LOUIS XIV AND THE HUGUENOTS

Roger Mettam

Historians have devoted much attention to the decision of Louis XIV, in 1685, to revoke the Edict of Nantes and thereby deny the French Protestants—the Huguenots—any role in his kingdom. The original Edict had been issued in 1598 by his grandfather, Henri IV, and was undoubtedly an uneasy compromise, designed to end the so-called ‘wars of religion’ which had divided Frenchmen since 1560. It insisted that the Roman religion was the true faith of the country, but it allowed the presence of Protestants, permitting them to become royal officials and to retain certain places of surety which they had the right to defend militarily. The Edict was therefore a recognition that none of the political and religious groups who had fought in the civil wars could achieve a total victory, and that an accommodation was vital. Yet to the moderate Catholics and to the extreme papalists, it went too far in its tolerance of these heretics, while to the Huguenots it was less than they had expected from a King who until recently had been the leader of their cause. Henri IV had been compelled to convert to Catholicism in order to secure his throne, but his Catholic subjects suspected his sincerity and the Protestants regarded his change of heart as a betrayal.

Further battles with the Huguenot minority dominated the subsequent reign of Louis XIII until, after the siege and fall of the last Protestant stronghold at La Rochelle, another agreement was reached in the 1629 Grâce of Alais, which severely restricted the access of Huguenots to offices and removed their right to garrison places of surety. Since that date, they largely ceased to be a problem for the French government. They played a conspicuous part in commercial and industrial life, showed no signs of disloyalty during the civil strife of the Frondes in 1648-53, and their only crime was therefore to be an heretical sect in the Catholic dominions of the Most Christian King, as the French monarchs always styled themselves.

Heterodoxy was always unwelcome in any monarchy where the power of the ruler rested partly on a religious basis, but the adherents of the RPR, the religion prétendue réformée, as it was generally known at the time, gave Louis XIV no reason to feel that he was harbouring an actively seditious group within his realm. If it was their mere existence which was offensive to this Catholic sovereign, then it might be expected that he would have taken action against them as soon as he took over the reins of power on the death of Mazarin in 1661. Yet nearly twenty years were to elapse before severe pressure was exerted upon the Huguenots to abjure their faith.

In his mémoires for 1661, Louis XIV listed the problems facing the crown on his assumption of personal power, and he devoted some time to the religious issues which concerned him. The Jansenists and the defiant Cardinal de Retz, with his militant supporters among the parish clergy of Paris, were all designated as dangerous elements in society, but the Huguenots were not even mentioned in this context. Later on in his text he does refer to them, and hopes that in the long term this heresy can be eliminated. Yet Louis stresses that this must be achieved by gentle persuasion and that the rights previously granted to this minority must be respected. It seems, therefore, that the decision to revoke the Edict of Nantes and force the Huguenots into submission was taken, not at the beginning of the personal rule, but at a much later date.

Historians have selected a number of villains on whom to blame this outrageous act of persecution, for that is the emotive language they have employed. To Protestant scholars, especially in England and the Netherlands, it bore the worst hallmarks of Catholic absolutism, but some French
writers have regarded it with little more favour. It caused the exodus from France of foreigners who had worked hard to boost French economic life, the exile of many Frenchmen who had been similarly industrious, and the loss of men with great military expertise, both in fighting and in the manufacture of new weaponry, most of whom now placed their talents at the disposal of enemy rulers. Worst of all, it did not solve the Protestant problem within the kingdom because, despite fierce and socially divisive persecution, stubborn enclaves of Huguenots remained in the frontier provinces until long after the death of Louis XIV in 1715, while many of those who had converted awaited their revenge.

