REVIEW ARTICLES

REASON OF STATE, RELIGIOUS PASSIONS, AND THE FRENCH WARS OF RELIGION


In 1993 Mack Holt entitled a review article for French Historical Studies ‘putting religion back into the Wars of Religion’.¹ This applied most appropriately to Denis Crouzet’s monumental Guerriers de Dieu that featured his eschatological anguish thesis for explaining the extent of the violence of the French Wars of

Religion. But the review also included Barbara Diefendorf’s *Beneath the cross* that analysed the build up of resentment amongst the Parisian population before the massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day. Both books marked a departure, as Holt noted, from the political and economic explanations for the French Wars of Religion that had dominated historical narrative to that point. One should note, however, that both Crouzet’s and Diefendorf’s works owe a great deal to Natalie Davis who had pioneered the cultural and anthropological approaches to religious violence with her seminal article ‘Rites of violence’. When Crouzet applied Alphonse Dupront’s ideas about the sacred, the crusades, and pilgrimages to the early modern period, however, he painted a novel picture of the sixteenth century as inherently anxious about the end of time.

It would now be very difficult to understand this period without acknowledging that religion mattered and that people genuinely had a stake in what was going on in the Church. It is no longer possible to ignore the involvement of the laity in the religious life of their community, above and beyond what was required of them, and argue that people just sheepishly did what they were told. The French Wars of Religion is a case in point since the violence evidenced in urban massacres was in many ways an expression of the laity’s involvement in the cleansing of the community, a phenomenon that escaped the control of the elite. The modernist paradigm that religion was imposed from above as a form of control is no longer tenable, at least not in the way that it was applied to the French Wars of Religion until relatively recently.

As Ariane Boltanski and Liz Tingle point out in their respective books, religion has come back centre stage at the expense of high politics and perhaps the baby was thrown out with the bath water. The books reviewed here remind us of the wider intellectual context in which the confessional debate took place, especially the political culture of courtiers, notables, and nobles that operated in the corridors of power. If the early 1990s have helped us understand the strength of feeling expressed in the violence of the French Wars of Religion, the books discussed here show how the political elite, in the widest sense, sought to govern these ‘passions’. Opposition between reason and the passions was set out in Seneca’s *De ira* (On anger) written 2,000 years ago. It was all the more relevant for those who found themselves in the unenviable position of having to curb the violent excesses of the French Wars of Religion. Political culture was transformed by religious change, redefining royal authority at the heart but also at the periphery of the kingdom. In outlining the political culture of an elite that sought to mitigate the worst excesses

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of religious passions, these books return to political and intellectual history of the highest calibre.

This trend could already be found in some excellent studies of elite culture that have been published recently: Stuart Carroll’s *Blood and violence*, for instance, is a sophisticated exploration of noble values expressed notably in the practice of duelling that throws light on many aspects of the internecine nature of the wars of religion. Whereas Xavier Le Person’s “Pratiques” et “practiqueurs” or Hugues Daussy’s *Les Huguenots et le roi* have refined our understanding of the politics of the French Wars of Religion. Beyond a simple tug-of-war between opposing ‘parties’, both Le Person and Daussy have demonstrated how the political elite, divided by religion or interest, shared common values which allowed them to make common cause beyond their differences. In this respect, the reign of Henri III, historiographically ensconced between St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre and the League, was crucial in fostering common values through an ambitious programme of reform that has received scant historical attention until now.

Mark Greengrass’s *Governing passions* focuses on the transformation of the political culture of civil servants instigated by Henri III between the Estates General of 1576 and the 1584 Assembly of Notables just before the League. This reform of the state was driven by neo-Platonic ideas about government that were championed at court; notably by Henri III’s mother Catherine de’ Medici. The influence of neo-Platonic ideas on Catherine de’ Medici is precisely the topic of Crouzet’s *Haut cœur de Catherine de Médicis* so there is a pleasing complementarily about the two books. Rather than explore the causes of religious divisions and violence, Crouzet and Greengrass have chosen to focus on the impact of the French Wars of Religions on France’s political culture and re-definition of power instead. Although Henri’s programme of reforms was abortive, it testifies to a transformation of the elite’s political culture that would bear its fruits in the seventeenth century.

Crouzet’s *Haut cœur* is the continuation of a discussion begun in his *La nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy*: an attempt to explain what really happened on St Bartholomew’s Day 1572. Applying the conclusions that he had reached for this singular event to the whole second half of the sixteenth century, Crouzet provides a justification for the oscillation between conciliation with Protestantism through the Edicts of Pacification and coercion, particularly on St Bartholomew’s Day. Crouzet’s answer rests in a painstaking reconstruction of a ‘lost dream of the Renaissance’: an internally coherent system of thought inspired by neo-Platonism. Catherine would have been impressed by the neo-Platonic rhetoric of love during her time at the Florentine court and would have striven to maintain this ideal in spite of

the political necessity that she was confronted with during her regency. The result, Crouzet argues, is a spiritually inspired reason of state that struck a balance between the higher ideal of persuasion and the necessity of the use of force in certain circumstances. The crown’s policy during the French Wars of Religion would have owed more to Marsilio Ficino and the rediscovery of Plato than to Niccolo Machiavelli.

