Religious Reform as Political Stability in France Under Henry IV and Louis XIV

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Politics and religion were closely intertwined in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France. The lives of French citizens hinged on the interplay between these two forces, as France was a Catholic state with a strongly allied monarchy and clergy. The spread of Protestant confessions throughout Europe beginning in 1517, following the Reformation, threatened the supremacy of Catholicism in France. The contrast between the religious policies of King Henry IV (1589-1610) and King Louis XIV (1643-1715) is highlighted in two significant pieces of religious legislation: The Edict of Nantes of 1598, and the Edict of Fontainebleau of 1685. These policies had vastly different implications for the Calvinists in France. While Henry IV encouraged Protestant reform, Louis XIV hindered it. The spread of religious reform was directly affected by the Crown's vested interest in maintaining stability within the state. The shift in Crown policy between the Edicts of Nantes and Fontainebleau illustrates that the disparity in the policies maintained the common goal of preventing dissent. Religious policy aimed to maintain control of religious factions, since religion was so closely bound to politics at this time. The King's rule was inherently tied to the legitimacy of the Catholic Church in France, given the Gallican tradition. The changes in state policy towards Protestant reform in France from 1598-1685 were therefore not driven by theology, but rather by the need for security of state and rule. Religious tolerance of Protestantism was a direct outcome of the state's perceived security, which had a direct effect on the lives of the Protestant Huguenots in France. Through analysis of the Edict of Nantes and the Edict of Fontainebleau, it becomes evident that changes in states policy towards Protestant reform in France were a product of the desire for political stability.

The Wars of Religion wracked France from 1562 until 1598, with intensely divisive infighting between Catholics and Protestants that posed a major threat to the stability of the state, including the security of King Henry IV's rule. Historian W.J. Stankiewicz argues that these wars were rooted in animosity between Catholics and Protestants following the spread of the Protestant Reformation to France.[1] Protestant confessions spread quickly throughout the sixteenth century, and by 1562, Calvinists made up one-tenth of the population.[2] The Huguenots tried to appeal to Gallicanism to win over the Crown, arguing that they would win France's liberty from the papacy. However, they were unable to convince the monarchy of the legitimacy or utility of Calvinism.[3] Increasing violence between Catholics and Protestants in the 1560s prompted Chancellor Michel de l'Hôpital to introduce temporary confessional coexistence to preserve peace within France.[4] Though it did not legitimize or justify the Protestant cause, this policy was a break from traditional Crown religious policies. However, temporary coexistence was necessitated by the threat of Christian factions to the security of the state. Instability severely threatened French society, exemplifying the absence of tolerance between religious factions. Calvinism was persistent and demanded attention from the Crown. There was a dire need to stabilize the rivalry and factionalism that threatened the state's security.

Henry IV's solution to the civil wars was the Edict of Nantes. It stipulated a tenuous peace on 13 April 1598, ending the Wars of Religion by alleviating internal pressures that weakened the state.[5] The Edict of Nantes addressed both Catholics and Protestants in order to provide a fundamental working relationship. By promoting toleration, the policy would allow

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1 Wladyslaw Jozef Stankiewicz, *Politics & Religion in Seventeenth-Century France: A Study of Political Ideas from the Monarchomachs to Bayle, as Reflected in the Toleration Controversy,* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1960) 19.
2 Joseph Bergin, *The Politics of Religion in Early Modern France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 23.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid., 24.
5 Ibid., 32.

France to recover from the internal divisions caused by confessionalization. The edict affirms that its main goal was to promote peace in the interest of preserving France as a state.[6] The Edict of Nantes simultaneously confirmed the centrality of Catholicism in France and the legality of Protestants as French citizens. The Huguenots were given full rights: protection from harassment; recognition as subjects of the King; right to titles, venal offices, and property; and freedom to construct places of worship. However, the Edict of Nantes also stipulated that church property previously seized by the Huguenots during the Wars of Religion was to be returned. This reinforced the predominance of Catholicism in France at the time. The edict formally addressed religious intolerance by insisting on *oubliance,* or amnesty, for both sides.[7] Historian Joseph Bergin argues that the conciliatory tone highlights the difficulty of constructing a general settlement without instigating another civil war.[8] This emphasizes the instability in France following the Wars of Religion, and the inability of the Crown to defeat the heretical Protestant movement on the battlefield. Instead, the Edict of Nantes was a diplomatic settlement that helped the spread of Protestant reform by legalizing and liberating the sect.

