

Evangelicals persecuted by the French state



The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century changed the face of Europe, including France. At one point, evangelical Protestants (known as Huguenots) made up ten per cent of the population of France,¹ and close to half the nobility.² But after

two stormy centuries of persecution, the great majority of them had been driven from their native land. When given the opportunity, these loyal and hard-working citizens made a great contribution to France, and also in the countries to which they fled.³

The story of the Huguenots encourages Christians in our day to “seek the peace of the city” in which they live. However, despite being model citizens, their religious liberty gave way to persecution – a timely warning not to take civic freedoms for granted.



Growth and persecution



Fleeing Huguenots welcomed by the Prince-elector of Brandenburg-Prussia

The renewed study of the Bible during the Renaissance helped prepare the way for the Protestant Reformation. At its core, the reformers rediscovered the Bible's teaching that salvation is a gift of God's free grace. The reformed church spread quickly in Europe. In France it gained ground despite vicious persecution from the authorities.⁴

In 16th century Europe it was usual for a country to tolerate only one religion. So, in Catholic France, Protestants were viewed as disloyal. The prestigious Sorbonne University demanded the execution of these 'heretics'.⁵ And in 1534 that is what King Francis I decreed, after a protest against the Roman Catholic mass that even some reformers saw as overly provocative.⁶

This first wave of persecution was fierce. Some Protestants

were burned at the stake. Many others were tortured or sent as slaves to galley ships, or fled to neighbouring countries.⁷

Despite this, the reformed church in France kept growing.⁸ The joyful witness of those willing to suffer for their faith attracted many others into the church. Crowds were amazed to see men, women – even children – singing psalms as they faced a horrible death.⁹

Into this context, Protestant missionaries came from Geneva to teach and nurture new congregations. About 88 entered France in the late 1550s and early 1560s.¹⁰ Amazingly, there were about 2,000 reformed churches in France by 1561¹¹ – comprising about ten per cent of the population.¹²

The Huguenots were persecuted despite being known as loyal and economically productive citizens.¹³

MARGUERITE OF NAVARRE

The sister of King Francis I of France, Marguerite, was unusually gifted and beautiful – and deeply committed to the Protestant faith. She used her position as Queen of Navarre (a territory in south-west France) to give refuge to those fleeing persecution.¹⁴ During her reign (1525-1549), the poor of Navarre were well educated, the sick and needy were cared for, and agriculture and good administration flourished.¹⁵



Queen Marguerite

Huguenots history: Key dates

1517

Luther wrote his '95 theses'



1523

Jean Vallière became the first Protestant martyr in France



1534

Intense persecution following the 'placards' incident

Massacres and resistance



St Bartholomew's Day massacre

On the death of the King Henry II in 1559, real power in France passed to the nobility, many of whom had, by that time, become Protestant. Political influence was precariously balanced between the Roman Catholic House of Guise and the Protestant House of Bourbon.¹⁶

In January 1562, increased Huguenot influence helped secure a royal edict granting limited religious toleration. But the hope of even greater freedom was dashed by the outbreak of civil war that same year. A series of massacres, (for example 63 Huguenots were killed at Vassy in 1562), prompted

some Huguenot leaders to take up arms in protection of their families and communities.¹⁷ Civil war dragged on for over thirty years.¹⁸

The most brutal atrocity was the infamous St Bartholomew's Day massacre of August 1572.¹⁹ Just prior to this there had been a welcome lull in hostilities, and the leading Huguenot nobles had all been invited to Paris to witness the wedding of the Huguenot Henry of Navarre and the Catholic Princess Margaret.²⁰ Their union was intended to symbolise peace.

Shortly after the wedding, however, it seems that the Catholic regent of France, Catherine de Medici, ordered the assassination of the Huguenot leader, Admiral Coligny. But the plot failed and Coligny was only wounded. Catherine feared revenge and so, as a pre-emptive strike, the order was issued to kill the Huguenots in Paris and elsewhere. The order was brutally executed (the river Seine ran red with their blood). Estimates of deaths range between 10,000 and 20,000.²¹

Civil war flared up once more, with Henry of Navarre leading the Huguenot forces.²²

CONSTITUTIONAL RESISTANCE

In response to the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, a number of Huguenots wrote powerful critiques of absolutist monarchy. In 1579 *A Defence of Liberty against Tyrants* argued that a king must observe the laws of God and of his country. Lesser magistrates operating under a tyrant could legitimately curb his actions. Such Huguenot works contributed to the development in Britain of the idea of a constitutional monarchy limited by a representative parliament.²³

VINDICIAE
CONTRA TYRANNOS:

DE PRINCIPIS IN
Populum, Populi in Principem,
legitima potestate,
STEPHANO IUNIO
Bruno Celta, Auctore.