Crouzet attempts to explain the apparent inconsistency of the monarchy’s actions through the contemporary idea of dissimulation: those in authority kept their true motives secret and professed a different justification for their actions. Unlike what can be found in Machiavelli’s The prince, often evoked in discussions of Catherine de’ Medici, dissimulation could spring from deeply principled moral imperatives. Although his work is not mentioned in either study, this invites a discussion of Jan Elster’s pioneering study of modern rationalism, Raison et raisons, that challenges Seneca’s one-dimensional opposition between reason and the passions. It discusses familiar strategies like ‘enlightened self-interest’ where selfish motives are dressed up as altruism, but also the less familiar idea that the greater good can be pursued through actions that appear motivated by selfish passions. This could be applied to the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre and account for the apparent duplicity of the crown’s actions that Crouzet argues was nonetheless consistent with a higher moral imperative.

Crouzet’s assessment of the origins of reason of state would be commonplace if it did not include an important proviso: only a divinely appointed moral high ground gave the monarch the ability to make that call. By emphasizing the importance of these ideas on the political culture of Catherine de’ Medici, Crouzet offers a new perspective on a problem that has concerned historians of the French Wars of Religion for over a generation: to account for its successive swings between persuasion and coercion without coming to the conclusion that the French monarchy was totally cynical and/or inept. This book dispels the view that the French monarchy was inconsistent in dealing with religious change, even if the successive swings in policy fuelled the perception that it was. This amounts to a rehabilitation of Catherine de’ Medici as inherently duplicitous but more significantly sketches religious rather than secular origins for the modern reason of state.

This revisionism can also be found in Greengrass’s discussion of the reign of Henri III where neo-Platonism also played a role in the genesis of reform of the state. Neo-Platonism featured prominently in a series of lectures on moral philosophy that were given at the Palace Academy for the benefit of the king and his close advisers and served as an intellectual background to these reforms. Greengrass demonstrates that Henri III was successful in fostering common values of service and virtue amongst the notables and laid the foundations for the emergence of a professional civil service. The king upheld the idea that

‘governing passions’ was the best way to moderate the excesses of the religious wars and that leading by example would inspire the notables to enforce peace in the provinces. A series of books on civic government during the wars of religion reflect that Henri’s reforming efforts rippled all the way to the provinces, even if it was misinterpreted.

Mark Konnert’s *Local politics in the French Wars of Religion* is also revisionist in challenging the traditional narrative of the waning of royal authority between the reigns of Henri II and Henri IV. The Valois ruled in the provinces largely by consent, their political authority relying on being represented locally by royal officials. The rebellion of a large number of towns during the Holy Catholic League from 1585 to 1598 has been interpreted in the past as a symptom of the state’s weakness. But, Konnert argues, the towns of Champagne’s adherence to the League was more determined by local politics and opposition to the crown’s perceived onslaught on urban autonomy than by patronage or religious rhetoric. The picture depicted by Konnert, therefore, is one of towns defiant of a growing centralization of political authority in the hands of the crown.

A detailed account of one town’s struggle against the crown that ostensibly used leaguer rhetoric is the journal of Sébastien Le Pelletier, the grammar teacher attached to the cathedral of Chartres. The journal is edited by Le Person in another instalment of the *Travaux d’Humanisme et Renaissance* published by Droz. As usual for this series the scholarship and apparatus are painstakingly accurate and useful for a published primary source. Le Pelletier’s narrative offers a good example of a town that failed to be convinced by Henri III’s rhetoric, although how much of the leaguer priest’s cynicism was injected *a posteriori* and can be ascribed to later events is difficult to establish since the original manuscript is lost.

Nantes was the last city to submit to Henri IV in 1598 and in this respect Tingle’s *Authority and society in Nantes* is important. Tingle demonstrates that until the reign of Henri III, the relationship between crown and town council had been mutually beneficial. Similarly to what can be found in Konnert, Tingle seems to suggest that the crown sought to exert its authority in the towns more aggressively than before in the years immediately preceding the League. This fits in with the narrative of an ambitious programme of reform of the state that was uncovered by Greengrass. Although Henri III’s reforms were not actually implemented, Greengrass has established that the manuscript compiled at the Assembly of Notables of 1584 served as a blueprint for royal reforms far into the seventeenth century. Perhaps Henri’s rhetoric was more successful at the centre as is suggested by Sylvie Daubresse’s *Parlement de Paris* and Boltanski’s *Les ducs de Nevers*.

