

The Protestants of Paris and the Old Regime

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On 1 November 1725, All Saints' Day, everyone in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris was going to church. There were many convents, each with its own chapel, so there was a wide choice of places to go, but many of churches were small and the crush was such that not everyone could get inside. Some people—up to 200 at one church—were forced to follow the service from the exterior. Or so they said. But the clergy were not fooled. These were so-called “new Catholics”, former Protestants who had abjured their religion but who repeatedly failed to fulfill their obligations as Catholics. They persisted in coming to the most crowded services and arrived late, refusing either to attend earlier in the day when there was room or to go to other churches.¹

This was forty years after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, and it is a tantalizing hint that Protestantism—or at any rate resistance on the part of former Protestants—was not dead in Paris. Yet general works on eighteenth-century Huguenots rarely mention the capital, and one has the impression that after the persecution at the end of the seventeenth century Protestantism had been eliminated there, at least until the arrival of foreign Protestant artisans and bankers later in the eighteenth century. And it is indeed likely that most of the ten thousand or so Huguenots living in the city in 1685 had emigrated or been forced to convert.² Yet a hundred years later, after the so-called Edict of Toleration in 1787, a remarkable number of seventeenth-century Huguenot family names recur in the records of the re-

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¹ Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal [henceforth BA], MS 10171, letter of 1 November 1725.

² Emmanuel Orentin Douen, *La Révocation de L'Edit de Nantes à Paris*, 3 vols (Paris, 1894), 1: 161-62.

established Protestant churches and even before that in the recently rediscovered registers of the Swedish and Danish ambassadors' chapels.³ Somehow, despite the persecution, these families maintained their faith against all the odds, right under the nose of the King, in a city reputed to have the best-organized police force in Europe. Had they been there all the time or had they left and come back when the pressure was off? Had they pretended to convert, as the complaint of 1725 from the Faubourg Saint-Antoine suggests, but managed to remain true to their beliefs? If so, how had they done so, with no church, no schools for their children, withstanding pressure from the clergy and the police, and the ever-present risk of denunciation by Catholic neighbors. This article is a first step towards answering these questions. It focuses on the actions and thinking of the Parisian authorities and examines how much scope Protestants in the city had to resist and to maintain their faith in the early years of the eighteenth century.

The Paris Huguenots, in fact, were broadly speaking more fortunate than their provincial coreligionists. Immediately after the Revocation in 1685 the police made strenuous efforts to convert them, combining threats, punishments and promises. They put intense pressure on the elders of the church and on men with influence in the city, hoping that the conversion of these key individuals would persuade others to follow. The elders who resisted were exiled to the provinces, and some were imprisoned for short periods. Meanwhile, to some of the poor who relied on charity from their Huguenot brethren, the police offered money if they converted.⁴ Only when these efforts had limited success did the authorities, at the direct insistence of the King, bring soldiers into the capital, something they had no hesitation doing in other parts of the country. The use of soldiers seems to have lasted little more than a month. This drove most of the remaining Paris Protestants either to flee or to convert.⁵ Those who subsequently relapsed were sometimes imprisoned, and some had their children taken away and put into convents to be educated as Catholics.

Yet this level of persecution was far less than that endured by most provincial communities. Two main concerns seem to have made the Parisian authorities reluctant to use the full range of measures that were widely employed elsewhere. First, as we shall see, they were afraid of provoking a mass emigration that might have serious effects on the city's economy, and the police files indicate that much of the repression after 1686 was designed to deter the Huguenots from leaving.⁶ Second, the Paris authorities were reluctant to bring in dragoons for fear of the further disorder that might result. They already had trouble with soldiers, always an unruly group, and were afraid that the example of troops smashing up Protestant property might lead the Catholic population to join in. In October 1685 they were quick to arrest soldiers who had ransacked a fruit shop owned by a Calvinist. Even after the King insisted on bringing in troops, those who billeted themselves on Protestant families without direct orders were punished. The authorities may have feared that employing dragoons to intimidate those who refused to convert would legitimate attacks on the property of merchants and shopkeepers and might spill over into broader unrest. This may have been what the police and the Parlement meant when they evoked "les suites d'un tel

³ Janine Driancourt-Girod, *Registres des communautés luthériennes dans les ambassades de Suède et du Danemark à Paris de 1679 à 1810*, 2 vols ([Paris], 2002).

