Conflict and the Making of Religious Cultures in Sixteenth-Century France

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In 1973, Natalie Zemon Davis published what has become the most influential article on the wars of religion: “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France.” The impact of this article reached well beyond specialists in the field to become a pioneering model of cultural history. At the time of its publication, most historians were laboring in the vineyards of social history, trampling out the grapes of class conflict. This was equally true of sixteenth-century specialists whose arduous plodding up and down in tax rolls and judicial records seemed to yield a robust vintage of bourgeois-led religious movements (in the loose sixteenth-century sense of urban, middling groups ranging from master artisans to municipal magistrates). In France, at least, the socio-economic status and ambitions of these men made them useful allies in aristocratic struggles over control of the French monarchy, debilitated by the bizarre death of Henri II in 1559. In this way, class struggle apparently helped both to complement and complicate existing explanations that emphasized either religion or politics as the dominant forces in a series of civil wars that devastated France from 1562 to 1598. Davis’ article was hugely successful because it sweepingly replaced class conflict with what can only be described as cultural conflict, though she did not use the term.¹ Her article discredited supposed causal connections between grain prices and popular riots using religious rhetoric and persuasively suggested that Protestant victims and Catholic perpetrators represented more or less proportionately the full range of urban identities except for unskilled workers. This last argument rested on detailed evidence she claimed would appear in a forthcoming book, Strikes and Salvation at Lyon, which actually never came forth (pp. 80-1). The article’s appeal also lay in the fact that it completely ignored the extraordinarily complicated politics of this period; furthermore, it neglected most of the resulting violence because it was perpetrated not by crowds, but by organized armies bolstered by regional militias and foreign mercenaries. Nonetheless, omitting the details of nine civil wars in thirty-seven years that invited intervention from numerous foreign powers, while still presenting a powerful interpretation about the nature of

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violence during this period, was an impressive feat. As a result the article appeared far and wide, including in numerous undergraduate courses on western civilization. [But just how much does Davis’ cultural model explain about the conflict in France in the last third of the sixteenth century?]

As its title indicates, Davis’ article argues that religious riots owed much of their structure and content to both religious and secular rituals. Catholic and Protestant rioters shared much the same goals: to achieve the ends of preaching (that is, to defend true doctrine and refute false doctrine) through dramatic action, and to rid communities of religious pollution. Differences in religious doctrines and practices, however, led to notably different forms of violence. Catholic rioters favored the actual murder of “heretics,” followed by mutilating their corpses and disposing of them in the purifying waters of a nearby river. Protestant rioters attacked the symbols of Catholic worship as false idols and instruments of the papacy, usually likened to the anti-Christ; these included priests and canons, of course, but not usually ordinary parishioners. The faithful of either side legitimated their violence by deploying a repertory of actions, which they derived from a range of sources such as the Bible, the liturgy, official justice, and folk rituals of humiliation, all designed to purify the community. As long as rioters remained within this framework, they showed few signs of remorse for their actions – it was guilt-free violence. Because pillaging was ubiquitous, Davis dismissed it as unhelpful in determining the essential motive for such riots.

Despite the fact that her article became an almost stand-alone explanation for the nature of violence during the French wars of religion, Davis explicitly denied that she was describing “a self-sufficient structure” studied in isolation from a wider context. Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France: A Rejoinder,” Past and Present 67 (1975): 131-35. And yet, both her original article and her response to criticism adopted a limited time frame which did
not cover the full period of religious violence in the sixteenth century, but rather largely ended in 1572. Thus, she included the Saint-Bartholemew’s Day massacre of Huguenots in Paris and a dozen similar massacres in the provinces over the next six weeks that took place that year, but ignored the subsequent quarter century of civil strife. One explanation for drawing all of her evidence from the first decade of the civil wars is that she did most of her early work on Lyon. Here as much as a third of the population of 60,000 had converted to the “reformed religion.” The first two wars of religion (1562-3; 1567-8) led to a precipitous decline in numbers until, finally, the bloody massacre known as the “Lyon Vespers” of October 1572 destroyed most of the remaining congregations as Protestant survivors either left the city or melted back into the dominant Catholic population.4 Timothy Watson, “Preaching, printing, psalm-singing: the making and unmaking of the Reformed church in Lyon, 1550-1572” in Society and Culture in the Huguenot World, 1559-1685, Raymond A. Mentzer and Andrew Spicer, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 10-28. But this is not the main explanation for her limited time frame. Rather, the history of Calvinism at Lyon simply reflects a more basic structural reason for Davis’ skewed analysis: the massacres of 1572 had a profound impact on both emerging religious cultures as well as on the nature of civil strife all over France. Scholars have tended to treat these changes as largely determined by politics rather than religion. Their focus shifts to the monarchy, especially the handling of the crisis by the monarchy, at the time in the hands of the craven Charles IX and then his vacillating brother, Henri III, and the actions of aristocratic grandees ranging from the Protestant Henri de Bourbon, king of Navarre, to the ultra-Catholic Henri “the Scarface,” duke of Guise. Even when religious elements are taken seriously, they tend to run parallel to the main narrative, serving as a subplot at best.

In order to appreciate the full significance of the events of 1572 for the different religious cultures of late sixteenth-century France, the massacres of that year need to be understood in more explicitly psychological and cultural terms. Such an approach will reveal that the events of 1572 marked a caesura in the wars of religion due to the differential psychological impact they
had on Protestants and Catholics, which was not as straightforward as one might assume given the obvious differences between victims and perpetrators. One way to discern these differences is to investigate the ways in which these massacres were communicated and apprehended. To do so requires analyzing the dissemination of descriptions and depictions of large-scale killing. Only by successfully communicating the experience of wholesale slaughter to non-participants could it link individual suffering with group identities and thus become a possible source of “collective trauma.” This study pays particular attention to the impact of visual images of religious violence, which have yet to receive much serious study, even from art historians. Mass produced images of religious violence first appeared in France only around 1570. It is my contention that the sudden emergence of such images provided a powerful complement to an outpouring of pamphlets and helped to extend the communication of suffering well beyond traditional social media such as sermons, songs and public processions. Together these contributed to a “collective trauma” that intensified the Calvinism of the Reformed Church in France. But the victims were not the only ones deeply affected, even Catholics drew distressing conclusions from the events. As a result, the failure of the massacres to extirpate “heresy” became a catalyst to remake French Catholicism into a religion of greater personal piety. The French wars of religion (1562-1598), the Fronde (1648-53), the French Revolution (1789-1802), the Revolution of 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1871 each spawned enough popular violence to sap the foundations of the existing polity and require it to be substantially redefined. Because of their destabilizing intensity, these five periods of widespread violence offer opportunities to analyze the changing relationship between individual experiences of violence and their communication to and reception by larger groups in society. In short, how did personal tragedies become collective traumas? How did that process change over three centuries of French history? How did those changes in turn reshape the individual’s experience of violence and sense of self? These are the central questions of my current book project, of which this paper is preliminary work.

