

THE EUROPE OF WARS OF RELIGION

Europe: Between Religious War and Peace

16th Century-First Half of the 17th Century

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ABSTRACT

The spread of the Protestant Reformation during the first half of the 16th century led to fractures in Christianity. While the South remained faithful to Catholicism, in the North, political authorities imposed the new denominations, or confessions. In between, multi-denominational nations were shaken by religious clashes; they had to invent modes of coexistence and a new equilibrium between politics and religion. The violence that erupted in Germany, France and the Netherlands was fed by the fear of an imminent Last Judgement and by a desire to contribute to doing God's will. That violence jeopardized nations. By coming up with peaceful means of resolving inter-denominational conflicts, political authorities managed to defuse the violence. The interiorization of piety and the growth of a more individualized concept of salvation also participated in that ebbing. The experience and memory of religious troubles contributed to strengthening the role of nations and to imposing the idea of a separation between the political and religious spheres.



Denominational map of Europe. © Pierre Couhault.



Heinrich Thomann, scenes of iconoclasm from the year 1528 in Heinrich Bullinger, *Reformationschronik*, circa 1564 (Zurich, Central Library, ms. B 316, f° 321v and 337). In Bern (top), the Disputation ends with the City Council adopting the Reformation and having images removed from churches. In Toggenburg (bottom), the destruction of images by the inhabitants is both a religious and political act: they are rallying behind Zwingli's reforms while also condemning the rule of the Abbot-Prince of Saint Gall, the local nobleman.



Giorgio Vasari, *Scenes from the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre*, the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican, 1573. These three monumental frescoes decorate the Regal Room (sala regia). They depict the attempted assassination of Admiral Coligny (center), his execution and the massacre of Protestant (left), and King Charles IX accepting responsibility for the events (right).

The emergence and spread of the Reformation in the early 16th century destabilized the balance of power in many European countries. Religious divisions became superimposed over political and social conflicts, leading to civil wars breaking out around Europe until the mid-17th century.

At the time, they were referred to as revolts, rebellions, troubles or even wars “with a religious pretext.” It wasn’t until the 1580s that the expression “Wars of Religion” appeared, in both French (*guerres de religion*) and German (*Religionskrieg*). During the century of the Enlightenment, it caught on as an umbrella name for 16th-century conflicts and the Thirty Years’ War. The idea was to emphasize the fact that religious belief could ruin a country and tear society apart.

A political reading of those conflicts dominated until the early 20th century, one that reduced the religious factor to a pretext that was instrumentalized by the elites. In the 1920s, Marxist historians and those from the Annales School focused their analyses on the economic aspects, describing the troubles as the result of class struggle. It wasn’t until the late 20th century that Natalie Zemon Davis’s and Denis Crouzet’s work on religious violence highlighted the deeply religious meaning that those involved gave to their actions, gestures and targets. Protestantism’s success could be explained by the profound spiritual crisis experienced by the faithful at the dawn of the 16th century.

This return of the religious dimension allows us to better explain seemingly irrational behaviors, commitments and forms of violence that had hitherto been impossible to interpret. Although the relevance of the expression “Wars of Religion” to refer to the conflicts that ravaged Europe from 1522 (Knights’ War) to 1648 (Peace of Westphalia) is still being debated, it cannot be denied that the religious factor played a crucial role. The desire to impose one’s own denomination or defend one’s religious community sparked the conflicts. None of the wars were entirely about religion. They all depended on a complex equation between religious requirements and political solutions, the salvation of individuals’ souls and the permanence of the political community. Those tensions need to be taken into account in order to understand the dynamics of the conflicts and the paths to pacification and ending the troubles.

Fracturing Christianity

“Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”

Those are the terms Martin Luther used to describe the liberating conclusion he arrived at in 1516: that faith in Christ’s redeeming sacrifice alone sufficed to make a Christian righteous in God’s eyes. That was liberating for his contemporaries, who were subjected to guilt-inducing sermons focusing on the severity of Divine Judgement and urging them, therefore, to multiply works of mercy. The idea that each individual believer received God’s grace personally satisfied the aspirations of laypeople who did not want to depend any longer on corrupt clergyman to be saved. By asserting that salvation was accessible, Luther delivered Christians from fear of the Last Judgement, which preachers insisted was nigh.

Lutheran ideas spread rapidly across Germany and northern Europe thanks to the rise of the printing press, which made it possible to distribute letters, sermons and conversations widely. Not only did Luther address Germans in their own language, rather than in Latin, but his answer to their religious fears seemed more straightforward. Humanists like Erasmus were actually condemning superstitious rituals, clerical abuses and lack of Christian virtues while remaining faithful to the institution of the Church.