Though the Huguenots benefitted from the policy, the Edict of Nantes shows that Henry IV's aim was actually political stability. By creating a bilateral religious policy that promoted toleration, the edict of 1598 encouraged religious reform and a cohesive society. Though the spread of reform was inherent in the legalization of Calvinism, the main intent was not for a morally driven policy that would allow permanent legal recognition of Protestantism.[9] The provisions for religious tolerance were pragmatic: the main challenge facing Henry IV was

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6 Jotham Parsons, trans., "The Edict of Nantes," in *The Edict of Nantes: Five Essays and a New Translation,* ed. Richard Loewer Goodbar, (Bloomington, MN: National Huguenot Society, 1998), <http://www.huguenot-museum-germany.com/huguenots/edicts/01-edict-nantes-1598-english.pdf>, accessed 27 October 2016.
7Parsons, "The Edict of Nantes" pp.?.
8 Bergin, *The Politics of Religion*, 50.
9 Stankiewicz, *Politics and Religion*, 58.

rebuilding France. The fortified Huguenot towns directly challenged the state's authority, which was especially significant for Henry's weak government. Later referred to by Cardinal Richelieu as a "state within a state,"[10] the *places de sûreté* legitimized the Calvinist threat.[11] Allowing religious tolerance eased pressure on the Crown. The Edict of Nantes was thus based on fundamental concerns of political stability, which also happened to also promote the spread of Protestant reform in France.

Protestant reform was thus concurrently helped and hindered through Henry IV's policy. Though the Edict of Nantes brought about temporary religious freedom for the Huguenots, it also established the supremacy of Catholicism in the French state by declaring the return of traditionally Catholic land holdings.[12] Though they were free from harassment in designated areas, the Huguenots remained socially and legally inferior to Catholics. As historian K.P. Luria notes, reconciliation in the seventeenth century sense is not the same as the modern religious tolerance. Rather, tolerance had the negative connotation of a nuisance that could not be eradicated.[13] Religious toleration was unorthodox and uncommon in early modern France – Stankiewicz affirms that the Edict of Nantes was not demanded by the widely-held values of the time.[14] Henry IV's aim was, therefore, not the benevolent promotion of religious tolerance. The policy was intended to minimize stability concerns, and was not due to noble intentions to create equality between Catholics and Protestants. Instead, the Crown's concerns were temporal: promoting a laxer religious policy benefitted the French state as a whole. Protestant reform was a result of religious tolerance encouraged by the Edict of Nantes.

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[10] Bergin, *The Politics of Religion*, 52.
[11] Stankiewicz, *Politics and Religion*, 59.
[12] Ibid., 60-61.
[13] Keith P. Luria, "France: An Overview," in *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World*, edited by Thomas Max Safely, 209-38. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 238.
[14] Stankiewicz, *Politics and Religion*, 7.

When religious freedom no longer addressed the King's concerns of stability within the state, it was no longer useful. Thus, the Crown's approach to religious policy changed in accordance with its political ideology in order to best suit the state's demand for stability. Cardinal Richelieu became King Louis XIII's chief minister in 1624, adopting more conservative policies that began to guide the Crown towards absolutism.[15] Richelieu's aim was to centralize and eradicate any opposition outside of the Crown's control. Centralizing the state's power demanded a uniform populace that obeyed the official doctrine of the Crown. Stankiewicz argues the Huguenot's reliance on the strongholds and feudal castles bound the Edict of Nantes to fail.[16] Protestantism relied on feudal establishments and the aristocracy, which were antagonistic to absolutism. The shift towards absolutist policies continued through the policies of Cardinal Mazarin, who served as chief minister of France from 1642 until his death in 1661.[17] Since the state was ambivalent about pursuing inherently just policies, it seems inevitable that the spread of Protestant reform had to be quelled to best suit the King's absolutist agenda. The Protestant strongholds that had been secured through the Edict of Nantes posed a major concern to the centralized nature of an absolute monarchy, and thus had to be eliminated.

While Henry IV's conciliatory Edict of Nantes enabled the spread of Protestant reform, Louis XIV's absolutist domestic policies intentionally hindered it. Louis XIV ruled France from 1643 until his death in 1715, and was a major proponent of a centralized monarchy. Louis XIV saw any force that decentralized his power as a threat to the stability of the French state as a whole.[18] So, absolutism would secure a strong state by combating Protestant heresy.[19] However,

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15 Stankiewicz, *Politics and Religion*,., 92.
16 Ibid., 110.
17 Ibid., 141.
18 Louis O'Brien, *Innocent XI and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (Berkeley, CA: Columbia University Press, 1930), 9.
19 Stankiewicz, *Politics and Religion*, 166.

