The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France

Natalie Z. Davis

Eight religious wars rocked the kingdom of France from 1562 to 1598. Spurred by the grandiose ambitions of the leading aristocratic families and fueled by the religious fervor so characteristic of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, these civil wars became international wars as Spain sought to dismember its northern neighbor — and nearly succeeded. The devastation was enormous, as Huguenot (French Protestant) and Catholic armies crisscrossed France. Indeed, by the late 1580s, there were three competing factions: Protestant, ultra-Catholic (receiving support from Spain), and the French who placed the state above religion. No wonder, then, that during these ungodly four decades of turmoil, violence and brutality were endemic.

Natalie Z. Davis, a historian of early modern France and former president of the American Historical Association, is professor emeritus from Princeton University. Here she explores one aspect of violent behavior in late-sixteenth-century France — the religious riot — and analyzes the patterns of riot behavior. Her sources include memoirs, journals, correspondence, sermons, contemporary books and pamphlets, and literary works. Davis does not see the riots as class warfare; they drew legitimacy from religious rituals and beliefs. Most notorious of the riots was the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of 23–24 August 1572, when Catholics killed perhaps two thousand Huguenots in Paris and, later, approximately three thousand in other parts of France. Davis goes beyond this well-known event to the dynamics of religious riots, and in so doing she raises important questions. What claims to legality did the rioters have? We are often tempted to dismiss rioters out of hand as lawbreakers, but sixteenth-century participants in crowd violence had other perspectives. Were the participants the very poor, hoping to profit from the occasion, or better placed social groups, sin-

cerely committed to specific goals? Did the rioters simply lash out at random, or were they organized, planning their acts of desecration, brutality, and death?

Davis's examination of the idea of pollution places us in the midst of the religious crowd. Sixteenth-century Catholics were certain that Protestants profaned god and the community by their actions and even by their very existence. Protestants believed the same about Catholics. The French felt an obligation, a duty to society and to god, to remove the uncleanness and profanation. Sincere Christians in the sixteenth century could not permit defilement by others who threatened to overturn society, to rupture what should be, according to both Catholics and Protestants, a society unified by the one faith and only one faith. French people did not believe in the virtue of religious tolerance. In fact, they considered religious tolerance injurious to god and to god's plan. What were the differences between Catholic and Protestant riots, and how did the belief system of each religion affect the types of violence practiced by its adherents? Do you think religious violence was extraordinary or usual in Reformation France?

These are the statutes and judgements, which ye shall observe to do in the land, which the Lord God of thy fathers giveth thee... Ye shall utterly destroy all the places wherein the nations which he shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree:

And ye shall overthrow their altars, and break their pillars and burn their groves with fire; and ye shall hew down the graven images of their gods, and destroy the names of them out of that place [Deuteronomy xii. 1–3].

Thus a Calvinist pastor to his flock in 1562.

If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or thy wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying Let us go serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers... Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him... But thou shalt surely kill him; thine hand shall be first upon him to put him to death, and afterwards the hand of all the people... .

If thou shalt hear say in one of thy cities, which the Lord thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying, Certain men, the children of Belial are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known... Thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly and all that is therein [Deuteronomy xiii. 6, 8–9, 12–13, 15].

And [Jehu] lifted up his face to the window and said, Who is on my side? Who? And there looked out to him two or three eunuchs.1 And he said, Throw

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1 Castrated men.
her down. So they threw [Jezebel] down: and some of her blood was sprinkled on the wall, and on the horses: and he trode her under foot. . . . And they went to bury her: but they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. . . . And [Jehu] said, This is the word of the Lord, which he spake by his servant Elijah . . . saying, In the portion of Jezreel shall dogs eat the flesh of Jezebel: and the carcase of Jezebel shall be as dung upon the face of the field [II Kings ix. 32–3, 35–7].

