

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Burning Zeal: The Rhetoric of Martyrdom and the Protestant Community in Reformation France, 1520–1570. By **Nikki Shepardson**. Bethlehem, Pa.: Lehigh University Press, 2007. 208 pp. \$44.50 cloth.

Catholic Activism in South-West France, 1540–1570. By **Kevin Gould**. St. Andrew's Studies in Reformation History. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006. viii +199 pp. \$99.95 cloth.

Local Politics in the French Wars of Religion: The Towns of Champagne, the Duc de Guise, and the Catholic League, 1560–95. By **Mark W. Konnert**. St. Andrew's Studies in Reformation History. Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2006. x+309 pp. \$120.00 cloth.

The three books under review here share the common aim of deepening our understanding of the religious divisions and militant faith that led France into decades of civil war during the second half of the sixteenth century. Nikki Shepardson's *Burning Zeal* addresses the rhetoric of martyrdom employed by French Calvinists to forge a community of believers strong enough to surmount the persecution intended to destroy French Protestantism at its roots. By contrast, Kevin Gould's *Catholic Activism in South-West France* deals less with rhetoric than with deeds and examines the formation of militantly anti-Protestant alliances in the major cities of Guyenne and Languedoc before and during the first religious wars. Mark Konnert's *Local Politics in the French Wars of Religion* also deals primarily with deeds as it attempts to untangle the complicated politics of factional affiliation in the towns of Champagne during the period when the Wars of Religion radicalized and a Holy League headed by the province's leading family, the Guises, placed itself in more and more overt opposition to the policies of compromise adopted by the Crown. Each of the books thus asks not how people decided their fundamental religious beliefs and confessional allegiances but rather how they decided whether publicly to proclaim this allegiance and how far to carry it when life and livelihood were at risk. For Shepardson, the fundamental question is why—and how—French Protestants were encouraged to accept persecution, even at the price of their lives, and to testify to their faith by their deaths. For Gould, it is why—and

how—some French Catholics came forward early in organized opposition to Protestant initiatives that they thought the Crown was doing too little to repress. For Konnert, somewhat surprisingly, since his book deals with what we are used to thinking of as the most radical stage of the wars, the real question is not why zealous Catholics rallied behind the Holy League but rather why the league seems to have had so little enthusiastic support in a region one might have thought would be its natural heartland.

Ultimately, it is this question that is the most challenging—and the author's response to it most satisfying—of the three books under review. It is Konnert's book that most significantly deepens and revises our current understanding of the field. This too is at first surprising. There is already a voluminous literature on the era of the Holy League. With the possible exception of the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, this period has attracted far more recent attention than any other part of the religious wars.¹ There is good reason to think, then, that what we really need now is renewed attention to the growth of sectarian militance, the breakdown of civil order, and the opening stages of the Wars of Religion. We do need this, but a truly satisfactory rethinking of these dimensions of France's religious conflicts lies somewhere in the future.² In the meantime, we can take satisfaction in Mark Konnert's resolution of some of the ambiguities and puzzles left over from clashing interpretations of the Holy League.

Much recent historical writing on the *Sainte Union* has emerged out of the crosscurrents of three interpretations of the Paris League: Élie Barnavi's identification of the movement as an attempt on the part of a middle class that perceived itself as disenfranchised to reclaim power by means of a sociopolitical revolution, Robert Descimon's attribution to the same middle class of the more reactionary intention of restoring traditional communal values, and Denis Crouzet's interpretation of the movement as the product of

¹To cite just a few of the most important works: Élie Barnavi, *Le parti de Dieu: Étude social et politique des chefs de la Ligue parisienne, 1585–1594* (Brussels: Nauwelaerts, 1980); Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525–vers 1610*, 2 vols. (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1990); Robert Descimon, *Qui étaient les Seize? Mythes et réalités de la Ligue parisienne, 1585–1594* (Paris: Kincksieck, 1983); and Jean-Marie Constant, *La Ligue* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

²To my mind, the single most valuable recent contribution to our understanding of Protestant militance and the breakdown of civil order in France is the brief article by Philip Benedict, "The Dynamics of Protestant Militancy: France, 1555–1563," in *Reformation, Revolt and Civil War in France and the Netherlands, 1555–1585*, ed. Philip Benedict et al., 35–50 (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1999). This article would, for example, have helped Kevin Gould clarify his explanation of why Catholics in Southwestern France felt so threatened by Protestant activism in the period leading up to the religious wars. Denis Crouzet's article, "Calvinism and the Uses of the Political and the Religious (France, ca. 1560–ca. 1572)," in the same volume (95–114) might have been equally useful to Nikki Shepardson in her attempt to situate Anne du Bourg's ideas in the broader current of Huguenot resistance theory.