The Reformation movement soon broke into several schools. As early as 1523, Zurich formally adopted the ideas of Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), who believed that each individual is predestined for salvation or damnation; he also described the eucharist as a symbolic commemoration. In Geneva, John Calvin reprised Zwingli's idea of predestination, but argued that God remains present, spiritually, in the Eucharist sacrament. His ideas caught on in Scotland, France and the Netherlands. Although they wished to present a united front, the reformers were unable to overcome those divisions. They wavered between quarrels and demonstrations of solidarity. The one thing they agreed upon was their condemnation of Rome and the radicals - like the Anabaptists, who were against the baptism of children - whom they saw as a danger to the social order.

Why did some people convert during the Reformation while others remained faithful to the Roman Catholic Church? The reasons are doubtlessly manifold: geography, which in some places did and in others did not favor the penetration of new ideas; groups' and individuals' socio-cultural and economic situations; political advantages, and family and social bonds, as well as individual sensitivities and mind-sets. One certainty persists: the Reformation would and could not have caught on without the context of a fervent expectation of the Second Coming or political elites' embrace of it.

Luther's socio-political conservatism was reassuring to the authorities of his day, and played a critical role in German princes' and cities' decisions to convert. He condemned subjects who rebelled in the name of religion and granted the politically powerful a central role in the Reformation. His ideas also offered more tangible advantages: he gave the Church's possessions to political authorities and authorized churches to assert their independence from Rome and even from the emperor. In 1529, in Speyer, five princes and representatives of 14 Imperial Free Cities protested when Charles V ordered them to return to the Catholic fold: their act was the origin of the word *Protestant*. In the elective kingdoms of Denmark and Sweden, Frederick I (1490-1533) and Gustave Vasa (1523-1560) introduced Lutheran-inspired reforms in order to get their hands on the bishops' huge landholdings and to keep them from wielding influence in the choice of the sovereign. In England, the Pope's refusal to grant Henry VIII (1491-1547) a divorce from Catherine of Aragon drove the king to declare himself Supreme Head of the Church of England. Upon the king's death, that church retained its non-Roman Catholic aspect, but his quarrels with Rome influenced his descendants' religious choices. Mary, the daughter of Catherine of Aragon, remained Catholic. Elizabeth and Edward, born of marriages not recognized by Rome, embraced the Reformation. Their respective accessions to the throne - Edward VI in 1547, Mary I in 1553, Elizabeth I in 1558 - forced their subjects into denominational backing-and-forthing that didn't end until Elizabeth imposed a religious settlement, which led to the Anglican Church being seen as a *via media*, or middle way, between the extremes of both Catholicism and Protestantism.

In France, the miraculous and sacred nature of the monarchy constituted an obstacle to the King's converting. Francis I (1515-1547) and his entourage were actually open to the idea of religiosity based on Christ-like piety and reading the Gospel. In 1534, however, when Swiss-influenced placards, or posters, against saying Mass cropped up

in several cities in the kingdom, the “Affair of the Placards” became a watershed moment: Francis I’s policy went from conciliatory to repressive. Not only did the posters defy the official condemnation of Lutheranism, they also went so far as to deny Christ’s physical presence in the world and proclaimed the impossibility of miracles – including, therefore, the King’s Consecration. Both Francis I, and later, Henry II (1547-1559) had heretics prosecuted for sedition. Their successors engaged a policy of civil tolerance while remaining militantly Catholic.

In the Netherlands, royal power began to come into conflict with the growing number of Calvinists and defenders of local freedoms in the 1560s. In 1567, after a wave of iconoclastic acts, Philip II (1555-1598) appointed the Duke of Alba to restore order. He punished the iconoclasts, as well as partisans of civil tolerance and defenders of local privileges. The moderate Catholic governor of a majority-Calvinist province, Prince William of Orange federated all of Alba’s opponents and became the leader of the rebellion.

Conversely, southern European countries – Spain, Portugal and Italy – remained faithful to Rome. On the Iberian Peninsula, the memory of the *Reconquista*, the struggle against the North African invaders, as well as the missionary undertakings in the New World, reinforced the traditional faith. In addition, the Inquisition maintained religious conformity. In Italy, geographic proximity and the prestige of the Papacy soon stifled hotbeds of Protestantism in Ferrara and Venice. Thus we can observe the emergence of three “Europes:” Catholic southern Europe, reformed northern Europe, and, an arc stretching from France to Poland-Lithuania via Bohemia and Hungary where the denominations clashed within each territory.

Religious Confrontations, European Experiences

Although both Luther and Calvin saw political and social order as an expression of divine will, armed conflicts soon broke out. In Switzerland, antagonism between Catholic and reformed cities sparked two wars, in 1529 and 1531; the Peace of Kappel, which ended them, divided the territory into Catholic and Protestant cantons. In the Holy Roman Empire, Protestant cities and princes united in the Schmalkaldic League to defend themselves against the emperor, who had remained a Catholic. But it wasn’t until the threat of an imperial offensive that Luther finally acknowledged their right to take up arms against their sovereign. It took two Schmalkaldic Wars (1546-1547 and 1552) before the Peace of Augsburg (1555) granted leaders the right to choose between Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism.

