CHAPTER IX

THE REFORMATION AND THE CIVIL WARS IN FRANCE

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SOURCE READINGS: TRANSLATIONS AND REPRINTS, University of Pennsylvania, Vol. III., No. 3 (Death of Coligny, Edict of Nantes, etc.); ROBINSON, Readings, Vol. II., Chapter XXVIII. (St. Bartholomew, Edict of Nantes).

The wars of France and Spain over Italy.

WE have already examined the monarchy of France with a view to acquainting ourselves with its internal position and its international policy at the beginning of the Modern Period. We have seen that the king's power was very extensive, because he had a revenue which was independent of the meeting of his estates, and which he could use, if he pleased, to keep an army dependent on himself alone. Encouraged by their splendid position, the kings aspired to play a great rôle and attempted to conquer Italy. Charles VIII. inaugurated this adventurous policy with the famous invasion of 1494, did some local mischief, and retired much as he had come. He had, however, accomplished one thing heavy with consequences; he had aroused the jealousy of Spain. From this moment began the struggle between

France and Spain for the possession of Italy, that filled Europe with wars and rumors of wars for the next half century. We have seen that Charles VIII. was baffled; his successor, Louis XII., began auspiciously, but his successes, too, passed away like vapor. Francis I., on his accession in 1515, returned once more to the assault, occupied Milan after the victory of Marignano, and held it for some years. But his history is a repetition of the fate of his predecessors. Spain would not hear of sharing Italy with another power, and at the battle of Pavia (1525), where Francis himself was captured, raised her banner over Lombardy. Again and again Francis renewed the war, like a man held by a spell; but he was no match for the steady, ponderous policy of his adversary, Charles V. The Spanish conquest of Italy was slow but irresistible, and when Francis died in 1547 it looked like an accomplished fact. Wearisome and apparently unprofitable as the long conflict with Charles V. was, it had one feature redounding to the French king's honor, for without the stubborn fight made by Francis, Europe might have fallen under the dominion of the powerful emperor. However complete his victories in Italy and the Netherlands were, Charles discovered that the resistance to him stiffened the moment he entered French territory. France and its king were capable of sudden heroism when it was a question of maintaining the integrity of the nation, and by vigorously upholding France they indirectly saved all Europe from subjection.

Victory inclines toward Spain.

Attitude of Francis toward the Reformation.

Of equal importance with the Italian wars is the question of the Reformation and the course it took during the reign of Francis. Naturally, France could not avoid being affected by so universal a movement, and, naturally, the attitude toward it of a king so nearly absolute was of the highest consequence to its progress. Francis was a product of that worldlier Renaissance which arrived at its best ex-

pression in Italy in a brilliant reign of art and letters. For the more austere side of the movement which found vent, especially in the north, in the desire for a nobler religious life, he had little understanding. His early plunge into Italian life emphasized his natural bent. What he saw in the peninsula fascinated him, the social refinement, the luxury of dress and dwelling, the literature and art. He cultivated the friendship of the great painters—Leonardo da Vinci, Michael Angelo, Titian, Andrea del Sarto—and rejoiced not a little when he succeeded in carrying some of them away to his own France. Occupied with such interests, religious and dogmatic quarrels were not likely to touch him very closely, and he would incline on the whole to let them alone. This course the king pursued until he made the disconcerting discovery that the religious agitations had a political side and were involving him in difficulties with the Pope and the rigid Catholic element of his people. Then he struck at the reformers, not from religious enthusiasm, it will be observed, but from what he set down as reasons of state.

Humanism and reform.

The Reformation in France, as everywhere else, started from small beginnings. Humanism had spread a vague longing for the reform of life in state and Church, and at the opening of the sixteenth century certain select spirits began definitely to formulate their protest against existing conditions. The leader in the humanistic circle was Jacques Lefèvre. As early as 1512 he translated St. Paul's Epistles, deriving from them that doctrine of justification by faith which under the strong championship of Luther became the very cornerstone of Protestantism. When one of Lefèvre's pupils became bishop of Meaux, he summoned his old master and other kindred spirits about him, and with their help made the town of Meaux the centre of the new religious spirit and the diocese of Meaux its seed-bed. When

Luther's writings began to appear, the circle at Meaux was far from receiving them unconditionally, but was in general not displeased at the assault made upon the stolid self-satisfaction of Rome. Daily the partisans of reform grew, especially, it would seem, among the artisan class. But that the upper class was not left entirely unaffected is proved by the case of Queen Margaret of Navarre, the sister of Francis I., who, although she never formally separated from the old Church, became the friend and patron of the men who propagated the new ideas. Her attitude, vacillating between the old and the new, but not definitely committed to either, is typical of many people in France during the next generation.

