

Has the role of religion in the French civil wars of the sixteenth century been exaggerated?

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A number of causes have been proposed for the French Wars of Religion. The most obvious, as the name suggests, is simply religion. However, since the early 20th century, other analyses have been advanced, for example that of Henri Hauser in "The French Reformation and the French People in the Sixteenth Century".¹ In particular, an orthodox Marxist analysis would suggest that social factors are merely a façade for material factors, and thus that the Wars of Religion came about due to conflict between the crown, the established aristocracy, and the growing bourgeoisie. More recently, such analyses have been rejected as being deterministic and focused too narrowly on economic issues. Critics such as Mack P. Holt have tried to look more deeply at the nature of religion in the sixteenth century and to analyse the impact it may have had. This essay will look at the various factors that may have led to the wars, and attempt to determine the relative importance of each.

On one level the Wars of Religion can be looked upon as a crisis of the monarchy. During the sixteenth century the French crown had suffered from financial problems and political conflict; these were compounded in the later part of the century by the early death of Henri II, whose eldest son, François, was only fifteen. They, in turn, died young; only the third, Henri, acceded to the throne as an adult and saw his thirtieth birthday. During much of this time, Catherine de' Medici, the queen mother (wife of Henri II) was regent or adviser to the various kings. François, according to the law, was old enough to rule in his own right, but nevertheless deferred to

¹Henri Hauser, 'The French Reformation and the French People in the Sixteenth Century', *American Historical Review*, 4, 1899, 217-27 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1833553>>.

his mother and the Duc de Guise; when he died less than eighteen months later Catherine was appointed as regent for her second son, Charles. She remained in a position of authority until his death and throughout the subsequent reign of his younger brother Henri, being excluded from government only a few months before Henri's death. This lack of royal authority naturally led to a power vacuum, with several factions (in particular the House of Guise) vying for influence.

The structural weakness, however, was not limited to the later sixteenth century, but had been an ongoing feature of French monarchy (and, more generally, of early-modern European monarchy). Monarchs in many cases relied on local nobility to enforce their will across the country, and it was necessary for a monarch to keep the various factions in line merely to be able to conduct the ordinary administration of the state. This can be seen, for example, in the influence of the Duc de Guise and Cardinal de Lorraine at court, ousting the Duc de Montmorency from power, and later the attempt on their lives instigated by the Prince de Condé.

The position of the monarchy was further weakened in the aftermath of the Italian Wars, concluded overall near the end of the reign of Henri I. The effects of this were still ongoing at his death and throughout the reign of François; the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis required France to renounce significant amounts of territory, particularly Piedmont and Savoy. Moreover, the Crown was in debt by several times its annual income. The Duc de Guise attempted to address the debt by raising a forced loan, while simultaneously reducing royal and military expenditure.² There had been significant inflation and, since the 1540s in particular, the population had been growing faster than the food production, leading to increasing shortages and thus widespread unrest.

Finally, it is of course impossible to overlook the role of religion itself. Much debate has revolved around the social makeup of Protestantism, both in France and elsewhere. The traditional view was that Protestantism in France had mainly appealed to the aristocracy, and its failure to establish itself was due to its failure to appeal to ordinary people; this was debunked by Hauser, who argued that it had a significant following among urban workers, and that its failure was due to its lack of support among the peasantry.³ Supporting this, further research has shown that in certain areas, more than 80 percent of Huguenots were either artisans

²R. J. Knecht, *The French Wars of Religion, 1559–1598* (Longman, 1989).

³Hauser.

or professionals.⁴ It has also been shown that the social makeup varied from region to region; for example, in Burgundy, where a significant part of the economy was based upon the wine trade, and the wine trade was dependent upon vineyards owned ultimately by the Church, the populace remained more staunchly Catholic.⁵ This has parallels in England, where the religion of the local landowners had significant influence over the religious leanings of the populace at large.⁶ Similarly, Protestantism was particularly popular among trades and professions requiring literacy: “it is hardly surprising that [a religion that put so much emphasis on the primacy of scripture] would draw its initial strength from those best able to interpret the printed Gospel”.⁷ It is therefore not always to separate the social class from the religion — those most inclined to Protestantism were also, in many cases, those who also had other reasons to be dissatisfied with the status quo.

It has also been argued that in many cases the choice of religion, among the nobility, was a matter of political manoeuvring more than anything else; for example, the Prince de Condé. Religion could align one with the Duc de Guise or other political players and was thus an important aspect of patronage. A notable example would be the conversion of Henri IV to Catholicism towards the end of the wars, intended as a unifying move.

Similarly, the membership, and the political inclination, of the Protestant churches was influenced by political events over time; for example, it has been argued that the repression of Calvinism led to the creation of a “religion for rebels”, allowing them more and more to justify their refusal to conform with the law.⁸ In particular the events of the St Bartholemew’s Day Massacre brought about an inclination to argue that, by ordering a massacre (or so it was believed) the monarchy had lost its right to be obeyed; this, in turn, was seen as treasonous and led to further retaliation against Protestants (in particular, the *Vindicae contrae tyrannos* argued that the people had not only a right but a duty to remove a tyrannical king).

Overall the question of religious influence in the Wars is complicated, and depends to some extent on how one interprets the idea of religion; for ex-

⁴Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Les Paysans de Languedoc* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1966), 1; quoted in Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562–1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139163682>>.

⁵Holt.

⁶Ronald Hutton, ‘The Great Civil War’, in *Debates in Stuart History* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

⁷Holt.

⁸Knecht.

ample, it is not necessarily the case that the wars were over matters of religious doctrine but that they were over religion “as defined in contemporary terms: as a body of believers rather than a body of beliefs”.⁹ That is to say, the wars were fought between two groups who identified as members of one religion or the other, and, to understand the causes, it is necessary to understand the myriad influences that might cause individuals or groups to identify with that religion. Those indirect causes, though many and varied, play a significant part in the causes of the wars; as such, merely summarising them as ‘religion’ does nothing to enlighten.

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⁹Holt.