Collective Trauma

In order to appreciate the role of the massacres of 1572 in reifying differences between Catholic and Protestant religious cultures in France, we need first to understand the relationship
between “collective trauma” and the modern “self.” As common as these concepts may be in our own time, they were arguably only beginning to emerge in the late sixteenth century.

Collective traumas are not natural or inevitable responses to large-scale violence, but are culturally constructed in ways that often distort, exploit, or obscure the personal tragedies and individual incidents upon which they are built. The concept of psychological trauma has experienced considerable inflation in the field of cultural studies, especially when the Holocaust is invoked, as well as in the field of psychotherapy where “recovered memory” was recently in vogue. Various scholars have reacted to this conceptual drift by emphasizing the need to restore a sense of the differentiated experience of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders.6 This is both an historical and moral imperative. The expanding concept of trauma has led Wulf Kansteiner to remark that it would “require considerable conceptual retooling before the trauma paradigm could yield helpful reassessments of historical events such as the French Revolution.”7 The obvious point of undertaking such retooling is to avoid anachronism while also illuminating the experience of shared suffering.

What constitutes a “collective trauma”? If it is a dubious concept to apply to the French Revolution, how much more dubious might it be for the wars of religion? These questions are particularly difficult to address because even the concept of individual trauma is not fixed in either clinical psychological terms or in legal terms; in fact, it continues to experience rapid inflation in both fields.8 However, by taking note of the factors currently at work expanding the concept of trauma we become better equipped to know what we should be looking for historically. These factors are: 1) prevailing practices of violence, 2) contemporary discourses

6 For example, Omer Bartov, Mirrors of Destruction: War, Genocide, and Modern Identity (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).


and images of violence, 3) legal codes and practices that criminalize and contain violence, 4) changing understandings of the “self” in relationship to collective identities. To study the reflexive relationship between personal suffering and collective trauma, therefore, requires paying particular attention to fear – its production via violence, its distribution via public media, its limitation via the law, and its consumption via the psyche – in specific historical circumstances.

Such an approach assumes that changing vectors of fear repeatedly reshaped how individuals experienced violence. Just because individuals have always suffered does not mean that they have always understood that suffering in the same manner. The possibility that the experience of violence by victims, or what could be called the cognitive phenomenology of victimization, can change over time is confirmed by the changes that have taken place in the experience of rape in western societies from the seventeenth to twenty-first centuries. In seventeenth-century England, for example, rape was prosecuted as a crime against fathers, husbands, and brothers as much as against female victims. Therefore, when women recounted their experience of rape to magistrates, they naturally placed it in a social framework of family and household honor. This contrasts sharply with the common framework of rape narratives in our own society where these attacks are described as assaults on personhood, as psychological trauma, and even as attempted murder of the female psyche; the consequence is described as “a shattered self.”

This radical change in victims’ descriptions of rape shows that not only narratives, but the actual experience, the cognitive phenomenology, of sexual violence in western societies has changed dramatically over time.

This has important methodological implications for historians of violence. As Joan Scott has noted in a different context, “Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted.” Historical changes in the experience of violence, as the

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history of responses to rape shows, are the result of the interaction between personal tragedies and wider cultural phenomena. This interaction becomes especially dynamic when certain experiences of violence are widely disseminated within a particular social group. Here is where the field of trauma studies proves alluring. Scholars of psychological trauma generally agree that individuals can feel like victims even if they, or anyone close to them, have not actually suffered direct personal tragedy. It is a sense of belonging to a larger community, or sharing a common social, ethnic, or religious identity, that makes it possible for such people to feel victimized without having experienced the event that is the source of the trauma. Controversy arises, of course, over the level of psychological damage from which would-be indirect victims of “collective trauma” can suffer. This depends on how effectively the original violence and its immediate effects can be communicated to those who did not experience them firsthand.

We need to distinguish between communicating a sense of suffering to fellow members of a community based on face-to-face interactions and communicating suffering to a larger public whose individual members are largely unknown. So-called “communitarian” communication draws powerfully on the natural compassion generated among others when they are members of the same community and when they are able to witness directly the delivery of a message through voice, facial expressions, bodily gestures, tears, etc. In the larger public sphere, the real or potential audience for the representation of someone else’s suffering could include almost anyone, therefore their reactions are not motivated by natural commitment and are more open to skepticism and uncertainty about the identity and experience of the victim. Thus, the ability to convey suffering in a public sphere requires creating a representation of it that can withstand challenges of falsehood and which can be conveyed with the least modifications possible to the largest audience possible.\(^\text{11}\) In short, controversy over veracity kills compassion. Of course, disseminating experiences of violence and suffering beyond a face-to-face community is not only more successful among those who share a sense of common identity, it can help to create that

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shared sense of identity. Jeffrey Alexander has observed, “‘Experiencing trauma’ can be understood as a sociological process that defines a painful injury to the collectivity, establishes the victim, attributes responsibility, and distributes the ideal and material consequences. Insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised.”