an apocalyptic and millenarian religiosity. Scholars working on provincial cities have tried out these models but, for the most part, concluded that they did not work. Few provincial cities experienced either the enthusiastic popular participation or the waves of apocalyptic and penitential piety that characterized the Parisian league. Many cities that ultimately adhered to the league did so only lukewarmly and after considerable hesitation. Local considerations, ranging from internal political rivalries and relationships with regional authorities to perceived economic advantage, played a larger role than religious enthusiasm in determining a city's eventual choice to accept or reject the Holy League. Far from being the model and rallying point for kingdom-wide organization, the *Sainte Union* in Paris now appears to have been exceptional and the movement as a whole both more diverse and more locally oriented than the previous historiography suggested.

Konnert's book reaffirms these findings while building on them in several useful ways. As a case study, it takes as its scale the province and not, like most other works, the individual city. This facilitates systematic comparison and allows Konnert to be more analytical than previous studies about the sort of local considerations that influenced a city's politico-religious alignments and how these changed over time. The fact that Champagne is the province where the Guise family interests were strongest in terms of both land and office holding makes it a particularly intriguing subject for a case study—especially when it becomes clear that even those provincial towns most closely associated with the Guises committed themselves only slowly and reluctantly to the Holy League.

Konnert lays out the reasons why this was the case in a clear and logical fashion. He begins with a discussion of the geography of Champagne, thereby establishing the province's importance to Guise dynastic strategy but also its vulnerability as a frontier province through which foreign armies would repeatedly pass in the course of the wars. He then outlines the economic and political characteristics of the major towns—Troyes, Châlons, and Reims—but also such lesser cities as Langres, Épernay, Vitry-le-François, and Mézières. In each case, he sets out not only the social and political frameworks of civil government but also past relationships to episcopal and royal officials, rivalries with neighboring towns, and other local particularities that might influence a town's political allegiances during the wars. Succeeding chapters proceed chronologically from the outbreak of religious war through the formation of the Holy League, its implantation in Champagne, and its ultimate defeat.

Along the way, Konnert demonstrates that for most of the cities of Champagne the danger of Protestant takeover was very small. Of the major towns, only Troyes had a large and dynamic Protestant population and significant levels of religious violence prior to the outbreak of war. Even in

Troyes, however, the Protestant position remained essentially a defensive one, with earlier incidents of violence sparking vicious repression on the part of Catholics—including the only Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Champagne—and no attempt at a Protestant coup. The towns of Champagne were thus spared the lengthy sieges and brutal clashes of armies that proved so destructive elsewhere in France. On the other hand, they did suffer periodically from the depredations wrought by passing armies, especially the German mercenaries hired by both sides in the wars and seldom paid soon enough or bountifully enough to prevent them from laying waste to the countryside in the course of their retreat. Local security was thus a very important consideration to Champenois towns and figured into their political calculations in a major way. Promises of outside assistance, even from the provincial governor or king, were nevertheless always met with some suspicion, out of a longstanding hatred of military occupation but also out of a fear of permanently losing precious autonomy.

The “quest for urban autonomy” (257) was a primary consideration even when it came to the Holy League. Konnert convincingly argues that even the cities most closely allied with the Guises were initially reluctant to join the Holy League because they saw no advantage in it. They feared that their only role would be to pay for it, with any benefits going to the league's aristocratic participants but not to themselves. As the Guises tried to tighten their hold on Champagne, they stirred more resistance than support for the league. A number of cities ultimately succumbed to the pressure and joined; others remained stubbornly royalist, even though this meant at least tacitly accepting a Protestant prince as heir to the throne and then as king. The difference between towns that joined and those that remained aloof, Konnert concludes, cannot be reduced to sweeping generalizations. At least in Champagne, towns did not join out of religious enthusiasm or as a wholesale rejection of a centralizing state. Rather, they reacted to a complex matrix of local considerations rooted in past experiences specific to their locale.

