions with a measure of toleration on both sides. According to the traditional interpretation, this settlement was brought about by a growing group of 'modern thinking' men in the 1590s called 'politiques', who felt that the survival of the state was more important than ridding the kingdom of heresy, especially as forty years of civil war had not achieved the defeat of the Huguenots. Putting religious differences aside, they turned to the newly converted Henry IV to end the violence and restore law and order. Mariéjol, Neale, and Livet go out of their way to underscore that this was indeed the case,

and by implication suggest that had it not been for the less tolerant policies of Louis XIII and Richelieu that Henry IV's edict of 1598 might have survived. 'The wars demonstrated', noted Georges Livet at the end of his brief summary of the conflict, 'that religious unity was an impossibility in late sixteenth-century France. The only solution possible if the country was to survive was the co-existence, albeit regulated and limited, of the two religions.'[3] The perspective presented here, while hardly novel in itself, will suggest that the Edict of Nantes was never intended by Henry IV or his 'politique' supporters to be more than a temporary settlement, to end the violence in order to try to win back by conversion those remaining Huguenots to the Roman Catholic church. Indeed, Henry himself urged his former co-religionnaires to emulate his own example and abjure the Protestant religion. This perspective stresses the continuity in the aims of Henry IV and Louis XIII rather than a dichotomy. Both monarchs had the same goal in mind: the traditional *un roi, une foi, une loi* – that is, one king, one faith, and one law – of their ancestors. Their means of achieving this goal certainly differed – with Louis XIII and Richelieu abandoning Henry's carrot of conversion in favour of a return to the stick of suppression – but an analysis of their policies suggests that their religious aims were not wholly dissimilar. Moreover, this perspective counters the traditional claim that the 'politique' supporters of Henry IV in the 1590s were a more 'modern' group of secular, political men with sceptical attitudes toward religious ideology. 'Liberty of conscience and toleration', Livet concluded, 'the foundation of a secular state, were two ideas dearly bought which defined the originality of Henry IV's French solution [in the Edict of Nantes]'.[4] No matter how hard generations of liberal, Protestant historians have tried to separate 'one faith' from 'one law' and 'one king', in the sixteenth century no such dissolution was possible.

Finally, in order to take account of recent work by historians on both sides of the Atlantic, the most stimulating of which has been in the area of social and cultural history, this perspective will take on a decidedly more popular and provincial look than most histories of the Wars of Religion. I have done my best to write as balanced an account as possible, in view of the many partisan accounts of the wars that still seem to surface. Doubtless much of the polemic is the result of the contemporary sixteenth-century rhetoric in the sources, where partisans of both sides tended to speak out much more often than more moderate voices, which

[3] Georges Livet, *Les guerres de religion* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977 edn.), p. 122.
[4] Ibid., p. 123.

were in a distinct minority in any case. As will become apparent, in a clash
of cultures such as the religious wars it is easy for the historian to swallow
whole the Catholic views of Protestants as 'seditious rebels' and the
Huguenot view of French Catholics as 'superstitious idolators'. These
perceptions clearly should be treated as stereotypes rather than reflec-
tions of social reality, as insiders describing outsiders, members of one
culture depicting a counter-culture. As such, they reveal much more
about the creator of these images than their intended targets. This is
not to suggest that many Protestants were not in fact rebelling against
the crown or that some Catholics were not superstitious. Historians such
as Peter Burke and Roger Chartier, however, have much to say on how to
'read' these texts. They can reveal a great deal, but about what, or whom?
Even self-perceptions need to be treated with care, as the Catholics' view
of themselves as 'guardians of law and tradition' and the Protestant
perception of themselves as the 'persecuted minority' are stereotypes.
None of these stereotypes was wholly fact or fiction, but the point is
that the stereotype itself can tell us a great deal about the motivations of
its creator whether it reflected social reality very well or not.[5]

Although my goal throughout has been to try to write a balanced
account, some readers will be able to detect a distinctly Burgundian
flavour to the book. This is explained by the fact that I had already been
working for two years on a study of the political and religious culture in
Burgundy during the Wars of Religion when I was approached to write
this volume. I have made a genuine attempt, however, to balance my
perspective with examples from other parts of France, or have only
chosen to illustrate my story with episodes from Dijon, Beaune, and
Auxonne which I thought were characteristic of France as a whole.
Nevertheless, I apologize if some readers still find the aroma of *pinot
noir* and *moutarde* too pungent for their palates; perhaps it will whet the
appetite of others.