The Self

The vast bulk of work on collective trauma has been done in contemporary societies where personal identities are more provisional than in the past and, therefore, have become increasingly the fruit of psychological acts that combine an individual’s thought, emotion and volition with socially mediated frameworks of identity. Living in a mass society, with its attendant physical and social mobility, requires individuals to perform the relentless psychological work of fitting together an unprecedented array of choices in life with the almost universal need to feel a sense of belonging to a social group. Thus, the psychological work individuals perform in the process of creating their own personal identities as both social projections and interiorized understandings, that is, in defining their “selves,” has become in modern societies a highly subjective and constructive task. This is not to say that only in the recent past have individuals come to understand their identities through introspection. “There has never existed a human being who has not been aware ... of his individuality, both spiritual and

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12 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser Piotr Sztompka, eds., Collective Trauma and Collective Identity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 22. See also the editors’ introduction to Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suárez-Orozco, eds., Cultures under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), which makes clear that, at the very least, a “massive trauma” (their phrase for my “collective trauma” and others’ “cultural trauma”) needs to be understood as the proliferation of individual psychological traumas beyond those individuals who had a direct personal experience of violence as victims. This proliferation may take place either through interpersonal empathy or through damage inflicted on the social tissue of larger groups which undermines a sense of community, interpersonal trust, and institutions of support.

physical,” argued Marcel Mauss. This is the basis for the “self,” but it is not sufficient to explain the extent to which individuals in modern societies have come to think in terms of both understanding and performing their own personal identities. Perhaps an analogy reveals the relationship best: awareness of individuality is to a sense of “self” what trade is to capitalism. The latter may be based on the former, but it is the historically acquired sophistication and cultural salience of the latter that comes to matter most.

According to the moral philosopher Charles Taylor, the emergence of the modern “self” in western societies is the product of changes in four ways of understanding individual significance based on: 1) a sense of inwardness, 2) a sense of what makes daily life worth living, 3) forms of narrativity that stress personal development, and 4) individual agency within a network of social bonds. Historical changes in these four areas have combined, says Taylor, to enable modern individuals to think of having “selves” in the same way as they think of having heads. Taylor’s formulation, though contested, is helpful in discerning historical differences in how individuals have performed the psychological task of shaping their own individual identities. Despite making concern for suffering and personal dignity important aspects of a growing affirmation of ordinary life, however, Taylor pays no attention to experiences of violence, threats to self and community, and individual as well as shared fear, all of which interacted with the emergence of a sense of self. For that matter, this field remains wholly unexplored for the pre-modern period. Historians have sought to understand how pre-modern societies defined and responded to “atrocity” or “massacre,” but their generation of “collective trauma” and their integration into changing


notions of the “self” are scholarly steps that have yet to be taken.18

**Religious Reform**

Although long-standing claims about the radical nature of Renaissance individualism have been recently challenged,19 there is no doubt that the new religious doctrines of the sixteenth century encouraged a more personalized, that is, more psychologically interiorized, experience of faith and, thereby, provided an impetus for the emergence of the “self” in western societies. Historians agree that the sixteenth century brought an intense desire to develop a more intimate relationship to God. This bred concern on the part of the faithful that the Church could no longer provide for their spiritual needs.20 However, the restricted success of Calvinism in France – at their apogee reformed churches constituted no more than one tenth of the population and met as a thousand or more separate congregations – shows that its theology was only one way to respond to the strong expectation of a deeper faith and better assurance of salvation. Catholicism developed its own reform dynamic, which soon proved highly successful and eventually predominated.

Scholars such as Davis, however, tend to ignore the fledgling nature of the so-called “Reformed Religion” in France at the start of the civil wars in 1562, when the reformed were known as évangeliques21 and instead write as though there were a fully unified and doctrinally fixed Protestant Church throughout the kingdom. But so idiosyncratic and diverse were the early

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18 For a discussion of the social-psychological literature upon which historians will need to draw, see Jürgen Straub, “Personal and Collective Identity: A Conceptual Analysis” in Identities: Time, Difference, and Boundaries, Heidrun Friese, ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002): 56-77, though he claims that his own formulation can only apply to modern identities.


20 The consensus on this question is evident when it underpins (p. 32) an authoritative survey such as the introduction to Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1998) written by Arlette Jouanna, Jacqueline Boucher, Dominique Bilochi, and Guy Le Thiec.

21 Sebastien Castellion, Conseil _ la France désolée avquel est montré la cause de la guerre présente (1562) used the most common terminology of the day when he contrasted Catholiques with Évangeliques (p. 25).
reformed churches that historians have almost abandoned efforts to explain the pattern of their emergence. In fact, the first national synod did not occur until 1559. Furthermore, a bitter internecine debate over church governance soon followed. It pitted those who favored more autonomous and participatory congregations (Morély and Ramus) against those who favored consistories and synods (Calvin and Beza) and was only concluded in favor of the latter by the tragic events of 1572. In the meantime, many of the French reformed churches did not require their pastors and elders to exercise disciplinary functions through the consistory _la Gen_ve because they feared that disciplined members would return to Catholicism and possibly betray the congregation along with its leaders. Thus, the struggle to establish a measure of unity and uniformity among reformed churches in France, thereby creating a true French Calvinism, took more time than is usually acknowledged.

Likewise, historians slip easily into treating Catholicism as a single, unified religion at a time when the Church’s basic orthodoxies and institutional practices were still being hotly contested. Many of the outcomes admittedly amounted to either affirmations or clarifications of existing doctrine. Nonetheless, actual religious practices underwent important changes decided by the Council of Trent, which only ended in 1563, and thus, after the French civil wars had already broken out. These changes became known as Tridentine Catholicism, which lay at the heart of the overlapping concepts of Counter-Reformation and Catholic Reformation. And yet, even bishops who had their convictions strengthened by participating in the Council of Trent were slow to implement the prescribed reforms. Not until the mid 1570s did the leadership of

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23 Robert Kingdon, Geneva and the Consolidation of the French Protestant Movement, 1564-1572 (Geneva: Droz, 1967), 37-120. Janine Garrison, Protestants du Midi, 1559-1598 (Toulouse: Privat, 1991), 229-90, provides abundant detail on the struggle to impose Calvinist practices on new believers. For example, the Huguenots found it exceptionally difficult to impose the teaching of the catechism in their own heartland – Languedoc; nobles and village notables had repeatedly to be prevented from undermining the theological egalitarianism of the reformed religion by assuming special status during the four annual Communion services; efforts to impose austerity on funerals practically failed altogether, etc. See also her evocative summary of efforts to
the Gallican Church commit itself to make significant changes and only in the 1580s was “tridentisation” fully underway.  