⁴ Douen, *Révocation*, 2: 1-125.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2: 186-216.

⁶ The papers of the *commissaire* Delamare provide many examples: Bibliothèque nationale [henceforth BN] Ms fr 21621-22.

désordre.”⁷ Protestant resistance thus created a direct conflict between two basic imperatives of absolutist rule: the demand for obedience and the concern to prevent “disorder.”

The use of soldiers was nevertheless more successful than earlier methods of persuasion, and by early 1686 only a small number of intransigent Huguenots remained. The others had either left the city or had abjured. From then on the police effort was mainly directed against those who relapsed or tried to flee. Some were imprisoned, and some had their children taken away and put into convents to be educated as Catholics. This persecution, however, was not continuous. After a relative lull in the early 1690s there was a new wave of arrests and imprisonments from 1698 to 1701, partly because of official concern over meetings of Protestants that were reported to be taking place in various parts of Paris and partly to forestall further departures.⁸ Another bout of imprisonments came in 1719, following a series of too-well-attended services at the chapels of the English and Dutch ambassadors. There was a further crackdown in the mid 1720s following publicity about Huguenot assemblies in Languedoc. And throughout Cardinal Fleury’s years as de facto first minister the police repeatedly intervened when denunciations alerted them to children who were being brought up as Protestants. The youngsters were sent to a convent to be re-educated.⁹

Yet these moments of rigor were exceptions in a trend of growing leniency in the eighteenth century. When in 1697 Marc-René d’Argenson replaced Gabriel-Nicolas de La Reynie, the police chief who had enforced the Revocation in Paris, he took a less rigorous approach, not because of any sympathy for the Protestants but because he believed harsh measures would arouse sympathy and resistance among those who had nominally converted. Above all, he was concerned about public order and did not want to draw public attention to the Protestants. He opposed applying the law that condemned the bodies of those who refused the final sacraments to be dragged through the city. And while he and his successors ordered the removal of Protestant children they took no action against the parents. After 1700, imprisonment was reserved for those suspected of proselytizing, of teaching children, or of assisting their co-religionists leaving France.¹⁰ In 1708 the Conseiller d’Etat Henri d’Aguesseau proposed what would become the general policy throughout the century. In Paris, he wrote, “there will be no pursuit of the living or of the dead on account of their religion, provided there are no assemblies and no public scandal.” In other parts of France, however, the laws would be executed according to the letter.¹¹

This attitude helps to explain not only why relatively few Paris Protestants were subjected to punishment but also how they were able to continue working in the city’s guilds, despite the almost universal requirement in the statutes that members be Catholics. An anonymous commentary of 1710 attributed this directly to the complicity of the authorities. Since 1685, it stated,

⁷ Douen, *Révocation*, 2: 191.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2: 201, 601; BN Ms fr 21621, esp. fols 336-42 ; BN Ms fr 21622, fols 44-5 ; and Monique Cottret, *La Bastille à prendre* (Paris, 1986), 40.

⁹ For examples see BA MS 10855, dossier Rolland (1724); MS 10913, dossier Brouillé (1726); MS 11282, dossier Falaise (1735); and MS 11314, dossier Chastanier (1736).

¹⁰ Douen, *Révocation*, 1: 92. BA MS 10958, fols. 278-92 (1727).

¹¹ BN Ms fr 7046, fol. 9.

all persons of the [Protestant] religion have made their conversion, either real or feigned, to the true and Catholic religion. Since that time no master has been received who did not say he was Catholic, but they are taken at their word, and on that of the guild officials, without any demand for a certificate from their parish priest or other proof . . . and whenever the zeal of certain priests has led them to denounce these stubborn Huguenots . . . the now deceased President de Harlay and Monsieur de la Raynie [sic] always believed that they should cover things up.¹²

Since all new masters were registered with the Châtelet, the royal courts, it would have been easy to require a certificate from the applicant's parish, but this was not done. And while guild statutes systematically required new masters to be Catholics there were various ways around the rules. One was to settle in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, where guild membership was not required. But there were also clear variations in the degree to which the different guilds enforced their own statutes, and Protestants were able to continue in significant numbers as wine-merchants, ribbon-makers, clockmakers, goldsmiths and jewelers.¹³ They were also able to have their sons accepted as apprentices and subsequently as masters. In 1713 d'Aguesseau argued against measures to exclude Protestants from the guilds because they "would renew the emigration . . . since by an unhappy chance, in nearly all trades the most able workers and the richest businessmen were Protestants."¹⁴

