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Huguenots and the French Enlightenment

Allison Ramsey

The seventeenth and eighteenth century European Enlightenment movement sparked a fundamental reorientation in attitudes toward human reason and political, social, and individual rights. However, it was also a time of religious upheaval in France. The Catholic and Protestant religious groups, working along with the wishes of the monarchy, struggled to find a way to coexist. When Louis XIV inherited the throne in 1643, the French Protestants, or Huguenots, found themselves in a difficult situation. The Sun King effectively ended all hope for Protestantism in France with the Edict of Fontainebleau—or the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes—in 1685. Even though Catholics and Protestants alike were weary of fighting within the country, they could not agree upon a peaceable co-existence. This led to a grand migration of Protestants in search of a better life in other areas of the world. Eventually, with the help of popular philosophe opinion, the Huguenots regained many of their individual rights in France, even though these were reluctantly given. While the Enlightenment represented a growth in personal freedom for many, it was a time of fluctuation, instability, and turmoil for the Huguenots.

A study of the troubles of the French Protestants could logically start with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Henry IV issued the original policy in April of 1598 in an attempt to bring peace during the turmoil of the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) and it included civil rights and an amount of tolerance toward the Protestant religion heretofore unknown. It permitted “those of the said religion called Reformed to live and abide in all the cities and places of this our kingdom and countries of our sway, without being annoyed, molested, or compelled to do anything in the matter of religion contrary to their consciences.”¹ Unfortunately, neither the Catholics nor the Protestants were entirely satisfied with the contents of the edict. This would change when Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715) took the throne.

The Huguenots found themselves in a difficult situation following Louis XIV’s accession. Upon the urging of the Catholic Church, the new king slowly and methodically introduced new measures that rescinded French Calvinist rights. It was hoped that by reducing their freedoms, the Huguenots would be persuaded to simply convert through self-interest.² The ex-Huguenot Paul Pellisson was charged with leading a *Caisse des Conversions*, which was meant to reward Protestants

willing to convert to Catholicism. This financial program offered social and educational support to converts, and provided funding that converts could use to build new homes.³ Additionally, Versailles encouraged dialogue between the embittered rival theologians in an effort to bridge the gap between their opposing creeds. Finally, and most dramatically, Intendant Nicolas-Joseph Foucault of Bearn initiated the *grande dragonnade*. This group swept through southern France in 1681 and in May of 1685, battling in the major strongholds of Huguenot power.⁴ In the past, dragoons had aided in forcible conversions, but this was secondary to other acts, such as responding to armed rebellions. The *grande dragonnade*, however, had the sole purpose of forcing Protestants in even the most remote places in France to convert. Soldiers lodging with Protestants until they finally abjured achieved this goal.⁵

The Edict of Fontainebleau, presented on October 22, 1685, ended all rights for the Huguenots and their religion, referred to as the *Religion Prétendue Réformée*, or “alleged religion,” within the edict. It stated,

And since by this fact the execution of the Edict of Nantes and of all that has ever been ordained in favor of the said R.P.R. has been rendered nugatory, we have determined that we can do nothing better, in order wholly to obliterate the memory of the troubles, the confusion, and the evils which the progress of this false religion has caused in this kingdom, and which furnished occasion for the said edict and for so many previous and subsequent edicts and declarations, than entirely to revoke the Edict of Nantes, with the special articles granted as a sequel to it, as well as all that has since been done in favor of the said religion.⁶

The severe penalties exacted with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes led to a lifestyle that was uncertain at best for the Protestant people living in France. Studying the relationship between Catholics and Huguenots during the Enlightenment requires navigation through frequently murky waters. Even though there were obvious religious and political differences between the French Catholics and Protestants, the reality of the situation often showed them working together in a neighborly setting. Dr. Keith P. Luria, history professor at North Carolina State University and published author, suggested, “familial, social, business, intellectual, and political contacts produced shared concerns.”⁷ In such a turbulent time period in history both groups would have been eager to keep peace between themselves. The French people as a whole were crippled and worn out

from their wartime exertions. Another element to consider was the strength each group had within their communities. If the Catholics were the dominant group, the Protestants would more than likely have changed their mannerisms enough to peaceably coexist within their neighborhood. The reverse could also have been true. In areas where Protestantism was prevalent, the Catholic community would have had a harder time reestablishing their ways of worship.⁸ In addition, outsiders were able to impact relations between the two religious groups. For example, royal officials would have been on hand to ensure both remembered the importance of following the king's wishes for peace within his realm.⁹

For every situation where outsiders acted as peacekeepers between the two groups, there was an adverse situation where they acted as interlopers. Missionaries sought to light a fire under their religious counterparts, stirring up controversy and provoking conflict. The groups were often unable to come to peaceable terms concerning the sharing of local power, the partition of communal sacred space, or their respective religious observances.¹⁰ Catherine Randall, senior lecturer for the Department of Religion at Dartmouth, summed up the situation succinctly when she stated, "Even if the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes put the Protestants in peril, it was not able to eliminate them or their beliefs. Louis XIV, intending to wipe out with one stroke of his pen this irritating religious anomaly in his kingdom, succeeded only in creating serious internal and external political problems."¹¹

