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Heresy and Tyranny: The Political Discourse of the Radical Catholics During the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598)

Abstract: The French Wars of Religion (1562-1598) provided the biggest challenge to the French monarchy since the end of the Hundred Years War. They were characterized by a significant weakening of the central authority, intense factional strife and interference from foreign powers, in particular Spain, but these troubling circumstances also led to the first substantial attempts of reforming the French monarchy on a more constitutional basis, which envisioned a royal power limited by the institutions of the French Crown. To this extent, there was a wide range of political tracts and pamphlets written by both sides in conflict, Huguenot and Catholic. While the former put forward less sectarian theories, the latter focused almost exclusively on the issue of heresy as defining the concept of tyranny: for the radical Catholics, the king's worthiness depended on his attitude on heresy. A king who tolerated heresy or, worse, was a heretic himself was considered *ipso facto* a tyrant, because he would have been in violation either of his own coronation oath, who compelled him to defend the Catholic faith and destroy heresy, or of what many Catholics considered to be a fundamental law of France, that the monarch belong to the Catholic faith. The rhetoric of the Catholic radicals, who coalesced in the Catholic League during the second half of the Wars of Religion, joined these two issues, heresy and tyranny, tightly together, but the lengths they were willing to go to in order to achieve their goals, including accepting a foreign prince on the throne, alienated the rest of the French polity, ensuring their ultimate failure.

Keywords: France, Wars of Religion, Catholic League, heresy, tyranny, tyrannicide

1. Heresy and Repression in Early Sixteenth-Century France

The medieval ideology of power did not draw clear boundaries between sacred and temporal, between ecclesiastical and secular: on the contrary, any ruler, whether the Holy Roman Emperor, a king or a prince, was consecrated by the Church, perceived to possess a certain sacrality, which set him apart from ordinary subjects, and, in turn, was expected, as promised in the coronation oath, to defend the Church and the faith. Whatever occasional conflicts occurred, whether motivated by jurisdictional issues or merely by the popes' attempts to censor the behaviour of particular rulers, did not alter this fundamental relationship between rulers and the Roman Catholic Church. Holy Roman Emperors and kings of France challenged the papal authority, indeed, over its pretensions of disposing of both "swords", spiritual and temporal, and vehemently denied that the pope possessed any kind of temporal authority over them, let alone the power to dispose of their thrones as some popes argued. But such conflicts did not run very deep, because they involved only a papacy overreaching itself: how connected were the secular authorities to ecclesiastical ideology can be seen from the fact that, in order to counter papal claims, they relied invariably on the national clergy assembled in national councils. The monarchical ideology and ecclesiastical hierarchy were therefore indissolubly linked together. In turn, the monarchy accepted its share of responsibility in rooting out heresy, a tradition which dated from the time of Emperor Constantine, who "first used the power of the state to enforce the decisions of the Church against the persons and the property of heretics" (Baumgartner 1995, 180). How little impact the struggles between different princes and popes had upon the cooperation between the feudal monarchy and the Catholic Church against heresy can be seen from the fact that two such bitter enemies as the emperor Frederick II and pope Innocent IV were able to find common ground over this issue, the latter accepting the imperial edicts on the use of torture and burning for obstinate heretics (Baumgartner 1995, 180).

If medieval heresies could be described as an irritant, but not an existential threat to the Catholic Church, the situation changed radically in the sixteenth century, in the wake of the Protestant Reformation: not only did Protestantism spread much wider than the medieval heresies, capitalizing on long held dissatisfactions with the Catholic Church, but it also managed to gain the cooperation of secular authorities, particularly in

Germany. In fact, winning the support of the monarchies for their movement was something Luther and other Reformation figures were counting on, therefore they displayed much deference to their authority, invoking repeatedly the principle established by Saint Paul of obedience towards the “civil magistrate”. In France, though, the hopes of the reformers were to be greatly disappointed: the institutions of the French Crown reacted harshly against Protestantism, with the Parlement of Paris taking the first lead in persecuting the adherents of the Reformation. King Francis I was not very enthusiastic about persecution in the beginning, even trying to protect some Protestants such as Louis de Berquin against the Parlement of Paris (Roelker 1996, 194-205). The case of Louis de Berquin, a councilor at the Parlement of Paris, burned at the stake in 1529 for heresy after several trials and imprisonments, during which the king himself interceded on his behalf, is relevant because it involved the first confrontation between the Crown and the radical Catholic faction over the matter of insufficient persecuting zeal. Despite the fact that Berquin had been released several times from prison on the king’s command, in the words of Tyler Lange, “the Parlement’s persistent refusal to admit that the king could use his absolute power to derail a heresy trial demonstrated that the assumptions underlying the fundamental law of Catholicity had not yet been articulated, but were implicit in the court’s action” (Lange 2014, 195). The main ideological argument of the Catholic rebellion against the Crown six decades later had already taken root during the 1520’s: the power of pardon was one of the fundamental attributes of any monarchy, but the Parlement’s refusal to relent in its pursuit of Berquin indicated that, in the eyes of many hardline Catholics, royal prerogatives were subordinated to the imperatives of the Catholic Faith. It did not come to a clash at this time, not only because the French monarchy was still too strong, but also because Francis I heeded the urgings to “uproot and extirpate completely the damnable and intolerable Lutheran sect” (Lange 2014, 198). His attitude will slowly change, especially after the 1534 “Affair of the Placards” – when protestant placards attacking the Catholic Mass were posted in many cities of the kingdom and even on the door of the king’s bedchamber at Amboise – which appeared as a challenge to royal authority and it also made perfectly clear to the king that Protestantism was not merely an attempt to reform the Catholic Church from within, like many such instances in the past, but it posed a direct challenge to many of the Catholic dogmas and, indirectly, despite Protestants claims of the contrary, to the French monarchy. In the words of Mack Holt, “for French kings as well as their subjects the anointing

