Paris is Worth a Mass: How the Protestant Reformation Forever Changed the Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Europe

Ryan Denenberg

For more than a century after Martin Luther initiated the Protestant split from the Catholic Church in 1517, Europe was wracked by civil strife, largely stemming from religious violence. Indeed, such violence claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, Protestant and Catholic, over the course of various religious wars and conflicts. In an ironic twist, much of Luther's impulse to affect moral change was ultimately employed in war-making. The struggle between the two Christian sects would produce permanent political and social change across Europe, tearing apart empires, ending dynasties, and forever weakening the once all-powerful political hold of the Catholic Church. On the surface, it might appear as though the sole source of conflict was a difference in religious belief, as had been the case with the iconoclasm in Antwerp. However, in reality, the religious difference between Catholics and Protestants merely provided a medium through which opposing political entities could vie for power, providing each side with the opportunity and 'just' cause with which to destroy the other.

In the sixteenth century, religious passion had not yet given way to politics as the sole motivation for inter-religious violence in Europe. For example, during the Protestant riots in Antwerp in 1566, the violence targeted Catholic "idolatry" quite narrowly and was carried out in a controlled and organized manner. This would suggest that the Protestant response to Margaret of Parma's edict against Protestant worship was not motivated by politics, or else they would have attacked Spanish governmental infrastructure and killed their Catholic enemies en masse. However, the target of the mob's rage was Catholic icons alone, and rather than endangering the city's Catholics, the riot caused no

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bloodshed between the two sides. An English merchant's agent who witnessed the rioting was awed by the order and precision with which the mob desecrated chapels, burned Catholic books, and destroyed religious art. He also noted that the Catholic worshippers and clergymen were left unharmed, and more miraculously, no looting took place. When the disorder had subsided, "[A]ll were gone home again, as if there had been nothing done."[1] The specific targeting of religious icons and not government institutions, as well as the lack of bloodshed caused by this Calvinist uprising, is proof positive that in this case the violence was purely the result of religious tension itself. However, even within the region of the Netherlands this was an isolated instance. The issue of religion was used mostly as a blanket excuse by the nobility to shed the shackles of imperial and royal authority. Since the early days of the Reformation, Dutch nobles had converted to Protestantism as a convenient way to escape Charles V's authority. Charles had been steadily raising taxes and attempting to expand imperial power at the expense of the nobles. The proud nobility clung to their age-old autonomy, and, knowing that Charles was devoutly Catholic, seized the opportunity to convert, thus absolving themselves of any obligation to show fealty towards him. Then, when confronted with the tyranny of King Phillip and his Spanish Inquisition, Protestant and Dutch nobles alike united under William of Orange in 1581 in the Union of Utrecht. In a show of nationalistic anti-Spanish sentiment, they put aside their religious differences and seized the opportunity to declare independence. This makes it abundantly clear that the Protestant-Catholic conflict in the region did not stem solely or even primarily from religion. Dutch Catholics turned on their Spanish co-religionists for the sake of independence. They had put their political ambitions before their religious beliefs.[2]

Similarly, in France the Religious Wars were not actually a result of inter-religious hatred, but rather the rivalry between the Valois and Bourbons. The Concordat of Bologna provided monetary incentive for the Valois to maintain Catholicism, as they were able to collect bribes from nobles who aspired to high-ranking clerical office. However, the Huguenots, who were Calvinist, represented 40% of the nobility as well as a large portion of the middle class, making them a potent political force. The Bourbons, most notably Henry of Navarre, gave their support to the Huguenots. Because this threatened a source of revenue

for the crown, the Valois began to inspire the sort of anti-Protestant violence that culminated in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572. A prominent Huguenot, Admiral Coligny, had gained the king's ear, much to the dismay of the king's mother, Catherine de' Medici. In order to curb his influence, Catherine plotted to have him killed along with several other troublesome Huguenot leaders. While on the surface this might appear to be merely anti-Protestant hatred, it was in fact quite politically motivated. First, she hoped to eliminate Coligny, thus enabling her to regain control of her son, the king, so that she might once more determine French political policy. Then her secondary motive was to decimate the Huguenot leadership who threatened the strong source of revenue that the Catholic faith offered France. Under the guise of religious righteousness, she had her political enemies slaughtered. One witness to the massacre described the cruel way in which the body of Coligny was treated, hung mutilated for all to see.[3] Here is further evidence of political motives at work, because the mutilation and public display of his corpse made him an example, a warning to Huguenots to abandon their war against the crown. When Henry of Navarre took power he took two actions that further suggested that he found religion to be a useful political tool. First, famously remarking that "Paris is worth a mass," he converted to Catholicism. Understanding that it would be necessary in order to be accepted by the French masses as their king, he sacrificed his faith for political gain. Then in 1598 he issued the Edict of Nantes, granting liberty of conscience and worship to the Huguenots, who on religious grounds were now his de jure enemies insofar as he was a newly converted Catholic. Again this suggests that he cared more for his political ambition than his faith, as he tolerated so-called heretics simply because they were his longtime political allies.

A similar story unfolded in England, where Henry VIII severed his ties with the Catholic Church for his own personal and political gain, using the new Church of England to expand his power. The first and most basic reason for his formation of the Church of England was that he wanted a divorce. His wife at the time, Catherine of Aragon, had not borne him a son, but when he asked Pope Clement VII for an annulment he was refused, as Catherine's nephew the Holy Roman Emperor was effectively determining papal policy. But there were a number of

other factors that appealed to Henry, namely the acquisition of Church lands and other wealth throughout England and Wales. This would enrich the English coffers and expand the power of the crown. With English ties to the Church severed, Henry did just that. He also passed the Supremacy Act in 1534, making him the official head of the Church of England. This bestowed upon the king not just the earthly title of sovereign, but also the spiritual title of the protector of the faith. This made him more than just the king in the eyes of the people: it made his rule a mandate of God's will. Henry had ended hundreds of years of Catholic dominance and appointed himself England's 'pope.' He had clearly bent the Christian faith to his own devices, namely the consolidation of his political power.

While the rampant religious conflict of the sixteenth century may appear to have been largely motivated by differences in faith, the root of the violence draws more water from the spring of politics. This shows the first cracks in what had once been a stalwart and apparently everlasting papal dominance not just of religious life, but social and political as well. In Northern Europe at least, the papacy was reduced to a relic of the Middle Ages. With leaders now using faith as a tool rather than a basis for policy—as a means rather than as a sacred end in itself—the first signs of secularized thinking emerge. Christianity is seen not as an unbreakable moral code, but rather as an easily manipulated system of belief capable of providing rationale for power. Further exemplifications of this concept can be seen in the divine-right absolutists who followed immediately after, all the way to the Islamic fascists of today. No longer were religion and politics one and the same. Faith had become a tool in the political arsenal that the modern leader possesses. ●

Notes

1. "The Protestant Fury: Antwerp, 1566," in Sears McGee et al., eds., *Kings, Saints and Parliaments*, 2nd ed. (Kendall-Hunt, 1994), 195.

2. For a similar series of events during the American Revolution, see Charles P. Hanson, *Necessary Virtue: The Pragmatic Origins of Religious Liberty in New England* (University Press of Virginia, 1998).

3. John McKay et al., *A History of Western Society: Since 1300*, 9th ed. (Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 204.