Accusations of infanticide on the eve of the French Wars of Religion

Introduction

Infanticide is commonly thought to be the crime committed by women who find themselves burdened with an unwanted child. This understanding derives from work which has concentrated on trials on the 17th, 18th and 19th century. Infanticide in the medieval and early modern period, however, remains less well known. Although women were put on trial for the crime as in the later periods, infanticide was not exclusively linked to unwanted pregnancy and poverty. On the eve of the French Wars of Religion, for instance, infanticide was associated with heresy and the accusation was levelled against the Protestant community as a whole. It is interesting to note that, unlike the following period, it was the entire group, male and female, that was accused of infanticide, and the narratives indicates a collective responsibility. The accusation of ritual murder, including neonaticide, the killing of a newborn child, was used against other groups, such as Jews, since late antiquity. The long history of this accusation, which was used continuously from late antiquity to the early modern period, highlights the horror with which it was regarded in Europe. Concealment and secrecy was a predominant element of these accusations. It is precisely because nobody knew what Protestants were doing during their nightly meetings, that it was possible for Catholic propagandists to accuse them of neonaticide. This element of doubt, together with the fact that infanticide remained a ‘hidden’ crime, often difficult to prove, constitutes a disturbing element of continuity with the later period.
One cannot underestimate the importance of religion in pre-industrial Europe. The Scriptures were the first port of call and referred to infanticide in the context of pagan and sacrilegious rituals. In the middle ages, accusations of ritual murder, also known as the ‘blood libel’, were therefore turned against non Christian Jews and heretical groups. The French Wars of Religion, which divided the country from 1562 until 1598, is often explained along political or social lines. It is only recently that religion has come back centre stage in the historical explanations of this period. The ‘blood libel’ constitutes an important facet of the Catholic response to Protestantism in France and provides an interesting background to the discussion of infanticide in the later period.

1. Catholics and Protestants before the French Wars of Religion

The French Wars of Religion were marked by atrocious acts of violence which culminated with the massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day in August 1572. Recently, Denis Crouzet has argued in Les Guerriers de Dieu (Paris, 1991) that violence was motivated by the fear of the end of time. This work gives pride of place to the eschatological literature, almanacs, astrological predictions and sermons, that would have made France into a ‘civilization of astrological anguish’. Crouzet’s thesis has been criticized for the partial view it provides of the printed culture of sixteenth century France. Furthermore, a bibliographical survey of the printed literature of sixteenth century France, pursued at the St Andrews Reformation Studies Institute, suggests that the astrological literature described by Crouzet does not figure as prominently as it was made out to be.

One unsuspected finding of this survey concerns the vibrancy of the Catholic response to the challenge of the Reformed message, emanating from the printing presses of Geneva in the second half of the sixteenth century. An important component of this response was
devoted to the systematic denigration of the Protestant cause by Catholic propagandists, including high ranking theologians of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris. These authors resorted to medieval stereotypes of the heretic, borrowed from the patristic and medieval period, to make a comparison with French Protestants. Quoting from a long list of precedents, Catholic theologians argued for the continuing persecution of Protestants at a time when the Crown was advocating measures of conciliation. These works were destined for a lay readership although the extent to which these representations of Protestants penetrated beyond the ranks of literate urban elite is difficult to establish. Catholic propagandists nonetheless aimed at manipulating the perceptions of their readership, turning Protestants into manifestations of an undying monster: the infanticidal heretic.

In the closing years of the reign of Henri II, Protestants were actively persecuted and forced to seek refuge in the anonymity of private houses. The edict of Châteaubriant (1551) made heresy into a criminal offence, while the edict of Compiègne (1557) imposed the death penalty for the exercise of the Reformed religion. Persecution remained unabated after the accidental death of Henri II, as the Guise seized the reins of power and took the young king François II under their protection. Accusations in print of orgies and infanticide served to justify the persecutions. The polemical campaign intensified at the beginning of the reign of Charles IX as the regent, Catherine de Médicis, sought measures of conciliation towards Protestantism. ⁶

