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Henry IV: Faith's Power in Politics

Until the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic faith of the kings and queens of Europe was an assumption, not a debate. As the fragment grenade of the reformation exploded across Europe, however, what was once assumed was now questioned. Many lesser nobles across Europe found the Reformed religions appealing and converted to Lutheranism and Calvinism, thereby destabilized the political order of Europe and often causing both political and social turmoil. These issues came to a point only in the French Wars of Religion, however, when a Calvinist prince became heir apparent to the throne of France.

Henry of Navarre, to become Henry IV of France, undertook his final conversion to Catholicism in 1593 for largely political reasons, relinquishing the Calvinist faith to which he remained committed throughout his life and in which he always believed. Heavily influenced in his religious belief by his Calvinist mother Jeanne d'Albret, Henry IV's personal experiences led him to take a practical approach to religion. Henry IV's rule of France subsequent to his conversion was certainly influenced by his personal theology; the Calvinist King's rule was one of relative tolerance and compromise, as evidenced by the Edict of Nantes, issued in 1598, which demonstrates not only the king's own personal sense of obligation to the Calvinists with whom he still associated, but his pragmatically motivated desire for peace in France.

Raised Reformed: Henry IV's Upbringing and Continued Calvinism

Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre and Henry of Navarre's mother, converted to Calvinism in 1559¹ and subsequently became one of its staunchest supporters. Antoine de Bourbon, Henry IV's absentee father, in contrast, remained Catholic despite dabbling in

¹ Ronald S. Love *Blood and Religion: the Conscience of Henri IV, 1553-1593*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001): 18.

Calvinism. De Bourbon's absence meant that he had little influence on the future king of France,² however d'Albret's staunch belief in her commitments to "the religion, the service of the King, His Lord, and the duty of the blood"³ made her a significant influence on Henry of Navarre's religious belief. D'Albret "imbued him with her own evangelical faith by careful instruction in his youth..."⁴, furthering this influence through the hiring of vehement Calvinist intellectuals including Francois La Gaucherie, Pontus de la Caze, and Pierre Victor Palma Cayet⁵ as Navarre's tutors. These men "slowly transformed Henri's hitherto ingenuous adherence to the Reformed Religion into a strong personal conviction and firm belief in Calvinist religious tenets that reached beyond a faith inspired by filial devotion to Jeanne d'Albret."⁶ The combination of his mother's belief and his Calvinist-tinged instruction created a lasting foundation in the Reformed religion which would follow Henry through his life.

The influence of d'Albret cannot be overstated. In her memoirs, the Queen of Navarre demonstrates clearly her strong personal connection with her son, saying that she would help him follow the same "straight path" which she had followed and emphasizing her perception of the purity of her son's religion.⁷ D'Albret had little reason to fear; Henry of Navarre's adolescent actions demonstrated clearly his commitment not only to his mother but to the Calvinism. During his captivity at court following the St. Bartholomew's day massacre⁸, Henry IV wrote a letter to

² When Antoine de Bourbon died in 1562, he his wavering religious stance meant that he was "branded an atheist by Protestant and Catholics alike. Antoine's behavior was to become an abject lesson on the perils of confessional change for Henri...": Michael Wolfe *The Conversion of Henry IV: Politics, Power, and Religious Belief in Early Modern France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993): 23.

³ Jeanne d'Albret *Mémoires et poésies* (Paris : E. Paul, Huart et Guillemin, 1893) : 2 : "...mon intention est de desclarer plus particulièrement les dictes occasions...qui sont la Religion, le service du Roy, Monseigneur, et le devoir du sang."

⁴ Love *Blood and Religion*: 19.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷ D'Albret *Mémoires et poésies*: 4 : "J'ay tousjours, par la grace de Dieu, suivi le droict chemin. Je conjoindray que, par ceste mesme faveur...mon fils a este preserve parmi tant d'assaults en la purete de sa Religion."

⁸ Vincent J. Pitts *Henri IV of France: his reign and age* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009): 69-72.

d'Albret saying that while those in court thought "to separate me from the [Reformed] religion and from you;... I assure you...they will not succeed, for there was never a more obedient son to his mother than I am to you."⁹ D'Albret worked hard to instill her personal religious values in her son, and Henry IV quickly learned to associate his loyalty to his mother with their mutual religion.