Critique: 'Vindiciae
contra tyrannos'

1541

John Calvin settled in Geneva



1555

First formally constituted French Reformed Church



1559

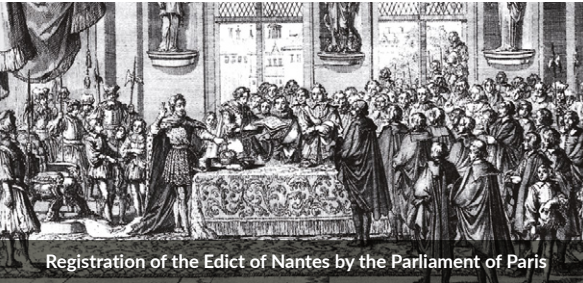
After the death of Henry II, nobles became more powerful. Up to half of them protected Huguenots.

1562

Limited freedom granted to the two million people in reformed churches in France.

2m

Edict of Nantes, 1598



Registration of the Edict of Nantes by the Parliament of Paris

In 1589 the Huguenot leader Henry of Navarre (Henry IV) succeeded to the throne.²⁴ To gain the support of Paris, he converted to Catholicism in 1593.²⁵ Famously, he is supposed to have said: 'Paris is worth a mass'.²⁶ Henry didn't forget his old friends, the Huguenots. In 1598 he issued the Edict of Nantes, which secured rights for Protestants and gave strong guarantees that they would be respected.²⁷

Most people in France, sickened by the brutality of civil war, welcomed the new settlement. For two major faiths to be officially tolerated within one country was a historic development for Europe.²⁸

The Edict of Nantes provided an interlude of freedom in which Huguenots were able to actively participate in society.²⁹ Their industry, agriculture and trade prospered. They became leaders in the textile, paper, iron and printing industries, and were famous for beautiful designs and craftsmanship, often travelling abroad to learn new techniques. Many Huguenots became leading lawyers, doctors and writers.³⁰ Later in the 17th century, Louis XIV's government minister Colbert described them as 'the thriftiest, most hard-working, and most intelligent of the King's subjects'.³¹

THE DUKE OF SULLY

France had been devastated economically by the civil war and the Huguenot contribution was a key factor in national recovery. King Henry IV famously vowed to ensure that every peasant in France would be able to afford a chicken in the pot (poule au pot) every Sunday.³² Helped by his chief adviser, the Duke of Sully, a remarkable transformation took place. Sully, a Huguenot, was a gifted financier, engineer, agriculturalist, military adviser and politician. He organised a programme of works to build the infrastructure of France: bridges, roads, hospitals, schools, fortifications, and a canal system. To liberate commerce, he abolished road tolls and created a national postal service. Sully ended the policy of deforestation and ordered the planting of thousands of trees.³³ He promoted new agricultural methods and oversaw projects which some say almost doubled the area of productive farmland. Sully sponsored new industrial techniques, and organised the rebuilding of Paris.³⁴ He encapsulated the Huguenot virtues of hard work, enterprise and loyalty.

1562

A massacre of Huguenots at Vassy triggered civil war



1572

Massacre of St Bartholomew's Day



1598

The Edict of Nantes granted toleration for Huguenots



1610

Assassination of Henry IV



Tyranny and the end of toleration

When Henry IV was assassinated in 1610, the Huguenots were immediately vulnerable. The fall of La Rochelle, the main Huguenot city, in 1628 marked the loss of their political influence.³⁵ But during the long reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715) their situation became much worse, culminating in the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.³⁶