This is a period when the Catholic majority became increasingly aware of the presence of a Protestant minority in its midst. It is marked by what were perceived as acts of provocation and defiance by the Protestants. On the night of 4 September 1557, students of the Collège du Plessis stumbled upon a clandestine Protestant meeting in a house of the rue Saint Jacques where between three and four hundred people had gathered to celebrate the
Lord’s Supper. The presence of women among them inspired a rumour, which was reproduced in print by Catholic polemicists, that they had assembled there to take part in an orgy. In May 1558, between four and six thousand Protestants met every evening of a whole week in the Pré-aux-Clercs to sing psalms. The French Reformed Church was becoming more aggressive and organized, and its first national synod was held in Paris in 1559. These events marked the intensification of religious divisions and the beginning of a polemical campaign to revile Protestants.  

It is important to understand that the most salient point of contention between Catholics and Protestants concerned the Eucharist. Calvinists denied the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist and emphasized the symbolic nature of what they called the Lord’s Supper. It had been a Protestant attack on the Catholic Mass in 1534, known as the Affair of the Placards, that had provoked the change of heart of François I towards evangelism. At the colloquy of Poissy in 1561, the ultimate attempt at conciliation before the outbreak of the Civil Wars, Theodore Beza had declared that the body of Christ was as distant from the wine and the bread as the sky is from the earth. The intractability of the Catholics and the Protestants on this particular point of contention rendered any attempts at conciliation ineffectual. The Eucharist and the Mass was at the heart of the collective religious experience of the Catholic Church. By partaking of the body of Christ, the communicant renewed his bonds with the community at large as well as with God. The Protestant onslaught on the real presence threatened the very foundations of the communal religious experience of the Catholics. During the wars of religion the host was the source of much controversy and violence. Protestants pointedly derided the host by calling it 'Jean le Blanc' while Catholics celebrated its efficacy and ability to work miracles.
It was the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the Protestant response to the Catholic Mass, which was at the centre of the polemical campaign to revile them. In order to avoid detection, Protestants were made to swear an oath not to reveal the names of those who took part in their ceremonies. The clandestine nature of these proceedings was the source of much suspicion just as the ceremonies of the Manichees had roused the suspicion of Augustine: ‘I cannot know what you, the elect, do among yourselves. I have often heard you say that you received the Eucharist, but the moment of its reception remains hidden from me: how could I have known what you received?’ Like the early Christians, Jews and heretics of antiquity, it was the secrecy of the Protestant’s celebrations which enabled the Catholics to spread stories against them. A Catholic polemicist writing in 1560, addressed the king directly to make that very point:

Now (if I understand correctly) after they realised that your royal majesty was offended by such insolence, they retired in caverns, forests, and hidden places, where they conduct their Sabbath, and diabolical Eucharist, revoking from hell the superstitions of the ancient idolaters.

In the 1550s, and especially in the wake of the affair of the rue Saint Jacques in September 1557, Protestants were accused of conducting orgies under the cover of darkness. Reference to darkness, secrecy and enclosed spaces, are recurrent in each description of the ‘diabolical Sabbath’ of the Protestants. The word ‘cavern’ is the most often reproduced in these accounts: ‘caverns, forests, and hidden places’, ‘caverns, and subterranean hidden holes’, ‘what characterises the heretics is to have pits, caverns and hideouts’. These conventicles always took place at night or under the cover of darkness: ‘surely when you see them, you will say that they are enemies of light as the owls are, night thieves, blind moles,
when entire companies of them throw themselves in caverns to hide, in pits and remote places and any other hideout that they can find’.

Because Protestants gathered clandestinely at night to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Catholic propagandists were able to summon ancient nightmares of heretics conducting a parody of the Mass, drinking the blood, and eating the flesh of a slain infant. This parody of the central sacrament of the Christian faith had emerged during the Christian persecutions under the Roman Empire. It had antecedents in anti-Semitic accounts of the Jewish ceremony of Passover, which were assimilated by pagan critics of the new Christian religion.