with the sanctified oil of the holy ampulla, the explicit promise to defend the church from heresy, and the public display of the celebration of mass in both kinds were all signifiers full of meaning, as well as evidence that in France there was a special relationship between church and state that was not duplicated elsewhere” (Holt 2005, 8). The sacral character of the French monarchy was deeply associated with the Catholic rituals and symbolism, as seen from the fact that the more and more numerous instances of Protestant iconoclasm drew in turn expiatory processions in which the king himself and the princes of the blood took part – such as the one in January 1535, following the already-mentioned Affair of the Placards, which, in the opinion of Christopher Elwood, was “truly unprecedented” and demonstrated “the seriousness with which the authorities viewed this most recent evidence of the incursion of heresy into French territory” (Elwood 1999, 27-30). This sacral character of the monarchy allowed the French kings to exert a strong tutelage over the French church and rely on its support even in direct defiance of the papacy, but at the same time it permitted and compelled them to take an active stance against Protestantism, having no motivation to support the Reformation despite the occasional conflicts with the Holy See. The French Crown quickly assumed jurisdiction over the matters of heresy in France, not just supporting, but even supplanting the ecclesiastical tribunals.

The struggle against heresy had implications also for the political thought in France: just like dissatisfaction with the monarchy during the Wars of Religion led the warring factions to look for ways of restraining the royal power, in the beginning, the hopes that the monarchy would lead the attack against Protestantism led to a push towards absolutism, making institutions such as the Parlement of Paris to abandon its previous constitutionalism. As Tyler Lange convincingly demonstrated, the Parlement of Paris started to consider unconstitutional royal actions as a weapon against heresy, while “the image of Francis I as an avenging Hebrew king sacralized the monarchy and effaced the constitutionalist emphasis on kingship as an office” (Lange 2014, 251-252). Despite its initial hesitations, Francis I moved to fulfill these expectations, with harsher and harsher measures taken in order to check the spread of Protestantism: in 1540, the Edict of Fontainebleau was issued, which was, in the words Nancy Lyman Roelker, “the first step in the systematic assembling of machinery for the repression of heresy”: this edict required the royal courts to submit their findings in cases of heresy to the criminal chambers of the Parlements, which were ordered to give these cases priority and report to the king every six months, and also forbade

association with heretics because the profession of false doctrine “contains in itself the crimes of human and divine lèse-majesté, popular sedition, and the disturbance of our state and the public peace” (Roelker 1996, 207-208). The wording of the edict established a direct link between heresy and sedition, reflecting the sixteenth century conviction that unity of religion was essential for the well-being of the state. This connection also justified, from a legal point of view, the lead taken by the monarchy in the prosecution of heresy and even the subordination of the ecclesiastical tribunals to the royal courts in this matter. In 1544 a list of prohibited books was established by royal decree and in 1545 special commissions of “parlementaires”, whose purpose was to seek out heresy in particular regions, began to function (Roelker 1996, 182).

The repression reached its peak not under Francis I, but under his successor, Henry II, a devout Catholic, who made the struggle against heresy one of his major policy goals: in October 1547, he created a new criminal chamber, the Second Tournelle, in the Parlement of Paris, whose mission was to deal exclusively with heresy cases, which earned it the nickname “chambre ardente”. This chamber ceased to function after two years, but the policy of persecution continued and a new edict in 1551, issued at Chateaubriand, again equated heresy with sedition, while banning the importation of books from Geneva and all contact with the city (Baumgartner 1995, 143-144). Henry II’s reign ended up on the same note, with the king ordering the arrest of a group of members of the Parlement of Paris suspected of heresy, in one of the most high profile cases of repression, during a session of the Parlement from 10 June 1559. But Henry II was to die just one month later and all his plans to extirpate heresy in France came to naught: the government of the new king, Francis II, dominated by the Guise family, was indeed ultra-catholic, but too weak to succeed where two powerful kings such as Francis I and Henry II had failed. After some initial persecution, the new regime started to take some steps back from the policy of repression: the edict of Amboise from 2 March 1560 offered an amnesty to all peaceful reformers, ordered the release of religious prisoners and allowed religious dissenters to petition the king, while the Edict of Romorantin, from May 1560, eased the judicial pressure on the Protestants, transferring the responsibility for trying heretics from royal to ecclesiastical courts (Knecht 2014, 60-68). At the same, the punishment of illicit assemblies and forceful demonstrations, which had occurred during the last years of Henry II, were entrusted to new royal tribunals called presidials: in the words of R. Knecht, “the most important aspect of the Edict of Romorantin was its

preoccupation with law and order rather than religion” (Knecht 2010, 26-27). Francis II did not reign long anyway and, after his death in December 1560, the Guises were ousted from power. This change of government also led to a change of policy, with Catherine de Medici, regent for her underage son, Charles IX, searching for a compromise between Catholics and Protestants in France. The most high profile effort at finding a resolution to the religious divide in France was a meeting between Catholic and Protestant clergymen and theologians which took place at Poissy in 1561: despite the hopes placed in it by the government of Catherine de Medici, it served only to emphasize the doctrinal differences between the two camps and the impossibility of a compromise solution. According to J. H. M. Salmon, the failure of the conference at Poissy confronted the government with the choice of enforcing the laws against heresy or of legally tolerating the existence of dissent: it chose the latter, although the chancellor Michel de l’Hôpital, who had previously refused to consider the existence of two religions, declared it a temporary expedient (Salmon 1979, 141).