Some chroniclers of these dramatic events have placed the principal responsibility upon the King himself. The Edict of Fontainebleau of 1685, which revoked the Nantes agreement, was based on the premise that, as the recent policy of conversion had been overwhelmingly successful, there was no further need for an edict of toleration because there were no Protestants remaining. Surely, it has been argued, the King did not really believe that. If he did not, then the revocation was clearly designed to countenance persecution. Yet kings are always at the mercy of their advisers, and perhaps it is they who should be blamed, either for misleading their sovereign or for being themselves misled about the number of converts. Madame de Maintenon, that most pious of royal mistresses, has also been suspected of influencing the King, as have his confessor and the other Jesuits. Some writers have singled out the war minister, Louvois, suggesting that he was reluctant to disband the army which he had assembled with such difficulty for the recent Dutch War of 1672-9 and saw a policy of forced conversion as a way of employing the troops in peacetime. Many have noted that the revocation came two years after the death of Colbert – the minister who had most valued the Protestants, both French and foreign, for their contribution to his plans for economic revival and expansion. Or was it a gesture by Louis XIV to appease the Pope, who had been increasingly irritated by the aggressively gallican approach of the King to his relations with the Holy See, and might be somewhat mollified by a crusade against heresy?

Whatever the calculated risks of initiating the persecution of the Huguenots, there were a number of consequences which could not have been foreseen in 1685, even though historians have added them to the charges against Louis XIV when they have considered the revocation and its aftermath. First of all, Europe seemed peaceful. The Dutch War of 1672-9, in which the French had been forced to fight the Holy Roman Emperor, the King of Spain and many powerful German princes, when they had hoped to confront only the tiny Dutch Republic, had been far from successful for Louis XIV. Yet the following years had been more peaceful, and in 1684 the Truce of Ratisbon was signed by France, Spain and the Empire, which committed them to a further peace for twenty years. The French were therefore reassured that the Emperor had no aggressive designs against them, and would concentrate on the Turkish threat to his imperial lands. Another cause for celebration was the accession of a Catholic King, James II, to the throne of England, with no indication that he would be forced to vacate it a mere three years later. The next great European conflict, the Nine Years War of 1688-97, was not even thought to be likely. Also, the possible exodus of many Protestant Frenchmen was not envisaged, because the royal ministers were confident that their newly fortified frontiers were as capable of keeping citizens within France as they were adequate for preventing unwelcome enemies from violating her territorial sovereignty.

Historical chance apart, the government was nevertheless guilty of complacency in its foreign policy during the 1680s. Louis had always protested the legitimacy of his diplomatic claims and his military adventures, but other powers had not been convinced. They saw him as an aggressive seeker after glory and new conquests, who was prepared to use the most brutal tactics in order to achieve his purposes. The French therefore grossly underestimated the desire of many other rulers to humiliate their nation. Similarly the Pope, far from praising the King of France for his resolute assault on heresy, regarded the revocation of the Edict of Nantes as yet one more arrogant act by a sovereign who had been violating the rights and liberties of the Church for many years. Indeed this one action did more than any other to harm the reputation of Louis XIV in his own country and in many parts of Europe. It is obviously vital for historians to discover why such a repressive decision was taken and who was responsible for it.

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If the Huguenots had been hardworking and docile subjects since 1629, the memory of their earlier misdeeds was still vivid. This was an age when much attention was paid to the history of France, and in particular to the reign of Henri IV and his success in ending the ‘wars of religion’. In fact religion had been only one element in the sixteenth-century civil wars, although warring aristocratic factions and provincial separatists had adopted sectarian labels when they were politically convenient. The most enduring memories of Huguenot participation in those turbulent decades were that some of them had contemplated the dismemberment of the kingdom, hoping to establish a Protestant state in the southern and western provinces where they had been dominant; that they had also allied with foreign enemies of the crown; and that they had formulated political theories which were unashamedly revolutionary. To moderate Catholic Frenchmen, there was little to choose between the Protestants and the ultrapapists, for both groups seemed to owe their prime allegiance to an international system which appeared to threaten the government of France.