2. The origins of the ‘blood libel’

The ritual murder of children has deep roots in the collective memory of the Judeo-Christian World. The Old Testament associates the ritual burning of children with the cult of the Canaanite fire god Moloch. The Greeks and Romans were thought to sacrifice children to Kronos or Saturn, a deity which was often depicted as eating his own children. At the turn of the third century Tertullian reported that: ‘children were openly sacrificed in Africa to Saturn as lately as the proconsulship of Tiberius’. In both cases, the ritual killing of infants was attributed to a pagan cult, that of Moloch among the Canaanite and to the cult of Saturn among the Romans. The versatility of the accusation of infanticide, associated with a hostile religious cult, points to its universal appeal as a mark of infamy. Whether these accusations had any foundations is uncertain.

It was widely believed, from the use of the word *expositio* to refer to abandonment, that Romans abandoned children to die in the wild. John Boswell, in *The Kindness of Strangers*, has argued that although the abandonment of children was a common fixture of the pre-industrial world, the children were often adopted and seldom died. It seems, however, that the
sale or abandonment of children did not carry the same moral stigma that it would today. The
eating of children, however incredible it may seem, was also reported in cases of famine or
sieges. The Scriptures already describe two women who had agreed to eat each other's
children in turn during the siege of Samaria. In Spain in the thirteenth century, it was
criminal to cause a child's death by abandonment but it was legal to sell or even eat one's own
child during a siege. The Scriptures' condemnation of infanticide as a form of ritual sacrifice
indicates that it probably did take place. The sacrifice of Isaac is the most notorious example
of infant sacrifice: the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his own son reflects its acceptance
in the ancient world. The intervention of the angel and the substitution of Isaac with the ram
marks a watershed in this respect. The New Testament marks an even greater departure as the
sacrifice of Christ on the cross can be seen as the reversal of the sacrifice of Isaac: God offers
his own son in sacrifice to redeem humanity.

Although both the Old and New Testament condemns it, both Jews and Christians were
accused by the Romans of committing infanticide. Jews were accused of the ritual killing of
infants under Emperor Caius: ‘Appion spread the rumour against the Jews that they killed a
Greek child in their temple and sucked his blood, after having fattened him for a year’. The
‘blood libel’ dates back to at least the second century BC when the Syrians captured Jerusalem
and heard that every seven years Jews carried out a similar ritual in the temple. During the
persecutions in Rome, Christians were accused of committing ritual murder and of eating the
flesh of infants. It has been suggested that the allegation of ritual murder at the hands of
Christians sprang from a misunderstanding of the Christian Eucharist. The biblical entreaty:
'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life' was perhaps interpreted literally
by those outside the Christian faith. As we shall see cannibalism and/or the burning of
infants to make flour and bake a simulacrum of the wafer was also leitmotiv of Patristic anti-
heretical literature.

The predominance of this them suggests the emergence of a taboo regarding infanticide
in the Christian world. Having been used against pagans, Christians, and Jews, the accusation
of ritual murder became the mark of the heretic. After the conversion of Constantine, when
Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, the ‘blood libel’ was appropriated by
the Church Fathers who used it against the first Christian heretics. Epiphanius of Salamis
(315-403) first used narratives of ritual murder against the Gnostics, who were among the first
challengers of Christian orthodoxy:

In the first place, they hold their wives in common ... the next thing they do is
feast ... they next go crazy for each other .... And when the wretched couple has
made love ... the woman becomes pregnant .... They extract the fetus at the stage
appropriate for their enterprise, take this aborted infant, and cut it up in a through
shaped like a pestle. And they mix honey, pepper, and certain other perfumes and
spices ... and then all the revellers ... assemble, and each eats a piece of the child
with his fingers.23

Epiphanius’ catalogue of heresies was followed by a similar work by Augustine of
Hippo (354-430) who used a variation of the blood libel against the Montanists:

They are said to have a baleful sacrament: they make their wafer the same way
they would bread, mixing flour with the blood of a one year old child, extracted
from small puncture wounds from his whole body: if the boy dies, he is venerated
among them as a martyr; if however he survives, he is held among them as a great
priest.24
The Church Fathers provided precedents against which every subsequent heresy was compared. From the twelfth-century until the fifteenth, several heretical movement were accused of the ‘blood libel’. Guibert, abbot of Nogent (1055-1125) describes in his *Autobiography* the bacchanalia of the heretics of Soissons at the beginning of the 12th century, with a slight variation:

In caves or other subterranean and hidden places, they hold their council. There, both men and women light some candles and go to a young girl who, bent forward, offers her behind for all to see: this is what I heard. Later on, they extinguish the lights, and shout: Chaos! Immediately, everyone grabs the person nearest at hand and makes love. If, following from this, a woman is pregnant, they return to the same place after birth: this time, a great fire is kindled, people sitting around it pass the baby from hand to hand, and then throw it into the fire where it is consumed; when it is reduced to ashes, they use it to make bread that is divided between all of them; a heretic will never repent once he has participated in such a Eucharist. If you read Augustine’s list of heresies, you will find a similar account concerning the Manichees.25

Different versions of this story were used throughout the Middle Ages whenever the Church was faced with a wave of heterodoxy.26 The same story was used at regular intervals against a variety of undesirable groups such as the Albigensians, the Waldensians, the Beguines and the Templars at the turn of the thirteenth century.27 Significantly, Jews were equally persecuted during the Middle Ages and were singled out as scapegoats in times of plague. They were often accused of having kidnapped missing children to offer them in sacrifice in the ceremony of Passover. The children who were thought to have been killed in this way became martyrs and sometimes saints and their graves were visited in pilgrimage and
were the sites of miracles. Probably the most famous example of this phenomenon is the martyrdom of William of Norwich in 1144:

... the Jews of Norwich bought a Christian child before Easter and tortured him with all the torture that our Lord was tortured with; and on Good Friday hanged him on a cross on account of our Lord, and then buried him. They expected it would be concealed, but our Lord made it plain that he was a holy martyr, and the monks took him and buried him with ceremony in the monastery, and through our Lord he works wonderful and varied miracles, and he is called St. William.28

Another example is provided by the case of 'Little Saint Hugh' who was allegedly ritually murdered by Jews in 1254 in Lincoln, and whose grave became the site of miracles and pilgrimages. In 1235 in Fulda, thirty four Jews were massacred around Christmas time, having been accused of the ‘blood libel’; the authors of the massacre went as far as carry the bodies of the alleged victims to the Emperor to prove that the Jews lusted for blood.29 In Trent in 1475, Jews were judged for the killing of a child who shortly became 'blessed Simon martyr', accused of having drawn blood for the purpose of celebrating Passover.30 Later accusations, which focus on the drawing of blood, show a clear kinship to the stories of antiquity.31

Medieval accusations of infanticide went hand in hand with monastic idealisation of children's virginity as marks of purity and innocence. The medieval catalogue of saints included many infants whose sanctity derived from their virginity. Hayward argued that, ‘children were thought to possess an almost angelic and pre-lapsarian purity in both body and mind by virtue of their virginity, and the monastic life was frequently conceived as a means of preserving this condition or of returning to it’.32 And according to John Boswell, there was a
lapse in child abandonment in the twelfth-century as monasteries often welcomed abandoned children as oblates. In the hagiography of early Christian Europe, royal children killed by ambitious relatives were often made into Christian martyrs.

Strikingly, the ‘blood libel’ had lost none of its potency in the early modern period when it was turned by Catholics against Protestants. Natalie Davis has described how children were often involved in acts of cruelty against Huguenots and Crouzet has argued that they carried out God's will in all innocence and purity. By contrast, the accusations of ritual murder of innocent children in diabolical ceremonies made the Protestants all the more detestable.

3. The use of the ‘blood libel’ against Protestants

Comparison between Protestantism and the heresies of late antiquity and the medieval period were a common staple of anti-Protestant polemics. These key periods of Church history were marked by two fundamental Church Councils (Nicaea in 325 and the fourth Lateran Council in 1215) which defined orthodoxy in the face of heresy. The heretics condemned at these Councils became indistinguishable from one another in the minds of the Catholic authorities and were used as precedents to condemn further heresies. To all intents and purposes, all heretical groups were related and any new heterodox movement would immediately be added to the family tree of heresy. Augustine had described the tree of heresy and the great medieval sums perpetuated this image and passed it on to the sixteenth century. For example, Bernard of Luxembourg’s Catalogus haereticorum omnium (1522) and Alphonso de Castro’s Adversus omnes haereses (1534) catalogue heresies along the principles laid down by Augustine.