I should also stress that the decision to write a more 'popular' history
was not shaped by any political agenda, social cause, or moral duty to
write a history of 'the common man' (not to mention woman) in the Wars
of Religion. Such attempts often do no more than trivialize or patronize
the subjects they are trying to elevate, and they can be just as one-sided as
those histories written from the perspective of the elites. Moreover,
decisions taken by kings to wage war or raise taxes had just as much a

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[5] Although many of their works could be cited, see particularly Peter Burke, 'Perceiving a
Counter-Culture', in his *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on
Perception and Communication* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 63–75; and Roger Chartier, 'Les
élites et les gueux', *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, vol. 21 (1974), 376–88.

direct impact on the lives of most French men and women as climatic
changes or declining birthrates. Thus, the attempt here is to eschew the
traditional court-centred approach in favour of one that takes into
account what the wars meant to those who lived in the towns and in the
countryside, not because it is more fashionable or more important, but
because ordinary French men and women bore just as many of the hard-
ships of the wars as courtiers and soldiers. One cannot ignore altogether
the central actors, who after all made the decisions that mattered in
waging war for half a century; but surely it is time someone attempted
to grasp the nettle and tried to integrate the new research of the past
twenty-five years with the traditional historical narrative of the civil wars
into a digestible form suitable for student and teacher alike. Of course,
this perspective is not the only way to view the religious wars, and I would
urge interested readers to explore the many other useful and valid
attempts to make sense of this complicated period. And I hardly need
add that this is not a 'total history' of the civil wars, much less a compre-
hensive history of France from 1562 to 1629. It is simply one historian's
'attempt' at making sense of a complex problem that still plagues the
world at the advent of the twenty-first century: religious wars.

1   Prologue: Gallicanism and reform in the sixteenth century

Ever since the Middle Ages French kings were both consecrated and crowned during the coronation ceremony that marked their ascension to the throne. And though French ceremonial shared much in common with English coronations across the Channel, by the sixteenth century it was clear that the constitutional aspects of the ceremony so emphasized in England took a backseat to the liturgical nature of the coronation so heavily accentuated in France. The ceremony itself was called a *sacre* in France, emphasizing consecration rather than coronation. Patterned after the first such ceremony, the crowning of Charlemagne by the pope in Rome in the year 800, French coronations traditionally took place in the cathedral church of Reims with the local archbishop officiating. With the ecclesiastical and lay peers of the realm, as well as the bishops of the French church and the royal princes of the blood assembled around him, the new king was required to make explicit his duties and responsibilities to the Christian church in his coronation oath. In the first part of the oath, called the ecclesiastical oath, the king swore: '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, as much as I am able – with God's help – just as a king ought properly to do in his kingdom.' Then in the concluding section, called the oath of the kingdom, the king further underscored his duty to defend the church as well as the kingdom. '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 jurisdiction subject to me all heretics designated by the Church. I affirm by oath all this said above.' Then, each new king of France would be consecrated as the archbishop anointed him with the sacred oil of the holy ampulla, anointing his body and smearing the sign of the cross on his forehead as he uttered, 'I anoint you king with sanctified oil. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.' This was the highlight of the entire ceremony, as the holy oil connected the new king to

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God as well as to all his predecessors of the previous thousand years (since, according to legend, a dove had first delivered the holy ampulla upon the occasion of the baptism of Clovis and all French kings had been anointed with it ever since). Only after consecration was the new monarch addressed as king and presented with his crown, sceptre, and regal vestments. The coronation concluded with prayers, psalms, and the celebration of mass, where the sacerdotal nature of French kingship was underscored once again as the newly consecrated and crowned monarch partook of the eucharist in both kinds – the host and the communion cup – demonstrating that in this one moment at least he was more priest than ordinary layman.