Thus in 1568 Parisian preachers held up to their Catholic parishioners the end of a wicked idolater. Whatever the intentions of pastors and priests, such words were among the many spurs to religious riot in sixteenth-century France. By religious riot I mean, as a preliminary definition, any violent action, with words or weapons, undertaken against religious targets by people who are not acting officially and formally as agents of political and ecclesiastical authority. As food rioters bring their moral indignation to bear upon the state of the grain market, so religious rioters bring their zeal to bear upon the state of men’s relations to the sacred. The violence of the religious riot is distinguished, at least in principle, from the action of political authorities, who can legally silence, humiliate, demolish, punish, torture and execute; and also from the action of soldiers, who at certain times and places can legally kill and destroy. In mid sixteenth-century France, all these sources of violence were busily producing, and it is sometimes hard to tell a militia officer from a murderer and a soldier from a statue-smasher. Nevertheless, there are occasions when we can separate out for examination a violent crowd set on religious goals.

. . . We may see these crowds as prompted by political and moral traditions which legitimize and even prescribe their violence. We may see urban rioters not as miserable, uprooted, unstable masses, but as men and women who often have some stake in their community; who may be craftsmen or better; and who, even when poor and unskilled, may appear respectable to their everyday neighbours. Finally, we may see their violence, however cruel, not as random and limitless, but as aimed at defined targets and selected from a repertory of traditional punishments and forms of destruction.

. . . My first purpose is to describe the shape and structure of the religious riot in French cities and towns, especially in the 1560s and early 1570s. We will look at the goals, legitimation and occasions for riots; at the kinds of action undertaken by the crowds and the targets for their violence; and briefly at the participants in the riots and their organization. We will consider differences between Protestant and Catholic styles of crowd behaviour, but will also indicate the many ways in which they are alike. . . .

What then can we learn of the goals of popular religious violence? What were the crowds intending to do and why did they think they must do it? Their behaviour suggests, first of all, a goal akin to preaching: the defence of true doctrine and the refutation of false doctrine through dramatic challenges and tests. “You blaspheme,” shouts a woman to a Catholic preacher in Montpellier in 1558 and, having broken the decorum of the service, leads part of the congregation out of the church. “You lie,” shouts a sheathmaker in the midst of the Franciscan's
Easter sermon in Lyon, and his words are underscored by the gunshots of Huguenots waiting in the square. "Look," cries a weaver in Tournai, as he seizes the elevated host from the priest, "deceived people, do you believe this is the King, Jesus Christ, the true God and Saviour? Look!" And he crumbles the wafer and escapes. "Look," says a crowd of image-breakers to the people of Albiac in 1561, showing them the relics they have seized from the Carmelite monastery, "look, they are only animal bones." And the slogan of the Reformed crowds as they rush through the streets of Paris, of Toulouse, of La Rochelle, of Angoulême is "The Gospel! The Gospel! Long live the Gospel!"

Catholic crowds answer this kind of claim to truth in Angers by taking the French Bible, well-bound and gilded, seized in the home of a rich merchant, and parading it through the streets on the end of a halberd. "There's the truth hung. There's the truth of the Huguenots, the truth of all the devils." Then, throwing it into the river, "There's the truth of all the devils drowned." And if the Huguenot doctrine was true, why didn't the Lord come and save them from their killers? So a crowd of Orléans Catholic taunted its victims in 1572: "Where is your God? Where are your prayers and Psalms? Let him save you if he can." Even the dead were made to speak in Normandy and Provence, where leaves of the Protestant Bible were stuffed into the mouths and wounds of corpses. "They preached the truth of their God. Let them call him to their aid."

The same refutation was, of course, open to Protestants. A Protestant crowd corners a baker guarding the holy-wafer box in Saint Médard's Church in Paris in 1561. "Messieurs," he pleads, "do not touch it for the honour of Him who dwells here." "Does your God of paste protect you now from the pains of death?" was the Protestant answer before they killed him. True doctrine can be defended in sermon or speech, backed up by the magistrate's sword against the heretic. Here it is defended by dramatic demonstration, backed up by the violence of the crowd.