From the outset of the Reformation, Catholic theologians compared Protestants with what they saw as their medieval counterparts. For example, in 1537, the Catholic
controversialist George Witzel described the Lutherans in those terms: ‘the sects of this age have great affinity with the old .... The similarity of nature and behaviour is in all points obvious’. In order to fuel their arguments, Catholic theologians also translated and borrowed heavily from Church Fathers’ treatises against heretics. The translator of an edition of Vincent of Lérins’s Pour la Verité et Antiquité de la Foy Catholique (1560) thought that no modern author could be as eloquent, or brief, on the subject of heresy. When George Witzel compared the doctrine of salvation by faith with the Manichees’ beliefs, he was echoed by the French authors who wrote against the Calvinists. This argument was used, for example, by Nicolas Durand, Chevalier de Villegagnon, who compared the doctrine of predestination to the dualism of the Manichees. Thus all heretics were interchangeable and were guilty of the same crimes. Crucially, infanticide played a large role in the stereotyping of heretics.

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the ‘blood libel’ was influentially relayed by Desiderius Erasmus in his book On the Concord of the Church (1533):

But these examples are all in the past. Surely much more to be deplored is that within recent memory there have been discovered nightly gatherings at which, after praise has been given to God, the lights are extinguished and the men and women consort in promiscuous love. Or the ceremonies in which mothers freely hand over their infants to be butchered, and even watch serenely the horrid crime, so persuaded are they that their children will thus find a high place in heaven ...
This madness seems to have taken its origin from the heresy of the Valentinians, who made the Eucharist from flour mixed with the blood of an infant. This blood they would draw from small pinpricks, and if in the process the child died, it was venerated as a martyr.
Whether this passage was inspired by a rumour that circulated in Paris in 1532 about a sect that sucked the blood of infants is unclear. But the use of the ‘blood libel’ by Erasmus gave it a degree of credibility and subsequent authors cited it as a precedent. Stanislas Hozius, a Polish Cardinal, refers to Erasmus as his source in his *Hatchet of Heresies* (1561):

I only mention in passing the 300 who, after having sung praises to God, extinguished all the lights, and copulated with one another like animals ... And another sect (which is mentioned by Erasmus) amongst whom mothers bring their own children to be killed, and consider lightly such a horrible sacrifice ... Can anybody think of something more abominable, hateful, and horrible than that?

A Frenchman, Antoine du Val, referred to Erasmus for a precedent of what he inferred had occurred at the assembly of the rue St-Jacques in September 1557:

Our Calvinists are like those heretics: after having sung psalms and other songs, they put out the lights: as for what they do after that, I refer you to what was done in Paris, in the night of 4 September 1557, in the great rue Saint Jacques, where there were more than 500 heretics assembled ... who after the candles were put out, mixed together indiscriminately, men and women, to make love. Erasmus adds in his book on the admirable concord of the church that far worse was done at these nocturnal meetings, where fathers willingly offered their own children to be sacrificed, seeing such horrible crime favourably, believing that their children, thus killed, became martyrs.

By using this story, Catholic polemicists associated Protestantism with a long list of heretics and sought to justify their persecution at a time when Protestantism threatened to take over the body politic. The use of the ‘blood libel’ against the Protestants of the rue Saint
Jacques must be seen in the context of centuries of characterization of heretics, which had become ingrained in the culture of western Christendom. The story had become an integral part of the institutionalized Church’s response to heresy and the Catholic authors were perpetuating medieval persecution mechanisms.