Queen Margaret of Navarre.

From the first the theological faculty of the University of Paris, which was known under the name Sorbonne, and which had enjoyed an immense reputation in the Middle Ages, undertook to combat the movement of reform in France. The learned doctors prided themselves on their orthodoxy and raised a great outcry over the spread of heretical ideas. Nevertheless, their opposition was not likely to count for much, unless they could make the king act in their interest. That proved difficult, owing to the tolerance of Francis, until the disastrous battle of Pavia (1525) made him a prisoner and reduced the country to serious straits. The mother of Francis, Louise of Savoy, who acted as regent during his captivity, was ready to go down on her knees for help to almost anybody, and when she discovered that she could have the support of the Catholic clergy only at the cost of persecution, she consented. Francis on his return from Madrid quashed the heretical proceedings for a while, but as his need of ecclesiastical support continued, he saw himself obliged before long to return to the policy of repression. It was in one of these periods of persecution, in 1533, that there was banished from

Orthodoxy intrenched in the Sorbonne.

Francis becomes a persecutor.

France a young man who was destined to make the world resound with his name—John Calvin. In this way, urged on by the Pope, whose alliance he needed, or by the Church of France, whose money and influence were essential to his plans, he drifted into a policy of persecution. Before he died his measures had acquired a severity that might have won the applause of Loyola and his newly formed order of Jesuits. The climax was reached in the famous Waldensian Massacre. The Waldenses were a simple and thrifty peasant people, who dwelt among the western Alps, and who, because they were half-forgotten in their remote valleys, had remained in undisturbed possession of certain doctrines spread by one Peter Waldo back in the twelfth century and condemned as heretical. The Roman intolerance of the sixteenth century found them out, and the king, yielding at last to the long-continued pressure, signed the order for their extermination. In 1545 the snow-capped mountains of the Alps witnessed a terrible scene. Three thousand helpless souls were massacred, hundreds were dragged from their homes to wear out their lives in the galleys, and many other hundreds were driven into exile.

The Waldensian Massacre, 1545.

Francis was succeeded by Henry II. (1547–59) who had little in common with his courtly, affable, and somewhat frivolous predecessor. If Francis persecuted from political necessity, Henry did so from deliberate preference. He had a sombre streak in his character, indicative of the shadow which the approaching Catholic reaction was casting before. On the day of his coronation he said to a high French prelate that he would make it a point of honor to exterminate from his kingdom all whom the Church denounced. This promise he took seriously, laboring without rest to uproot heresy from his realm. He even had the desire to establish the Inquisition with its vigorous machinery of courts, prisons, and police. But here he met with opposition from the Parliaments. Heresy had hitherto belonged to their jurisdiction, and they did not care to have their power clipped for the advantage of the clergy. Therefore the Inquisition, technically speaking, never was admitted into France; but the Parliaments, urged on by the zealous king, did such cruel work in condemning Protestants to death and confiscating the property of suspected persons, that it is hard to see how the Inquisition could have done more. But cruelty was of no avail. Protestant opinions continued to circulate, spreading chiefly from Geneva, where the exiled Calvin had by this time established his Reformed Church, and before Henry died several dozen congregations had sprung into existence, which, like the early Christians, conducted forbidden worship in garrets and cellars in the perpetual shadow of annihilation.

The persecution of Henry II.

Persecution in hands of the regular courts of law.

If Henry was largely occupied with the persecution of the Protestants, who stubbornly refused to be exterminated, he did not, therefore, neglect the foreign interests of France. As the heir of his predecessors he found himself involved in a sharp rivalry with Spain. The chief object of that rivalry had been Italy, and the matter, when brought to the issue of arms, had been decided again and again in favor of Spain. At the time of Henry's accession Italy was seemingly secure in the hands of the victor, but that did not keep Henry, with a resolution more bold than discreet, from challenging the fact. That he gained no more than his predecessors we have seen in Chapter VI, for he was obliged to sign with Spain the Peace of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559), which was in substance a complete renunciation of the claims of his house to a position in Italy. But the Spanish wars of Henry's time were, nevertheless, not so entirely unp ofitable for France as the long struggle of his father had been. When in 1552 the German Protestants, inspired and led by Maurice of Saxony, rose against Charles V., Henry II., in return for

Henry and the enmity with Spain.