The Huguenots were persecuted in many different areas of daily life. The Edict of Nantes did little to curb the hatred the Catholics held for the Protestants. For example, a man naming a Protestant place of worship as a "church" could be fined up to 500 livres. In Rouen, a Protestant youth was not able to be apprenticed until fourteen Roman Catholics were taken in. They were forbidden to sing psalms, forced to bury their dead in the middle of the night, and unable to send their children to anything more than minor schools in which they were merely taught to read, write, and count.¹² Protestant churches were pulled down in alarming numbers, forcing church members to travel great distances, at times forty or more miles, in order to attend services or to have their children baptized.¹³

These are just a few examples included on a lengthy list of reasons why the Huguenots were receptive to the idea of leaving France in large numbers. According to Charles Nicholas de la Cherois Purdon's 1865 series regarding French settlers in Ireland, three thousand families left during a single quarter in 1682.¹⁴ The Revocation affected 730,000 French Protestants.¹⁵ An estimated 150,000 to 180,000 individuals escaped the country between 1680 and 1700.¹⁶ The emigration of the Huguenots spanned a large portion of the globe. They settled in many locations outside of France during the Enlightenment including North and South Carolina,

Virginia, New York, and Massachusetts in North America. The Huguenot settlements in North America reaped both positive and negative consequences.

Many Huguenots looked to the lands across the Atlantic as a place where they could escape persecution and find reprieve from political and religious turmoil.¹⁷ However, their adversities and misfortunes did not end with relocation to new areas. A new Languedoc arrival to Boston wrote back to his friends in France, “You must disabuse yourself of the Impression that Advantages are here offered to Refugees . . . Whoever brings Nothing, finds Nothing.”¹⁸ Huguenots in the New England area found themselves in the middle of a battleground of spiritual and literal warfare, with French Protestants and French Catholics both fighting for dominance over Native American missionary conversions.¹⁹ This was in addition to fighting off the English in an effort to gain Native American resources and converts.

Despite these initial hardships in moving to North America, the Huguenots were able to thrive in their new environment, and as the Huguenot refugee Charles de Saille wrote in July of 1700 to an English colleague, “We are, thank God, in a fine and beautiful country, where, after the first difficulties, we shall live well and happily.”²⁰ As time went on, the colonies, and Pennsylvania in particular, attracted the attention of the French philosophes for the religious freedom for which they had fought. Then, in 1776, the United States offered a revolutionary approach to dealing with the centuries-old dilemma of state religions. The newly formed country decided that individuals could choose on their own what they would believe and practice with a separation of church and state. Marquis de Lafayette, an instrumental general in the Revolutionary War, acted as a link between the new religious freedom in the United States and the fight for Huguenot relief in France. According to Concordia University’s former History Chair, Geoffrey Adams, “his admiration for Washington played no small part in his decision to join the lobby working to achieve in France the kind of religious freedom the Americans had fought to confirm.”²¹

While the Protestant refugees received a mixed welcome from the colonists in North America, several European countries had provided a warmer welcome over the years. In the late sixteenth century, entire regiments of Huguenots were sent by William, Prince of Orange, to accompany him to England and Ireland. After the peace was restored in these areas, many of the Protestant soldiers stayed and several new settlements were formed.²² An example of this can be found at Youghal, Ireland, where the parish registers record the prefixes “Cornet,” “Ensign,” “Levt.,” and “Captain.”²³ Shortly after the Edict of Nantes was signed, large numbers moved into Switzerland, Germany, England, and

Holland. The Queen of Denmark and the Swiss showed the greatest sympathy and received all who came. In Holland, those who had served in the French army were offered commissions equal to their prior rank in their new country of residence.

Despite their past issues, the Huguenots prospered in many areas. Linsburn in the county of Antrim, Ireland, was one particularly successful Huguenot community. The Irish King invited Louis Crommelin and his son, refugees living in Holland, to settle the area as a linen manufacturing center. They brought with them a number of Huguenot refugees and began a colony. A church was built and the services conducted in French for the benefit of the community.²⁴

Meanwhile, back in France, the Enlightenment movement flourished and, with it, came support for the Huguenots in the form of the philosophes who were gaining in popularity throughout the country. They were ambassadors for toleration and individual rights, which easily translated into the reintegration of the Huguenots into the national community.²⁵ Huguenot assimilation into other countries did not go unnoticed by the popular thinkers and writers of the Enlightenment. Baron Charles Montesquieu, who believed more in morality than in religious devotion, and Voltaire, who believed in tolerance, were particularly vociferous about the situation and religious pluralism in the “Protestant North.” For example, during the summer of 1765, Voltaire wrote of growing support in a letter to Claude-Adrien Helvétius, aspiring poet and disciple of the philosopher, “All the North is with us . . . Russia, Poland, Austria and Prussia have raised the banners of toleration and philosophy. . . . We French are obviously not destined to be first in these matters; truths reach us from abroad; but even if such truths come to us from outside, it is, of course, excellent that we should adopt them.”²⁶