Konnert's argument contains an important diachronic element, allowing the reader to see how these local considerations changed over time. In particular, he identifies an important change in the character and purpose around which Catholic defense networks were formed in the late 1570s. Prior to this time, he notes, there was “no sense of conflict between the interests of the Crown and those of the governor. In other words, in an entirely traditional practice, the king was strengthening his authority in the province precisely by strengthening Guise's” (146). King Henri III was able to co-opt the first Holy League in 1576 by placing himself at its head because he and his provincial authorities were perceived to have a common interest in reducing religious dissent and civil conflict in their provinces. This changed in 1579, when Henri realized that “Guise's purposes were not his, and that the

governor, not the king, was the power that mattered in the province.” A new league formed at Bassigny in defiance of the Peace of Bergerac, which forbade such associations, “barely mentions the king.” It also “provided for a sort of noble self-defense organization, a direct challenge to the principles of royal justice” (147). Guise was not mentioned by name, but it was clear that he was the intended military leader of the new organization. Henri III responded by appointing a new *lieutenant-général* for Champagne, Joachim de Dinteville, and assigned him to find out who had joined this new league and to put an end to it. From this point on, although Dinteville ostensibly worked in collaboration with Guise in Champagne, in fact each worked for a different end—Dinteville to preserve and restore royal power in the province, and Guise to undermine it.

As Konnert points out, “there was nothing new in the idea of a sworn association to defend the interests of the Catholic Church. Local and regional leagues had existed from the beginning of the wars” (136). By this analysis, Catholic leagues only assume a real importance when they begin to threaten not just local Protestants but royal authority, and Konnert places the date at which this occurred relatively late in the wars. Kevin Gould would not agree. *Catholic Activism in South-West France* upholds precisely the opposite point of view, arguing that the significance of militant Catholic organizations formed in the 1550s and 1560s has been too long overshadowed by historians’ “obsession” (6) with the Holy League. Earlier associations should not, he argues, be seen as merely ephemeral “precursors to the *Sainte Union*” (5). Individual leagues frequently associated themselves with neighboring associations, thereby playing a more important political and military function than has been assumed. The existence of such leagues, in Gould’s opinion, “challenges the historiographical axiom that places the Council of Trent at the center of the sixteenth-century movement of Catholic renewal in France” and demonstrates that “determined individuals sought to defend orthodoxy long before the Tridentine decrees ever reached the royal court, insistent that heresy should not prevail in their community” (6).

This last claim is puzzling. To my knowledge, no one has ever seriously suggested that French Catholics only began actively to oppose heresy after the Council of Trent issued its final decrees in 1563. Quite to the contrary, all of the literature suggests that Catholics responded to Protestant aggression with aggression of their own in an ever-deepening cycle of violence. The real questions here—the ones that Gould can help us to answer—are just how soon did the Catholic violence become organized, what forms did these organizations take, and how effective were they? Gould also misleads readers somewhat at the outset when he says that he seeks to place “the militant bodies of the mid-decades of the century at the

vanguard of Catholic renewal” (6). Readers should understand that he refers here to the defense of Catholic orthodoxy and not the spiritual renewal or intensification and interiorization of faith usually associated with the Catholic Reformation. Although there are several brief mentions of “penitential fervor” (137, 161), there is no substantive discussion of the spirituality of Catholic activists or assessment of how their piety might have differed from that of more moderate Catholics. This is a book about political activism and not religious practice or piety. It contributes to our understanding of the attempts by militant Catholics to organize a response to Protestant expansion and aggression.

Catholic Activism in South-West France is based on solid and extensive archival research. Gould does an excellent job of tracing elusive references to early attempts to organize Catholic resistance in the face of Protestant activism as well as royal temporizing and policies of conciliation. He uncovers some previously unrecognized links between associations in different towns and shows how Catholics whose militance was already identifiable before the wars continued to play an active role in Catholic associations and initiatives even after the wars broke out. The book works best as a narrative reconstruction of locally based initiatives by confraternities and by urban and rural elites. The chapter recounting the clashes between the Bordelais *basoche* (young lawyers-in-training and lesser officials associated with the Parlement of Bordeaux) through their Confraternity of Saint-Yves and the Protestant-inclined students of that city’s Collège de Guyenne is fascinating.