Although both the “Reformed Church,” officially stigmatized by a royal edict of 1576 as the “so-called reformed religion” (religion prétendue réformée), and the reformed Roman Church, best termed Tridentine Catholicism, intensified the religious experience of lay men and women, they did so in distinctly different ways and at distinctly different times. Despite growing official repression of Protestantism under Henri II (1547-59), it took years of intense civil strife thereafter, years characterized by continuous hatred from the majority of the population, frequent personal assaults, occasional outbursts of collective violence and even sectarian taxation, to make fully apparent the exceptionally high level of personal commitment required on the part of those who chose the reformed religion. These conditions made the collective singing of psalms vital to sustaining the faithful, for the psalms carried a three-fold message: David had suffered much, but eventually triumphed over his enemies; the suffering and triumph of Christ had been predicted and fulfilled; and, most importantly, the suffering of the true church, as well as its triumph, had likewise been prophesied. The intensification of religious piety for those who remained Catholics came later and differently. In fact, ultra-Catholics associated with the Holy Union, better known as the League, developed aspects of religious performance that varied considerably from that of moderate Catholics (often derided by zealots as politiques). As mentioned earlier, historians have long been distracted by the political actions of the Guise-led League, which opposed Henri III for failing to extirpate heresy, and the Catholic politiques, who supported his more moderate and pragmatic approach. The differences in religious practice

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26 Even histories that purport to restore religion to the wars of religion lack any coverage of changes in popular religious practices among Catholics, e.g. Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*.
between these strains of Catholicism are only just beginning to be studied. Nonetheless, it is already clear that those who associated with the League that emerged in the mid 1580s put greater emphasis on God’s immanence in the world and, therefore, supported to a much greater extent religious processions, memorial masses, and penitential confraternities. In this way, their affective investment in religious performances both strengthened the bonds of community and heightened the sacral importance for individual salvation of the liturgy and the sacraments.27

Thus, the more intense forms of religious culture that emerged during the wars of religion in France, Calvinism and ultra-Catholicism, both featured a more personalized piety and, therefore, contributed each in its own way to a more defined sense of “self.” But what explains the differences in timing? Why did the intensification of personal piety among Catholics take almost a generation longer to develop than it did among Protestants? Denis Crouzet’s monumental study of the “warriors of god” provides an intriguing explanation.28

Though not interested in the “self” per se, Crouzet’s work largely assumes the centrality of psychological processes in the unfolding of events. He argues that astrologers such as Nostradamus, whose predictions received unprecedented distribution thanks to the recently invented printing press, helped to generate a profound “eschatological anxiety” in the population of mid sixteenth-century France. Catholics responded to this growing fear of the Apocalypse by seeking to purge their communities of heretics, witches and atheists. This made Catholic violence against Protestants “sacral” and “mystical,” and thus a means by which to prepare the faithful for the Second Coming of Christ. Just as the doctrine of transubstantiation rested on a belief in divine immanence in the material world as a means for man to partake of the sacred, violence perpetrated for the purpose of purifying communities also represented a form of divine immanence in the real world. In contrast, Calvinism offered a “providentialist” and “rational”

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28 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) as do specialist studies. For example, despite being over 500 pages in length, Jean-Marie Constant, La Ligue (Paris: Fayard, 1996), makes no attempt to analyze new forms of piety and link them to politics.
response to fear of the Final Days. Huguenots were taught to see the Eucharist as merely symbolic representation because, rather than infuse the material world with his presence, God transcended it. The surge in adherents to the “reformed religion” in the 1550s, coupled with a wave of missionary preaching, generated a sense of revolutionary possibilities, a hope that a new world could be created by purging society of its papists practices. In the early 1560s, therefore, Huguenots engaged in extensive iconoclasm. Though most of their violence was directed against idolatrous images and practices, it had a tendency to include Catholic clergy as well. According to Crouzet, therefore, these differential responses to existential fear explain the differences in sectarian violence first highlighted by Davis for the years up to 1572.

The Saint-Bartholomew massacres of 1572 naturally provoked a differential response as well. On one hand, the persecution Calvinists had already suffered enhanced their stoicism in the face of the onslaught. Furthermore, by surviving the massacres and then being able to check Catholic violence by forming a powerful political and religious organization across southern France (generally known as the United Provinces of the Midi), Huguenots increasingly liberated themselves from fear of the Apocalypse and began to separate the affairs of the world from religious belief. (It should be noted that, at the same time, Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor at Geneva, added to Calvinism a much greater emphasis on the doctrine of predestination of the elect.) On the other hand, Catholics interpreted Protestant violence against their religion as the scourge of God for failing to extirpate heresy. A period of self-doubt followed by penitential fervor revived eschatological anxiety, which then underpinned the Catholic League of the 1580s. Once convinced of their own piety again, Catholic zealots blamed the continued presence of “heretics” in the kingdom less on the Huguenots themselves and more on the failed policies of Henri III.

Crouzet’s analysis is excessively schematic and often ignores critical developments, such as the precipitous decline in Huguenot strength after 1572. Nonetheless, his penetrating analysis suggests that there is good reason to view the wars of religion as a transformative period in the

interaction between the “self” and “collective trauma.” If nothing else, the nature of the sources that helped to spread “eschatological anxiety” and to communicate the effects of religiously justified atrocities and massacres (namely sermons, processions, pamphlets, and prints) invite more rigorous analysis of their psychological impact.

**Protestant Response**

Changes in Huguenot responses to persecution are particularly striking. The first war of religion in 1562-3 produced a sharp shift in the preoccupations of French Protestants from martyrdom to massacre. The shift derived from, and accentuated, a shift from royal persecution of “heretics” to generalized civil strife. The martyrology of Jean Crespin, first published in 1554, became a run-away bestseller, growing in comprehensiveness with each edition up to 1570. Not everyone who died for the faith, however, qualified as a martyr. Only a judicial procedure could authenticate the purity of attitude of a Protestant put to death. Once intense religious strife erupted in the early 1560s, political interests and general massacres separated the earlier heroic martyrs from more ordinary victims.  