A more frequent goal of these riots, however, is that of ridding the community of dreaded pollution. The word "pollution" is often on the lips of the violent, and the concept serves well to sum up the dangers which rioters saw in the dirty and diabolic enemy. A priest brings ornaments and objects for singing the Mass into a Bordeaux jail. The Protestant prisoner smashes them all. "Do you want to blaspheme the Lord's name everywhere? Isn't it enough that the temples are defiled? Must you also profane prisons so nothing is unpolluted?" "The Calvinists have polluted their hands with every kind of sacrilege men can think of," writes a Doctor of Theology in 1562. Not long after at the Sainte Chapelle, a man seizes the elevated host with his "polluted hands" and crushes it under foot. The worshippers beat him up and deliver him to the agents of Parlement.

One does not have to listen very long to sixteenth-century voices to hear the evidence for the uncleanness and profanation of either side. As for the Protes-

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2 A Gothic church in Paris, built in the thirteenth century to house relics.

3 The Parlement of Paris, a sovereign judicial court with jurisdiction over approximately one-half of France.
tants, Catholics knew that, in the style of earlier heretics, they snuffed out the candles and had sexual intercourse after the voluptuous Psalmsinging of their nocturnal conventicles. But it was not just the fleshly licence with which they lived which was unclean, but the things they said in their "pestilential" books and the things they did in hatred of the Mass, the sacraments and whole Catholic religion. As the representative of the clergy said at the Estates of Orléans, the heretics intended to leave "no place in the Kingdom which was dedicated, holy and sacred to the Lord, but would only profane churches, demolish altars and break images."

The Protestants' sense of Catholic pollution also stemmed to some extent from their sexual uncleanness, here specifically of the clergy. Protestant polemic never tired of pointing to the lewdness of the clergy with their "concubines." It was rumoured that the Church of Lyon had an organization of hundreds of women, sort of temple prostitutes, at the disposition of priests and canons; and an observer pointed out with disgust how, after the First Religious War, the Mass and the brothel re-entered Rouen together. One minister even claimed that the clergy were for the most part Sodomites. But more serious than the sexual abominations of the clergy was the defilement of the sacred by Catholic ritual life, from the diabolic magic of the Mass to the idolatrous worship of images. The Mass is "vile filth"; "no people pollute the House of the Lord in every way more than the clergy." Protestant converts talked of their own past lives as a time of befoulment and dreaded present "contamination" from Catholic churches and rites.

Pollution was a dangerous thing to suffer in a community, from either a Protestant or a Catholic point of view, for it would surely provoke the wrath of God. Terrible wind storms and floods were sometimes taken as signs of His impatience on this count. Catholics, moreover, had also to worry about offending Mary and the saints; and though the anxious, expiatory processions organized in the wake of Protestant sacrilege might temporarily appease them, the heretics were sure to strike again. It is not surprising, then, that so many of the acts of violence performed by Catholic and Protestant crowds have ... the character either of rites of purification or of a paradoxical desecration, intended to cut down on uncleanness by placing profane things, like chrism, back in the profane world where they belonged. . . .

For Catholic zealots, the extermination of the heretical "vermin" promised the restoration of unity to the body social and the guarantee of its traditional boundaries:

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4 Secret religious meetings.
5 The Estates in French provinces were assemblies that maintained relations with the central government and dealt with provincial affairs.
6 A concubine is a woman who cohabits with a man to whom she is not married.
7 1562–1563.
8 Holy oil used in Christian ceremonies.
And let us all say in unison:  
Long live the Catholic religion  
Long live the King and good parishioners,  
Long live faithful Parisians,  
And may it always come to pass  
That every person goes to Mass,  
One God, one Faith, one King.

For Protestant zealots, the purging of the priestly “vermin” promised the creation of a new kind of unity within the body social, all the tighter because false gods and monkish sects would no longer divide it. Relations within the social order would be purer, too, for lewdness and love of gain would be limited. As was said of Lyon after its “deliverance” in 1562:

... When this town so vain  
Was filled  
With idolatry and dealings  
Of usury and lewdness,  
It had clerics and merchants aplenty.  
But once it was purged  
And changed  
By the Word of God,  
That brood of vipers  
Could hope no more  
To live in so holy a place.

Crowds might defend truth, and crowds might purify, but there was also a third aspect to the religious riot — a political one. . . .