Gould’s strategy of addressing Catholic activism with separate narratives for each of the three principal cities of southwestern France—Bordeaux, Agen, and Toulouse—is nevertheless more successful for the period leading up to the Wars of Religion than for the period encompassing the wars themselves. Not enough background on the broader context of the wars is provided to effectively situate the local quarrels. In chapter 3, for example, Gould recounts debates over attempts by a rather elusive “Catholic syndicate” to tighten security and establish a Catholic militia in Bordeaux between 1561 and 1563 with only the briefest, most glancing reference to “the formal outbreak of war in April 1562” (45). Whether these debates were influenced by the fact that Protestants had seized a number of cities across France or that royal armies were laying siege to some of these cities and pursuing Protestant rebels in neighboring parts of Languedoc and Guyenne is nowhere addressed. Nor does Gould ever clarify whether the principal opponent of the syndicate, the *premier président* of the Parlement of Bordeaux, Jacques-Benoît de Lagebâton, was motivated by a sincere desire to uphold the Crown’s announced policy of conciliation or, as Lagebâton’s enemies claimed, by his own pro-Protestant sympathies. It is consequently not clear

here whether the quarrel was primarily one between Protestants and Catholics or one between Catholic moderates and Catholic activists.

There is more contextual discussion of the wars in the chapters on Agen and Toulouse, because Toulouse suffered an abortive Protestant coup and Agen actually fell to the Huguenots before being retaken by Catholics. There was also more military action in the hinterland of these towns. In these chapters too, however, the reader is frequently left wondering whether the local initiatives that Gould describes were independent of royal authority or in defiance of it. Just how completely had royal authority broken down? Gould does give a partial answer to the question on the book's last pages, where, citing Robert Harding to the effect that "Catherine de Medici allowed her generals considerable liberty to interpret and execute the law during the early phases of the wars," he concludes that local administrative and military leaders therefore had a great deal of freedom to impose their own policies: "there was no coherent royal strategy for the region" (164). This is an important observation, but since it does not derive from Gould's own research, it might have been more usefully employed in setting up an analytical framework for the study than as a part of its conclusion. That is to say, it would have been helpful to ask early on to what extent Catholic militance should be seen as a desperate attempt to fill a void left by the absence of royal authority, and to what extent it represented a fundamental challenge to royal authority by Catholics opposed to the moderate and conciliatory policies of the Crown. As Mark Konnert's work has suggested, a league that challenges royal authority has different implications and long-term significance from one that represents a more limited attempt to counter Protestant aggression.

Where Kevin Gould and Mark Konnert take Catholic militance as their subject and focus more on action than ideology, Nikki Shepardson looks at Protestant militance and focuses on how the rhetoric of martyrdom was used to build and fortify the French Protestant community. She approaches her subject through case studies. The first two substantive chapters of the book focus on the execution of Anne du Bourg, a counselor on the Parlement of Paris, in 1559 and show how some inconvenient realities were edited out of the story of du Bourg's execution so as to represent him as a loyal magistrate sent to death for his faith alone. Two issues especially were problematic. Du Bourg succumbed to pressure to save his life by renouncing his faith before reasserting himself and retracting this confession, and his martyrologists had to find a way to explain this momentary weakness without compromising their larger picture of a man steadfast in his faith. More important, he smuggled a treatise out of prison that many took to threaten the king by saying that princes too can "commit the crime of *lèse majesté*" if they go against the will of God and that the king "would be

guilty unto death if he persisted in an error that he should have condemned” (68).³ I do not entirely agree with Shepardson when she cites this passage as evidence that “du Bourg clearly advocated tyrannicide.”⁴ The political rhetoric surrounding the assassinations of Henri III and Henri IV suggests to me that we should take care to distinguish between the suggestion that God might punish a king for his errors and assertions that either magistrates or private individuals might act in God’s stead. It is nevertheless true that even suggesting that a king could be “guilty unto death” was politically unacceptable and contrary to the image of the loyal magistrate that du Bourg’s martyrologists wished to create.

In addition to lengthy analysis of the du Bourg case, Shepardson uses an extended case study as the basis for her chapter on “Gender and the Rhetoric of Martyrdom.” Focusing on the death of Marguerite Le Riche, the wife of a Parisian bookseller, in 1559, she argues that both Le Riche’s family responsibilities and her actions as a Protestant believer had to be carefully edited so as to preserve the passivity and subordinate role considered appropriate to the female sex. Although female martyrs were frequently characterized as “overcoming all weakness of their sex” (94), this was depicted as the product of divine election and not their own efforts. Shepardson further observes that, in contrast with male martyrs, who were frequently depicted as actively and deliberately choosing to place their duty to God above their duty to their families, women were “portrayed as passive ‘abandoners’” (106); their sacrifice of husband and children went unacknowledged.