Territorial successes of Henry.

his alliance with the princes, was permitted to occupy the three border bishoprics of the empire, Metz, Toul, and Verdun; and when in 1557 and 1558 Philip II. defeated the French at St. Quentin and Gravelines, the duke of Guise retaliated by suddenly pouncing upon and seizing from the English, who were the allies of Philip, the port of Calais. The sum of Henry's wars is that by the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis the French definitely abandoned Italy, but adopted in its place, as is shown by the acquisition of the three bishoprics and of Calais, a policy of expansion upon their eastern and northern frontier. This was a much more natural ambition for the sovereign of a country situated like France, and set a precedent which had an important effect on Henry's successors. With his death the kingdom fell for a while into an eclipse through civil dissensions, but when it recovered, it undertook to push out its border to the east and north. In consequence of this diversion of French ambition the rivalry with Spain tended to fall into abeyance, and in its place arose the rivalry with the country most directly threatened by the change of direction in the French advance—Germany.

Henry gives French ambition a new direction.

When Henry signed the Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis, it was with the clear consciousness that it was necessary for all foreign wars to cease until the matter which was every day becoming more pressing and more baffling, namely, the spread of Protestant opinion, had been attended to. In league with Philip he designed to extirpate heresy, root and branch. The new alliance was signalized by the marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to the Spanish king. At a tournament which was a feature of the prolonged celebration, Henry rode into the lists against the captain of his guard. A chance splinter from his antagonist's lance entered his eye, and he died before he could realize his dream of purging his realm of the Protestant infection.

Death of Henry, 1559.

Until this time the Protestants of France had suffered their persecutions in patience. But now the time came when they organized themselves more perfectly and offered resistance to their oppressors. This was no more than happened everywhere, for the intolerance of the dominant religion looked upon every rival faith as wrong and pernicious, and hence insisted on its suppression, if necessary, by the sword. The result of Protestant resistance was a long civil war, in which became involved other issues besides the initial one of religion. The reader will recall a similar confusion of issues in Germany and England. When in 1546 civil war broke out between the German Protestants and the emperor, Maurice of Saxony used the opportunity to advance his own fortunes in the world; and when in 1553 Edward VI. died, the duke of Northumberland, on the plea of religion, tried to put his own daughter-in-law, the Lady Jane Grey, upon the English throne. The inference to be drawn from these examples is that many mean, sordid, and personal interests are likely to intrude themselves into every religious struggle in order to fight for their own ends under the mask of religion. We shall presently meet this deplorable mixture of religious and selfish motives in the civil wars of France.

Protestantism makes a fight for its life.

At the death of Henry, his son Francis, who was but sixteen years old, and physically and mentally feeble, succeeded to the throne. When the power in an absolute monarchy such as France practically was at this time is not exercised by the sovereign, it is inevitably seized by some ambitious man or faction. The conditions in the court which surrounded the boy king have therefore an unusual interest.

Francis II.

The wife of the feeble Francis was a queen in her own right, Mary of Scotland. Although a woman of parts, she was of her husband's age and too inexperienced to assume

Queen Mary and the Guises.

control in his name. Her presence on the throne, however, offered an opportunity for the ambition of her two uncles, brothers of her mother and heads of the great House of Guise. The older was Francis, duke of Guise; the younger was a churchman, Cardinal Lorraine. They seized the reins, and because they were ardent Catholics continued Henry II.'s policy of Protestant persecution.

The Bourbons.

There were those, however, who looked with jealousy upon the rule of the Guises and called it usurpation. They were the princes of the House of Bourbon, a younger branch of the royal family. The head of the house was sovereign of what was left of the kingdom of Navarre in the Pyrenees and was known as King Anthony. The younger was Louis, prince of Condé. They contended that, as princes of the blood royal, they had a better right to rule for the feeble king than the family of Guise, and naturally everybody at court who had a grudge against the Guises came to their support. Thus the Bourbon princes headed a party of "malcontents," who were ready to seize every opportunity to rid themselves of their rivals. In casting about they could not but observe that the Guises were also hated by the Protestants whom they persecuted. Out of this common enmity there soon grew an intimacy and an alliance. Anthony in a faithless, vacillating manner, Condé more firmly, accepted the Reformed faith, and many of the "malcontents"—high-placed courtiers and noblemen for the most part—following their example, it came to pass that French Protestantism became inextricably involved with political intrigue. It was at this period that the party name of Huguenots, a term of uncertain and disputed origin, was fixed upon the French Protestants.[1]

Alliance of Bourbons and Protestants.

Catherine de' Medici, the queen-mother.