The distinction between martyrs and the persecuted faithful was important because it separated role models to be emulated from mere co-religionists who died tragically. Individual Huguenots could have chosen to die as martyrs by not renouncing their faith when on trial, but they had no choice but to defend themselves or flee when caught up in a massacre. In other words, ordinary Huguenots may have been inspired by martyrs, but it was far easier to imagine themselves falling victim to a Catholic mob than being subject to a spectacular trial and execution by a royal court.

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The apogee of martyrs came just before 1561, the year Huguenots turned to widespread iconoclasm and Catholics perpetrated their first large massacres. Both forms of violence helped to consolidate the Reformed Religion not just as a separate faith, but as a major threat to the French polity. An unusual series of prints by Tortorel and Perrissin entitled *Quarante tableaux ou histoires diverses qui sont memorables touchant les Guerres, Massacres et Troubles advenues en France ces derniers annees* embodies this transition. Among the first prints in the series is a depiction of the execution of a Protestant member of the Parlement of Paris, Anne du Bourg, on 21 December 1559 for advocating lenient treatment of “heretics” and refusing to recant his faith (slide 1). The image has all the hallmarks of martyrdom, but, despite coming early in the series, is the only such image in it. Thereafter, the prints mainly depict battles and massacres.

This series of prints, known in English as the *Wars, Massacres and Troubles* and published in 1569-70, was a landmark in the history of printmaking. It was the first synthetic pictorial history of contemporary events in France. Although single-leaf prints depicting current events had been pouring from print shops in Italy and Southern Germany for decades by 1570, French print-makers generated only 29 known single-leaf prints devoted to current events in the three decades between 1553 and 1582. Almost all of these depict sieges or battles, and none shows a massacre. Thus, the sheer number of images – thirty in the early edition of 1569 and forty in the full edition of 1570 – together with their variety of subject matter and richness of detail make the series by Tortorel and Perrissin the most important visual source mediatizing massacres during the French wars of religion. Fortunately, Philip Benedict has just published a thorough study of the evidentiary provenance and physical production of these prints.\(^\text{31}\) Though he did not investigate the issue of immediate impact, his study makes it possible for the first time to assess the role that depictions of massacres played in shaping Huguenot responses to the wars of religion.

The publication in 1569-70 of the print series *Wars, Massacres, and Troubles*, which

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\(^{31}\) *Graphic History: The Wars, Massacres and Troubles, of Tortorel and Perrissin* (Geneva: Droz, 2007). Credit is also due to Pierre Bonnaure, “Des images _ relire et _ rehabiliter: l’oeuvre gravé de Tortorel et Perrissin”
covered events in France between the arrest of Anne du Bourg in June 1559 and the daring crossing of the Rhône by Huguenots forces in March 1570, held considerable potential to impact Protestant attitudes to persecution. Such a claim rests on several convergent pieces of evidence. First, the print series reached a relatively large audience: it was, by the standards of the day, mass produced – over 6,300 copies – and not especially expensive – a half livre tournois or slightly more per set. Second, these thousands of copies flooded France in a short space of time, between 1570 and 1572, after which production stopped due to bankruptcy. Third, even before the series had been expanded to forty images in 1570, a highly successful copy of twenty-two images in smaller format had been pirated and was being printed en masse at Cologne by Frans Hogenberg. Fourth, the print series either replicated or complemented an outpouring of pamphlets on the religious strife in France. Many of these were scrupulously assembled into document collections, which became virtually a new genre at the time. Third, the print series embodied a Protestant version of events, but it did so, almost paradoxically, by striving for accuracy and eschewing vituperative partisanship, thereby avoiding the taint of overt propaganda.

Taken together, these features made the Wars, Massacres, and Troubles a landmark in the communication of suffering through the public sphere. The distinctively Protestant characteristics of including convincing circumstantial detail, avoiding errors so as not to be caught out by enemies, and even including episodes that did not flatter the Huguenots (e.g. military defeats and a massacre of Catholics), were likely intended to make the series of prints by Tortorel and Perrissin more marketable beyond Huguenot circles. More important for our purposes, however, these essentially historical features also made the print series a more powerful medium to communicate the suffering of others to individuals far away from the communities where the violence took place. A closer look at three of these prints will make this

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This included Antoine de La Roche Chandieu, Histoire des persecutions et martyrs de l’Église de Paris depuis l’An 1557. jusques au temps du Roy Charles neufiesme (Lyon, 1563); Jean Crespin, Histoire des vrayes tesmoins de la verité de l’Evangile (Geneva, 1570); Jean de Serres, Memoires de la III. guerre civile et des derniers troubles de France sous Charles IX (n.p. 1570); Lancelot Voisin, sieur de La Popenhin_re, La vraye et enti_re histoire de ces derniers troubles, advenues tant en France qu’en Flandres et pays circonvoisins (n.p., 1572), etc.
abundantly clear.

“The Massacre at Vassy” (1 March 1562) is a print of exceptional intimacy (slide 2). By removing the “fourth wall” between the action and the audience, the print-makers nearly bring the viewer into the scene itself. Female Huguenot viewers would certainly have felt the urgency of the woman in the center foreground as she tries to stop a Catholic soldier from bringing his sword down on the fallen man before him, or have empathized with the sheltering embrace given to a young child by the woman just behind her. Male Huguenot viewers would have especially identified with the sense of helplessness conveyed by the obvious inability of the worshiping men to protect either women or children, let alone to defend themselves. The intimacy of the scene allows the artist to depict a variety of facial expressions, including the fear of the man on the ground in the lower right corner and the throes of death on the woman run through with a sword in the lower front. The general panic is palpable from the many arms thrown in the air, the entangled mass of struggling bodies, and the wild scramble to escape across the roof. Furthermore, famous details known from widely circulated pamphlets, such as the theft of the poor box and the sounding of trumpets, are included to bolster the veracity of the scene. Finally, the whole event is explained as a Guise-led massacre by the presence of both the Duke of Guise (letter B) and the Cardinal of Guise (letter E). The intensity of this print lives up to the importance of the event, which led directly to the first war of religion, but its greatest effectiveness lies in its ability to communicate suffering to a wide variety of individuals who were not members of the Protestant community at Vassy.