After the Massacre of St Bartholomew in 1572, Protestant writers had elaborated ideas of a social contract between king and people which could be revoked if the sovereign behaved in a tyrannical manner, in this case his persecution of religious creeds. Some even advocated tyrannicide, and further offended by insisting that society and government were purely civil creations, by and for the people, and that there was no divine basis for such political arrangements. Political theory was being secularised, even if it was to safeguard the liberties of religious minorities. In fact these ideas, some of which were also
adoption by the ultra-papist opponents of Henri III and Henri IV, ceased to be voiced so militantly in the early seventeenth century. Yet the ministers of Louis XIII still regarded the Huguenots as potential republicans and tyrannicides, who denied the divine nature of kingship. Although many Protestant merchants and town councillors were more moderate and wanted to live in peace with their king, confirmed in their religious freedom by the Edict of Nantes, the more militant among them again negotiated with foreign powers in the 1620s and aroused royal doubts about their loyalty. Also there were still influential nobles associating with the Protestant rebels for more secular motives, as was demonstrated by the speed with which they defected to the royalist side when sufficiently persuasive bribes, financial or social, were offered to them. As much of Europe was already deeply involved in the Thirty Years War, and it was only a matter of time before France would have to take an active part in this conflict, Richelieu was keen to crush internal rebellion and stop treacherous negotiations with countries which would be certain to make use of this.

When the Huguenot insurrection was finally suppressed and the Grâce of 1629 was signed, Richelieu did not take steps to prevent the practice of the Protestant religion. He was prepared to tolerate many Huguenots because they were clearly invaluable for his own schemes of economic reorganisation and colonial expansion. It was only their free access to administrative office and their right to have places of surety which could no longer be allowed. Nevertheless a few of them did attain positions of high favour, including Hervart, who became one of the two intendants of the finances under Mazarin, and Turenne, who was an outstanding military commander during the reign of Louis XIV. In foreign policy Richelieu did not regard religion as an intrusive consideration, and he, like François I a century earlier, sought allies for purely strategic reasons. Where François had allied with the German Protestant princes and even with the Turk, Richelieu now cheerfully enlisted the aid of the Lutheran Swedish King, Gustav II Adolf.

The government policy of excluding Protestants from most administrative positions was supported by many other influential groups in France which were always hostile to heterodoxy. The judges of the Paris parlement, the senior law court in the realm, were as hostile to Protestantism as they were to any attempts by Rome to assert papal authority within the kingdom. Although the gallicanism of the parlementaires was prompted by different concerns - largely jurisdictional - from those of the King, they were staunchly Catholic moderates and wanted nothing to do with heresy. So the settlement of 1629 pleased many people, because it ensured that Huguenots could never become administratively dominant in the provincial cities.

At La Rochelle, as in many other towns, a Catholic municipal magistrature was imposed by Richelieu upon a merchant population, many of whose principal and richest members were Huguenots. This did not necessarily cause tension, because the mercantile and civic elites were not rivals on the same ladder of social advancement. The former dominated the economy, the latter the administration. Even in the 1660s, when foreign Protestants were enticed into France by Colbert, and were encouraged to establish much needed industries with the protection of royal monopolies and grants of privileges, the native middle class was seldom inflamed, for it had often shown itself to be uninterested in establishing innovative manufactures. Colbert was irritated by the amount of French trade which was shipped by the Protestant Dutch, instead of by the French mercantile marine which he was always trying to expand, but this problem could be solved by giving incentives to indigenous shipbuilders and merchants, by exclusive tariffs and ultimately by war in 1672. It did not require the persecution of the Huguenots and their foreign co-religionaries who had now become domiciled in France. In the 1660s their loyalty was to France, not to fellow Protestants abroad, and Colbert had the highest opinion of their worth.