In the aftermath of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, both Navarre and his cousin, the Prince of Conde, were imprisoned at court by Charles IX who "offered them their lives, conditional upon an immediate renunciation of heresy"¹⁰ in exchange for protection from the violence spreading across France. Under extreme pressure, Henry IV did convert, but by this point his "faith had become his conviction...tempered now by his vivid experiences with the horrors of religious fanaticism."¹¹ His first abjuration was taken for wholly practical reasons and the circumstances surrounding it would influence Navarre's perception of religious conversion in his later life. Henry IV's reaction during his captivity and statements thereafter demonstrate the false nature of this first conversion. Yet even in their statement of abjuration, the young princes refused to cede their faith entirely to their captors. Instead, they "added a grim reminder of 'the fear...they...would have of the Holy Father's righteous wrath'"¹² had they not converted, a subtle stab at Henry III's power and threat of punishment. Such language emphasizes not only the duress under which their conversion took place, but also the bitterness the young men felt at being forced to abandon their religion.

⁹ Henri de Navarre's letter to Jeanne d'Albret, 1 March 1572, quoted in *Love Blood and Religion*: 49-50.

¹⁰ Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 63.

¹¹ *Love Blood and Religion*: 75.

¹² This was in reference to their praise of the King and Pope for supposedly enlightening them, thus suggesting that their fear was of the physical repercussion Henry III might have inflicted more than the wrath of God in light of their religious beliefs. Wolfe *The Conversion of Henry IV*: 27.

Despite Henry III's best efforts to convert Henry of Navarre in more than name, Navarre remained committed to the Calvinist cause. Once he escaped from court in February 1576, nearly four years after his forced abjuration,¹³ Navarre renounced the conversion, stating that the violence in Paris "had 'forced me to take... a religion for which I had wished neither by desire nor in my heart.'"¹⁴ While this demonstrated a clear commitment to his own Calvinist beliefs, Henry of Navarre's continued association with the Catholic nobility, many of whom would eventually "agree to commit themselves"¹⁵ to his cause, led to a strong distrust of Navarre by Huguenots. Once the heir apparent to the throne, the Duke of Alençon, died, Henry III plead Navarre to convert to Catholicism, but his supplications fell on deaf ears. The situation was such in France that both Henry III and Navarre stood to gain from Navarre's conversion; Henry III was threatened by the ultra-Catholic Guise faction, who opposed Navarre's position as heir, and Navarre stood to gain "Henri III's favour and readiness to join forces with Navarre"¹⁶ against the very group who so tormented his Huguenot fellows. Should Navarre convert, as Henry III asked, the King would secure a Catholic heir and Navarre would secure the protection of the crown for his people. Despite the advantages such an alliance might offer, Navarre responded to Henry III's envoys sent to encourage Navarre's conversion that "'it was unreasonable that [Navarre], who is a prince with a high opinion of himself and who believes that he has great resources both within and without the realm, should give up his religion on simple command of whoever it may be'"¹⁷, leading many contemporaries "to conclude that...the Calvinist monarch '[was] more Huguenot than ever.'"¹⁸ Yet Henry could still "not afford to offend irreparably the Valois

¹³ Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 75.

¹⁴ Henry IV's letter to the vicomte de Gourdon, 2 May 1576, quoted in Love *Blood and Religion*: 66.

¹⁵ Love *Blood and Religion*: 161.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁷ Henry IV's "Déclaration du Roy de Navarre contre les calomnies publiées contre lui" quoted in Love *Blood and Religion*: 121.

¹⁸ Love *Blood and Religion*: 121.

king...or the queen mother”¹⁹, so he refused radicalism and instead “solemnly reaffirmed his loyalty to the French Crown and offered his royal Catholic cousin aid”²⁰ in order to secure his position among both factions. Henry III’s best efforts to separate the Calvinist prince from his mothers’ religion, then, were futile: Navarre remained steadfast in the Reformed religion.

Upon the death of Henry III in 1589, who even on his deathbed “counseled [Henry of Navarre] to convert for the sake of his kingdom”²¹, and in the subsequent battle for the kingship of France, Henry IV refused a variety of invitations for abjuration. These continued refusals, even in the face of advantageous situations, can only represent Henry IV’s continued commitment to his religion. With the support of a not insignificant portion of the Catholic nobility of France, Henry IV managed to take the throne with only the promise of conversion, playing on “Catholic hopes that he might soon change confessions”²² and placating Loyalist fear through the twin Declarations of St. Cloud issued in August 1589, which swore to maintain Catholicism in France and confirmed the newly-crowned King’s “desire to seek religious instruction from a national church council,”²³ luring in Catholic loyalty with an abstract promise to receive the catechism.