Daubresse’s book painstakingly outlines the chronology of the relations, often thought to be hostile, between the Parlement of Paris and the crown, that can serve as a litmus test for the reformation of the state. The Parlement had no legislative powers of its own but was responsible for registering the royal edicts before they could become law. The jurisdiction of the Paris Parlement was much greater than any of the provincial courts and made it crucial for enforcing the royal will. The Parlement of Paris also evoked reason as an antidote against the
excesses of the passions. But it did so to different ends, however, placing its emphasis on catholicity of the kingdom symbolized in the motto that featured above the Parlement’s door: ‘one king, one faith, one law’ and by consistently opposing the Edicts of Pacification.

Daubresse concurs with her supervisor, Crouzet, in describing a transformation of the crown’s attitude in refusing to give justifications for the various Edicts of Pacification. As Ralph Giesey had argued, Parlement embodied French law and represented the legislative authority of the king, in effect the king’s corpus mysticum.11 Charles IX’s proclamation of his majority at a lit de justice, held in Rouen in 1563 as a ploy to enforce the Edicts of Pacification on a reluctant Parlement, was a turning point. Similarly Charles IX asked the first president of the Parlement to bury the results of his inquest into the origins of the St Bartholomew’s Day Massacre and preferred to endorse full responsibility for the massacre. This suggests that the wars of religion in general and the Massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day in particular marked a departure from the past and introduced reason of state. In refusing to provide justification for its actions, the crown placed itself above conventional reason and decided to bypass the usual channels of government.

Daubresse’s main thesis that the Parlement opposed the crown’s policies to protect it from the wrath of the Catholic majority suggests that perhaps the author has taken the Parlement’s own rhetoric too literally. The crown is surprisingly absent from the polemical exchanges that characterize the French Wars of Religion and it is true that members of the Parlement often professed to speak in its name. A case in point is Jean du Tillet, greffier civil of the Parlement of Paris, who was a close adviser of Catherine de’ Medici. Du Tillet, for instance, answered Conde’s propaganda campaign to justify his taking up of arms, and the accusations that were levelled against the duc de Guise after the massacre of Vassy. Interestingly, Du Tillet mirrored the concerns of the Parlement that the duc’s assassin, Poltrot de Mére, should be executed publicly lest the people of Paris storm the Conciergerie ‘pour en faire un massacre’.12 Jean du Tillet was a model civil servant who served as an intermediary between crown and Parlement and was the ideal candidate for defending the crown’s reputation without compromising its moderating stance towards Protestantism.

In this respect, Ingrid de Smet’s Thuanus, the literary biography of Jacques-Auguste de Thou, a prominent member of the Parlement and conseiller of Henri III, is a disappointment. De Thou was one of the greatest literary minds of his time and was a spokesman for the Parlement’s Gallican stance on the Council of Trent and a defender of the crown against the religious passions of the League.13 Beyond a fascinating discussion of De Thou’s Greenblattian self-fashioning, de

13 Alain Tallon, Conscience nationale et sentiment religieux en France au XVIe siècle (Paris, 2002).
Smet has little to offer by means of a discussion of the wider political or religious context. De Thou’s most important work, a History of his times, led him to be rejected for the post of first president because of his impartial discussion of St Bartholomew’s Day. It is regrettable that neither Daubresse nor de Smet discusses more fully the extent to which members of the Parlement were involved in contemporary polemic. The Parlement, by virtue of its role as regulator of the print trade, could rely on a privileged relationship with the printers to further its own agenda.14

Boltanski’s Les ducs de Nevers et l’état royal, for its part, describes a dynasty that remained loyal to Henri’s government despite disagreement about enforcing catholicity in the kingdom. Louis de Gonzague, duc de Nevers, participated in the Palace Academy lectures described by Greengrass, sought influence at court, and fostered a personal relationship with Henri III. He hosted a conference between Catholic and Protestant theologians in 1566 and after 1572 he was described as one of the ‘evil counsellors’ that had plotted the massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day. It is likely that he promoted the idea of a military coup to remove the Protestant leadership, illustrating Crouzet’s point about the emergence of reason of state. As a member of the conseil privé he participated actively in Henri III’s programme of reform although he agreed with the Parlement that it would only be successful if it served the re-catholicization of the kingdom. But as Boltanski demonstrates, Nevers did not join the League and remained loyal to the crown despite Henri III’s recognition of a Protestant heir in 1584. Here we can make a parallel with the Parlement that, notwithstanding its reluctance to register the Edicts of Pacification, was not well inclined towards the League. This suggests that the traditional narrative of state-building, emphasizing the building up of absolutism in opposition to power held in the periphery, does not quite hold true as far as Parlement and the nobility are concerned.