It was in the later 1670s that the mood began to change, and when the Peace of Nijmegen ended the Dutch War in 1679 some Huguenots were already apprehensive about their future in the kingdom of Louis XIV, although they had done nothing during the war to arouse suspicions of their disloyalty or of their sympathy for the Dutch cause. Some had complained that the international conflict was disrupting their trade, but Catholic merchants and provincial officials had also been outspoken on this same point. At first, much of the initiative for putting pressure on the Huguenots seems to have come spontaneously from certain provincial centres, although the Paris government seized this opportunity to assert its views on the desirability of converting the RPR because it now saw that there was considerable support in some areas for this policy. Yet violent methods were still to be excluded.

The rising tension between the two faiths in some French towns was largely caused by the gentle proselytising tactics which the crown and its agents had been using for many years, the subtle approach which Louis XIV had advocated in his mémoires for 1661. Financial incentives featured prominently among these methods of persuasion, whether in the form of bribes offered to individuals or more general grants of fiscal relief to those who converted. The King and his ministers put direct pressure on leading courtiers, while in the provinces bishops, intendants and royal agents either carried out the wishes of the King or even anticipated them, in which case the monarch was quick to laud their efforts. Nevertheless these plans for conversion were implemented to varying degrees in different parts of the kingdom, depending on the enthusiasm of the bishops and intendants, and on whether the two faiths were coexisting amicably or were already at odds. Some towns were predominantly of one religion, others more evenly divided between the two, and whatever the ratio there was often no tension. Moreover some intendants exaggerated the number of converts because they knew that such information would please the King, and that the central government would not be able to verify their statistics. In 1679 it was reported that 3,000 had abjured during the last two years in Languedoc, and that 25,000 écus had been spent there since 1676 in order to encourage them to do so.
Many of those who were prepared to go through the motions of conversion continued to practice their former faith in secret. Yet it was not only members of the RPR who benefited from the financial concessions made to converts. A number of less than scrupulous Catholics also profited, because they declared first that they had always really been Huguenots and then that they were now converting to the true faith, thus qualifying for the rewards paid to 'nouveaux convertis'. Also, some of those responsible for examining the would-be abjurers were less strict than others in the tests of orthodoxy which they demanded. However false or genuine these conversions, they were extremely offensive to the average Catholic, who had been a loyal son of the church, but who was being offered no fiscal concessions. It was these former heretics who were now being rewarded for their apostasy.

As the decade neared its end, the crown, either of its own volition or on the advice of its provincial agents, began to make life more difficult for the Protestants. The provisions of the 1598 Edict were still upheld, but anything not specifically included in it could now become a target for repressive governmental decrees. As the Edict had been designed to solve certain problems, there were many aspects of daily life which it simply ignored. Many of these were now regulated, and in such a way that the Huguenots could be greatly harrassed and inconvenienced if Catholic officials in the localities chose to do so. Yet these irritations were as nothing beside the next stage in this policy of repression, the dragonnades, the billeting of dragoons on recalcitrant Huguenots. It was this decision which really caused alarm among the French Protestants and anger among their co-religionaries in other countries. Because it involved the army, it is this increase in brutality which historians have frequently attributed to the war minister, Louvois, and his father, Le Tellier.

The attitude to religion of Louvois was governed primarily by political considerations. Some Huguenots were dangerous, others were harmless, and a third group was positively useful. In the first category Louvois included all those involved in local disturbances, whether as instigators or as victims, because he had a deep detestation of internal disorder. Also the presence of Huguenots in frontier provinces was very worrying, because they might alIy with a neighbouring Protestant enemy in time of war. These peripheral areas of the kingdom were always troublesome and separatist, but heterodoxy made them more unreliable, and the minister accordingly instructed local officials to use all means, gentle and fierce, to eliminate it. Yet he positively welcomed the role of the Huguenots in industry, and especially in the manufacture of armaments. On the death of Colbert in 1683, Louvois was actually made the minister responsible for all such economic activities. There were also many members of the RPR in the enlarged army which Louvois and his father, had created, and which they did not want to see reduced too greatly after the 1679 Peace. About one-tenth of serving Frenchmen were Protestant, as were some of the crack troops of foreign origin, notably the splendid Swiss. Nor had Louvois any reason to doubt their loyalty and willingness to serve the King of France. He was therefore determined that these men should not fall prey to the growing desire of Louis XIV that his realm be purged of heresy.

