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Corporal Imagery and the Language of Exclusion in Catholic Propaganda during the Reign of Charles IX (1560-1574)

Abstract: The French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) saw a deep polarization of the French society, fractured along confessional lines. The religious unity of the kingdom whose motto was “un roi, une loi, une foi” was shattered like never before and this represented a massive trauma for the sixteenth-century people, who had been accustomed from times immemorial to see religious unity as the greatest good and division as the greatest evil. Despite their differences in many other matters, this was an issue which both Catholics and Huguenots could agree upon, thus both proclaimed their wish to restore this unity, Huguenots by means of a national council, Catholics by bringing back the Protestants into the Catholic fold or by excluding them from the “body politic” of the realm. With respect to the latter, radical Catholics carried out an intense propaganda war intent to demonize the Huguenots and depict them as a malignant element, who had willingly placed themselves outside the “body” of the Church and, therefore, had to be cast out of the “body” of the realm as well. One of the tools employed in this onslaught of anti-Huguenot propaganda was the corporal analogy, in particular the vivid and powerful image of the heresy as an infectious disease, which appeared in the discourse of the most influential Catholic propagandists, such as Simon Vigor, René Benoist, Antoine de Mouchy, Gentien Hervet and other less known (or anonymous) authors of pamphlets. This paper tries to explain the significance of this argument in the overall picture of the anti-Huguenot rhetoric and in the creation/preservation of a boundary between the two faiths, while analyzing the occurrences of this analogy in the political and propaganda literature of the era..

Keywords: Huguenots, Wars of Religion, body politic, heresy, disease