2. The Gathering Storm: The Warnings of the Radical Catholic Preachers

If, during the reigns of Francis I and Henry II, the dedication of the monarchy to the eradication of heresy satisfied the expectations of its Catholic subjects, after 1559 the situation gradually changed: a weaker central government displayed less and less commitment to the fight against the Reformation and instead sought all kind of formulas for possible accommodations. This policy, promoted by Catherine de Medici and the chancellor Michel de l’Hôpital, met with repeated failures, because the Crown proved unable to cope either with the pressures of the Catholics for a harsh attitude towards the heretics, nor with the suspicions of the Huguenots, who, despite their formal declarations of loyalty, distrusted the regime of Catherine de Medici and were dissatisfied with the concessions they were offered. Following the massacre of Vassy, on 1 March 1562, when a group of Huguenots were killed by men from the retinue of François de Guise, one of the leaders of the Catholic camp, a series of civil wars and compromise peaces occurred for the duration of the reign of Charles IX. During this period, the discontent of the Catholics started to grow and the first warnings addressed to the monarchy were issued, from popular preachers, active especially in Paris. The criticism during the reign of Charles IX remained moderate and the Catholics who

urged the Crown to take a firmer stand against the Huguenots constantly emphasized the contrast between the obedience of the Catholic subjects and the alleged rebelliousness of the Protestants. Even though there were some Catholics who preached that a king who favoured the heretics could be deposed, the majority accused the Huguenots of “conspiring against the monarchy and argued that obedience towards the Crown was one distinguishing mark between Catholics and heretics” (Baumgartner 1975, 53-55). In 1560, in the aftermath of a failed Huguenot plot to kidnap the young king Francis II, in order to remove him from under the influence of the Guises, Jean de la Vacquerie, a doctor at Sorbonne, claimed that the most Christian king of France, in his “zeal to guard the honor of God”, would not allow the Catholic Church to be oppressed, arguing at the same time that the heretics had always been “the mortal enemies of kings and lords”, inciting rebellion with their false doctrines (Jean de la Vacquerie 1560, 5; 30). The Catholics were still beholden to the ideology of the sacred French monarchy, whose king was “most Christian”, bound by his coronation oath to defend the faith: if he became lax in this duty, then the fault belonged not to the king, but to the “evil advisers” who deceived him, a common medieval trope which the Catholic preachers during the reign Charles IX constantly reiterated. In their eyes, “the king was God’s instrument for purifying the realm of heresy” (Baumgartner 1975, 55) and the purpose of their admonitions was not to attack the king, but to help him fulfill his duty – and, therefore, protect him from the unavoidable divine punishment if he were to fail in his task. Some of the most active preachers of this period were Simon Vigor and René Benoist, who used their sermons not only to inflame the Parisian population against the Huguenots, but also to castigate the government (and, indirectly, the king) for its attempts to reach a compromise, while also warning the king of the risks involved in a policy of appeasing the Protestants. In the words of Barbara Diefendorf, Simon Vigor argued that “the king had no right to pardon the heretics, and that, if he did so, it was to be feared that God would take his kingdom from him”: the implication was that if the king strayed from his obligation assumed in the coronation oath to defend the Catholic faith, then it became unworthy of his office and deserved to lose his throne. And the king (and his advisers) was not the only target of Vigor’s admonitions: Vigor also questioned the piety and the devotion of the nobles, who did not take part in Catholic rituals, and the laxity of the Church hierarchy, who displayed insufficient zeal in the pursuit of heresy and allowed it to spread throughout the kingdom (Diefendorf 1991, 152-158). The common people alone never swayed from the right path and

remain the true bulwark of the faith, but that did not excuse the clergy from neglecting their responsibilities: the bishops had to “teach, instruct and correct”, so that heresy will not take hold (Taylor 2001, 112). Yet, with his criticism against the upper classes, Vigor was sowing the seeds of the future radicalism of a section of the Catholic League, which combined the religious fanaticism with a revolutionary challenge of the aristocratic order – something which was to prove the undoing of its efforts to keep Henry IV off the throne. But Charles IX and his ministers had to contend not just with the preachers who were agitating the population, but also with the obstructions of the Parlement of Paris, which constantly opposed the Crown’s edicts of pacification, delaying their registration and sending remonstrances to the king. The king had to resort to the procedures called *lettre de jussion* and even to *lits de justice* – which allowed the king to bypass the opposition of the Parlements – in order to impose his will, but even so, the judges in the parlements represented a significant number of French Catholics who viewed the legal recognition of the Huguenots by the crown as a severe breach of the king’s prerogative (Holt 2005, 47-49; 58-59). One such example was Jean du Tillet, a clerk of the Parlement of Paris, who argued strenuously against concessions to the Huguenots because the latter were treacherous and could not be trusted, the edicts of toleration were against the will of God and a sign of weakness from the king, which, instead of establishing a durable peace, could only cause the ruin of the kingdom: in the words of Penny Roberts, du Tillet’s views, albeit extreme, represented “an influential strand of uncompromising Catholic invective which would become louder as the wars progressed, culminating in the pronouncements of the Catholic League” (Roberts 2007, 303-304). And, despite the fact that the government of Charles IX recognized the impossibility of defeating the Huguenots by force and the necessity of compromise, they still formally shared the ideology of people like Vigor or Tillet. The dilemma the monarchy was caught in was perfectly illustrated in many documents and pronouncements of that period: such an example are the letters patent from 8 November 1567, which “recalled the link uniting, in France, the monarchy and the religion” and asserted that, just as power belongs to only one person, a realm must have only one religion (Cuillieron 2002, 63).