“The Massacre at Sens” (12-14 April 1562) lacks the same intimacy (slide 3). Nonetheless, it achieves its intensity and effectiveness through a combination of narrative structuring and sheer brutality. Here it was not leaders of the ultra-Catholics, but the civic militia and ordinary town dwellers who committed the massacre. Rather than capture a single moment in time, this image depicts events that lasted three days. Diachronic vignettes are scattered throughout the print. For example, the letter E in the center is explained in the coded playlet as the wife of master Jaques Ithier, doctor, first trying to prevent the pillage of her neighbor’s
house, then being stripped of her clothes, and finally being dragged by the neck to the river. The rampaging brutality is clearly evident in the river, where naked men and women (one face up and apparently pregnant) are attached in threes and fours to floating timbers and carried off by the Yonne river. Pillaging and human butchery are emphasized throughout the image and would have made an especially strong impression on Protestant burghers in other towns.

Despite being set outside and including an entire city-scape, “The Massacre at Tours” (July 1562) manages to combine proximate intimacy with even more shocking brutality (slide 4). The desperate agony of struggling against drowning is readily visible on several victims’ faces, especially that of the man behind the largest boat. Clubbing people in the water, and even chopping the hands off a woman clinging to a boat, highlight the determination of the killers. More gruesome yet are the vignettes to the far right. There, behind the cadavers being devoured by dogs and ravens, is the town’s principal royal official, Bourgeois, suspended from a tree while his heart and entrails are torn out. The cold-blooded nature of the butchery is apparent even in an alternative, more laconic, legend that replaced the lettered key in some editions: “The population of Tours rises up against those of the Religion and massacres up to about two hundred of them; taking them first from a church, where they had been imprisoned, in the faubourg of la Riche, and made to wait two or three days without water or food; then killing and drowning them.”

Thus Tortorel and Perrissin’s depictions of massacres generated considerable compassion among viewers by using a variety of visual and verbal techniques, perhaps the most ominous element being the apparent lack of motive for the barbarous actions of the Catholic populace.

It is important to note that although all three of these massacres took place in 1562, the print collection depicting them did not begin to circulate in France until seven to eight years later. By then, France had been through three separate wars of religion (1562-3, 1567-8, 1568-70). This trajectory of religious strife was well documented by pamphlets and collections, especially from a Huguenot perspective. Catholic versions circulated, too, but they were generally rarer,
less supported by evidence, and more vehemently partisan. Then the Edict of Saint-Germain (8 August 1570) conceded extensive toleration to the Protestant minority, including public worship in numerous localities and specified “safe towns” that were off limits to royal troops. This was the first treaty to be officially described as “perpetual and irrevocable.”

Thus, the forty prints in the *Wars, Massacres, and Troubles* entered France at a time when there was growing reason for them to be viewed merely as a pictorial chronicle of a period now over.

But the worst was yet to come. On 24 August 1572, the Catholic populace of Paris, believing it was carrying out both the King’s will and God’s will, followed the example set by royal soldiers and slaughtered at least 2,000 Huguenots in the capital. This St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre was not a day, but a season, as Jules Michelet famously noted, for massacres followed in more than a dozen provincial cities, including Rouen, Lyon, Toulouse and Bordeaux. Whereas the massacres of 1562-7 had produced roughly 3,000 deaths, those of 1572 killed around 10,000. Estimates at the time, however, were generally two or three times higher, both in Paris and in the other cities. A catastrophe of such magnitude sent shock waves through Calvinist communities everywhere. Major towns and cities that experienced massacres saw hundreds, even thousands of Protestants return to the Catholic Church. So too did towns such as Dijon, where there had been no massacre. There Catholic authorities had gone so far as to gather local Protestants into a castle keep for their own protection. However, having to sign a declaration promising “to live catholically” in exchange for their release started a small wave of abjurations that extended beyond those temporarily under guard. Elsewhere no coercion was necessary to initiate the process. Huguenots who had sworn never to return to Catholicism even if burned alive as martyrs were returning “not in ones or twos, but in large groups to sing in the churches.” Some no doubt abandoned the new religion because they interpreted the massacres as

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divine condemnation of it. Others apostatized simply out of fear of also being slaughtered.36

One can hardly imagine a more tangible manifestation of “collective trauma” than individually signed abjurations conducted en masse in hundreds of communities across the kingdom.37 Not only were individual Protestants psychologically traumatized, but Reformed Churches all over France were torn apart by the tension of whether to abjure, remain faithful or turn into “nicodemites” who displayed outward conformity, but continued Protestant practices in secret. Here Tortorel and Perrissin’s graphic images of earlier massacres undoubtedly played a part. Verbal and textual descriptions of the St. Bartholomew’s massacres contained plenty of material to terrify Protestants not directly afflicted by mob violence. All the same, none of the contemporary pamphlets conveys so vividly the visceral cruelty of contemporary massacres as do these prints. Moreover, the fact that they formed a new medium for the reporting of recent events greatly increased their emotional impact. At the very least, the variety of massacres depicted in the collection made it easier to imagine the massacres of 1572 without having to witness them first hand. They also complemented both the tone and the content of the most explicit pamphlets of the day, which further enhanced their effectiveness in communicating the distant suffering of those who directly experienced the Saint-Bartholomew’s massacres. Thus, from the historian’s perspective, they serve as suitable proxies for the sort of descriptions contained in pamphlets, as well as in private correspondence and Protestant sermons, most of

36 Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 125-50 (quote from p. 148); Janine Garrisson, *La Saint-Barthélémy*, 138; Mack Holt, “L’évolution des “Politiques” face aux Églises (1560-1598)” in Thierry Wanegffelen, ed., *De Michel de L’Hospital _l’Édit de Nantes: Politique et religion face aux Églises* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Blaise-Pascal): 591-607. Rouen alone registered more than 3,000 abjurations. A decade later, Jean de L’Espine claimed that French Protestant churches had lost two-thirds of their members (Robert J. Knecht, *The French Civil Wars* [Harlow: Longman, 2000], 166). The flip-side of this widespread apostasy was that the pernicious role of the monarchy in the massacres gave Huguenots who remained committed to their religion a source of inspiration to rally together: to wit, the notion of Charles IX as a tyrant. This liberated them from the obedience to state authority emphasized for so long by Calvin. Their new-found lack of trust in the institutions of the state is yet more evidence of the trauma caused by the Saint-Bartholomew’s massacres.