4. Protestant reactions to the ‘blood libel’

It is difficult to gauge what Catholic polemicists tried to achieve by using the ‘blood libel’ against Protestants and whether it had the intended impact of their audience, which remained fairly limited. It provoked, nonetheless, a vigorous response from the Protestants and fuelled a flurry of polemic which contributed to the definition of Protestant identity. Because the ‘blood libel’ had been used against Early Christians, Protestants argued that their persecutions were as unjust as those of the Early Church Martyrs. This enabled them to make a case for the martyrdom of the victims of the persecutions under the reign of Henri II. Martyrdom was a keystone of Protestant identity, and it was propagated from Geneva through the numerous editions of Jean Crespin’s Book of Martyrs from 1554 onwards. The most revealing exchange took place between Nicolas des Gallars, who was minister in Paris during the affair of the rue Saint Jacques, and the Dean of the Paris Faculty of Theology, Antoine de Mouchy.

Des Gallars made the point of indicating the pagan origins of these accusation: ‘Is it not the same accusation that was used against Christians in the past, saying that they killed little children to eat them?’ Des Gallars pointed out the similarity with the accusations against which Tertullian wrote his Apology during the persecutions of Emperor Trajan in the second century:
We are called abominable from the sacrament of infanticide and the feeding thereon, as well as the incestuous intercourse, following the banquet, because the dogs, that overturn the lamp, (our pimps forsooth of the darkness) bring about the shamelessness engendered by our impious lusts.\textsuperscript{49}

Unlike any minority group against which the accusation had been used before, Protestants were able to turn it round to their advantage. By drawing attention to the use of the accusation against the Early Church martyrs, Protestants were legitimizing their cause. Another Parisian minister, Antoine de la Roche Chandieu, recounts in his \textit{History of the Persecutions} (1563), that des Gallars’ arguments had been decisive:

Doctors of the Sorbonne tried to respond to this argument: but the stupid brutes, as it is their custom, could only uncover their own ignorance in this matter. One named Mouchy, deducing without any proof from a learned decree that we are heretics, spends the whole book discussing the punishment of heretics and concludes that they must be burned.\textsuperscript{50}

Whether in response to the Protestants’ arguments or not, there is evidence that Antoine de Mouchy attempted to substantiate his claims with first hand accounts of the clandestine meetings. The controversy that had been roused by the affair of the rue Saint Jacques in 1557 was intensified during the short reign of Francis II, which was dominated by the infamous duc de Guise who stepped up religious persecution. This period coincided with an unprecedented wave of persecution that lasted from August 1559 to March 1560 and culminated in the purge of royal officials and high-ranking civil servants. In addition to accusations in print, there is evidence that the Cardinal of Lorraine, the duc de Guise’s brother, conspired with de Mouchy to add credibility to these stories at court.\textsuperscript{51} According to Protestant sources, Antoine de
Mouchy received the testimony of two young apprentices who claimed to have been taken to a Protestant meeting by their master. They were coaxed into revealing the names of those who had taken part and to testify that an orgy, such as was described in the polemic, had indeed taken place. Antoine de la Roche-Chandieu provides a detailed account of the testimony of one of the apprentices:

The apprentice told the judges that it was his master who had led him to the assembly. As he was so prompt to denounce his master, great promises were made to him in exchange for the names of those he saw there, and he enumerated everyone without exception, adding that the rumours about the assemblies were true, that people copulated freely once the candles were put out.\(^{52}\)

According to another account, one of the apprentices even claimed to have had sex two or three times with one of the daughters of the lawyer in whose house this orgy had taken place.\(^{53}\) The Cardinal of Lorraine brought the two apprentices to Catherine de Médicis in an attempt to convince her that the stories disseminated in print by de Mouchy and others were true.\(^{54}\) Theodore Beza’s *Ecclesiastical History* adds that the Cardinal of Lorraine made a parallel with a number of medieval heresies which suggests that he was drawing from printed polemic:

The Cardinal, for his own part, did not miss an opportunity to use their testimony. With their written confession in hand and the two apprentices at his tail, he went to the Queen Mother, to describe to her at length the content of their confession with great exclamations, leaving nothing out so that those of the religion were portrayed as the most odious and abominable creatures that had ever lived. So that nothing would be missed, he embellished his account with all the things that
various heretics had done in the past, accusations which had been suggested by the
devil to cast a shadow on the light of the Gospel, from the time when it had started
being preached in secret, because of the persecutions of the pagan and idolatrous
emperors.55

The long list of heretics provided by the Cardinal of Lorraine was also used as precedent in Catholic polemic, notably in Antoine de Mouchy’s work. There could be no better evidence of the congruence between the agenda of the Guise and the productions of the Catholic polemicists.