The massacre of Saint-Bartholomew’s night, on 24 August 1572, if it determined the Huguenots to openly advocate for the first time (at least for a while) a policy of resistance to a monarchy seen as dedicated to their extermination, also provided a vindication to the Catholic hopes of having

the Crown commit to a relentless anti-Huguenot policy. Their satisfaction did not last long, though, because, under the reign of Henry III (1574-1589), through the Peace of Beaulieu from 1576, the Huguenots gained extremely favorable conditions, which came pretty close to full toleration of the Protestant faith. It was at this point that certain Catholic factions started to lose hope with the effectiveness of the Crown's efforts against heresy and, without abandoning their formal deference to the monarchy, embarked on a constitutional program meant not just to suppress Protestantism, but also to restrain the monarchy which was seen as failing in its duties. The most important step was the formation of the so-called Catholic League in 1576, immediately after the Peace of Beaulieu: while swearing obedience to Henry III and his successors, the Leaguers agreed to resist, by force if necessary, anyone who refused to accept their stated principles (Knecht 2010, 75). The radical Catholics attempted to empower the Estates-General, following the model provided by the Huguenots during the same period, in order to impose their will on a monarchy regarded as unreliable in the struggle against heresy. The Estates provided the discontented with an alternative locus of power, which could have "bridled" the Crown, without formally renouncing the allegiance which they traditionally owed to it: for the more conservative-minded among the warring camps, this looked like the ideal solution, which would have allowed to reconcile the traditional monarchism of the French political thought and the more revolutionary trends which were starting to emerge during the Wars of Religion as a result of the dissatisfaction with the Crown's policies. The Catholic League had a very specific goal in mind, for which they intended to exploit the authority of the Estates-General: the inclusion of a specific clause regarding the catholicity of the king among the so-called "fundamental laws" of France. By the 1570s, everyone, even the most zealous proponents of royal absolutism, agreed that such "fundamental laws", which were beyond the power of the king to alter, existed, yet there was some uncertainty as to which laws exactly enjoyed such an exalted status. Generally, it was considered that "fundamental laws" were only the "Salic Law", according to which the Crown of France passed only in male line and no woman could either inherit the Crown, or transmit any right of inheritance to it, and the principle of inalienability of the royal domain, which stated that no king could alienate any possessions or rights associated with his office. There was no similar provision that the king of France had to be Catholic, but, at the Estates-General from 1576, which had an overwhelming Catholic majority, the first attempt to add such a principle to the fundamental laws

of the realm was made. In 1577, the instructions carried by the emissaries from the Estates to Henry de Navarre declared that Catholicism was the principal and fundamental law of the realm, more fundamental and inviolable than the Salic Law, and that religious unity was fundamental to the constitution not only because of long observance but also because it had originally been instituted by king and people in the Estates-General (Church 1969, 89). This issue was going to dominate the rhetoric of the Catholic League and became particularly acute after 1584, when the leader of the Huguenots, Henry de Navarre, became the heir apparent to the throne of France, following the death of the king's brother, the duke of Anjou.

But Henry III was not the only one which stood in the way of the radical Catholics' desire to wipe out heresy. From the beginning of the civil wars in 1562, it was quickly recognized by some that the destruction of the Huguenots could not be achieved – at least not without doing irreparable damage to the state –, therefore a policy of tacit toleration was preferable. That was the logic behind the measures advocated by Catherine de Medici and the chancellor Michel de l'Hôpital during the 1560s and it came to be embraced by a wider range of political actors, which the radical Catholics derisively called “politiques”. If the Parlement of Paris proved to be a major obstacle to the first edicts of pacifications, during the reign of Henry III many of its members came to embrace “politique” ideas: the Parlement might have been devoutly Catholic, but it was also profoundly royalist and the attacks of the League against the king could have only displeased the court. But, besides its royalist position, there was one further matter at play in deciding the Parlement's attitude: its Catholicism was strongly dominated by Gallicanism and rejected the papal supremacy. In the words of Nancy Lyman Roelker, the Tridentine Reformation “threatened the total annihilation of the religious tradition and not merely its modification”, while, on the other hand, “every sign of leniency toward heresy on the part of the crown and the Gallicans, or attributable to them, however implausibly, was ammunition for the ultramontane party in its propaganda, both at home and abroad” (Roelker 1996, 478).

3. “Heretic and Tyrant”: The League's Rhetorical Duology

The first Catholic League of 1576 did not have that much of an impact, as Henry III moved quickly to neutralize it by proclaiming himself its head and adding a clause to its oath which pledged its signers to carry out the commands of the king – an action which effectively

destroyed the incipient League and the threat to the king's security (Baumgartner 1975, 35-36). But the League was revived in 1584, when the prospect that a heretic, Henry de Navarre, could ascend the throne became a real possibility. By this time, as a result of his erratic behaviour and vacillations on the matter, the king, even though he intended to make no move to reconcile with Navarre as long as the latter was still Protestant, was already regarded by extremists as sympathetic to heresy and the grounds for the furious anti-royalist propaganda of the League which ensued after 1588 were pretty much prepared (Salmon 1979, 206). In the words of Perez Zagorin, "the Catholic League's political ideology blended papalism, sacerdotalism and allegiance to the church with monarchomach and populist doctrines", with the popular origins of power, the right of the people to depose and elect kings and the defense of tyrannicide becoming common themes in the League's propaganda (Zagorin 1984, 80).