37 “These events [the Saint-Bartholomew’s massacres] provoked a veritable traumatism – the word does not seem too strong – on those who experienced them directly or indirectly (ceux qui de pr_s ou de loin, les ont vécus). We are not surprised, therefore, that certain individuals who strongly felt the tragedy in their hearts and souls translated their emotions into very violent images.” I would argue that images, both visual and verbal, were
which have long disappeared. In short, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the images and explanatory playlets contained in the *Wars, Massacres and Troubles* made it a powerful medium that helped to generate the “collective trauma” experienced by Huguenots in the wake of the Saint-Bartholomew’s massacres of 1572.

The publication of Tortorel and Perrissin’s prints does not appear to have inspired others in France (or Geneva) to generate printed images of contemporary events. In fact, the very small output of single-leaf prints depicting recent events in France actually declined somewhat after 1572. Perhaps more interesting to contemplate is the fact that no prints appeared depicting the massacres of that year. But that was hardly necessary. The earlier emphasis on stoic martyrs had been replaced by an emphasis on ordinary victims. What would otherwise have been mere pity became instead genuine compassion, the sort of emotional and psychological investment in others that underpins a community of believers even if they never come to know one another as individuals.

**Catholic Response**

According to Denis Crouzet, the massacres of 1572 also had a major psychological impact on French Catholics, despite being the perpetrators. Rather than being sickened by the slaughter, however, the bulk of Catholics became profoundly distressed by the survival of the Huguenots. As far as Catholics were concerned, the Saint-Bartholomew’s massacres had been a form of divine intervention in the world, but it proved to be a *miracle manqué* because it failed to extirpate heresy. The explanation for this was that Catholics themselves, by their sins and

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38 For a rare example of a detailed description of massacre provided by private correspondence, see “La Saint-Barthélemy _ Orléans racontée par Joh.-Wilh. de Botzheim, étudiant allemand, témoin oculaire, 1572” *Bulletin de la société de l’histoire du protestantisme fran ais* (1872): 345-92.

39 The only contemporary image available to historians, and therefore the one reproduced in most textbooks, is the painting of the Parisian massacre now in the museum at Lausanne. François Dubois’ painting has several notable similarities to the massacre scenes designed by Tortorel and Perrissin. This is hardly surprising. Although Dubois was in Paris during the Saint-Bartholomew’s Day massacre there, he painted his picture in Geneva, where he had fled as a Huguenot refugee, and where he certainly would have seen the impressive work of Tortorel and
wickedness, were responsible. Far from freeing good Catholics of their eschatological anxiety, therefore, the massacres instead elicited a heightened sense of sinfulness and called for a collective penitence on the part of God’s faithful, all in preparation for a return to God’s soteriologic violence. This need for collective penitence and preparation for sacral violence constituted the religious foundation of the Catholic League that took shape in the 1580s.40

Remarkably, contemporary printed images of Huguenots committing violence are almost completely absent from the wars of religion in France – the only one being that of the Michelade at Nomes depicted in the Protestant produced Wars, Massacres and Troubles. Some idea of what Catholic depictions of Protestant depredations may have looked like can, however, be gained from watercolor illustrations in the manuscript volume De Tristibus Galliae, Carmen in Quator Libros produced at Lyon (slides 5 and 6).41 These focus primarily on the destruction of religious images and artifacts, although interpersonal violence does appear in a few pictures. This is notably the case in the siege of Montbrison, where murder and religious pillaging are linked (slide 7).

Instead of picturing massacres, Catholic polemicists produced images designed to provoke massacres. These images drove home a message of intolerance by depicting Protestants as iconoclastic monkeys (slides 8 and 9). A modern viewer, aware of the Hutus’ description of Tutsis as cockroaches and of the Nazis’ labeling of Jews as Untermenschen, can hardly avoid being unsettled by depictions of Huguenots as monkeys – the dehumanization of victims being an essential element of most massacres.42 But we must also pay attention to the religious idiom of the sixteenth century. First, the cult of images played a key role in the construction of identities,

Perrissin, itself created and printed in Geneva.

40 Crouzet, Guerriers de Dieu, ii. 119-20.

41 My claim that mass-circulation prints may have resembled these drawings is based on the very strong similarities between the image of iconoclastic monkeys in slide 11 and one of the colored drawings in De Tristibus Galliae. In should also be noted, that all of the Huguenots in the drawings in this manuscript have the faces of animals. See the website of the Biblioth que municipale de Lyon.

whether social, professional, religious or political, through the social media of processions, confraternities, dedications, and public oaths. The sudden abolition of such images profoundly changed how individuals understood their relationship to a community. Destroying images of patron saints, scattering relics, and tearing down altars all sundered the ties between the living, the dead, and the celestial protectors that had constituted an enduring collectivity. Thus, what could appear as mere property damage today, was experienced by Catholics as the massacre of communities founded on the immanence of God in the world.

Second, the link to the Apocalypse is made explicit in a printed frontispiece that quotes the book of Revelation: “Power was given to the beast to blaspheme against God and His tabernacle, and those who dwell in heaven. And he was permitted to make war on the Saints and to defeat them.” According to scripture, the period of the beast’s power would be limited and would be destroyed in the final battle of Armageddon, the essential precursor to God’s reign on earth. The obvious conclusion to draw was that Huguenots were themselves a sign of the end times and, therefore, Catholics needed to prepare for another great blood bath. Thus, what may appear as almost playful, even farfetched, images of iconoclasm are, in fact, once fully understood in a biblical and eschatological context, visceral provocations to religious massacre.