For their part, Paris Protestants were in general careful to avoid drawing attention to themselves, but they enjoyed increasing leeway. A memoir writer noted that in 1712 provincial Protestants condemned to the galleys had been visited by "a good Paris Protestant, named M. Girardot de Chancour, a rich merchant."¹⁵ The discrepancy between the treatment of provincials and that of Parisians could hardly have been more starkly demonstrated. In fact the large Girardot family, wealthy wood merchants, was well known to the police. They had all abjured but their refusal to perform their duties as "new Catholics" was conspicuous enough to be brought to Louis XIV's attention in the 1690s. Several children of the family were confined at the male or female convents for "new Catholics," probably because of fears they were to be smuggled out of France. Yet after 1701 the Girardot family was left alone and managed to pass on its considerable wealth to the Girardot children, despite laws confiscating the property of those who relapsed and allowing Catholic members of the same family to claim it. After 1720 burials of French Protestants were permitted in the Girardot wood-yard on the fringe of the city—though only late at night and with no ceremony or lights.¹⁶

¹² Archives nationales [henceforth AN] K1244B. This document is a copy, and the original source is uncertain. Original spelling retained but accents standardized.

¹³ Alfred Franklin, *Dictionnaire historique des arts, métiers et professions exercés dans Paris depuis le treizième siècle* (Paris, 1906), 160; and Alain Thillay, *Le faubourg Saint-Antoine et ses "faux ouvriers". La liberté du travail à Paris aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Seysse, 2002), esp. 173-74.

¹⁴ Quoted in Douen, *Révocation*, 1: 85.

¹⁵ Jean Marteilhe, *Mémoires d'un protestant. Jean Marteilhe de Bergerac, condamné aux Galères de France pour cause de Religion, écrits par lui-même*, ed. Gaston Tournier (Cahors, 1942), 168.

¹⁶ Douen, *Révocation*, 2: 69-72 ; and Y. Zephirin, "Une famille protestante dans la paroisse Saint Nicolas du Chardonnet," *La Montagne Sainte Geneviève et ses abords*,

Even during the occasional clampdowns the repression was very limited. In 1719, when the police became concerned about the numbers attending Protestant services at the Dutch ambassador's chapel, police officials arrested seven of the 400 or so who were present. Six turned out to be foreigners and were immediately released but the seventh, a prosperous cloth merchant who had been living in Paris for forty years, could hardly claim ignorance. When reminded that he had converted to Catholicism in 1685 he replied, according to the record of his interrogation, that "as he abjured only to obey the King's orders, he believed that he could and should continue to live as a Protestant and to bring up his son in that religion." The police concluded that he "cannot but be regarded as a relapsed heretic." By law, therefore, he should have been punished severely. The authorities nevertheless decided to release him, given that he was sixty years old and that imprisonment would damage his business. They extracted from him a promise not to go back to the chapel, and it was clear that they simply wanted to stop public displays.¹⁷

Even in the 1720s there are hints that the determination of the authorities to prevent the next generation from being educated in the "errors" of their parents was weakening. Involuntary admissions to the euphemistically-named convent for female New Catholics allow us to plot fluctuations in official attitudes. According to Orentin Douen, some ninety-two girls or women—presumably mostly Parisians—were forcibly confined there in the year immediately after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Annual admissions subsequently fell steadily, averaging three or four a year in the early 1690s. In 1698 they suddenly rose to sixteen and in 1699-1700 a further sixty girls were taken in.

