
Imposition of Order: The Edict of Nantes and the Price of Stability

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Finally, we order that all the inhabitants of the aforementioned city, so that the one and the other religion will live in peace and concord without giving each other either subject nor occasion for quarrel, either in fact or in word, will comport themselves modestly in the exercise of their religion following the form of the edict, which they will guard and observe point by point according to its form and tenor, under pain of being declared and chastised as rebels, criminals of les majesty and *infracteurs* and *perterbateurs* of the public good and repose. (Rabut 106)^[1]

In the late fall of 1599 a new reality was taking shape. Peace and stability were in the air, and the possibility that these would be lasting was substantial. King Henri IV, through the agency of his commissioners, was listening. He was interested in the concerns of each community, and was prepared to fashion a customized pacification for communities that were both Protestant and Catholic. This willingness grew out of the king's perception of himself as a peacemaker, along the model of King David. As such, he hoped to be able to establish religious unity, in fulfillment of his responsibility for Christianity in France (Delumeau 44). The Edict of Nantes provided for some of the interests of both Catholics and Protestants. It had as its first priority the reestablishment of Catholic worship throughout the realm. Additionally, it has been celebrated for the toleration it extended to the Huguenots in the form of protected worship in specified places throughout the realm, along with legal and physical protection offered by the courts and the *places de sureté*. Thus, the Edict of Nantes went beyond earlier pacifications to create a viable structure for a bi-confessional France (Delumeau 43). The work of bringing the terms of the edict into practice throughout France accomplished several things. It did, in fact, initiate a period of peaceful relations, which involved the protection of vulnerable minorities. This often meant protection for Protestants, but at times the edict served to shield the Catholic

population. It also was a means by which the king extended his authority throughout his realm in a range of matters, not all of which were explicitly religious, and it helped to lay a foundation upon which communities could co-exist. This foundation was a powerful precedent, which was evident when religious tension again boiled over later in the seventeenth century. As Henri IV's grandson worked to revoke the Edict of Nantes, some bi-confessional communities were willing to tolerate religious differences in order to protect everyone from the intrusion of the power of the king. Thanks to the published transcription of the records of the commissioners in Dauphiné we have valuable insight into this process of the enforcement of the Edict of Nantes. The records from the age of Henri IV suggest that the power of the king was expressly manifested in the visits of his commissioners. In 1599 they were often helpful in creating a means for co-existence, if not full-fledged toleration. The transcripts also suggest some of the basis upon which later resistance to the king and his manipulations of local communities would be built.

In Dauphiné commissioners of the king, one Catholic and one Protestant, took a turn around the province, visiting with local notables and clerical leaders. They listened to the requests and concerns in each locality, and established the new rules and regulations for the establishment of peace and confessional cooperation in bi-confessional towns. Following the announcement of the new settlement, the inhabitants pledged to uphold the terms determined in this manner. This peace was a negotiated peace on the local level, and as such it had great promise.

With the promulgation of the Edict of Nantes, Henri IV laid the groundwork for a new era in France, a move away from the warfare that consumed the last years of the Renaissance monarchy in France toward a state that was characterized by peace and the powerful influence of the crown. Though his predecessors François I and Henri II worked to centralize the monarchy (Garrison 170), the reign of Henri IV represented a new level of the intrusion of royal authority into the lives of French communities and individuals (Greengrass 109). Through the imposition of the edict, Henri IV was able to extend his reach more than had been the case previously, an ability that he exploited to enforce his will with regard to the Edict of Nantes, along with addressing other issues

central to the imposition of his growing and increasingly centralized authority.

The edict was primarily concerned with the establishment and regulation of the peace, not theological or doctrinal differences. Its intention was to assert the authority of the king thorough the negotiation of religious peace (Rabut 14) and to build a bipartisan basis for participation in French communities (Mentzer 102). The edict specified that France was a realm in which there was freedom of conscience and which included numerous places where there was freedom of worship for the Huguenot faithful. It did not, nor did it intend to, create a realm of religious toleration in the modern sense. The sixteenth-century notion of toleration is summed up in the definition from the dictionary of the Académie Française in 1694. It was a “condescension or indulgence for what one cannot prevent” (qtd. in Benedict 282). In keeping with this understanding of the concept of toleration, the Edict of Nantes was not seen by contemporaries as a permanent and desirable solution to the problem of religious violence, rather as a mechanism that allowed “Protestants and Catholics to live side by side within the state pending the end of the religious schism” (Knecht 469).^[2] Creation of this peace required negotiation of some of the problems that had torn so many French communities apart over the past decades, problems that often had specific local variations that required the attention of the commissioners of the king. The process of negotiation created a situation where minorities had some protection against unwarranted persecution by the local majority. In the case of Dauphiné, this allowed for the continuation of Protestantism, and in some cases its growth, rather than its disappearance (as many hoped for and expected). Further, it created the means by which many communities were able to coexist in reasonable peace throughout the seventeenth century.^[3]

A central aspect of the negotiations and declarations of the king’s commissioners was to communicate the authority of the king in matters of organizing civil affairs to ensure peace and cooperation. In so doing, the commissioners repeatedly enumerated the crimes with which those who violated the terms and disturbed the public repose would be charged, and specified what would constitute a disturbance of the public tranquility. Underscoring the role of these commissioners in securing a plan

for peace, rather than negotiating doctrine or religious behavior, was the broad nature of their promulgations. They included, for example, a reiteration of the prohibition on dueling, for religion or any other reason, and the curtailment or prohibition of the actions of the *Abbaye de Malgouvert* and charivaris, in addition to bans on religious (or irreligious) acts such as blasphemy.⁴¹ These suggest the degree to which Henri IV was working to gain control of his kingdom in ways that went beyond the creation of religious order.

