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978-0-521-77324-9 - Society and Culture in the Huguenot World 1559-1685

Edited by Raymond A. Mentzer and Andrew Spicer

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SOCIETY AND CULTURE IN THE HUGUENOT WORLD, 1559–1685

The Huguenots formed a privileged minority within early modern France. During the second half of the sixteenth century, they fought for freedom of worship in the French ‘wars of religion’, which culminated in the Edict of Nantes in 1598. The community was protected by the terms of the edict for eighty-seven years until Louis XIV revoked it in 1685. The Huguenots therefore constitute a minority group tolerated by one of the strongest nations in early modern Europe, a country more often associated with the absolute power of the crown – in particular that of Louis XIV.

This collection of essays explores the character and identity of the Huguenot movement by examining their culture and institutions, their patterns of belief and worship, and their interaction with the French state and society. The volume draws upon recent research by leading historians and new specialists from across Europe and North America.

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AND

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Preface

Historians and their readers might well view French Protestantism under the *ancien régime* with considerable professional relish. The field of study is tightly defined, above all by strict chronological limits. The phenomenon unfolded tangibly and publicly in 1534 with the 'Affair of the Placards' and the repression that ensued, and closed in 1685 with the proscription of Reformed churches and worship within the kingdom. These 150 years represent, drawing an analogy with geology, a cross-section of time sufficient for significant stratigraphy without the need to sink into the impermeable and impenetrable geological strata. At the same time, providential reference points suitably structure this middling span. The first national synod of the Reformed churches opened in 1559; the final synod concluded exactly a century later. In between, the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, the Edict of Nantes and the Peace of Alès regularly and unmistakably punctuated the collective fate of the Huguenots until their official proscription with the Revocation.

The historiographic advantages of a legally recognized and tolerated Protestantism do not end here. Its implantation and continuing presence was soon concentrated in several relatively limited areas, which offer the additional pleasure of being largely south of the Loire in a region that is exceptionally inviting in terms of climate and countryside, historical patrimony and gastronomy. It would not be an excessively hazardous presumption to find here a related motive for the passion among many Anglo-Saxon historians for our Protestant past! On a more serious note, the community or collectivity, while not always collective, of Huguenots possesses comfortable dimensions, neither too large nor too small for those who wish to understand it. They were perhaps 15 per cent of the kingdom's population and maintained a stability wholly remarkable from the end of Henri II's reign until the middle of that of Louis XIV. In short, they constituted an undeniable minority in terms of mass, space and time. Accordingly, this appealingly pure minority has been, for the

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past half century, the chosen territory, the exquisite field for the historian of culture and society.

After having toured the deeply esteemed object, having determined the reference marks and offered the definitions, the moment comes to enter into the reality of things and to explore the terrain patiently and profoundly. What was the unique character and singularity of these populations, these groups, and these individuals whom the law and various institutions designated special or unusual without being foreign or unfamiliar? How did they feel about themselves? How were they recognized by others, especially when they were not worshipping in their temples or singing the psalms in their homes? Even the most fervent, who were undoubtedly not the most numerous, could not spend their entire lives in these pious activities. It is not always the distinctive nature of war, repression, massacres, or even petitions and remonstrances that allows us to see clearly. Faced with the etiquette of being Protestant under a monarchy ever more absolutist and Catholic, the historian's eye joins with that of the anthropologist.

This double vision, which leads us to read in fresh ways materials already examined and to gather and explore previously ignored sources, makes all the more valuable the project designed and executed by Professors Mentzer and Spicer. The dozen original essays gathered here have the common purpose of responding with nuance and variety, all the while avoiding excessive complexity, to a question put very simply, almost as if it has never been posed. What did it mean to be Protestant in France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for them, among them, for others, and for the powerful Catholic majority, which was both close by and typically hostile? How do we provide a concrete response to the two fundamental points raised by the prince de Condé in his 1563 letter to the king: 'this is to say, the unequal treatment of your subjects and the liberty to live among themselves without fear of being sought out for reason of their conscience'?

Leaving aside these general ideas, upon which French historians have written prodigiously and with which their foreign colleagues are well acquainted, the scholars at hand depart with near-missionary zeal to flush out, wherever they find – at worship, at school, in the army, at home, among friends, confronted by adversaries, at work, in midst of destitution, even as far as the cemetery – Protestants in their normal course of speaking, thinking, writing, calculating, organizing themselves, acting and, above all, simply existing in expansive and delightful as well as constrained circumstances and the small worries that formed the fabric

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of their daily lives. The internal and external sociability of a minority and frequently bullied community, whose shared faith does not guarantee homogeneity, requires, for precise description or, better yet, reconstitution, enormous tact in the approach as well as a fresh spirit. People in any society do not always tell us what they are doing, and the Huguenots are no different. The normative texts, whose interpretation is never simple, often serve as a screen or pretext for practices which are very different in either the letter or the spirit, as demonstrated by family or professional strategies revealed through private correspondence. In addition, spiritual and ecclesiastical issues are mixed with material, social and cultural considerations, which complicate matters and intensify their meaning.

In the presence of this Huguenot world and of the mass of documentation that it has produced, our colleagues, however familiar they may be with the subject, come almost entirely from a cultural universe that is external to Protestant France. In most cases, French and especially its Huguenot variant is not their mother tongue. Accordingly, they reflect on matters that no longer attract our attention. They see and discover things that we no longer recognize because we are too close. The horizon of truth is never clearer than in advancing pure vistas and multiplying the perspectives.

All of this explains why I, as the president of the Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français, honoured by the request to write this preface, and cognizant that the Society's Library and its many publications are integral to the work of the contributors, find it entirely in keeping with my position to celebrate the present volume, whose learned commentary does not exclude clarity of tone, as the admirable result of shared labour conceived essentially beyond the Channel and the Atlantic. In truth, the international network of skills and friendships present in this collection witnesses the unique and multiple interest elicited by the 'French Protestant' to whom this volume confers a presumption of an additional and particularly convincing existence.

LAURENT THEIS

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AC	Archives Communales
AD	Archives Départementales
AM	Archives Municipales
AN	Archives Nationales, Paris
ARG	<i>Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte</i>
Aymon	J. Aymon, <i>Tous les synodes nationaux des églises réformées de France</i> , 2 vols. (The Hague, 1710)
BHR	<i>Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance</i>
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris
BSHPF	<i>Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français</i>
CO	G. Baum, E. Cunitz and E. Reuss (eds.), <i>Joannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia</i> , 59 vols. (Brunswick, 1863–1900)
MS	Manuscripts/Manuscripts
MS Fr	Manuscripts Français
SHPF	Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français
SCJ	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>