As for John Calvin, he was still hoping to convert France by winning over the king. Out of legalism, he discouraged the founding of Reformist churches. He urged the faithful to practice passive resistance, advising them either to flee or to expose themselves to martyrdom. He was soon overtaken by their impatience. At the initiative of the faithful, acts of iconoclasm against churches and “Papist idols” were carried out throughout the 1550s, like in Paris in 1555. But things didn’t come to a head until the Amboise Conspiracy (1560) against the advisors of young Francis II – Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine and Francis, Duke of Guise, the uncles of the queen, who were associated with the policy of persecution. The conspiracy exposed the breadth of Calvinist sympathies amongst the nobility. Spooked by what had happened in Scotland, where Protestant nobles had imposed Calvinism in 1560, the royal government decided to play for time.

After the death of Francis II, Catherine de' Medici, as regent for her son, Charles IX (1560-1574), supported a policy of civil tolerance. The Edict of Saint Germain (1562) granted a limited freedom of religion to French Protestants, or Huguenots, but it precipitated the kingdom into its first civil war. Scandalized by this "favor to the heretics," intransigent Catholics goaded Huguenots more and more, forcing them to take up arms. The first three wars were marked by religious violence. The Calvinists aimed at idols and the clergy; the Catholics attacked heretics' bodies in order to purify the community from diabolical pollution. The massacres reached their apex during the "season of Saint Bartholomew." Having begun on August 24, 1572 in Paris, it continued for several months in various cities in the kingdom, with victims numbering nearly 10,000. After that period of violence, the conflict became more political.

On one side, intransigent Catholics believed that maintaining a single faith had to be the goal of royal policy. On the other, the "politically minded" thought that preserving the nation was more important than religious consensus. In 1585, the Catholic League, gathered around Henry, Duke of Guise, imposed the Edict of Union on Henry III (1574-1589): Henry of Navarre - the legal heir to the throne, but a Huguenot - was excluded from the royal line of succession, and Catholicism's monopoly was reestablished in the kingdom. Henry III's elimination of the Guises three years later sparked widespread rebellion. In August 1589, the king was assassinated by a Dominican monk, Jacques Clément. The assassination was celebrated as the legitimate elimination of a tyrant. On his deathbed, Henry III named Henry of Navarre as his legitimate successor. It took several years - and his conversion to Catholicism - for the then Henry IV to reconquer and pacify the kingdom. In 1598, the Edict of Nantes granted a large measure of religious tolerance to the Huguenots.

In the Netherlands, a military conflict pitted William of Orange's troops against those of his brother, Louis of Nassau, on the one hand, and the Spanish army, on the other. In 1579, that conflict resulted in a veritable political and religious schism. In the south, the Catholic Union of Arras rallied to the side of the King of Spain. In the north, the Calvinist Union of Utrecht proclaimed its independence. Yet it was not until 1648 that the Spanish monarchy recognized the United Provinces of the Netherlands, also known as the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands.

Those violent conflicts did not unfold in a vacuum. Political ideas, texts and models crossed borders. The Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation were trans-European phenomena. Interaction between Lutherans, Anglicans and Calvinists was intense, even if they found themselves unable to get beyond their disagreements, and the gulf between them grew wider over the years. The Catholic response was more unified: begun in 1545, the Council of Trent condemned Protestantism and specified the disputed points of doctrine. It also suggested disciplinary measures in response to criticism about abuses within the Church. The Council's decrees gave bishops across all of Europe solutions for reforming the Church. Missionary activity upheld the Council's work. Founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1541, the Society of Jesus, or Jesuit Order, conducted Catholic pedagogical activity on a European or even global scale.

Solidarity among Catholics, as among Protestants, could also be seen at a political level. French Calvinists (known as Huguenots) received military support not only from German princes and Reformed nobles in the Netherlands, but even from the Queen of England. Reformist nations welcomed Huguenot refugees after the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre. The French Catholic Party was supported by both the Pope and Philip II of Spain. In 1588, the latter launched an "invincible" armada of 130 ships against the English coast as a punitive response for the execution of the Catholic Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, who had had a strong claim on the English throne, but

had been deposed by the Protestants. The next year, Philip sent money and troops to France in support of the Catholic League in their struggle against first Henry III, then Henry IV.

Aware of the European dimension of the conflict, contemporaries were attentive to news from abroad and commented on it frequently. Political treatises published in national languages also circulated in Latin translation, feeding a common store of ideas and concepts for the continent's political thinkers. Theories about the legitimate right to resist tyranny devised in Scotland, France and the Holy Roman Empire mutually influenced each other (Quentin Skinner). At the same time, the notion of sovereignty also became more widespread. Neighboring countries' political experiences were held up as examples in order to influence both political decision-makers and ordinary readers.