... When the magistrate had not used his sword to defend the faith and the true church and to punish the idolators, then the crowd would do it for him. Thus, many religious disturbances begin with the ringing of the tocsin,9 as in a time of civic assembly or emergency. Some riots end with the marching of the religious “wrongdoers” on the other side to jail. In 1561, for instance, Parisian Calvinists, fearing that the priests and worshippers in Saint Médard’s Church were organizing an assault on their services . . . , first rioted in Saint Médard and then seized some fifteen Catholics as “mutinous” and led them off, “bound like galley-slaves,” to the Châtelet prison.

If the Catholic killing of Huguenots has in some ways the form of a rite of purification, it also sometimes has the form of imitating the magistrate. The mass executions of Protestants at Merindol and Cabrières in Provence and at Meaux in the 1540s, duly ordered by the Parlements of Aix and of Paris as punishment for heresy and high treason, anticipate crowd massacres of later decades. The Protestants themselves sensed this: the devil, unable to extinguish the light of the Gospel through the sentences of judges, now tried to obscure it through furious war and

9 Bell used to sound an alarm.
a murderous populace. Whereas before they were made martyrs by one executioner, now it is at the hands of “infinite numbers of them, and the swords of private persons have become the litigants, witnesses, judges, decrees and executors of the strangest cruelties.”

Similarly, official acts of torture and official acts of desecration of the corpses of certain criminals anticipate some of the acts performed by riotous crowds. The public execution was, of course, a dramatic and well-attended event in the sixteenth century, and the wood-cut and engraving documented the scene far and wide. There the crowd might see the offending tongue of the blasphemer pierced or slit, the offending hands of the desecrator cut off. There the crowd could watch the traitor decapitated and disemboweled, his corpse quartered and the parts borne off for public display in different sections of the town. The body of an especially heinous criminal was dragged through the streets, attached to a horse’s tail. The image of exemplary royal punishment lived on for weeks, even years, as the corpses of murderers were exposed on gallows or wheels and the heads of rebels on posts. . . . [C]rowsds often took their victims to places of official execution, as in Paris in 1562, when the Protestant printer, Roc Le Frere, was dragged for burning to the Marché aux Pourceaux,10 and in Toulouse the same year, when a merchant, slain in front of a church, was dragged for burning to the town hall. “The King salutes you,” said a Catholic crowd in Orléans to a Protestant trader, then put a cord around his neck as official agents might do, and led him off to be killed.

Riots also occurred in connection with judicial cases, either to hurry the judgement along, or when verdicts in religious cases were considered too severe or too lenient by “the voice of the people.” Thus in 1569 in Montpellier, a Catholic crowd forced the judge to condemn an important Huguenot prisoner to death in a hasty “trial,” then seized him and hanged him in front of his house. . . . And in 1561 in Marsillargues, when prisoners for heresy were released by royal decree, a Catholic crowd “rearrested” them, and executed and burned them in the streets. . . .

The seizure of religious buildings and the destruction of images by Calvinist crowds were also accomplished with the conviction that they were taking on the rôle of the authorities. When Protestants in Montpellier occupied a church in 1561, they argued that the building belonged to them already, since its clergy had been wholly supported by merchants and burghers in the past and the property belonged to the town. . . .

To be sure, the relation of a French Calvinist crowd to the magisterial model is different from that of a French Catholic crowd. The king had not yet chastised the clergy and “put all ydolatry to ruyne and confusyon,” as Protestants had been urging him since the early 1530s. Calvinist crowds were using his sword as the king ought to have been using it and as some princes and city councils outside of

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10 Pig market.
France had already used it. Within the kingdom before 1560 city councils had only indicated the right path, as they set up municipal schools, lay-controlled welfare systems or otherwise limited the sphere of action of the clergy. During the next years, as revolution and conversion created Reformed city councils and governors (such as the Queen of Navarre) within France, Calvinist crowds finally had local magistrates whose actions they could prompt or imitate.

In general, then, the crowds in religious riots in sixteenth-century France can be seen as sometimes acting out clerical rôles — defending true doctrine or ridding the community of defilement in a violent version of priest or prophet — and as sometimes acting out magisterial rôles. Clearly some riotous behaviour, such as the extensive pillaging done by both Protestants and Catholics, cannot be subsumed under these heads; but just as the prevalence of pillaging in a war does not prevent us from typing it as a holy war, so the prevalence of pillaging in a riot should not prevent us from seeing it as essentially religious.