Louis XIV famously regarded himself as 'The Sun King'. He was supposed to have declared: 'One faith, one law, one king'.³⁷ He regarded the Huguenots as an affront to his absolute rule, and made life increasingly difficult for them, eventually engaging in a policy of outright persecution.³⁸

THE ESCALATION OF PERSECUTION – LITTLE BY LITTLE

1. Re-education. Books were published arguing that France should only have one religion. Priests were sent out to win back Protestants on their deathbeds.³⁹

2. Inducements to conform. From 1676 people were offered financial incentives to 'convert back' to Catholicism. Within three years the number of certified 'converts' had reached 10,000.⁴⁰

3. Repressive restrictions. Huguenots were only allowed to bury their dead at night, and no more than twelve were to meet for a wedding.⁴¹

4. Suppression of education. Huguenot schools were banned from teaching all but the bare minimum of reading and writing.⁴²

5. Banned from certain professions. Huguenots were forbidden to become lawyers, for example, and a Huguenot woman could not become a linen draper.⁴³

6. Religious discrimination. Huguenot pastors were accused under blasphemy laws and were eventually forbidden to preach. Churches and schools were torn down.⁴⁴

7. Intrusion into the family. Children not baptised into the Catholic Church could be removed from their parents and raised as Catholics, once they reached the age of seven.⁴⁵

8. Armed violence. From 1681, armed forces were billeted with Protestant families. Violence was encouraged to force conversion.⁴⁶

9. Emigration forbidden and enslavement practised. Many fled France. But those caught trying to escape or refusing to convert to Catholicism were often sent to the galleys.⁴⁷

10. Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. By 1685 Louis XIV claimed that there weren't any Huguenots left so there was no need for toleration. All Protestant worship was forbidden.⁴⁸

1628

Fall of La Rochelle, a Huguenot city



1643

Louis XIV accedes to the throne



1681

The policy of the Dragonnades commenced



1685

Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, many Huguenots flee France



Huguenots flee: France's loss, our gain

Jean Claude (1619-1687), a Huguenot pastor exiled to the Netherlands, said that persecution in France was an attempt at "making Religion to depend on the King's pleasure, on the will of a Mortal Prince".⁴⁹ He praised the compassion of foreign princes who welcomed the refugees.

Many refugees managed to flee from France at this time, including skilled silversmiths, weavers, linen workers, lacemakers, and clockmakers.⁵⁰ Their craftsmanship was highly valued by surrounding countries, and they were known as model citizens.⁵¹ England welcomed at least

50,000; another 10,000 fled to Ireland.⁵² Large numbers settled in London as well as places like Barnstaple, Bristol, Canterbury, Dover, Exeter, Norwich, Rye, Southampton, Winchester and north-east England.⁵³ In East Anglia, Huguenot refugees helped drain and reclaim 40,000 acres of fenland.⁵⁴



Tower of Constance

ONGOING PERSECUTION IN FRANCE

If you visit the French town Aigues Mortes you can still see the Tower of Constance, where, after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, Huguenot women were imprisoned if they refused to deny their faith.⁵⁵ Many of them suffered for years in terrible conditions rather than recant. Marie Durand was only a teenager when she was imprisoned in 1730. She remained steadfast in her faith for 38 years, and spent that time encouraging and helping her fellow prisoners.⁵⁶ It is believed that she inscribed the word 'Resister' on the prison wall, which can still be seen today.⁵⁷

LESSONS FOR TODAY

The Huguenots were absolutely committed to an evangelical biblical faith. The early years of fierce persecution and the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day forced them into careful reflection on the question of just resistance. Their writings contributed significantly to the development of constitutional democracy in the UK and the USA.⁵⁸

When they were tolerated in France, the Huguenots proved themselves to be hard-working and loyal citizens. The renewal of harsh persecution ultimately meant economic and cultural loss for France, as well as a corresponding benefit for surrounding countries, including Britain.

Today in the United Kingdom, some are pushing for a 'toleration' that, effectively, means 'forcing everyone to believe the same thing'. In fact, that is just another kind of tyranny. True toleration means allowing people freedom of conscience, religion, speech and assembly. And that is good for all of us.

References available at christian.org.uk/huguenots-ref



CHRISTIANINSTITUTE



@CHRISTIANORGUK



CHRISTIANORGUK



CHRISTIANORGUK