Protestant reform was not the only religious reform prevented by Louis XIV: the spread of unorthodox Catholic reform was also hindered in the mid-seventeenth century. Mazarin combatted the political and decentralizing power of Jansenism, a sect that was deemed heretical by the Crown and the Catholic Church[20]. In 1661, the anti-Jansenist Act of the Assembly officially outlawed Jansenism in France.[21] This legislation illustrates the Crown's opposition to any branch of religion that did not fit with its official orthodox stance. Though the Crown was more biased in favour of Catholicism, reform on either side was not tolerated as it threatened the monarchy. Any challenge to the pre-existing balance of religion was a danger to the position of the Crown, and thus compromised the stability of the state. In February of 1665, Louis XIV made apparent his intention to unify all subjects of France under Catholicism.[22] This proclamation supports the conjecture that religious policies were rooted in pragmatism; Louis XIV perceived the most beneficial policy as one which inspired stability through uniformity. Stankiewicz highlights the general anxiety within France from 1665, concerned that there was a lack of direction within the still-factionalized country following the issue of the Fronde and the ongoing external wars.[23] In this context of uncertainty, Louis XIV issued the Edict of Fontainebleau on 22 October 1685, officially revoking the Edict of Nantes.[24]

The Edict of Fontainebleau stipulated the renunciation of all articles of the Edict of Nantes, once again making Protestantism illegal in France. The revocation of Protestant rights was disingenuously justified on the basis that the kingdom of France was stable and had no remaining Protestants. The Edict of Nantes was therefore redundant and there was no need to

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20 Stankiewicz, *Politics and Religion*., 150.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 184.
23 Ibid., 173.
24 Luria, "France," 223.

maintain it.[25] Moreover, the Edict of Fontainebleau argued that the lack of stability in the state between 1635 and 1684 forced the Crown to reduce the number of places of worship for Protestants.[26] All Huguenot temples were to be razed, and all ministers who did not convert to Catholicism were given two weeks to leave France.[27] Private schools were outlawed, and Huguenots were banned from leaving the country, or they would face severe punishment if caught.[28] Finally, all Huguenots were granted liberty so long as they did not practice their faith.[29] However, the intensity of persecutions and forced conversions increased after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes.[30] As a blatant retraction of all freedoms previously afforded to the Protestants, the Edict of Fontainebleau clearly hindered the spread of Protestant reform by making the sect illegal.

The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes can be framed as necessary for French society at the time, but this would undermine the role of the French clergy. Stankiewicz highlights that Louis XIV followed the religious policy guidelines set out by the church, increasing his absolute rule.[31] Furthermore, Stankiewicz asserts that the clergy was the driving force behind all actions against the Protestants, claiming that this is supported by both Huguenot and Catholic contemporary views.[32] Thus, Stankiewicz removes agency from Louis XIV and re-appropriates blame upon the clergy for pressuring and misleading the King, who did not have a grand plan, but rather followed the advice of his advisers.[33] The question of whether rulers helped or

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25 James Harvey Robinson, trans. "The Edict of Fontainebleau," in *Readings in European History: A Collection of Extracts from the Sources Chosen With the Purpose of Illustrating the Progress of Culture in Western Europe since the German Invasions* (Boston, NY: Ginn and Co., 1906), 287.
26 Ibid., 288.
27 Ibid., 289.
28 Ibid., 290.
29 Ibid., 291.
30 Stankiewicz, *Religion and Politics*, 179.
31 Ibid., 181.
32 Ibid., 184.
33 Ibid., 172.

hindered the spread of religious reform assumes that rulers acted in isolation of political pressure and current events. Stankiewicz makes an interesting point that there were various actors that had a stake in the helping or hindering of religious reform, and the ruler in question did not act in a vacuum. In Louis XIV's France, staunching Protestant reform was viewed as integral to internal security, which prompted the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Louis XIV benefitted from cooperating with the clergy, which in turn strengthened France through political and financial support. A clergy that was aligned with the Crown created a united front for the populace, making it easier to garner homogenous support for the state, albeit at the expense of the Huguenots.

