

Kevin Gould. *Catholic Activism in South-West France, 1540–1570*. St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2006. viii + 190 pp. index. bibl. \$99.95. ISBN: 0–7546–5226–2.

Few scholars have studied mid-sixteenth-century France, preferring the more “glamorous” periods of the French Renaissance or Religious Wars. Nowhere has

this been more true than in the study of religious tensions that developed between Catholics and Protestants in the three decades before the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572. Scholars have written numerous articles about religion in this period on specific cities in France, but very few book-length studies have appeared. Kevin Gould takes a large step in rectifying this gap with his revisionist monograph on Catholic activism in southwestern France, an area that became a hotbed of Protestant activity and which saw the highest incidents of violence against Catholic churchmen in the mid-sixteenth century.

Gould challenges the standard view that "pre-League Catholic bodies . . . [were] anything other than disparate, localized entities" (5). In his detailed study of Bordeaux, Agen, and Toulouse, he examines Catholic militancy from a very early date, showing that it was far more organized and effective than previously was assumed. Different social classes as well as both formal and informal political groups within cities worked together to meet the perceived threats. In addition, there was a surprising degree of regional cooperation that in many cases was able to subdue or control Calvinist incursions and activities. The resulting associations were, unlike elsewhere in France, not tied to either the Guise family or any other noble potentates; their effectiveness resulted from their solidarity in facing each new threat. After religious clashes and iconoclasm in the 1540s through the 1560s, Catholics in all three areas formed confederations and *syndicats* of officials, engaging local nobles in their counteroffensive. A key figure in standing firm for Catholicism and yet maintaining relative calm was Blaise de Monluc, "who unified the clergy, nobility and magistrates . . . and who inspired the new ethos of collective action" (108). Catholics in the southwest increasingly had to face opponents on two fronts: not only the Calvinists who challenged their beliefs and attacked churches but also the monarchy that sought to enforce edicts of toleration in the 1560s. By 1568, the Catholic leaders in Toulouse, so alarmed by the diversity of religion, from which they believed only schism, division, and contradiction would result, called for a crusade against the "heretics." As Gould summarizes, "Catholics were no longer prepared to sit and wait to be assailed; they were now prepared to seize the initiative and take the fight to subversive forces within, and without, society" (142). The situation in the southwest was additionally complicated by the nearby presence of Queen Jeanne d'Albret of Navarre, who supported Protestants, and The Most Catholic King of Spain, Philip II. Catholics needed to balance their own need for regional security against threats from both inside and outside, including the French crown.

Gould shows through detailed studies of these three southwestern cities and their hinterlands that it was the policy of Catholic leadership, unity, and organized networks in the period leading up to and during the first religious wars that allowed Catholicism to maintain its strength in a region of deep confessional divisions. He argues that in view of the lack of any royal strategy for the southwest, "[t]he multifaceted nature of Catholic militancy was fundamental to these [Catholic] successes" (160).

*Catholic Activism* is a brilliantly researched and well-written book that breaks new ground in our understanding of local and regional strategies prior to and during the Wars of Religion. Challenging the standard view that pre-League Catholic efforts were scattered and unorganized, Gould provides detailed and persuasive evidence that the surprising unity of disparate elements “first [enabled] the defence of the towns, then the consolidation of power, then the formation of a counter-offensive” (165). Far from the center of power, the Catholics of the southwest had to find their own way to survive in order to save their beliefs and practices. This book should be mandatory reading for all scholars of sixteenth-century religious history.

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