The preamble to the Edict of Nantes claims that this edict, which proved to be the last in a series of edicts whose goal was the pacification of religious violence, intended to give a “general law, clear, pure, and absolute, by which they will be regulated in all differences that have formerly arisen among them, and that may arise hereafter” (“Preamble”). These words by Henri IV mark an important transition in the life of the French nation, though it was not necessarily that which was intended by the new king. The Edict of Nantes was seen through many different lenses. By some it was seen as the work of an insincerely converted king who wished to reward his Protestant supporters, by others it was seen as the betrayal of the duty of the king to maintain the unity of the kingdom, including its religious unity, while other modern scholars see it as a political necessity brought on by the shrewd manipulation of Protestant aristocrats exploiting the political opportunity (Greengrass 96-7), or the work of king trying to secure the loyalty of an increasingly unhappy Protestant population (Wolfe 182). Whatever its proper interpretation, this pacification enabled the king, community by community, to lay the foundation for co-existence of the Huguenot and Catholic communities.

Dauphiné was the first province to publish the Edict of Nantes after the parlement of Paris did so (Rabut 14). The legislation was actually a series of four legal actions, one edit, one “secret article,” and two *brevets*. The intention that the provisions would be temporary, despite the inclusion of the phrase “perpetual and irrevocable” in its preamble (“Preamble”) is clear by the clear expression of the expectation and hope of the eventual restoration of religious unity in the realm (Garrison 395). The reality of the tenuous position of the Edict of Nantes was reinforced when the Edict was reissued eight days after the assassination of Henri IV in 1610, and was reconfirmed in 1612, 1614, and 1615 (Greengrass 257).

In the work of the *commissaires* in Dauphiné we see the foundations, not for the creation of religious unity, but mechanisms by which the two religious communities could maintain their separateness without descending into armed confrontation or inviting unwanted royal attention to their affairs. During a reign that is often heralded as an early move towards establishment of the absolute monarchy, the Edict of Nantes provided a way for French communities to protect themselves from the growing encroachment of royal power (Greengrass 109). By the end of the sixteenth century, the Huguenot minority had established itself and was set apart from Catholic society by a distinct set of behaviors. For this community, religious identity was not about merely worshipping in the temple in a distinctive manner; it permeated every aspect of their lives (Mentzer and Spicer 1-9). They were distinguished by their abstinence from what they considered debaucheries, like drinking and gambling (Garrison 282-3), as well as by their demographic behaviors (Benedict 80-99). Despite the intention and hope of the Edict of Nantes and those who celebrated it, these differences did not disappear; rather they persisted for the next eight decades, until Louis XIV worked to eliminate the Huguenot community altogether.

In establishing religious peace, though not necessarily religious harmony, the Edict of Nantes put religious minorities under the protection of the king. It was a mechanism for strengthening the institutions of the monarchy. With the imposition of the edict the Huguenots throughout France became dependent on their protector, Henri IV. He was responsible for enforcing the provisions of the edict and providing for their sustenance and defense (Racaut 38). On the national level the Huguenots certainly became dependent on the king for many things, from the salaries for their ministers to the support of the garrisons in fortified towns (Greengrass 105). The case of Dauphiné indicates that it was not necessarily only the Huguenot minority that benefited from the king's protection and who perceived the king as their protector.

In communities where Catholics were the distinct minority, they too relied upon the edicts of the king for protection and support. By establishing a peaceful means for coexistence the king

not only re-established Catholic worship, he also allowed for the revival, and in some cases, survival, of the Catholic minority. Dauphiné was a strongly Protestant region, populated with many towns that were predominantly, if not exclusively, Protestant, and had twelve *places de sûreté* granted in the Edict of Nantes (Rabut 20). In some places, like Livron, the commissioners re-established Catholic worship in this *place de sûreté* where there were no Catholics to be found (Rabut 28).