The League's pretensions were not accepted mildly by everyone. The influential Huguenot Philippe Duplessis-Mornay took the pen in 1585 to deliver an acid reply to the League's propaganda, by pointing out that, "according to canon law, not all error was heresy, as Henry de Navarre subscribed to all the fundamentals of the Christian doctrine" (Sutherland 2002, 85). More so, Navarre had always asserted his willingness to be instructed in the Catholic religion by a free and legitimate council of prelates: in making this argument, Mornay was disingenuous, because he had always retained the hope that such instruction would result in a Calvinist outcome and conversion could be avoided – but, regardless of such concealed hopes, the possibility of Navarre's abjuration was kept open and it was something which many Catholics, including the king Henry III, were counting upon. Mornay also suggested that the laws of succession did not depend upon religion, a point which some "politiques" came to begrudgingly acknowledge, and furiously denounced the cooperation between the League and Spain, stating that religion was merely a pretext under which the Guises were attempting to achieve their own personal designs (Sutherland 2002, 84-87). Not long after Mornay's denunciation of the League, the pope Sixtus V interfered in the dispute by excommunicating on 20 September 1585 the two Huguenot leaders, Henry de Navarre and Henry de Condé, as relapsed heretics, barring them from the succession and releasing all their subjects and partisans from their oaths of loyalty. Henry III was also indirectly affected by this act, as it made his hopes of obtaining Navarre's conversion much more difficult and he was also reminded of his

obligation expressed in the coronation oath to exterminate heresy (Sutherland 2002, 114-123).

One of the most known Leaguer pamphlets published before 1588, *Advertissement, des Catholiques anglois aux François Catholiques, du danger où ils sont de perdre leur Religion*, is representative for the ambivalence which still dominated the ranks of the League at that time. Its author, Louis Dorlèans, was an important member of the League before and after the death of Henry III and, together with Jean Boucher, one of the loudest voices in the propaganda war during that period. The goal of *the Advertissement* was to warn the people of France against the dangers of a heretical king, by pointing out the ills which befell the English Catholics under the rule of Elizabeth I, but the main target of its rhetoric is Henry de Navarre, not Henry III, who is not just spared the brunt of its criticism, but even assessed favorably at certain points, as a “most Catholic king, who would never abandon the Catholic Church to the wolf” (Dorlèans 1586, 94).

The events from 1588, from the “Day of Barricades”, on 12 May, when the rebellion of Paris forced the king to flee from his capital, to the Estates-General of Blois, near the end of the year, seemed to ensure the triumph of the League, which was apparently succeeding in imposing its will upon the fugitive king. In 1588, shortly after the Day of Barricades, the king issued the so-called “Edict of Union”, which contained specific provisions directed against the Huguenots. The Edict of Union also addressed the most important question, the succession, which was the greatest concern of the League, by specifying that, after the death of Henry III, no one was to recognize as king a heretic or a favourer of heretics. The wording seemed to take into account the possibility that Navarre might convert: if Henry III had previously sought to achieve this very thing, now, under the domination of the League, he included a clause in his edict which could have foreclosed the possibility of Navarre’s ascension even in the eventuality of his abjuration. After all, a Catholic Henry de Navarre could always be accused of favoring heresy, because it was expected that, in such a case, he was going to retain his ties with his Huguenot supporters – even disappointed by a potential abjuration, they were going to expect from their leader a settlement on more favorable terms. In the words of Nicole Sutherland, this was an “attempt to manipulate the succession, but without publicly naming an alternative heir”, whose “purpose might have been to induce the king to will the throne to Guise” (Sutherland 2002, 204-205). The Edict of Union returned to the same issue raised during the previous Estates-General from Blois in

1576, by giving a constitutional paint to what was in reality an attempt at a revolution: the League's interference with the traditional laws of succession was given the form of a fundamental law. And how deep was the lack of trust between the king and the League, despite the fact that both sides tried to maintain some decorum, can be seen from the fact that, during the Estates-General held in the fall of 1588, the League's deputies constrained the king to swear the Edict of Union again, together with the Estates: the intention was, according to Frederic Baumgartner, to gain for the Estates a role in deciding what fundamental law was – something which the king seemed to accept when he declared that he would enact no fundamental law except with the consent of the Estates (Baumgartner 1995, 286-287). To these pressures exerted domestically by the League, the papacy added some of its own. While the king was issuing the already mentioned Edict of Union, Sixtus V menaced Henry III with both spiritual and temporal penalties if he did not cease to protect the heretics, demanding him to enact "strict laws" that whomsoever had been a heretic, or suspected of heresy, could never succeed to the throne (Sutherland 2002, 213-214).