Similar to Stankiewicz, Elizabeth Israels Perry blames the Catholic clergy and theologians for the marginalization of the Huguenots in France under the Edict of Fontainebleau. However, her argument is based more on *ad hominem* attacks on Catholics rather than the context of the state's need for stability. Perry blames the Catholics for the civil wars, and portrays the Huguenots as external to French society.[34] This point is challenged by the Wars of Religion – as civil wars, the two sides of the conflict encompassed French citizens who disagreed about religion, not a peripheral group trying to insert itself into society. Stankiewicz provides a more balanced analysis in which he views both the Protestant and Catholic sides as guilty of internal conflict, while recognizing that the reformation bred cyclical violence and intolerance on both sides. Perry's analysis is therefore less useful in demonstrating how rulers helped or hindered Protestant reform, because she largely focuses on criticizing the clergy and theologians, rather than expanding upon how the doctrinal debates affected wider French society at the time.

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34 Elisabeth Israels Perry, *From Theology to History: French Religious Controversy and the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1973), 6.

Joseph Bergin highlights the revival of Calvinism in the eighteenth century to support his conjecture that the revocation of the Edict of Nantes was not successful in permanently abating Protestantism in France. Antoine Court was a key figure in the revival of Calvinism in France, illustrating that the Edict of Fontainebleau failed to permanently discourage Protestant reform.[35] The Protestant renaissance in France proves that Louis XIV only temporarily hindered the spread of Protestant reform. Moreover, it supports the notion that there was no overarching religious policy that successfully assured stability in early modern France. Rather, religious policy had to be adapted to the prescribed circumstances. The Protestant movement was ready to mobilize, demonstrating that there was lingering instability and demand for religious freedom in France that prevented a completely absolutist government.

Though the nuances of the social and political challenges faced by Henry IV and Louis XIV differed, there were various similarities between their approaches to religious policy. Both rulers were mainly concerned with the promotion of stability in France, as opposed to advancing high-minded ideals. Additionally, both kings had the challenge of promoting peace in the face of instability. Henry IV faced the destabilizing effects of the Wars of Religion, and Louis XIV dealt with external wars and increasing pressure from the Gallican clergy. The internal security of the state depended on maintaining the status quo: the Edict of Nantes and the Edict of Fontainebleau both encouraged the centrality of Catholicism as the official religion of France. This assured the monarchy, clergy, and Catholic majority in France that their interests were protected. A secure government thereby provided a foundation for a secure society, albeit at the expense of the Protestants. The maintenance of orthodox Catholicism promoted stability of the King's reign and discouraged dissent against France's founding institutions.

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35 Bergin, *The Politics of Religion*, 276.

While the motivations behind the Edicts of Nantes and Fontainebleau were similar, the policies had different implications for Protestants. The former promoted Protestant reform by allowing religious freedom, whereas the latter hindered reform by making Calvinism illegal in France. This can largely be explained by the demands of French society at the time. Henry IV headed a vulnerable and weak government following the Wars of Religion, which demanded a policy of tolerance to prevent further civil war. Louis XIV spearheaded an absolutist movement that began with Cardinal Richelieu and was pushed further by a Gallican clergy. Contextual concerns were the main source of discrepancy in how the state treated Protestant reform. Henry IV's France benefitted from the cooperation of Catholic and Calvinists, because it allowed France to recover and established peace through tolerance. Louis XIV's France relied not on cooperation between sects, but rather a strong government that created uniformity amongst its subjects. Cooperation was more conducive to religious reform than religious homogeneity, though both approaches to religious policy were justified as the most effective method of stabilizing the state.

The symbiotic nature of politics and religion in France under Henry IV and Louis XIV was key in creating the Edict of Nantes and the subsequent Edict of Fontainebleau. Both rulers aimed to establish internal stability in their respective French societies. Though they faced different challenges, Henry IV and Louis XIV used political policies that helped or hindered the proliferation of religious reform in order to counteract opposing sources of power. Both kings' policies were products of the political strategies that were believed to be best suited their respective contexts. However, the religious policies were created to benefit the King, rather than out of concern for his subjects. Ultimately, the shift in tolerant religious policy between Henry IV and Louis XIV illustrates the lack of a comprehensive overarching religious ideology. Rulers

had to adapt to changing circumstances in order to maintain internal stability. Henry IV and Louis XIV both acted depending on the perceived needs of the state at the time, which yielded starkly different policies towards religious tolerance and the subsequent spread of religious reform.

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