HUGUENOT GLOSSARY

DEACONS - Calvinist deacons were laymen who organised poor relief, not (as in the Anglican Church) men in charge of the ministry.

DRAGONNADES - the selective billeting of dragoons on Protestant households in order to achieve conversion, begun in 1661. Billeting involved paying soldiers' wages as well as accommodating them, and was commonly accompanied by threats and violence.

THE EDICT OF NANTES - was a 'perpetual and irrevocable' grant of recognition, protection, and limited toleration to the Huguenots. It was revoked by the Edict of Fontainebleau of 1685.

JANSENISTS - were advocates of a strictly moral and austere form of Catholicism, and were consequently fierce enemies of the casuistical Jesuits. Also, Richelieu and Louis XIV wrongly suspected them of planning wider political subversion.

MAISONS DE CHARITÉ - refugee relief establishments in Soho and Spitalfields, places where food and other necessities were distributed.

THE MASSACRE OF ST BARTHOLOMEW - of August 1572, in which some 13,000 Huguenots were slain, was blamed on the King himself, and he was regarded thereafter by the Protestants as a tyrant.

UNITED PROVINCES - the northern provinces of the Netherlands, successful in winning independence from Spanish control in the sixteenth century, which became the Dutch Republic.

WALLOON - French-related language used in the southern provinces of the Netherlands, in the area now Belgium and the Franco-Belgian frontier region.

4. Louis XIV and the Huguenots

The war minister knew that he must make a serious attempt to reduce the number of Protestants in the army, in order to please his royal master, but he intended to do so by conversion rather than expulsion. Financial incentives were duly offered, and many soldiers did convert. As in civil society, a number of Catholics changed their religion twice in order to benefit from the scheme. Many of those abjuring their heresy were so blatantly insincere that priests began to refuse them entry to the Catholic communion, and Louvois was forced to write to the bishops, demanding that they instruct their clergy to receive anyone who wished to convert without pressing them too hard. His main purpose was to keep them in the army, asking very few questions about their convictions.

Far from wanting the dragonnades as a justification for the retention of a large peacetime army, Louvois had plenty of other tasks for his troops to carry out. Some particularly disorderly regiments had been disbanded at the end of the war, but considerable forces were needed to carry out the policy of réunions, by which Louis XIV hoped to 're-unite' with his kingdom certain neighbouring territories to which he claimed a frequently dubious legal right. Many soldiers were also working on the massive engineering projects associated with the embellishment of Versailles, especially the extensive river diversions to provide a constant water source for this garden of delights. The idea of dragonnades did not come from Louvois but from a provincial intendant, Marillac, in 1681, and the King welcomed it. The war minister undoubtedly provided the troops, but he continually exhorted the military administrators to ensure that the dragoons strictly observed all the rules of proper behaviour. He had been compelled to abandon his preference for gentle persuasion and acquiesce in a policy of forced conversion, but he was not prepared to condone brutality. Needless to say, the reservations of the minister were disregarded in some areas, and many hapless Huguenots experienced considerable savagery at the hands of troops who always had the reputation for lawlessness, against Protestants and Catholics alike.

Some Huguenots and foreign
Protestants began to depart in 1680, and the exodus gathered in speed and volume until the revocation of the Edict, and beyond into 1686 and 1687. Louvois was appalled at the inability of the frontier guards to prevent their departure. He protected those foreigners who did remain, and in 1686 persuaded Louis to grant permission for Protestant merchants from other countries to trade freely within France. Regrettably few were inclined to do so, and even fewer Frenchmen responded to the invitation of the minister to return home. At least Louvois was able to prevail upon the King to exempt regiments of foreign origin, like the Swiss, from his new religious uniformity.