Throughout the subsequent battle between Henry IV’s Loyalists and the Catholic League across France, the King’s theology is evident. Refusing to abjure by force, Henry IV instead “stressed blood over religion to preserve the integrity both of his royal authority and his private conscience...”²⁴ His persistent unwillingness to find time to receive the Catholic catechism, however, displeased the Loyalist faction who pressured him to convert. Despite the political

¹⁹ Love *Blood and Religion* 83.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

²¹ Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 142.

²² Wolfe *The Conversion of Henri IV*: 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁴ Love *Blood and Religion*: 271.

advantages it offered, the King's Calvinist faith remained too strong and he could not yet justify relinquishing the religion in which he truly believed. Henry IV's continued excuses can be seen to demonstrate the depth of his religious persuasion as instilled in him by d'Albret. Immediately after the Battle of Ivry in 1590²⁵, for example, Henry IV could easily have abjured without risking his reputation; indeed, "a conversion made from a position of great strength doubtless would have been interpreted as a gift to the nation rather than an act performed under duress."²⁶ It would appear, however, that Henry IV was not yet ready to abandon the Reformed faith, standing firmly by his faith until the final possible moment. In fact, Henry IV would continue to receive Calvinist ministry until July 1593, "two months after declaring his intention to convert."²⁷

When Henry IV did decide to convert in 1593, the very language of his abjuration demonstrated his political motivations rather than any deep-seated change in faith. The official abjuration stated that the King "desired in all conscience to be able to content his people,"²⁸ thus demonstrating his political aims. The abjuration further stated that through discussion with prominent Catholics he "had learned that [the differences between Calvinism and Catholicism] were rather matters of usage and practice than of doctrine."²⁹ Even in his abjuration, Henry IV refused to fully deny the religion on which he was raised, emphasizing instead Calvinism's similarities with Catholicism and his political aims over his personal faith, perhaps to placate his own doubt as much as to promote peace between the groups.

²⁵ Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 154.

²⁶ Love *Blood and Religion*: 185.

²⁷ *Ibid.*: 273.

²⁸ Henry IV, "The King's Abjuration, 23 July 1593" in *The French Wars of Religion: selected Documents*, ed. David Potter, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997): 231.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 231.

Yet the King's eventual decision to convert, however late it might have been, proves the primacy of Henry IV's moderate ideology and political goals over his deeply held theological beliefs. Henry IV cannot be convincingly shown to be anything other than strictly Calvinist, yet his decisions in regards to his rule were clearly motivated not only by his ability to moderate his own faith, but also on his understanding of the political situation in France.

After Ascendency: Henry IV's Balance of Politics and Theology

Even before 1589, when Henry IV became the heir apparent to the French throne, the nature of Henry IV's religious convictions and his moderate tendencies strongly affected how he ruled as King of Navarre and Bearn and how he managed his relations with Huguenot leaders. Having seen both in his personal life and in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre the dangers of fanaticism, Henry IV "consciously held himself aloof from the intense...religious extremism that characterized his ultra-Catholic enemy and zealous Calvinist"³⁰ brethren. In fact, before Henry III's death, Henry IV published a declaration to the people of Paris, including a portion to the clergy in which he stated: "We believe in one God, we acknowledge one Jesus Christ, and we draw upon the same Gospel. If in the interpretation of the same passages we have differed, I believe I...might bring us to agreement."³¹ The moderate nature of Henry IV's religious convictions, while not diluting the potency of his personal theology, certainly afforded him the luxury of political negotiation.

Henry IV was a shrewd politician and keenly understood how his actions would be seen by his own Huguenot and by both Loyalist and League-member Catholics. In 1589, Henry III encouraged Navarre to convert, supported by the Loyalist Catholic Sieur de Roquelaure who "urged Henri to go through with a public conversion to satisfy the Catholics, even if his

³⁰ Love *Blood and Religion*: 99.