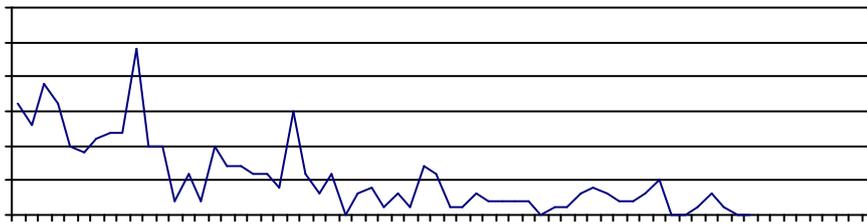


Figure 1. Involuntary entries of Parisian women to the Nouvelles Catholiques, 1704-60.
Source: AN LL1642

For subsequent years we have the register of admissions, which shows that between 1704 and 1715, on average, twelve or thirteen Parisian girls were forcibly confined in the convent each year, most of them in their teens but some as young as six or seven. There were also a number of older women. New peaks of admissions were recorded in 1719 and 1725; however, the average number of involuntary confinements fell to six per year in the 1720s, then to three in the 1730s and two in the 1740s. There were none at all in 1759 and 1760 and only a handful after that, though the last admissions by formal *lettre de cachet* took place in 1786, the two daughters of a Protestant cabinet-maker and his Catholic wife.¹⁸

no. 202 (1977). For one such burial, AN Y14948, 16 July 1733.

¹⁷ BA MS 10696, fols 276-95 (1720).

¹⁸ Figures for 1685-1703 from Douen, *Révocation*, 2: 254. Those for 1704-89 from AN, LL1642. They are not on the same graph because Douen's figures are total admissions and those for 1704-60 are just involuntary admissions and include only

But the raw figures conceal another change. After the late 1730s the new entrants to the convent were more and more often put there by their families: girls like Marie-Louise Belloc, imprisoned at the request of her brother-in-law, and Louise Simard, whose father wanted to remove her from the influence of her Protestant mother.¹⁹ In other words, the police increasingly saw Protestantism as a family affair: they would intervene in the same way as in cases of filial or wifely disobedience, but usually only at the request of the family.²⁰

The authorities also seemed increasingly likely to give up if the girl did not respond favorably. In 1740 the police were informed by a priest that a Demoiselle Gastebois, the daughter of a recently deceased banker, wanted to convert to Catholicism and that only the threats of her mother were preventing her from doing so. The young lady was therefore taken to the Ursuline convent, but in less than a week the Mother Superior of the convent was requesting her removal. She was, wrote the Superior, very intelligent and very obstinate in her faith, and she was a bad influence on the other girls being educated there. She was duly sent back to her mother!²¹

After the death of Cardinal Fleury in January 1743 there was little further official action against the Protestants of Paris. And in the mid 1740s, at a time when Huguenots were undergoing renewed violence and persecution in Poitou and in Languedoc, the Paris authorities symbolically demonstrated a new level of acceptance of their Protestants. In 1743 a new street-cleaning tax had been announced, and in an unusual spirit of consultation the police and the municipality decided to seek the views of notable Parisians on how it should be collected. They summoned some 160 men, and included in their number were at least two Protestants, both bankers.²²

This was not, of course, de facto toleration. Paris Protestants could not worship together, unless they took the risk of going to the chapel of one of the Protestant ambassadors. They could not legally marry or have their children baptized, and in principle no more than two people could attend the funerals of their loved ones, which had to be held in the depths of the night. They could not openly bring up their children in their own faith and risked having them forcibly taken away. They had to resort to subterfuge to pass on property to their Protestant descendants. Nevertheless, they survived, and some even thrived: the Girardot family, already mentioned, was one of the wealthiest families in the Saint-Victor quarter throughout the eighteenth century. Jacques-Alexis Monvoisin was one of the richest bakers in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine until his death in 1760.²³

A partial explanation of the way the Huguenots of Paris survived is already clear from the examples given above. First, they resisted, actively initially and later passively. When forced to convert to Catholicism by the threat of losing their

those living in Paris. The register indicates at whose request the girl was taken in and who was paying.

¹⁹ AN LL1642, fol. 150 (30 March 1739), fol. 153 (10 June 1740).

²⁰ On imprisonments at the request of families see Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, *Le Désordre des familles: lettres de cachet des Archives de la Bastille au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1982).

²¹ BA MS 11463, dossier Gastebois (1740).

²² I am grateful to Laurence Croq and Nicolas Lyon-Caen, who have studied these assemblies, for this information.