Ending Religious Conflict

In the mid-16th century, political leaders came up with various forms of religious coexistence. Except for Poland, where religious peace was preventively imposed on the king by the nobility, peace treaties put an end to the violence. As a contract that defines the terms of inter-denominational coexistence that was guaranteed by the political authorities, religious peace offered a temporary solution to conflicts, in order to ensure people's and goods' safety while they hoped for religious reunification. The Peace of Kappel (1531), in Switzerland, and the Peace of Augsburg (1555), in the Holy Roman Empire, were based on the principle of sharing territory by the authorities' choice of denomination. This followed the adage *cujus regio ejus religio* ("to each region its religion").

In France, on the other hand, all the edicts of tolerance, from the Edict of Saint Germain (1562) to the one of Nantes (1598), attempted to organize religious coexistence within the same territory. They established the principle of freedom of conscience, but not of equality between denominations. Catholicism was reinstated everywhere, whereas Protestantism was limited to a few specific localities. Although the Huguenots were allowed to work in all forms of public employment, none were reserved for them. Nonetheless, the monarchy showed concern for a certain level of equity. Legal disputes between Protestants and Catholics were tried in chambers with judges from both denominations on the bench.

As the guarantor of religious peace, the central government became an arbitrator, which strengthened its prerogatives over both local and ecclesiastic institutions. That new role emerged from within vastly different political systems. In the Holy Roman Empire, the *Reichskammergericht*, or supreme tribunal, handled inter-denominational disputes. The emperor's arbitrage was requested frequently. In France, the search for a political solution to conflicts involved an authoritarian practice of royal power that overcame Parliaments' and municipal authorities' reticence.

Yet it would be premature to speak of the "secularization" of government. To begin with, the conflict accelerated the sacralization of the sovereign. Henry IV declared himself an envoy of Divine Providence. He insisted that he alone was capable of re-establishing order over barbarity and of guaranteeing his subjects the conditions for salvation, which was now individual. Nor did centralized governments abandon hope of eventually obtaining religious reunification, almost always favoring one denomination over others. Under the terms of the Edict of

Nantes (1598), for example, public displays of Calvinism were limited, while public space was saturated with Catholic symbols, as well as frequently being taken over by Roman Catholic Church processions.

With religious peace, inter-denominational clashes cooled to a less violent level, shifting to the legal or pastoral sphere. In the Holy Roman Empire, a “confessionalization” (Heinz Schilling) phenomenon emerged. Governments used their denominational (or confessional) choices as the foundation of territorial identity by asking the clergy to reinforce their instruction of, and social control over, the faithful. Across the Empire, populations developed a stronger, clearer awareness of their denominational affiliation. At the same time, improved pastoral supervision contributed to a certain rationalization of religion and the spread of the idea of the individual nature of salvation.

In the early 17th century, religious conflicts were infrequent, but they did not disappear entirely. In France, Louis XIII’s Catholic policy worried Protestants in the western and south-western parts of the country, who took up arms several times between 1612 and 1629. Defeated, they had to abandon any hope of political and military organization and plead for the King’s mercy. But it was primarily in the Empire that war broke out on a European scale.

The Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) began with the Bohemian Revolt, when Protestant-majority Bohemia rose up against the emperor. A series of conflicts then opposed the Catholic Hapsburgs in Spain and the Holy Roman Empire against the German Protestant nations allied with the Dutch Republic, Sweden and Denmark. Although he was Catholic, Louis XIII wound up joining the Reformist side in order to counter the Hapsburgs’ hegemony. The conflict was extremely violent: in 1631, there were nearly 25,000 victims of the Catholic League’s troops’ sack of the Protestant city of Magdeburg. In 1648, the Peace of Westphalia put an end to the war. The *cujus regio ejus religio* principle was reinstated. A confessional division of the Empire was concluded between Catholics, Lutherans and Calvinists. The peace also confirmed the existence of multi-denominational localities and established parity between the three legal confessions in imperial institutions in charge of resolving conflicts.

Granted, denominational clashes did not disappear entirely with the Peace of Westphalia. Royal power retained a holy, religious dimension: the revocation of edicts of tolerance in France, Hungary and Savoy at the end of the century bore witness to that. So also did depictions of kings as various characters from sacred history, such as Louis XIV as the new Joshua, and William of Orange as the new David. A certain number of beliefs that had fueled the violence did fade away, however. Living with a heretic was no longer seen as a threat for the community or for the individuals’ salvation. No one believed that the physical extermination of the adversary was a sacred duty any more. Prophecy gradually faded away, replaced by political rationalism. Religion was internalized and rationalized, becoming a personal matter.

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