The period between the Day of Barricades and the Estates-General held at Blois in the fall and winter of 1588 was marked by the League's political thought teetering on the edge of open revolt against the king, but still staying clear of taking that final step. But there were clear signs of disrespect towards the king, even though they were hidden under the usual veil of criticizing the so-called "evil advisors", a sure indicator of the declining prestige of the monarchy under the last Valois: there were no open arguments in favor of deposition or even tyrannicide, with Henry III mentioned by name, as it was to happen next year, but there were plenty of ominous warnings of what could happen if the king and the League were to have some falling out. A pamphlet published by an anonymous author, called *Discours sur les calomnies imposées aux princes et seigneurs catholiques par les politiques de notre temps*, asserted unequivocally that "it was allowed for subjects to resist their prince in defense of the true religion" (*Discours sur les calomnies...* 1588, 61). Another pamphlet in a similar tone was Jean Boucher's *Histoire tragique et memorable de Pierre de Gaverston, gentilhomme gascon jadis le mignon d'Edouard 2, roy d'Angleterre, tirée des Chroniques de Thomas Valsinghan, et tournée de Latin en François*. On its face, the pamphlet was directed against the duke d'Épernon – to which it was ironically dedicated –, one of Henry III's "mignons", who had long been the target of the League's hatred: the dedicatory letter stated directly that "we also desire and hope that, when it pleases God, He will chase you

out, as a traitor to the fatherland, from this kingdom, or better (so that you will not return like Gaveston), remove you from this world” (Boucher 1588, *Epistre*). The pamphlet made no comparison between Edward II – who ended up overthrown and likely assassinated because of his mismanagement of the realm – and Henry III, but it was not hard for its readers to draw on their own a parallel between them.

The event which ushered in the most radical phase in the history of the Catholic League was the assassination of the two of its leaders, the Duke Henry de Guise and the Cardinal de Lorraine, at Blois, by the king’s guards, on 23 December 1588. As a result, the League immediately moved for the deposition of the king, something which was proclaimed by Sorbonne on 7 January 1589, without waiting for papal confirmation. In this regard, if the murder of Henry de Guise was the one most deeply felt by the League, the murder of the cardinal proved to be the most useful, because it gave them a legitimate reason for withdrawing their obedience from Henry III. Unlike his successor, Henry de Navarre, Henry III was never formally excommunicated, despite the expectations of the League, but the assassination of a high-ranking prelate allowed the League theologians and preachers to argue that, through such a deed, the king incurred such a penalty by default: and an excommunicated king could be deposed or even killed. These actions were accompanied by a feverish propaganda campaign meant to garner support for the League.

Some of the fiercest attacks against the king were expressed in a wave of anti-royalist pamphlets published immediately after the events from Blois. Because they had to be written quickly and appeal to a large audience, they do not represent some complex pieces of political thought, like the Huguenot tracts from the 1570s: rather unsophisticated in their arguments, they consist of entire litanies of complaints and accusations against Henry III. David Bell points out that their most dominant theme was that of disguise and dissimulation, emphasizing the contrast between appearances and reality in Henry III’s persona (Bell 1989, 378-384). Such a rhetoric was likely necessary in order to remove whatever doubts might have been placed in the minds of the common people by the king’s outward displays of piety – which had been numerous enough during his reign in order to stand out. One such pamphlet was *Origine de la maladie de la France, avec les remedes propres à la guarison d’icelle, avec une exortation à l’entretienement de la guerre*, where, with the help of medical metaphors, the anonymous author constructed the case in favor of Henry III’s deposition: reiterating a common trope of the French resistance theorists during the Wars of Religion, both Huguenots and Catholics, he

pointed out that the obedience due to the king was not unconditional, but depended on him being “religious, valiant, just, merciful, diligent”, “punishing the evil men, preserving the good and defending the Christian faith”. Henry III had failed on all accounts and, because he had joined hands with the heretics and “abandoned completely the cause of God and religion”, his anointing had become null and void. Such an unworthy king had turned into a tyrant and therefore had to be overthrown and confined in a monastery, the author alluding that even killing the king might become acceptable in order to cure France of its “disease” (*Origine de la maladie...* 1589, 7-13).

Another similar work published after the murder of the Guises was an anonymous tract called *La vie et faits notables de Henry de Valois... où sont contenues les trahisons, perfidies, sacrileges, exactions, cruautéz et hontes de cet hypocrite, ennemy de la religion Catholique*. The title itself is more than revealing about the position of the author, but the piece is more moderate than others, as it did not openly call for tyrannicide: yet, it was a bitter indictment of Henry III’s character and policies, mixing older grievances not related to religious matters, such as his taxation and squandering the financial resources of the state on his courtiers, with the most recent misdeeds of the king, such as the events from Blois. According to the anonymous author, Henry III had always desired two religions in his kingdom (*La vie...* 1589, 33), something which could have caused only the ruin and misery of France, and “chased out of his court divine and human justice” (*La vie...* 1589, 58). To this, the author added the charge that Henry III’s piety was nothing but dissimulation and in reality he was an atheist, always opposed to the “good Catholics”, having tried to cause the defeat of the Duke de Guise against heretics and having contributed to the death of Mary, queen of Scots (*La vie...* 1589, 74-80). Because of such sins and his persecution of the true religion, it was clearly implied that Henry III was no longer worthy of the title of “most Christian” associated with the kings of France: therefore, all Catholics were to hope that, by the grace of God, they were to be delivered from this tyranny (*La Vie...* 1589, 96).