According to the Ecclesiastical History, Catherine de Médicis would have been swayed by the testimony of the two apprentices but was advised to have them cross-examined.56 The cross-examination of the witnesses revealed that they had been lying, and the whole matter was dropped. There is evidence, however, that despite the denial of the false witnesses the belief that Protestants took part in orgies survived. Penny Roberts has uncovered the case of a city councillor of Troyes who escaped prosecution in 1562 by arguing that his only reason for attending a Protestant meeting was the hope of taking part in such an orgy:

A few were imprisoned in the goal of the palace where they stayed awhile. The conseiller de Pleurre was one of them. Being brought before those gentlemen of the court of the Parlement to be interrogated, he confessed so that he could be let out of prison. He had attended a Protestant assembly and sermon to fulfil his carnal desire and have sex with the woman of his choice, thinking that the rumour was true, that women gave themselves freely at those assemblies. But having seen and understood that this was false, and not having found what he was looking for,
he had resolved not to go there again. The court, trying hard not to laugh, released de Pleurre.  

Furthermore, the myth of the orgiastic Protestants was mixed with the horrible reality of the Parisian persecutions during which times children were left abandoned on the streets of Paris. Lancelot du Voisin de la Popelinière’s History of France recounts how preachers on street corners rekindled the ‘blood libel’ by pointing at these children as those the Protestants had intended to eat during their orgies:

One could not walk through the streets without coming across soldiers armed with swords who roughly led all kinds of male and female prisoners. Poor little children were left in the streets, crying of hunger, and no one rescued them for fear of being arrested himself. People paid less attention to them than they would to dogs, such was the Parisians’ contempt for the Protestant faith. To encourage the hatred of the Parisians, there were people at street corners who told them that the heretics gathered at night to eat those little children and copulate with one another when the candles were put out, after having eaten a pig instead of the Paschal lamb and committed together an infinity of incest and infamous deeds: and people believed it as if it was true.

Again, it is difficult to determine the circulation of the ‘blood libel’ and whether it had any credit among the Catholic population of Paris. Another Protestant author, however, remarks that the ‘blood libel’ lost credibility and that the Catholic switched to more credible accusations of rebellion. Indeed, in March 1560, a small army led by the Protestant noble attempted to kidnap the young king François II, which provoked a second salve of Catholic propaganda. After the outbreak of the French Wars of Religion in 1562, when the Protestant
Prince of Condé seized Orleans, the accusation of political disobedience was more credible and, one may argue, justified. Nonetheless, the ‘blood libel’ appeared once more on the eve of the massacre of Saint Bartholomew and was used against Italians, mirroring the rumour that had circulated in 1532. This points to the universality of the ‘blood libel’ which was used indiscriminately against Jews, heretics, Protestants and Italians in the course of almost two thousand years.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the ‘blood libel’ was used against minority groups in antiquity and throughout the middle ages. Catholic authors who disseminated these accusations in print after the affair of the rue Saint Jacques were merely setting the medieval persecution mechanism into motion. As it had successfully been used against heretics and Jews in the past, the expectation was that it would work again against Protestants. The Protestants were able to respond to these accusations and turn them to their advantage by drawing on a comparison with the early church martyrs. Furthermore, the agenda of Catholic polemicists like Antoine de Mouchy had coincided with the royal policy of persecution during Henri II and Francis II’s reign. But when the latter died in 1560, the ten-year-old king Charles IX was put under the tutelage of Catherine de Médicis who started implementing conciliatory measures. After the appointment of the Chancellor Michel de l’Hôpital, the policies of the regent’s court were increasingly at odds with the Sorbonne and the Parlement of Paris. The combination of these two factors meant that printed accusations of infanticide were gradually replaced by accusations of rebellion and civil disorder, which were easier to substantiate, especially after the outbreak of the French wars of religion.
In the early modern period, infanticide was not exclusively associated with women and unwanted pregnancies. The killing of a new-born child was a collective ritual, perpetrated by heterodox groups under the cover of darkness. To the modern reader, the ‘blood libel’ may seem little more than folk tales, but in the highly volatile context of sixteenth-century France, it could have dire consequences for the groups against which it was used. In the eyes of Catholic polemicists, it served to justify further persecution of heresy, in the same way that it had been used against Jews across the ages. On the eve of the massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day, it was even used against Italians, whose wealth and influence at court attracted popular hatred. Infanticide, before becoming a crime which could be ascribed to poverty and the opprobrium associated with pregnancy outside marriage, was the universal mark of infamy with which one could brand all undesirable groups.