Boltanski professes to revise our understanding of the emergence of the modern state from the ashes of feudalism, questioning the prejudices of the modernist approach to the process of state-building. In her analysis of the fortunes of the house of Nevers, ranking just below the princes of the blood, Boltanski aims to demonstrate that the reform of the state was not necessarily conducted at the expense of the princes’ power as is often argued. Concurrently, Daubresse concludes that if the Parlement of Paris was determined to safeguard catholicity in the face of the conciliatory efforts of the crown towards Protestantism it was by no means the thorn in the crown’s side that it is often made out to be. Rather, Daubresse argues, the Parlement served as a ‘buffer’ between the crown and the religious passions of its royal subjects, always mindful to maintain public order.

A narrative of co-operation between the crown and its satellites, the Parlement and the nobility, would replace the familiar story of a triumphant absolute monarchy jealous of its power. As Daubresse and Boltanski demonstrate, both the

Parlement and Nevers upheld catholicity of the kingdom as the first step towards successful reform of the state, a view that was shared by a large proportion of the French population. Royal rhetoric, as Greengrass and Crouzet argued, hinged on a break from the past and fostering common virtues amongst the civil servants that were not necessarily shared by the crown’s subjects. What Tingle’s and Konnert’s books have shown, is that this strategy was not entirely successful in the towns and provoked the resistance of local civil servants who taxed the crown with hypocrisy. This suggests that although the Parlement and the Catholic nobility shared the towns’ concern for catholicity, it was easier to dissent the further away you were from the centre of government.

Without misrepresenting the views of the authors of such an array of books, all with their respective merits, one can draw a number of useful conclusions from them. First of all, there seems to be a concerted effort to return to intellectual and political history and to revise the traditional narrative of state-building. Greengrass and Crouzet, both in different ways, outline the origins of a modern reason of state that goes against the modernist assumption that reason alone legitimized the actions of the state. This is outlined in Greengrass’s ‘governing passions’: divinely inspired moral principles steered good government between the Charybdis of emotions and the Scylla of reason, rather than promoting the predominance of one over the other. Beyond that Crouzet suggests that modern reason of state owed a great deal more to religious ideas than we thought, rather than being purely the product of a secularization process that took place in the course of the scientific revolution and culminated in the enlightenment. This is possibly the beginning of a new departure in the historiography of the French Wars of Religion: the modern distinction between reason and faith can no longer be applied blindly to the early modern period.

It is during the reign of Henri IV, of course, that the rhetoric of opposition between religious passions and political reason became the most prominent. In a recent book, After the League: politics and religion in early Bourbon France (2009) co-edited with Alison Forrestal, Eric Nelson analyses the king’s address to the Parlement of Paris before the registering of the Edict of Nantes. Henri IV applied to the conservative members of the Parlement the same treatment that he had given former members of the Holy Catholic League: a mixture of persuasion and coercion. He presented himself as a father would to his sons, forgiving and gentle, but also warned in no uncertain terms those who would oppose the Edict. He lambasted preachers who had excited ‘the passions’ amongst his subjects and appealed to the douceur of the lawyers, effectively appropriating the rhetoric that had suffused both Catherine de’ Medici’s and Henri III’s practice of government.

These books suggest that the Bourbon dynasty was able to draw on a reservoir of goodwill amongst the civil service and a political culture that had been moulded during the reigns of their Valois predecessors. Although reform of the state remained a dead letter largely due to the emergence of the League it enjoyed a lasting legacy far into the seventeenth century. Konnert’s, Tingle’s, and Le Person’s books illustrate the strength of the League in the towns but Konnert
suggests counter-intuitively that this was a consequence of the penetration of royal rhetoric in the provinces. As Daubresse and Boltanski demonstrate, this rhetoric was most successful at the centre inasmuch as the ducs de Nevers and Parlement remained loyal to the crown despite voicing sympathy for the general aims of the League.

This suggests that contrary to what contemporary polemic would have us believe, Henri III was more successful than he was given credit for. For too long has the historiography reproduced the myth of Henri IV as a providential king bringing peace to his kingdom after decades of civil war. As the books reviewed here demonstrate, Henri IV owed much more to the reforming efforts of Henri III and the political culture fostered by Catherine de’ Medici than had previously been thought. This amounts to a rehabilitation of Henri III from one of the most reviled French monarchs to the potential father of the modern state, prevented from implementing his ambitious programme of reform by the passions of his subjects. Perhaps the debt that the Bourbons owed to their immediate predecessors has been overlooked because of a spilling over of contemporary propaganda in the historiography. The Massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day continues to cast a long shadow and explains why both Catherine de’ Medici’s and Henri III’s more positive contributions to France’s political culture have been ignored until now.