The best known of the Leaguer works of this period is Jean Boucher’s extensive *De Justa Henrici Tertii Abdicatione e Francorum Regno*, published in 1589, immediately after the death of Henry III – and it was also one of the most radical, because it did not just call for the deposition of the tyrannical king, it argued that anyone had the right to kill him (Boucher 1589, 167-170). Boucher reiterated in his work several concepts which had already made their way in sixteenth-century

resistance theory through the works of the Huguenot monarchomachs: the concept of a pact between God and the people, to which the king was also part, and which entitled the people to depose their king if the latter was found in breach of the respective pact, the idea of the king as a mere guardian of the kingdom, which severely limited his power to dispose of it and allowed for his legal punishment in case he abused his trust, the principle of the people as holders of the ultimate sovereignty. To these, Boucher adds another principle, of the papal *plenitudo potestatis*, who had the right even to change or abrogate the laws of kingdoms and, therefore, facilitate the removal of a king or dynasty (Boucher 1589, 7-8). While not formally a heretic, Henry III was charged with favoring heresy and recognizing a heretic (Henry de Navarre) as his successor: as had been the case with previous League propaganda, Boucher's rhetoric basically blended the issues of heresy and tyranny, because, in addition to Henry III's alleged religious offences, he added the usual litany of temporal crimes, such as abusive taxation and, more remarkable, *lèse-majesté*, by arresting the League deputies at the Estates-General from Blois. Boucher's solution followed this dual line of thought: both the Church and the people were obligated to take action against Henry III. By murdering a cardinal, Henry III became *ipso facto* excommunicated – which Boucher regarded as the pope's most effective weapon to bring down an unworthy king –, but, even if the pope were to absolve him – an indirect recognition that Sixtus V was not as favorable to the League as the latter wished –, the people must still depose him on account of his tyranny (Baumgartner 1975, 123-144)

After the assassination of Henry III on 1 August 1589, the only thing which changed in the rhetoric of the League was the target of their invectives and the Leaguer propaganda continued unabated. Henry de Navarre had no hand in the events at Blois from December 1588, nor could he be accused of tyrannical misrule, as Henry III was, but it made little difference for the League, as it had come to completely equate heresy with tyranny. The main argument of the League preachers was that an “excommunicate and relapser could not be received no matter what face he put upon it” and tried to convince the people of Paris accordingly, while also casting doubts upon the sincerity and motives of Navarre's conversion, before and after it happened (Roelker 1996, 388-389). Besides less elaborate pamphlets, an extensive treatise was published in 1592, under the title *De Justa Reipublicae Christianae in Reges Impios et Haereticos Autoritate*. In the opinion of Frederic Baumgartner, *De Justa Reipublicae* was “the most comprehensive discussion of political theory

of all Leaguer works” (Baumgartner 1975, 145). This work, written by an anonymous author using the pseudonym Guglielmus Rossaeus (or Rosseo), was published several years after the death of Henry III and, therefore, the former king, unlike in the previous Leaguer propaganda, was no longer its central figure: even though there were references to Henry III as a tyrant who despoiled his subjects and violated the laws of the kingdom, it is noteworthy that Rossaeus no longer blamed him of having tried to destroy the Christian religion. In *De Justa Reipublicae*, the focus was placed on Henry de Navarre, now Henry IV: just like in other preceding works, the argument of the author shows how closely joined the issues of heresy and tyranny were for the League. While loyalist Catholics thought that the national polity had been destroyed by the "civil sedition" of the League, the leaguers attributed the damage to the heresy of the king and the defection of those who supported him from the tradition of “un roi, une foi” (Roelker 1996, 411). Basically, for the Leaguer theorists, a heretic was *ipso facto* a tyrant, whatever his actual actions might be: legally speaking, this was justified on the fact that a heretical king would be in direct violation of his predecessors’ numerous edicts against heresy and Rossaeus ironically pointed out that, were he to assume the throne, Henry IV would have to pass a death sentence against himself (Baumgartner 1975, 155).

Under the pressure of his own Catholic supporters and in order to take away from the League its greatest rhetorical weapon, Henry IV converted to Catholicism on 25 July 1593, in a public ceremony at Saint-Denis. Yet, even this step did not deter the radical faction of the League. Another round of elaborate arguments against accepting Navarre as king, even after his conversion, were once again delivered by the same Jean Boucher, in a series of nine sermons preached at Paris between 1 and 9 August 1593, later printed under the title *Sermons de la simulée conversion et nullité de la prétendue absolution de Henry de Bourbon, prince de Béarn, à S. Denys en France, le dimanche 25 Juillet 1593*. According to Boucher, Navarre’s conversion was worthless and his strongest arguments were the motivations of Henry de Navarre, as they were deemed hypocritical (Boucher 1594, 78-138), the fact that the ceremony itself was invalid in the absence of papal absolution (Boucher 1594, 227-232) and the Archbishop of Bourges, who performed it, lacked the necessary jurisdiction (Boucher 1594, 277-280). At that point, the League no longer had a clear candidate to put on the throne, its previous choice, the cardinal Charles de Bourbon, having died in 1590 – and this caused the Estates-General convoked by the Duke of Mayenne, the new

leader of the League from 1589, to founder due to the squabbles among the different factions, each with its own proposal. Despite this failure, Boucher argued strenuously in favor of the idea that the Estates were the institution which had the right to elect a king in such circumstances. Boucher's new political system, according to Frederic Baumgartner, is described as a "combination of theocracy and popular rule", because, if the king's election belonged to the Estates, it rested upon the Church, through the pope, to validate their choice and grant legitimacy to the candidate (Baumgartner 1975, 202-207).