Between the rival court factions of Bourbon and Guise,

[1] The most probable hypothesis is that Huguenot is a corruption of the German word *Eidgenossen*, a name applied to the Swiss Confederation.

and belonging to neither, stood a person not highly regarded at first, but destined to become famous—Catherine de' Medici. She was a Florentine princess, widow of Henry II. and mother of the young king. Protestant contemporaries came to look upon her as an incarnate fiend, but one of her chief antagonists, who afterward became King Henry IV. of France, judged her more leniently and correctly. He once silenced an over-harsh critic by asking what was she to do, an anxious mother, torn hither and thither by the fiercest of party feuds, and with no adviser on whom she could rely. In this apology of the great king lies probably the key to Catherine's career. She was, above all, a mother, mother of royal children, for whom she desired to preserve the throne of France. Doubtless, too, after she had once tasted the sweets of power, she clung to them with selfish tenacity as men and women will. Armed only with her woman's wit she plunged into the conflict of parties, and like other rulers of her time intrigued, bribed, and prevaricated to keep herself afloat. Thus she might even lay claim to our regard if her shifty policy had not involved her in one act which must forever smirch her name. We shall see that she was largely responsible for the Massacre of St. Bartholomew.

The troubles begin.

Out of these factions around the throne grew the intrigues which led to the long religious wars in France. It is needless to try to put the blame for them on one or the other side. Given a weakened royal executive, the implacable religious temper which marks the society of the sixteenth century, and a horde of powerful, turbulent, and greedy nobles, and civil war is a necessary consequence. We can notice only the more prominent symptoms of the coming outbreak. The path of the Guises was beset with conspiracies, instigated or connived at by the Bourbon princes. But they managed to keep the upper hand. On one occasion, at Amboise in 1560, they took a direful vengeance upon

Conspiracy of Amboise, 1560.

their adversaries, the Huguenots and "malcontents," by hanging groups of them to the battlements of the king's castle at Amboise and drowning others in the Loire.

Death of Francis, December, 1560.

But their downfall was at hand. In December, 1560, the boy king Francis died, and his widow Mary, finding her rôle in France exhausted, prepared to leave for Scotland. Thus the props upon which the power of the Guises depended broke under them. The successor of Francis was his brother Charles IX., a weakling and a minor, who was but ten years old. King Anthony of Navarre, as nearest of kin, might have put forward a claim to the regency, but peevishly yielded the honor to the queen-mother. Catherine, therefore, for the first time held the reins of power. Desirous, above all, of maintaining her son's authority, and filled with the sense of the difficulty of her position between Guise and Bourbon, she hit upon a policy of balance and moderation, called representatives of both hostile factions into her council, and published an Edict of Toleration, the first issued in France, granting to the Huguenots a limited right of worship. Here was a decided change of policy, exhibiting Catherine in the light of a promoter of the cause of religious liberty. But her good intentions came to naught, were bound to come to naught among men who, like the Protestants and Catholics of the sixteenth century, were passionately set on realizing their own religious system without the abatement of one jot or tittle. While the Catholics were imbittered by the extent of Catherine's concessions, the Protestants grumbled at the remaining limitations, and among the more fanatical followers of the two parties, sometimes without provocation, there occurred sharp conflicts, frequently ending in terrible excesses.

Catherine in control.

Catherine resolves on toleration.

The Massacre of Vassy, 1562.

One of these conflicts, the Massacre of Vassy (1562), put an end to hesitation and led to war. The duke of Guise was passing through the country with a company of armed

retainers, when he happened, at Vassy, upon a group of Huguenots, assembled in a barn for worship. Sharp words led to an encounter, and before the duke rode away sixty persons lay dead upon the ground and more than two hundred had been wounded. Fierce indignation seized the Protestants throughout France, and when the duke of Guise was received by the Catholics of Paris like a hero returning from successful war, and Catherine declared herself unable to call him to account, Condé issued an appeal and took the field.

Character of the war.

Thus were inaugurated the religious wars of France, which were not brought to a conclusion until 1598, by the Edict of Nantes, and which in their consequences continued to trouble the country well into the next century. For our purpose it is sufficient to look upon the period from 1562 to 1598 as one war, though it is true that there were frequent suspensions of arms, supporting themselves upon sham truces and dishonest treaties.[1] The war, like all the religious wars of the century, was waged with inhuman barbarity, and conflagration, pillage, massacre, and assassination blot every stage of its progress. Protestants and Catholics alike became brutes, and vied with each other in their efforts to turn their country into a desert.

The Peace of St. Germain.

When the Treaty of St. Germain (1570), granting the Protestants the largest toleration which they had yet enjoyed, temporarily closed the chapter of conflicts, many of the original leaders had passed away. King Anthony of Navarre had been killed in battle against his former friends, the Huguenots, whom he had basely deserted (1562); the duke of Guise had been assassinated (1563); and Condé

[1] Eight wars have been distinguished as follows: First war, 1562–63; second war, 1567–68; third war, 1568–70 (ended by the Peace of St. Germain); fourth war, 1572–73; fifth war, 1574–76; sixth war, 1577; seventh war, 1579–80; eighth war (called the War of the Three Henries), 1585–89, which continued in another form until the Edict of Nantes (1598).