4 The French Religious Book Project.


10 Diefendorf, Beneath the Cross, p. 122.


12 Jean de la Vacquerie, Catholique remonstrance aux roys et princes chrestiens, a tous magistrats & gouverneurs de Repub. touchant l’abolition des heresies, troubles & scismes qui regnent aujourd’hui en la Chrestienté (Paris, Claude Fremy, 1560), sigs D2r–D4r.

13 Ibid., sigs D4v, E5v, E6v; John Eck, Les lieux communs de jean Ekius, contre Luther (Lyon, Jean Marnax, 1551), sig. c4r; Antoine de Mouchy, Responce a quelque apologie que les heretiques ces jours passés ont mis en avant sous ce titre: Apologie ou deffence des bons Chrestiens contre les ennemis de l’Eglise catholique (Paris, Claude Fremy, 1558), sig. K1v; Thomas Beauxamis, Histoire des sectes tirées de l’armée sathanique (Paris, Guillaume Chaudière, 1576), p. 83.


17 2 Kings 6:28

18 Genesis 22


22 John 6:54


24 L. G. Müller (ed.), *The De Haeresibus of Saint Augustine: a translation with an introduction and commentary* (Washington, Catholic University of America Press, 1956), p. 74 [Dr Peter Maxwell Stuart has provided me with a more elegant translation].


33 Boswell, The Kindness of Strangers, p. 296.

34 Hayward, 'The idea of innocent martyrdom' p. 83; Boswell, The Kindness of Strangers, p. 139.


37 Bernhard von Luxemburg, *Catalogus haereticorum omnium* (Köln, E. Cervicorni, 1522).


42 Nicolas Durand, *Lettres du Chevallier de Villegaignon sur les remonstrances, a la Royne Mere du Roy la souveraine Dame, touchant la Religion* (s.l., s.n., 1561), sigs B3εv.


48 Des Gallars, Seconde apologie, sigs D8v; Baum and Cunitz, Histoire Ecclésiastique, I, pp. 143-4.


50 De la Roche-Chandieu, Histoire des persecutions, sig. d1v.

52 De la Roche-Chandieu, *Histoire des persecutions*, sigs x7r-x8r.


54 An., *La Maniere d'appaiser les troubles, qui sont maintenant en France, & y pourront estre cy apres: A la Royne mere du Roy* (s.l., s.n., 1561), sig. B2v.


56 Ibid., p. 237.

57 Penny Roberts, *A City in Conflict: Troyes during the French Wars of Religion*, p. 84 n. 64; BN Dupuy MS 698 (Pithou), fol. 243v (I have to thank Penny Roberts for the transcript of this document).


59 Augustin Marlorat, *Remonstrance a la royne mere du Roy, par ceux qui sont persecutez pour la parole de DIEU. En laquelle ils rendent raison des principaux articles de la Religion, & qui sont aujourdhuy en dispute* (s.l., s.n., 1561), sigs. B5v-B6v.

60 Henri Heller, ‘The Italian Saint Bartholomew: Assassins or Victims?’ (unpublished paper given at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, 1999), 17 pages; *Le Tocsain contre les*
massacreurs et auteurs des confusion en France (Reims, 1579) in Archives curieuses de l'histoire de France, L. Cimber & F. Danjou eds (Paris, Beauvais, 1835), 1ere serie, 7, p.27.