This assemblage of language, symbols, and gestures was anything but coincidental. Though the coronation ceremony had clearly evolved and been amended to meet changing political needs over the centuries, by the sixteenth century one historical constant at least was clear: the enfolding together of the French monarchy and the Catholic church. The language and symbols of the French coronation went far beyond the usual ecclesiastical overtones surrounding other monarchs of western Christendom, all of whom paid homage to their Lord as the true dispenser of their authority and on whose behalf they acted as his secular sword on earth. For French kings as well as their subjects the anointing with the sanctified oil of the holy ampulla, the explicit promise to defend the church from heresy, and the public display of the celebration of mass in both kinds were all signifiers full of meaning, as well as evidence that in France there was a special relationship between church and state that was not duplicated elsewhere. As Jean Golein, a fourteenth-century commentator, had described it, when each new king removed his clothing for the consecration, 'that signifies that he relinquishes his previous worldly estate in order to assume that of the royal religion, and if he does that with the devotion with which he should, I think that he is washed of his sins just as much as whoever newly enters orthodox religion'. While the pope may have recognized and singled out other monarchs for their service to God with special appellations – Ferdinand and Isabella were called 'Catholic kings' and Henry VIII was 'defender of the faith' – French kings had earned a much older and more redoubtable title: *Rex christianissimus*, the 'most Christian king'. Thus, the *sacres* of the kings of France were more than culturally replete symbols of the sacred nature of French kingship denoting a special relationship with God. As the General Assembly of the Clergy declared in 1625, French kings were not only ordained by God, 'they themselves were gods'. And as the Wars of Religion were to demonstrate, the special powers of these god-kings were accompanied by explicit responsibilities, the foremost of which was combatting heresy.

In Protestant England, by contrast, although their kings were also per-
ceived to be quasi-sacred and appointed by God, the coronation imagery
symbols were taken much less seriously. The holy oil with which English
kings were anointed was 'but a ceremony', as Thomas Cranmer declared
to Edward VI upon his coronation in 1547. The 'solemn rites of corona-
tion' were nothing but 'good admonitions' to the king. That Cranmer was
making a very Protestant point in this instance only underscores the ties
between the French *sacre* and the traditional Catholic church.[1] (Map 1
shows France during the period under discussion here.)

   Naturally, the sacerdotal and god-like powers bestowed on French
kings in their *sacres* necessarily required some sort of accommodation
with the ultimate temporal authority in matters spiritual, the papacy. And
it was this relationship between monarch and pope that had largely
shaped the king's ability to govern the Gallican church in France. The
term 'Gallican' itself was used by contemporaries to denote just such a
peculiar (or rather independent) relationship between the French church
and Rome; and the sacerdotal king of France stood as a prophylactic
barrier to protect the Gallican liberties from papal intervention. By the
sixteenth century, however, royal domination of the French church had
become so strong that the Parlement of Paris, the supreme sovereign
court in the realm, found itself faced with the prospect of protecting
and guaranteeing the Gallican liberties of the French church from the
grasp of royal rather than papal interference. 'By 1515', notes the histor-
ian R. J. Knecht, 'royal control of the ecclesiastical hierarchy was an
acknowledged fact'.[2]

   This was nowhere more evident than in the Concordat of Bologna of
1516. Because of the changing dynastic situation of the early sixteenth
century, with the Valois at war against the Habsburgs in Italy over
disputed possessions in Milan and Naples, Francis I sorely needed
papal support for his military adventures in Italy. In return for support
from Pope Leo X, Francis virtually decimated the Pragmatic Sanction of
Bourges of 1438: an agreement whereby king and pope had agreed to let
cathedral chapters elect both bishops and abbots independent of royal
and papal control. The king not only assumed the right to nominate
directly candidates for vacant bishoprics and archbishoprics, but also
to fill vacancies in the principal abbeys and monasteries in the realm.

[1] For an analysis of the French coronation ceremony see Richard A. Jackson, *Vive le Roi!
A History of the French Coronation from Charles V to Charles X* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1984),
quotations from pp. 20, 57–8, 215, and 218. Cranmer's speech to Edward VI quoted in
Peter Burke, 'The Repudiation of Ritual in Early Modern Europe', in his *The Historical
Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 233.
[2] R. J. Knecht, *Francis I* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 53.

10   The French Wars of Religion

Map 1 France during the Wars of Religion

In return, Leo received the right to veto any of Francis's nominations if
they were unqualified (bishops, for example, had to be twenty-seven years
old and trained in theology or canon law) as well as the right to collect
annates (one year's revenues) from all newly appointed holders of bene-
fices. Though the papacy had clearly much to gain by the Concordat,