The argument is plausible but not entirely convincing because it is based on such a very small number of cases. The total number of women who went to the stake in France is very small. According to Shepardson, martyrologist Jean Crespin recorded the deaths of seven French women put to death by the Parlement of Paris, as compared with 157 men (120). William Monter notes that Crespin overlooked some female martyrs; even so, they accounted for “less than 5 percent of all French martyrs before 1560.”⁵ Moreover, many of these female martyrs have been identified as single women or widows. The number who went to their deaths as wives is smaller still. In the end, then, the fact that Marguerite Le Riche’s husband was a Catholic may have more to do with his relative absence from the account of her death than Protestant

³The cited passages are from the *Oraison au Senat de Paris pour la Cause des Chrestiens, à la consolation d’iceux, d’Anne du Bourg Prisonnier pour la parole* (n.p., 1560), 10–11.

⁴Shepardson is not alone in citing this passage as advocacy of tyrannicide. This is an important part of David El Kenz’s argument in *Les bûchers du roi: la culture protestante des martyrs (1523–1572)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 1997).

⁵William Monter, *Judging the French Reformation: Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 192.

martyrologists' desire to portray women as "passive 'abandoners'" who remained true to their domestic roles even while dying for their faith.

It is, moreover, unfortunate in this respect that Shepardson chose to terminate her study before the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, even though the stories of many of the massacre's victims were incorporated into new editions of some of the same martyrologies whose pre-1570 victims she describes. Simon Goulart's continuation of Jean Crespin's *Histoire des martyrs*, for example, includes moving narratives of women pleading for the lives of their children, born and unborn, and also of women urging their husbands to fortitude in the face of imminent death.⁶ It is true that the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre irrevocably radicalized Protestant political rhetoric; it is not so clear that it had the same immediate and lasting impact on the rhetoric of martyrdom. Goulart's account of how magistrate Pierre de La Place was murdered on the streets of Paris as he obeyed a summons to appear before the king reflects the same rhetoric of the loyal magistrate that Shepardson identifies in accounts of the death of Anne du Bourg.⁷ Ironically, one of the accounts she uses was written by Pierre de La Place; comparing the narratives might have proved enlightening.

The last chapter of *Burning Zeal* returns to the subject of the importance of martyrdom to the Protestant community. Shepardson contrasts her approach here to that of Brad Gregory, which in her opinion focuses too much on the individual's experience and not enough on martyrdom's role in creating a collective identity and experience. She also finds Gregory dismissive of the close link between anti-Nicodemism and martyrdom in the minds of Huguenots when he says that this was not "part of a collective Protestant *mentalité*" (111).⁸ This misconstrues Gregory's meaning. He does not deny that there was an important link between Calvinists' insistence that believers publicly live out their faith and the martyrdom that might result; indeed, he discusses this connection at length. His point is merely that most Protestant believers were not prepared to put their own faith to this test and preferred to abjure or to hide behind Catholic practice rather than to become martyrs. Shepardson can only agree; the most important point she makes in this chapter is that, in the end, the rhetoric of martyrdom was not just an appeal to people to lay down their lives for their faith but "a vehicle by which the Reform could reconceptualize the past and create an interpretation of history

⁶For examples, see Jean Crespin, *Histoire des martyrs persecutez et mis à mort pour la verité de l'évangile, depuis le temps des apostres jusques à présent (1619)*, ed. Daniel Benoît and Matthieu Lelièvre (Toulouse: Société des livres religieux, 1889), 3: 674 (wife of Antoine Merlanchon), 675 (wife of a jeweler named Monluet), and 676 (wives of Philippe Le Doux and Pierre Feret).

⁷*Ibid.*, 670–672.

⁸Citing Brad S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake: Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 154.

(both ancient and contemporary) that would legitimate the new community” (141). This is a significant conclusion for a modest work.

Shepardson’s clear and deliberate way of setting forth her argument makes this a book that will be useful for classroom purposes. Gould’s study of Catholic activism, by contrast, will find its best audience among specialists already familiar with the course of the religious wars and eager to examine the organizational strategies of Catholic militants from a close-up view. Konnert’s book combines the advantages of both perspectives, rounding out scholarly debates on the formation of the Catholic League but also presenting these debates in an analytically useful way. None of these studies truly breaks new ground, but they do enrich our understanding of the beliefs and behaviors that made France’s religious schism so profoundly divisive that it culminated in decades of civil war.

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