²³ BA MS 11233, fol. 283 ; AN LL1642, p. 132, 13 March 1733; and AN Y14087, 20 October 1760.

livelihood or having their families torn apart, most chose to convert, but many maintained their Calvinist faith privately, within their households. Exactly how they did this, how they negotiated the Catholic customs of the city, and how they managed to evade laws preventing them from passing on property to their children, remains to be investigated. But it is clear that the authorities did not rigorously enforce the laws against them and even immediately after the Revocation did not pursue them in the way Huguenots were pursued in other parts of France. This had nothing to do with any sympathy on the part of the Paris police. It was, first, because of the economic importance of Protestant craftsmen in key trades such as goldsmithing, clock- and watch-making, and jewelry. Second, the police did not want to disrupt the process of bringing the city under control and of taming and “civilizing” its inhabitants. The position of Lieutenant General had been created in March 1667 to reinforce royal control of Paris and from the outset one of the key concerns was the reduction and prevention of violence. Over a hundred-year period Parisians were progressively disarmed as weapons of all kinds were banned. The first police chief, La Reynie, was preoccupied with taming the aristocracy and their servants, but the second, d’Argenson, embarked on a wider campaign to improve the behavior of Parisians. He issued scores of ordinances designed to rid the city of “vagabonds,” to reduce prostitution and theft, and to combat “disorders” of all kinds.²⁴ Neither of these men, nor the magistrates of the Parlement who in general supported this work, wished to see their efforts undermined by a revival of religious conflict. While remaining hostile to the “religion prétendue réformée,” their vision was essentially a secular one, of a city that was peaceful, crime-free and prosperous. Harsh measures against Protestants might put that goal at risk. For the police, clearly, the mere presence of the remaining Huguenots was no longer a threat: they had no fear of revolt and no real concern that the morality or the spiritual well-being of Paris might be damaged by the influence of heretics. Economic disruption and violence by the Catholic population were greater dangers.

But there was a second way in which living in Paris made it possible for the Huguenots to survive. Initially the police had the registers of the Protestant church and used them to track down adherents. They subsequently used the records of conversion to keep an eye on them. Yet this became increasingly difficult. While rich former Protestants were easy enough to watch, the poorer ones moved and could easily disappear into the crowd. Huguenots from the provinces came to Paris, in significant numbers according to some witnesses, precisely because there they could escape surveillance.²⁵ By the 1720s, when police observers tried to identify French Protestants attending services at the chapels of the Protestant ambassadors, the only way they could do so was by following them home. But the spies often lost people in the crowd. The suspects, furthermore, resisted. In 1725 a report complained that the Protestants had posted watchers outside the Dutch ambassador’s residence, and when they identified a police spy the doorman, who as the ambassador’s employee was immune from arrest, abused and threatened him. On another occasion the ambassador’s own carriage was used to smuggle away people attending the service.²⁶

²⁴ Jean Chagniot, *Paris et l’armée au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1985), 60-63 ; and Paolo Piasenza, *Polizia e città. Strategie d’ordine, conflitti e rivolte a Parigi tra sei e settecento* (Bologna, 1990), 101-70.

²⁵ Jean Rodolphe Hollard, *Relation d’un voyage nouvellement fait en France* (London, 1717), 31.

²⁶ BA MS 10903, fol. 232 ; and BA MS 10747, fol. 240.

The clergy faced something of the same problem as the police. Already by 1700 most parishes were too large, and the mobility of the population too great, to enable the priests to keep track of all the inhabitants. While wealthy merchants and property-owners could be identified, the thousands of servants, shop girls and artisans could not. No communion lists were kept, and no-one even knew how many people lived in each parish. Some priests continued to hunt down people who openly flouted Church teachings, but the only way they or the police could track down Protestants was through denunciations. If the surviving police archives are representative then such denunciations were relatively infrequent. Catholic Parisians, it seems, were increasingly reluctant to inform on their Protestant neighbors. Or perhaps they could not be bothered.