So long as rioters maintained a given religious commitment, they rarely displayed guilt or shame for their violence. By every sign, the crowds believed their actions legitimate.

One reason for this conviction is that in some, though by no means all, religious riots, clerics and political officers were active members of the crowd, though not precisely in their official capacity. In Lyon in 1562, Pastor Jean Ruffy took part in the sack of the Cathedral of Saint Jean with a sword in his hand. Catholic priests seem to have been in quite a few disturbances, as in Rouen in 1560, when priests and parishioners in a Corpus Christi parade broke into the houses of Protestants who had refused to do the procession honour.

On the other hand, not all religious riots could boast of officers or clergy in the crowd, and other sources of legitimation must be sought. Here we must recognize what mixed cues were given out by priests and pastors in their sermons on heresy or idolatry. However much Calvin and other pastors opposed such disturbances (preferring that all images and altars be removed soberly by the authorities), they nevertheless were always more ready to understand and excuse this violence than, say, that of a peasant revolt or of a journeymen's march. Perhaps, after all, the popular idol-smashing was due to "an extraordinary power (vertu) from God." The role of Catholic preachers in legitimating popular violence was even more direct. If we don't know whether to believe the Protestant claim that Catholic preachers at Paris were telling their congregations in 1557 that Protestants ate babies, it is surely significant that Catholic preachers did blame the loss of the battle of Saint Quentin on God's wrath at the presence of heretics in France.

11 A Roman Catholic festival instituted in the thirteenth century to honor the Blessed Sacrament (the body of Jesus).
13 Spanish victory over the French in 1557.
And if Protestant pastors could timidly wonder if divine power were not behind the extraordinary force of the iconoclasts, priests had no doubts that certain miraculous occurrences in the wake of Catholic riots were a sign of divine approval, such as a copper cross in Troyes that began to change colour and cure people in 1561, the year of a riot in which Catholics bested Protestants.

In all likelihood, however, there are sources for the legitimation of popular religious riot that come directly out of the experience of the local groups which often formed the nucleus of a crowd — the men and women who had worshipped together in the dangerous days of the night conventicles, the men in confraternities, in festive groups, in youth gangs and militia units. It should be remembered how often conditions in sixteenth-century cities required groups of “little people” to take the law into their own hands. Royal edicts themselves enjoined anyone who saw a murder, theft or other misdeed to ring the tocisin and chase after the criminal. Canon law allowed certain priestly roles to laymen in times of emergency, such as the midwife’s responsibility to baptize a baby in danger of dying, while the role of preaching the Gospel was often assumed by Protestant laymen in the decades before the Reformed Church was set up.

The occasion for most religious violence was during the time of religious worship or ritual and in the space which one or both groups were using for sacred purposes.

Almost every type of public religious event has a disturbance associated with it. The sight of a statue of the Virgin at a crossroad or in a wall-niche provokes a Protestant group to mockery of those who reverence her. A fight ensues. Catholics hide in a house to entrap Huguenots who refuse to doff their hats to a Virgin nearby, and then rush out and beat the heretics up. Baptism: in Nemours, a Protestant family has its baby baptized on All Souls’ Day\(^{14}\) according to the new Reformed rite. With the help of an aunt, a group of Catholics steals it away for rebaptism. A drunkard sees the father and the godfather and other Protestants discussing the event in the streets, claps his sabots\(^{15}\) and shouts, “Here are the Huguenots who have come to massacre us.” A crowd assembles, the tocisin is rung, and a three-hour battle takes place. Funeral: in Toulouse, at Easter-time, a Protestant carpenter tries to bury his Catholic wife by the new Reformed rite. A Catholic crowd seizes the corpse and buries it. The Protestants dig it up and try to reburry her. The bells are rung, and with a great noise a Catholic crowd assembles with stones and sticks. Fighting and sacking ensue.