Rather than trying to communicate suffering through print media, however, Catholics in late sixteenth-century France, and especially in the mid 1580s, instead mobilized the faithful through devotional confraternities and their attendant public processions. These processions were penitential in nature, serving as collective expressions of expiation and pleading for divine mercy. Processions were especially effective rituals of religious purification because they thoroughly fused the individual and the community. Penitents effaced their social status and

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44 Intercessional confraternities devoted to patron saints or the Holy Spirit were fundamentally social organizations and had a much longer history than devotional confraternities, such as those which proliferated during the wars of religion as a means to develop the personal piety of their members. Marc Venard, “Les confréries en France au XVIe siècle et dans la première moitié du XVIIe siècle, Société, culture, vie religieuse aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles” (Paris: Presses de Paris-Sorbonne, 1995), 48-9. See also, Jouanna et al., Dictionnaire, 293-7.
individual identities by wearing hooded tunics, but accepted individual suffering through long marches barefoot, sometimes combined with acts of self-flagellation en route, in order to invoke God’s immanence in their communities (slide 10). These processions became veritable instruments of clerical propaganda when they were directed toward key cities riven by confessional conflict. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that they sometimes turned into minor religious pogroms. In fact, the violence itself, when directed against “heretics,” became evidence of divine immanence and thus fostered yet more violence. Ecclesiastical authorities, especially those deemed politiques, worried that the popular fervor had escaped their control and that a rift was opening between the faithful and the institutional church.45

The role of processions as an alternative means to communicate suffering has not been fully appreciated and thus deserves much more attention that it can be given here. Suffice it to say that the ability to share in the suffering of others depended on the theological notion of belonging to the mystical body of Christ in which the union of the baptized produces a commerce of prayers and in which “everything received in holiness by each, belongs somehow to all.”46

The role of the Church in mediating individual salvation was, therefore, paramount. As the vehicle of the sacred, it deployed a rejection of the profane life in clerical celibacy and monasticism on the one hand, and made available the sacraments, on the other, thereby both denigrating and rescuing the laymen at the same time. Lay Catholics did not ordinarily share the same level of dedication to the faith as clerics, but in a time of widespread “eschatological anxiety,” processions offered laymen an opportunity to become instruments of their own salvation as well as that of their communities in advance of the Final Judgment.

**Conclusion**

The different responses to the massacres of 1572, inflected as they were by different means of communicating suffering, are more easily understood by borrowing Charles Taylor’s metaphor in which a Catholic layperson is “a passenger in the ecclesial ship on its journey to God,” but Protestantism is not a ship in the Catholic sense and thus has no passengers: “Each believer rows his or her own boat.” The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, therefore, had a profound impact on the means by which individuals came to understand the suffering of others. As Tortorel and Perrissin’s scenes of massacre demonstrate – and remember, they are excellent proxies for the far more abundant Protestant pamphlet literature of the day – representations of others’ tragedies could only provoke compassion in fellow believers if they contained details that could be substantiated, could be easily understood without elaborate explanations, and captured the intensity of human emotions and inhuman brutality at the same time. Thus, the ways in which Calvinism encouraged a more clearly articulated sense of “self” interacted reflexively with the new ways of communicating the suffering of those involved in a religious massacre to those who had no direct experience of it. Furthermore, the series of prints by Tortorel and Perrissin reflected an orthodox Protestant version of the causes and course of the wars of religion. The inclusion near the beginning of two prints showing the arrest and execution of Anne du Bourg created a clear trajectory from martyrdom to massacre in the years 1559-1562. The clustering of prints showing massacres from 1562 (Vassy, Sens, and Tours) while also omitting various others reinforces the contrast between a brief period of attempted political conciliation and a season of Catholic violence that precipitated the civil wars. The inclusion of these massacres in particular also indicates the process by which they became “chosen traumas” that helped to consolidate the collective identity of French Huguenots. (Thus, whenever

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Quoted in Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, 7.

Sources of the Self, 217.

Benedict, *Graphic History*, 50.

Vamik D. Volkan, “On Chosen Trauma,” *Mind and Human Interaction* 3 (1991): 13 develops the concept of a “chosen trauma” as the cohesive image of an event that caused a large group of people to feel victimized and humiliated, and to suffer psychologically, including a loss of self-esteem.
Protestant leaders negotiated peace terms with the crown, they argued for compensation for these massacres in particular.) Moreover, disseminating the series throughout France in 1570-72 had the unintended consequence of making the psychological shock of the Saint-Bartholomew’s massacres even greater. In this case, historicizing massacre had the effect of magnifying it. Protestants in France became convinced that only an effective fusion of religious organization and martial power could preserve the faithful. Once the United Provinces of the Midi had been formed, however, Protestants became more prone to perpetrate killings that did not fit the analysis of Natalie Davis. It would be easy to dismiss these as part of a cycle of vendetta, but that would suggest that they lacked religious content. Such an analysis soon becomes tautological: only when Protestants engage in iconoclasm and lynch priests are they truly engaged in religious rioting; the rest is merely murder.

Much the same can be said of Denis Crouzet’s analysis of Catholic responses to the massacres of 1572. He is alert to the psychological impact of what I have dubbed the miracle manquée of that year, though his description makes it appear even more traumatic for Catholics than for Protestants. The more than ten years that elapsed between 1572 and the full flowering of the penitential movement, however, suggests that this latter had more to do with a growing willingness to implement Tridentine reforms. At the very least, the two were complementary, fostering increased personal piety and, thus, a burgeoning sense of “self.” Furthermore, the popular and clerical trends clearly gave the militantly Catholic League a base of support that vastly inflated the political ambitions of the Guise family. It is a mistake, however, to see this all channeled into a form of mystical politics in which Catholic zealots of all ranks would find individual and collective salvation in the assassination of Henri III. The evidence suggests, on the contrary, that the religious purity of their civic community mattered as much in 1588, when the

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This was the main message of the hugely influential tract Dialogue auquel sont traitées plusieurs choses advenues aux Luthériens et Huguenots de la France (Basel, 1573), which was expanded and reprinted as Le Réveille-Matin des François et de leur voisins (Edinburgh, 1574). Arlette Jouanna, Jacqueline Boucher, Dominique Biloghi and Guy Le Thiec, Histoire et dictionnaire des guerres de religion (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1998), 205-6.
51
Sixteen locked down Paris in the “day of the barricades,” as it had in 1572. Just because they were not massacring “heretics” – mainly because there were so few available to massacre – did not make this any less religiously-inspired violence.

Thus, understanding the events of 1572 as a “collective trauma” for Huguenots and a catalyst for Catholic piety, and doing so through the various means of communicating suffering and all that implied for the emerging “self” in both religious cultures, suggests the need for a sequel to Davis’ famous article, one which escapes the notion of static religious cultures and a tautological approach to religious violence.

Crouzet, Guerriers de Dieu, 241-42.