If some 300,000 Protestants fled from France, twice that number remained there. Most of these converted to Catholicism, but their sincerity could not be guaranteed and ministers were always worried lest they should rise up against their monarchical oppressor. In the difficult mountainous areas of the South, these fears became a reality on a number of occasions before the death of Louis XIV in 1715. Moreover, if the vocation of 1685 was actively supported by many bishops, judges, priests, nobles, town councillors and ordinary Catholic subjects, it was condemned by many others, some of whom were extremely lucid and vocal. It was not that they included numerous Protestant sympathisers, but they either deplored forced conversions on the grounds that they did not really save souls, or they lamented the departure of so many useful citizens from the kingdom. Among these critics were some senior and respected bishops, who not only protested loudly but refused to implement the policy of repression with any fervour in their own dioceses. Some of them said that it would have been better to reform the abuses in their own church before seeking to gain converts to it. Military commanders, provincial governors, courtiers and officials were all represented in these critical ranks, and many of these also failed to take the repressive measures which were required of them. In addition, pamphlets from Huguenots in exile were successfully smuggled into France, castigating Louis XIV in ever more violent terms. Indeed some of these tracts were written within the kingdom itself, but with a false title-page which claimed a foreign place of origin in order to mislead the French police authorities.

A few of the Catholic critics within France blamed Louvois, but more popular targets were the Jesuits, Madame de Maintenon and certain high churchmen, in particular the Archbishop of Paris. Yet a number of them clearly implied, and a few openly stated, that the King himself had made a major error of judgment. This was an extraordinary assertion. The usual way of criticising the government was to praise the monarch and blame the ministers either for misadvising him or for acting without his knowledge. Very often the advisers were genuinely thought to be the culprits, for the sovereign was held in great awe. Now he was beginning to be personally blamed for a tyrannical act towards loyal and industrious subjects, and from then on the criticism would mount. Soon he would be censured for his wider religious policy, his aggressive diplomacy, his bellicosity and his mistakes in the internal government of France.

Truly the revocation of the Edict of Nantes was a turning-point in the reputation of Louis XIV in France and Europe, and from that moment he would seem to have been less and less in control of events. Within ten years of 1685, his armies would be dangerously on the defensive, he would have submitted to the authority of Rome, and his kingdom would be both impoverished and disgruntled. Although not all his later problems can be blamed directly on the revocation, that act undoubtedly contributed greatly to the fervour with which his enemies flung themselves upon him in the wars ahead, increasing his difficulties still further.

Meanwhile, other countries benefited in many ways from the skills of the Huguenots, both practical and artistic. Yet they were not always popular with the societies they joined, because some were considered too successful and others became a burden upon their new homelands. An anonymous Englishman, writing in 1715, who had encountered them in England and in France, commented on this state of affairs with some distaste. He noted that some had readily betrayed their faith in order to remain in their native land, while others showed an equally hypocritical zeal for their beliefs which thus ensured them a warm welcome in England. Once there, some of them acquired a new degree of prosperity which had eluded them in France, and the English traders suffered in consequence. This contemporary observation underlines the fact that the émigrés were a varied group with regard to personal wealth. Many were prosperous merchants and craftsmen who easily transferred their operations to another land with which they often had economic links already. Others had been less successful in the French commercial and industrial world, but hoped to improve their position in a new location. Some were poorer because much of their wealth had been in land and it was difficult to turn this into capital which could then be transported abroad. Accordingly the landed Huguenots fled in smaller numbers, because many felt that they had no choice but to remain on their estates and disguise their faith.

As we reflect on the events of 1685 in this tercentenary year, it is certainly difficult to excuse Louis XIV for his policy of persecution. Yet the Huguenots were not all the guileless innocents which their propagandists would have us believed. Many abjured their faith and stayed at home, but some saw that there was an opportunity to advance themselves in Protestant countries which could not refuse to receive and protect them. Thus, among many of those who stayed in France or left for other lands, it was the business acumen for which they have always been renowned which governed their religious allegiance.

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