By the time of Henry IV's conversion, the cause of the League was in significant disarray, with factions quarrelling against each other, and incapable of achieving its goals. The Leaguer propaganda was not just to satisfy the passions of its preachers and writers, but it had the self-confessed purpose of convincing the royalist Catholics from abandoning Henry de Navarre: in this, it had failed completely. Worse for them, the League was much more menaced by defections than the opposite camp. There was always a strong royalist faction in France which was determined to support the lawful king regardless of any other considerations, whether those were Henry III's weaknesses or Henry IV's protestantism. As Nancy Lyman Roelker pointed out, the *politiques*, particularly the members of the Parlement of Paris, were willing to give wholehearted support to Navarre in spite of his heresy, even if that did not imply that they had changed their lifelong opposition to division of religion in the state, as they were expecting the king's abjuration to occur at a certain moment. More so, in the opinion of some *politiques*, reasons other than religion started to weigh more, as Henry IV was regarded as better than the alternative – either the daughter of the Spanish king Philip II or a French prince like the son of the murdered Duke of Guise (Roelker 1996, 381). Nancy Roelker asserts that the position of the *politiques* was at the extreme opposite pole to that of the League (Roelker 1996, 382), but such a statement is only partially correct, because it places under the same umbrella both the moderate and the radical members of the League. For the latter, especially the group known as the "Sixteen" which dominated Paris, any solution was acceptable, no matter the cost to the national polity, in order to prevent the ascension of a heretic king: Frederic Baumgartner explained this attitude by pointing out that, for a number of Leaguers, the French kingdom was predicated on Catholicism and a Protestant king would destroy the nation (Baumgartner 1975, 176). All members of the League agreed, indeed, that religion was the only true bond of the state, but some started to distance themselves from the

extremists and had come to accept that defense of religious uniformity should not come at the expense of French independence. It was these elements which contributed decisively to the failure of the League's attempts to find an alternate king to Henry de Navarre, as Leaguer "parlementaires", such as Edouard Molé and Guillaume du Vair, mounted a fierce defense of the Salic Law and firmly rejected the attempts of the radicals to accept foreign candidates – and this occurred even before Henry IV's conversion, which, despite the attacks of the radicals, increased the ideological pressure on the League and provided the more moderate members with an acceptable reason to change sides. The disillusionment of the radicals, both with those who were considering switching their allegiance, and with the leaders such as the Duke of Mayenne, who seemed incapable of putting the good of the Leaguer cause ahead of their own petty interests, was reflected in works such as *Dialogue entre le Maheustre et le Manant*, written near the end of 1593 – and which was an attack on the aristocratic social order so radical that the League's own leadership tried to suppress it and the royalists republished it, with some alterations, as a useful piece of propaganda for their own party (Salmon 2002, 261-266).

4. Conclusions

Despite the attacks of Jean Boucher and other League radicals, the conversion of Henry IV, combined with the League's disunity and dependence on Spain, gradually led to the unraveling of the radical Catholic party. Paris, unsuccessfully besieged by Henry IV during the summer of 1590 and for long a citadel of the League and of Catholic extremism, surrendered to the new king in March 1594, with other submissions soon to follow. Some radical members of the League remained unrepentant though. After a failed attempt to kill Henry IV on 27 December 1594 by one Jean Chastel, the same Jean Boucher hurried to publish a tract justifying the deed, where he reiterated the previous Leaguer arguments in favor of tyrannicide. Boucher returned to the traditional argument about the difference between a legitimate king and an usurper, who could lawfully be slain by everyone. But, since Navarre's ascension was perfectly in accord with the fundamental laws of France, it was not easy to question his legitimacy. In order to achieve this goal, Boucher attempted once again to cast doubts upon the validity of his conversion: in his opinion, Henry IV "had no right to rule if only because he was excommunicated before his consecration" and "not even the pope

could restore his right to the throne, nor could the Estates elect him” (Knecht 2010, 78).

Boucher’s apology for Chastel, written from his exile in Flanders, was the swansong of the League’s propaganda, though. The failure of this propagandistic effort came because, in the end, it linked too intimately the problems of heresy and tyranny, more than the conventional political thought considered acceptable. According to the Jesuit political thinker Juan de Mariana, contemporary with the League, an attempt by the prince to alter the established form of religion would be tyranny, but, even though he strongly supported Leaguer concepts such as the deposition of tyrannical kings by the people or even tyrannicide, Mariana differed from the League when asserting that merely tolerating heresy was not tyranny – it was, in his opinion, only a dangerous practice (Allen 1957, 364). In this, the rhetoric of the League radicals crossed a line – and it was not the only one. Their insistence on granting the pope the right to decide upon the legitimacy of princes offended the Gallican sensibilities of a large part of the nobility, the Parlements and even the clergy – which had long asserted the privileged position of the kings of France with respect to the papacy. The refusal to accept the validity of Navarre’s conversion allowed the royalists to turn the tables on the League and cast doubts on the sincerity of the radicals: when some expressed their intention not to recognize Navarre even if the pope were to absolve him, that was something which disturbed even members of their own party (Roelker 1996, 415) and it was not hard for Henry IV’s and his supporters to paint their opponents as motivated by personal grudges and ambitions, instead of concern for the fate of the Catholic faith. In the end, the League propaganda utterly failed in what it proposed to accomplish in the short run: its radical theories of popular constitutionalism triggered in turn a sharp absolutist reaction from the royalist writers, whose opinions were to prevail completely. The Estates-General, which the League sought so hard to turn into a constitutional force able to control and censure the monarchy, were called only once more, in 1614, then never again until the French Revolution – and even the 1614 assembly ended with a complete abdication of the Estates from the role envisioned for them during the Wars of Religion and with a proclamation of royal absolutism, while the idea that the people could depose a king was completely banished from French political thought. Yet, in a rather ironic twist of fate, the new Bourbon dynasty, which the League struggled so hard to prevent from ascending the throne, was the one which, despite the limited toleration granted by Henry IV to his former coreligionists through the Edict of

Nantes from 1598, achieved the destruction of Huguenot political power that had so bedeviled the last Valois kings and the complete marginalization of the Protestant faith in France during the reigns of Louis XIII and Louis XIV.

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