By the early 1760s, French policy regarding the Protestants began to change. Physical repression stopped almost entirely and the King’s ministers started seeing reason in the philosophes’ desire to promote a spiritually open society.²⁷ Spain was the last symbol of the “medieval” past where, Adams remarked, “state and church conspired to crush the spirit.”²⁸ Voltaire, along with other philosophes of the time, would have been dismayed to see their country keeping company with another that most considered so backward. Antoine Court’s 1760 publication, *Histoire des Troubles des Cévennes*, mentioned the failure of forced religious conversions, stating, “instead of making Catholics, [it] made libertines, faithless men, atheists and finally rebels.”²⁹

The French Protestants finally felt some relief when the Edict of Toleration was introduced in November of 1787. The wording showcased the reluctance of the government to change its ways and stubbornly admitted that the Huguenots deserved to enjoy at least some rights as French subjects. This is most

easily seen in paragraph four, which stated,

The Catholic religion that we have the good fortune to profess will alone enjoy in our kingdom the rights and honors of public worship, while our other, non-Catholic subjects, deprived of all influence on the established order in our state, declared in advance and forever ineligible for forming a separate body within our kingdom, and subject to the ordinary police [and not their own clergy] for the observation of religious festival days, will only get from the law what natural right does not permit us to refuse them, to register their births, their marriages and their deaths, in order to enjoy, like all our other subjects, the civil effects that result from this.³⁰

Even so, the Edict of Toleration gave the Protestants, along with other religious groups, the same rights the Catholics had enjoyed all along. Following in the footsteps of the Americans and their separation of church and state, the French finally showed the same tolerance and allowed the Huguenots to practice their religion in peace. The edict allowed current and future residents of the state to enjoy all goods and rights regardless of their religious beliefs. It also gave people of all religions the right to pursue commerce, arts, crafts, and professions without discrimination.³¹

The philosophes gave strength and voice to oppressed commoners in France during the Enlightenment, although it took quite some time for the movement to aid in the plight of the Huguenots. The persecution of these families fueled a massive emigration from France into much of Europe and eastern North America. The acts of countries like the United States and Ireland, and individuals like Lafayette and Voltaire, did a great deal to further the cause of the French Protestants. The Huguenots and their ordeal represent the fluctuating nature of religious tolerance that was a defining characteristic of the Enlightenment movement of the eighteenth century.

Notes

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4. Adams, *Huguenots and the French Opinion*, 197.

5. Christie Sample Wilson, *Beyond Belief: Surviving the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in France* (Lanham: Lehigh University Press, 2011), 64.

6. Isambert, *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises XIX*, 530 sqq, translated in J.H. Robinson, *Readings in European History* 2 vols. (Boston: Ginn, 1906), 2:180-183, accessed December 28, 2013, Web.

7. Keith P. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early Modern France* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 1, accessed December 22, 2013, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10267233>.

8. Ibid., 2.

9. Ibid., 3.

10. Ibid., 2.

11. Catharine Randall, *From a Far Country: Camisards and Huguenots in the Atlantic World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 11, accessed December 26, 2013, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10367027>.

12. Charles Nicholas de la Cherois Purdon, "The French Settlers in Ireland, No. 1. The Huguenot Colony at Lisburn, County of Antrim," *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, first series, volume 1, (1853): 209-210, accessed December 5, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20563463>.

13. Ibid., 210.

14. de la Cherois Purdon, "The French Settlers in Ireland," 210.

15. David E. Lambert, *Studies in Church History, Volume 12: Protestant International and the Huguenot Migration to Virginia*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 26, accessed December 29, 2013, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/docDetail.action?docID=10516914>.

16. Ibid., 27.

17. Owen Stanwood, "Between Eden and Empire: Huguenot Refugees and the Promise of New Worlds," *American Historical Review*, volume 118, issue 5, (2013): 1326, accessed July 1, 2015, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=tsh&AN=92875086&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

18. Randall, *From a Far Country*, 61.

19. Stanwood, "Between Eden and Empire," 1336.

20. Lambert, *Studies in Church History*, 2.

21. Adams, *Huguenots and the French Opinion*, 197-198.

22. de la Cherois Purdon, "The French Settlers in Ireland," 211.

23. Samuel Hayman, "The French Settlers in Ireland, No. 4. The Settlement at Youghal, County Cork," *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, first series, volume 2, (1854), 224, accessed December

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24. de la Cherois Purdon, "The French Settlers in Ireland," 212.

25. Adams, *Huguenots and the French Opinion*, 197.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 201.

28. Ibid., 197.

29. Antoine Court, *Histoire des troubles des Cévennes, ou de la guerre des Camisars, sous le règne de Louis le Grand; tirée de manuscrits secrets et authentiques et des observations faites sur les lieux memes, avec une carte des Cévennes*, volume 3, (Villefranche: P. Chrétien, 1760), quoted in Adams, *Huguenots and the French Opinion*, 200.

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