³¹ Love *Blood and Religion*: 140.

conscience bade him otherwise.”³² Yet Henry IV would not do so, partially attributable to his continued hesitation to abandon his faith, but perhaps more importantly due to his understanding of the futility of an apparently empty conversion given the political atmosphere of France.³³ In his eventual declaration of intent of religion, Henry IV said that “...even had I become a Catholic at my accession to this crown, my people would not for that have had peace.”³⁴ Understanding the futility of such an act, Henry IV pursued a non-sectarian image for the subsequent fight against the League and insisted that his opposition submit before he abjure.

Henry IV’s moderate theological views and his political commitment to peace and tolerance strongly affected the laws and regulations he would make for, first, his personal territories and later for France. After his liberation from court, Navarre “deliberately enforced a policy of religious toleration throughout his gouvernement of Guyenne and his patrimonial domains of Bearn...[and] thereby guaranteed all of his subjects equal justice before the law and full freedom of conscience without distinction” making him the among the only religious or political leaders in France to truly advocate and act on their desires for tolerance.³⁵ Henry IV would continue this moderate leadership as he ascended the throne in 1589 through to his final conversion to Catholicism in 1593, maintaining his own religious convictions separate from his political aspirations. Due in large part to the King’s religious convictions and his political pragmatism, Henry IV’s reign in France would mark a time of unprecedented tolerance, characterized by his leniency towards both the militant Catholics and Huguenots.

³² Wolfe *The Conversion of Henri IV*: 47.

³³ As addressed previously, the experience of Henry IV’s father can be seen to have influenced this recalcitrance. Afraid of being branded an atheist or losing the respect of his people, Henry IV was hesitant to publically abandon his faith at the drop of a hat. Henry IV wanted, instead, to establish his authority before making the decision to convert, as he understood that the conversion would be an unfortunate necessity at some point and was simply seeking the opportune time to relinquish the faith he still professed.

³⁴ Henry IV “Henry IV’s declaration of intent on religion, April 1593” in *The French Wars of Religion: selected Documents*, ed. David Potter. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997).

³⁵ Love *Blood and Religion*: 102.

Theological Tolerance: The Edict of Nantes

Arguably the most significant act of his reign, Henry IV's Edict of Nantes, published in 1598, was a sincere attempt to establish peace in France and to broach a compromise between Catholics and Huguenots. In the document, one can see the influence of the King's true religious convictions. In fact, even many contemporaries were suspicious of Henry IV's motivation in regards to the Edict; the Cardinal de Medici wrote that Henry IV "spoke to me about an edict that is supposed to be published in favor of the heretics, excusing himself because he could not act otherwise."³⁶ The perception of Henry IV as having converted falsely cast doubt upon his motivation in creating the tenets of the Edict, perhaps rightly so. Yet having a crypto-Calvinist king would in fact lead France to peace.

Analyzing the Edict itself, one certainly finds evidence of Henry IV's leniency towards the Huguenots. After re-emphasizing the essential Catholicity of France, the Edict states that "we have permitted and do permit those of the so-called Reformed religion to live and dwell in all cities and places of this our kingdom and the lands of our obedience, without being...constrained to do anything with regard to religion contrary to their conscience..."³⁷ It further permits "all ... persons...the right of high justice within our kingdom", and gives Calvinists permission to exercise their religion in all Reformed cities and even to practice publically in non-Reformed cities at times.³⁸ Obligating Calvinists to respect Catholic feasts and certain social laws, limiting the Calvinists' ability to proselytize, and requiring them to pay tithes to the Catholic churches, Calvinists were otherwise granted freedom of conscience and, in many areas, freedom of public

³⁶ Cardinal de Medici letter to Pope Clement VIII, September 14, 1598, quoted in Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 204.

³⁷ "The Edict of Nantes With Its Secret Articles and Brevets" trans. Jotham Parsons in *The Edict of Nantes: five essays and a new translation*, ed. Richard L. Goodbar (Bloomington: The National Huguenot Society, 1998):43.

³⁸ "The Edict of Nantes With Its Secret Articles and Brevets" trans. Parsons in *The Edict of Nantes...* ed. Goodbar: 44.

worship.³⁹ Moreover, as part of the so-called “Secret Articles” to the Edict, Henry IV allowed “for those of the said religion living in the country to attend its exercise in the...other places where it shall be publicly established.”⁴⁰ Not only were Huguenots granted many French territories, they were permitted to practice privately in all of France—a significant right for the time.