Added to all of these difficulties was the fact that from the 1720s on, increasing numbers of foreign Protestants were arriving in Paris. They were particularly Swiss and German artisans, often highly-skilled specialists in furniture, porcelain, clock-making, and other luxury industries. Foreign Protestants had always posed a problem for the authorities, particularly the Genevans who were officially allowed to live and work in Paris. Their presence meant that some concessions had to be made. Foreign Protestants were allowed to attend services at the chapels of the various Protestant ambassadors, were allowed to run their own infirmary, and in 1720 they were given their own cemetery.²⁷ While the police tried to distinguish the Huguenots from the foreigners, this was not straightforward. By the early eighteenth century many French Protestants who had fled immediately after the Revocation had obtained residence rights in England, in the Low Countries, in the Swiss cantons and in Germany. If they or their children returned it was not easy to distinguish them. Furthermore, as the century went on, French Protestants intermarried with foreign ones and claimed to be exempt from the rules on Huguenots. These were problems that authorities in other parts of France did not face to nearly the same extent as did Parisian administrators. This helps to explain why, by the 1730s, the Paris police had pretty much given up. They tried to monitor the Huguenots and clamped down on gatherings or any kind of public activity, but as long as the Protestants stayed quiet they were largely ignored.

This, then, goes some way to explaining how it was that many families of Paris Protestants were able to retain a private faith and to re-emerge after the so-called Edict of Toleration in 1787. Their resistance to conversion, despite considerable pressure, left the Paris authorities with limited options, options furthermore that threatened the prosperity and the peace of the city. The police and the Parlement, after the troubles of the Fronde and with the memory of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre still in their minds, were not prepared to use the kind of force to which provincial Huguenots were subjected, nor were they willing to risk rousing the Catholic population against the Paris Protestants. It was not that they had any particular sympathy for the Huguenots and nor can they have feared the resistance of such a small minority. It was rather that the nature of the city and their conception of the interests of the state and of policing made these options unpalatable. They preferred containment. Thus the story of the Paris Protestants in the early eighteenth

²⁷ Thillay, *Le faubourg Saint-Antoine*, 166-72, 176-77 ; and Charles Read, "Les sépultures des Protestants étrangers et régnicoles à Paris, au XVIIIe siècle d'après les dépôts de l'état civil incendiés en 1871," *Bulletin historique et littéraire de la Société de l'histoire du protestantisme français*, 36 (1887), 25-35, 87-90, 133-41, 203-10, 260-69, 369-77 (29-31).

century provides a further example of the negotiated nature of government in early modern absolutist states. Even in the French capital—especially in the capital, in fact—there were limits to what royal authority could achieve without threatening its other goals of national prosperity and public order.

Even by mid century, Paris was a long way from toleration. Nevertheless, the pretense that there were no Protestants in Paris, when increasing numbers of Parisians knew they were there, sent a signal that the authorities did not see them as a threat. It was, paradoxically, a reversal of the situation before 1685 when the authorities actively undermined the legal recognition given to Protestants and thus conveyed to the Catholic population that discrimination was legitimate. The eighteenth-century policy of preferring public peace over strict application of the law, on the contrary, signaled de facto acceptance of difference, of a society in which different faiths could co-exist. The Paris authorities stopped talking publicly about Protestantism, implicitly taking a small step towards a state that was blind to religious diversity. Furthermore, while the clergy and religious zealots continued to campaign against Huguenots for some decades, the very small number of denunciations and the decline in references to friction between Catholics and Protestants suggest that public attitudes had begun to change quite early in the century. After the 1720s, and perhaps even earlier, police inaction was a discouragement to denunciation.

This both supports and nuances the insistence by historians of religious toleration on the extent to which new attitudes were imposed by governments. As Keith Luria has recently argued, the Edict of Nantes established a boundary between Catholics and Protestants, separating them in the interests of peace but in the process demarcating them more clearly. Louis XIV's policies were designed to separate them even further and then to eliminate the Huguenots.²⁸ Yet even before his death this policy had failed, though for different reasons in different parts of France. In Paris, by pushing the Protestants underground and into the midst of the Catholic population, it forced the two faiths together. At this point some Catholic Parisians would undoubtedly have responded violently if given the slightest encouragement, but the monarchy's claim to a monopoly of violence led it to outlaw such responses. In an increasingly secular society, the existence of Protestants in Paris was simply less of a threat to the aims of government than the possibility of religious conflict. The story of the Paris Protestants is a reminder, then, of the vital role that government policies and actions play in defining a context in which religious conflict or co-existence can develop. Yet there are clear indications that the government did not bear the full responsibility. While this article has not focused on the responses of Protestants and Catholics, it has pointed to indications that their actions helped to determine the impact of government policy. The factors determining their responses remain to be explored.

²⁸ Keith P. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries. Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early-Modern France* (Washington, DC, 2005), xxviii-xxxi.