Religious services: a Catholic Mass is the occasion for an attack on the Host or the interruption of a sermon, which then leads to a riot. Protestant preaching in a home attracts large Catholic crowds at the door, who stone the house or otherwise threaten the worshippers.

\(^{14}\) Commemoration of the souls of the departed, celebrated on 2 November.

\(^{15}\) Cheap wooden shoes worn by peasants and workers.
But these encounters are as nothing compared to the disturbances that cluster around processional life. Corpus Christi Day, with its crowds, coloured banners and great crosses, was the chance for Protestants not to put rugs in front of their doors; for Protestant women to sit ostentatiously in their windows spinning; for heroic individuals, like the painter Denis de Vallois in Lyon, to throw themselves on the “God of paste” so as “to destroy him in every parish in the world.” Corpus Christi Day was the chance for a procession to turn into an assault on and slaughter of those who had so offended the Catholic faith, its participants shouting, as in Lyon in 1561, “For the flesh of God, we must kill all the Huguenots.” A Protestant procession was a parade of armed men and women in their dark clothes, going off to services at their temple or outside the city gates, singing Psalms and spiritual songs that to Catholic ears sounded like insults against the Church and her sacraments. It was an occasion for children to throw stones, for an exchange of scandalous words — “idolaters,” “devils from the Pope’s purgatory,” “Huguenot heretics, living like dogs” — and then finally for fighting.

The occasions which express most concisely the contrast between the two religious groups, however, are those in which a popular festive Catholicism took over the streets with dancing, masks, banners, costumes and music — “lascivious abominations,” according to the Protestants.

As with liturgical rites, there were some differences between the rites of violence of Catholic and Protestant crowds.

...[T]he iconoclastic Calvinist crowds... come out as the champions in the destruction of religious property (“with more than Turkish cruelty,” said a priest). This was not only because the Catholics had more physical accessories to their rite, but also because the Protestants sensed much more danger and defilement in the wrongful use of material objects.

In bloodshed the Catholics are the champions (remember we are talking of the actions of Catholic and Protestant crowds, not of their armies). I think this is due not only to their being in the long run the strongest party numerically in most cities, but also to their stronger sense of the persons of heretics as sources of danger and defilement. Thus, injury and murder were a preferred mode of purifying the body social.

Furthermore, the preferred targets for physical attack differ in the Protestant and Catholic cases. As befitting a movement intending to overthrow a thousand years of clerical “tyranny” and “pollution,” the Protestants’ targets were primarily priests, monks and friars. That their ecclesiastical victims were usually unarmed (as Catholic critics hastened to point out) did not make them any less harmful in Protestant eyes, or any more immune from the wrath of God. Lay people were sometimes attacked by Protestant crowds, too, such as the festive dancers who were stoned at Pamiers and Lyon, and the worshippers who were killed at Saint Médard’s Church. But there is nothing that quite resembles the style and extent of the slaughter of the 1572 massacres. The Catholic crowds were, of course, happy to catch a pastor when they could, but the death of any heretic would help
in the cause of cleansing France of these pernicious sowers of disorder and dis-
union. . . .

. . . [T]he overall picture in these urban religious riots is not one of the "peo-
ple" slaying the rich. Protestant crowds expressed no preference for killing or ass-
saulting powerful prelates over simple priests. As for Catholic crowds, contempo-
rary listings of their victims in the 1572 massacres show that artisans, the "little
people," are represented in significant numbers. . . .

. . . Let us look a little further at what I have called their rites of violence. Is
there any way we can order the terrible, concrete details of filth, shame and tor-
ture that are reported from both Protestant and Catholic riots? I would suggest
that they can be reduced to a repertory of actions, derived from the Bible, from
the liturgy, from the action of political authority, or from the traditions of popu-
lar folk justice, intended to purify the religious community and humiliate the
enemy and thus make him less harmful.

The religious significance of destruction by water or fire is clear enough. The
rivers which receive so many Protestant corpses are not merely convenient mass
graves, they are temporarily a kind of holy water, an essential feature of Catholic
rites of exorcism. . . .