While certainly not punishing the Catholics, who were awarded control of a significant amount of French territory and maintained superiority in many political affairs, the Edict was more lenient towards Huguenots than many Catholics desired. Henry IV’s true faith in the Reformed religion, despite his conversion, lurks behind the tenets of the Edict of Nantes. The purported goal of the document was peace, given that by 1598 Henry IV had reason to believe that foreign powers might encourage “...his Protestant subjects [to] sustain a renewed civil war.”⁴¹ Thus, Henry IV might have given such leniency to Huguenots to prevent further conflict, framing these concessions in terms of a general pacification in order to do so. Indeed, the tenets publically outlined in the Edict are demonstrative of Henry IV’s tradition of tolerance and moderation in political affairs. Having enforced freedom of conscience in his personal territories before 1589, Henry IV understood the value of such concessions for the continuation of peace. Yet the extent to which tolerance had to be granted in order to establish peace was certainly contested by his contemporaries who suspected that the king’s conversion was only skin-deep and thus believed these concessions to be motivated by his private faith.

The extent of the concessions given to Huguenots point to the idea that Henry IV’s lasting Calvinism pushed him to show more generosity towards the Reformed religionists than a

³⁹ The Edict of Nantes With Its Secret Articles and Brevets” trans. Parsons in *The Edict of Nantes...* ed. Goodbar: 45-48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴¹ Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 210.

King with a purely Catholic history might have done. Nowhere is this more evident than in Henry IV's "Brevet", the final addition to the Edict of Nantes. In it, Henry IV promised to the Huguenots "to aid them in meeting some great expense which they have to support" by giving to these leaders 45,000 ecus for "certain secret affairs which concern them which His Majesty does not wish to be specified or declared."⁴² Henry IV's willingness to provide such resources to those who were no longer his co-religionists and his unwillingness to reveal the reason for it, demonstrates more than political pragmatism, as the rest of the Edict had done. Where tolerance had proven practical and Henry IV could be seen to implement this in his kingdom in the primary portion of the document, this final addition is convincing evidence of Henry IV's continued preference for the Huguenots. Indeed, "this last concession... exposed Henri to the charge of endorsing a Huguenot 'state within a state'."⁴³ In effect, Henry IV's sense of pragmatism was a strong influence in his creation of an edict for the general pacification of France, but his faith influenced him in his provision to the Calvinists many more concessions than might have been necessary. The King's theology was more than just a source of conflict, it became a basis for policy in his reign.

Conclusion

Henry IV never vacillated in his Calvinist faith, despite multiple abjurations. Having been raised in a devout Calvinist household, Henry IV demonstrated throughout his young-adulthood a continued commitment to his religion, moving beyond filial dependence to a clearly deep-rooted personal ideology. This commitment influenced Henry IV's policies as King of France after 1593 even after his largely political conversion to Catholicism, as evidenced by the Edict of

⁴² "The Edict of Nantes With Its Secret Articles and Brevets" trans. Parsons in *The Edict of Nantes...* ed. Goodbar: 65.

⁴³ Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 211.

Nantes of 1598. The deep Calvinist faith Henry IV demonstrated until 1593 lends credence to the belief that such a faith would not be lost regardless of any official proclamation of religious intent. Instead, it is likely that Henry IV remained, in his heart, a Calvinist and ruled as such until his death in 1610.⁴⁴

This understanding must inform any analysis of the Edict of Nantes. Having a king who was, despite being nominally a Catholic, sympathetic to Calvinist ideology afforded the Huguenots significant benefits and while tolerance, certainly might have been the goal of any ruler, Henry IV's motivations can be seen to be at least partially religious. Indeed, the Brevet to the Edict of Nantes—which afforded potentially rebellious Huguenots with financial benefits rather than with punishment—demonstrates not only Henry IV's continued sympathy towards the so-called Reformed religion, but also the effects of having a crypto-Calvinist on the throne of France.

Due in part to Henry IV's pragmatism and in part to his personal faith, Henry IV's reign saw a temporary respite in religious conflict through the extension of religious tolerance to Huguenots. Significantly, the faith of the French King gave the Huguenots a political and religious advantage they would not have enjoyed otherwise. The case of Henry IV in the French Wars of Religion demonstrates clearly the influence a ruler's religion and personal ideology had on the affairs of their territory, dictating the ways in which the ruler would respond to his people and their demands.

⁴⁴ Pitt *Henri IV of France*: 318.

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