The experience of Montélimar underscores the role that the crown could play in protecting religious minorities, even if that minority was Catholic in a given community. The commissioners arrived in town on November 12, 1599. They had just begun their work in the province, having started by presenting their letters patent on October 25 to the parlement of Grenoble. The commissioners were substantial men, including the Protestant military leader, Lesdiguières, who was also a member of the *Conseil d'Etat*; Mery de Vic, a member of the *Conseil d'Etat* and president of the parlement of Toulouse; and Rabot d'Illins, a councilor to the king and the president of the parlement of Dauphiné (Rabut 59). Upon arriving in Montélimar a few weeks later, the commissioners followed the established protocol and called a gathering of local leaders and explained their mission: to determine the way in which the king's edict would be executed in this city, point by point, and listen to the concerns and needs of the community (Rabut 86-88). That same day, some of the city's Catholic inhabitants had a particular request. They were fugitives from the city seeking assurances from the commissioners that they could return to their homes and reclaim their goods. They explicitly put themselves under the protection of the king so that they could return and reclaim their goods and their lives. This was allowed and the charges of treason discharged. They were admonished to return and comport themselves with modesty and obedience to the king, conforming to his edict (Rabut 93-4).

In other communities the protection offered the minority population was not so dramatic and immediately necessary, but significant nonetheless. In many locales the division of civic authority in the form of designating the confession of the consuls in the places that they visited and the confessional make-up of the *conseil particulier* at times provided a disproportionate voice to the local minority. In Valence, where Protestant worship was

prohibited within the city, the commissioners ensured that two members of the *conseil particulier* were Protestant and decreed that the consuls were to be chosen without regard to confession (Rabut 105). Alternatively, in Loriol, where the Catholic faithful represented only about one quarter of the population, they were assured one consul position and three of the nine places on the *conseil particulier* (Rabut 101). As testament to the ongoing challenges faced by communities with regard to the regulation of religious affairs, the council in Loriol had changed considerably by 1656 when there were four Catholic councilors and seven Protestant, with each confession still holding one consulship, a process of erosion of Protestant political power that continued in that particular community throughout the rest of the seventeenth century (*Archives*).

The goal of the Edict of Nantes, as we have seen, was the conclusion of a peace that would be sustainable, in the anticipation of a coming religious unification. This goal was, ultimately, not achieved through anything resembling peaceful mechanisms, and was in reality, never fully achieved even with the application of extreme measures. The process of enforcing the Edict of Nantes helped to create an environment where the Protestant population was able to sustain itself in some Dauphinois communities, even if its growth was stopped. The overall decline of the Protestant population in France is convincingly documented by Philip Benedict. It is clear that the population as a whole declined by as much as one-third between the death of Henri IV and the arrival of the first *dragonnades* in 1681.¹⁵ Despite this overall loss, some communities managed to sustain their numbers, including several of the rural settlements in Dauphiné (Benedict 60-2).

While the reasons for this ability of some Protestant communities to sustain their populations are unclear, the work of the commissioners provides some intriguing hints. Through their efforts the commissioners successfully established a basis upon which communities could coexist. They mandated protection for the local minority in a variety of fashions, from designated seats in local governing councils, to settling contentious issues of the use of cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and the town bell, to giving assurances of amnesty to those accused of treason. These were concrete steps that provided a path through which there was a

hope of moving beyond the memories of things past, as the king mandated in the first article of the Edict of Nantes (“Edict”). Failure to do so was in violation of the king’s express will, and risked the intervention of royal authority in local affairs. As the actions of Henri IV and his commissioners made clear, the king was increasingly able to interject his authority into the lives of his subjects, an ability that would continue to grow over the course of the seventeenth century. The proceedings of 1599 promised that those who violated its terms would be “declared and chastised as rebels, criminals of *les majesty* and *infracteurs* and *perterbateurs* of the public good and repose” (Rabut 106). Personal and communal interest argued against inviting such distinction. The pacification of the Edict of Nantes appears to have provided a basis upon which the local community could build mechanisms for co-existence that would allow them to resist the edicts of the king later in the seventeenth century.

The experiences of several communities in Dauphiné highlight some of the strengths of the Edict of Nantes that augmented its ability to build a basis for lasting peace. They also suggest some ways in which French communities were able to learn to tolerate religious differences to the point that they would later promote community interests over the push for religious uniformity orchestrated by Louis XIV. This preliminary investigation of the bases upon which co-existence was founded in Dauphiné provides insight into the degree of local cooperation that could exist as communities sought to retain some degree of local control in the face of a clear expansion of the king’s willingness and ability to intervene in their affairs.

Notes

[1.](#) This concludes the ordinance given by the commissioners of Henri IV to the Episcopal city of Valence in November 1599.

[2.](#) This understanding that the Edict of Nantes was intended as a temporary stop on the path to eventual religious unification is also underscored in Garrison at 395.

3. The relative peace of the seventeenth century did not mean, of course, that the terms of the negotiation were not challenged on the local level, nor does it ignore the sustained violence led by royal forces with the intention of eliminating the bases for Protestant independence. However, many bi-confessional communities continued to find ways to co-exist in spite of their religious differences, the willingness of Louis XIII and Louis XIV to use force to bring about religious unity, and the erosion on the local level of Protestant political power.

4. For example, these prohibitions were enumerated in Gap and Montélimar; Rabut 203 and 90 & 93.

5. For a full treatment of the experience of the Huguenot population, see Benedict.

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