Let us take a more difficult case, the troubling case of the desecration of
corpse3s. This is primarily an action of Catholic crowds in the sixteenth century.
Protestant crowds could be very cruel indeed in torturing living priests, but paid
little attention to them when they were dead. (Perhaps this is related to the Protes-
tant rejection of Purgatory and prayers for the dead: the souls of the dead expe-
rience immediately Christ's presence or the torments of the damned, and thus the
dead body is no longer so dangerous or important an object to the living.) What
interested Protestants was digging up bones that were being treated as sacred
objects by Catholics and perhaps burning them, after the fashion of Josiah in
1 Kings. The Catholics, however, were not content with burning or drowning
heretical corpses. That was not cleansing enough. The bodies had to be weakened
and humiliated further. To an eerie chorus of "strange whistles and hoots," they
were thrown to the dogs like Jezebel, they were dragged through the streets, they
had their genitalia and internal organs cut away, which were then hawked through
the city in a ghoulish commerce.

Let us also take the embarrassing case of the desecration of religious objects by
filthy and disgusting means. It is the Protestants . . . who are concerned about ob-
jects, who are trying to show that Catholic objects of worship have no magical
power. It is not enough to cleanse by swift and energetic demolition, not enough to
purify by a great public burning of the images, as in Albiac, with the children of the
town ceremonially reciting the Ten Commandments around the fire. The line be-
tween the sacred and the profane was also re-drawn by throwing the sacred host to
the dogs, by roasting the crucifix upon a spit, by using holy oil to grease one's boots,
and by leaving human excrement on holy-water basins and other religious objects.

And what of the living victims? Catholics and Protestants humiliated them by
techniques borrowed from the repertory of folk justice. Catholic crowds lead
Protestant women through the streets with muzzles on — a popular punishment
for the shrew — or with a crown of thorns. A form of charivari\textsuperscript{16} is used, where the noisy throng humiliates its victim by making him ride backward on an ass. . . . In Montauban, a priest was ridden backward on an ass, his chalice in one hand, his host in the other, and his missal at an end of a halberd.\textsuperscript{17} At the end of his ride, he must crush his host and burn his own vestments. . . .

These episodes disclose to us the underlying function of the rites of violence. As with the "games" of Christ's tormentors, which hide from them the full knowledge of what they do, so these charades and ceremonies hide from sixteenth-century rioters a full knowledge of what they are doing. Like the legitimation for religious riot . . ., they are part of the "conditions for guilt-free massacre." . . . The crucial fact that the killers must forget is that their victims are human beings. These harmful people in the community — the evil priest or hateful heretic — have already been transformed for the crowd into "vermin" or "devils." The rites of religious violence complete the process of dehumanization. So in Meaux, where Protestants were being slaughtered with butchers' cleavers, a living victim was trundled to his death in a wheelbarrow, while the crowd cried "vinegar, mustard." And the vicar of the parish of Fouquebrune in the Angoumois was attached with the oxen to a plough and died from Protestant blows as he pulled.

What kinds of people made up the crowds that performed the range of acts we have examined in this paper? First, they were not by and large the alienated rootless poor. . . . A large percentage of men in Protestant iconoclastic riots and in the crowds of Catholic killers in 1572 were characterized as artisans. Sometimes the crowds included other men from the lower orders. . . . More often, the social composition of the crowds extended upward to encompass merchants, notaries and lawyers, as well as clergics. . . .

In addition, there was significant participation by two other groups of people who, though not rootless and alienated, had a more marginal relationship to political power than did lawyers, merchants or even male artisans — namely, city women and teenage boys. . . .

Finally, as this study has already suggested, the crowds of Catholics and Protestants, including those bent on deadly tasks, were not an inchoate mass, but showed many signs of organization. Even with riots that had little or no planning behind them, the event was given some structure by the situation of worship or the procession that was the occasion for many disturbances. In other cases, planning in advance led to lists of targets, and ways of identifying friends or fellow rioters. . . .

That such splendor and order should be put to violent uses is a disturbing fact. Disturbing, too, is the whole subject of religious violence. How does an historian talk about a massacre of the magnitude of St. Bartholomew's Day? One approach is to view extreme religious violence as an extraordinary event, the product of frenzy, of the frustrated and paranoidic primitive mind of the people.

\textsuperscript{16} Davis defines this elsewhere as "a noisy, masked demonstration to humiliate some wrongdoer in the community."

\textsuperscript{17} A combined spear and battleaxe.
A second approach sees such violence as a more usual part of social behaviour, but explains it as a somewhat pathological product of certain kinds of child-rearing, economic deprivation or status loss. This paper has assumed that conflict is perennial in social life, though the forms and strength of the accompanying violence vary; and that religious violence is intense because it connects intimately with the fundamental values and self-definition of a community. The violence is explained not in terms of how crazy, hungry or sexually frustrated the violent people are (though they may sometimes have such characteristics), but in terms of the goals of their actions and in terms of the roles and patterns of behaviour allowed by their culture. Religious violence is related here less to the pathological than to the normal.

Thus, in sixteenth-century France, we have seen crowds taking on the rôle of priest, pastor or magistrate to defend doctrine or purify the religious community, either to maintain its Catholic boundaries and structure, or to re-form relations within it. We have seen that popular religious violence could receive legitimation from different features of political and religious life, as well as from the group identity of the people in the crowds. The targets and character of crowd violence differed somewhat between Catholics and Protestants, depending on their perception of the source of danger and on their religious sensibility. But in both cases, religious violence had a connection in time, place and form with the life of worship, and the violent actions themselves were drawn from a store of punitive or purificatory traditions current in sixteenth-century France.

In this context, the cruelty of crowd action in the 1572 massacres was not an exceptional occurrence. St. Bartholomew was certainly a bigger affair than, say, the Saint Médard's riot, it had more explicit sanction from political authority, it had elaborate networks of communication at the top level throughout France, and it took a more terrible toll in deaths. Perhaps its most unusual feature was that the Protestants did not fight back. But on the whole, it still fits into a whole pattern of sixteenth-century religious disturbance.

This inquiry also points to a more general conclusion. Even in the extreme case of religious violence, crowds do not act in a mindless way. They will to some degree have a sense that what they are doing is legitimate, the occasions will relate somehow to the defence of their cause, and their violent behaviour will have some structure to it — here dramatic and ritual. But the rites of violence are not the rights of violence in any absolute sense. They simply remind us that if we try to increase safety and trust within a community, try to guarantee that the violence it generates will take less destructive and less cruel forms, then we must think less about pacifying "deviants" and more about changing the central values.

MAKING CONNECTIONS:
RELIGION AND RITUAL

1. We have seen that Western religions have often fought among themselves and within their own faiths. Pagels brings to light the conflict between Gnostic and orthodox Christians, whereas Hsia documents Christian persecution of Jews. These are, of
course, only two examples of innumerable religious hostilities in Western civilization that involved not only Christianity and Judaism but Islam as well. Natalie Davis describes one aspect of the horrendous religious wars that racked Reformation Europe in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In detailing the nature of the religious riot during the wars of religion in France, Davis uncovers its ritualized violence, sense of legitimacy, goals, and its preoccupation with the concept of pollution. She applies the notion of pollution to Christian fears that different denominations sullied society and Christianity, thereby offending god and so proving that the legitimate religion could — in fact must — purge the polluters from society. Apply Davis's idea of pollution to Soler's discussion of Jewish concerns about proper diet, to Pagels's depiction of the hostility between orthodox and Gnostic Christians, and to Hsia's analysis of the ritual murder trial of Jews. What other examples of fears in Western civilization might fit Davis's idea of pollution? To what degree can we use pollution as a category of analysis to understand social as well as religious history? Provide instances of cultures' fear of social pollution in European history. Here you might consider the attitudes of various social groups toward one another and to those they considered marginal or deviant.

2. Was the religion of the sixteenth-century French people more a matter of belief or of behavior? What was the difference between religious and social behavior among the French people Davis describes? Compare the extent to which religion permeated the lives of the following groups: ancient Hebrews, early Christians, late medieval Germans, and the French during the late sixteenth century. Do you think religion affects the lives of people in contemporary society as much as it did in earlier periods? Why or why not? Are there areas of life today that religion does not seem to affect? Is religious ritual as important today as it was in earlier societies? Explain.