
H-France Review Vol. 5 (April 2005), No. 44

N. M. Sutherland, *Henry IV of France and the Politics of Religion, 1572-1596*, 2 vols. Bristol and Portland: Elm Bank, 2002. xvi + 628 pp. \$99.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 1-84150-846-2.

Review by Ronald S. Love, University of West Georgia.

Few events in the history of sixteenth-century France have fascinated specialists in the field as much as Henri IV's final conversion to Catholicism on 25 July 1593, at a critical juncture in his early career. As a major step toward a final resolution of the last of the bitter civil wars of religion that had disrupted the kingdom for more than thirty years, Henri's abjuration was a momentous event that had profound implications for the subsequent shaping of royal power and society in France under later Bourbon monarchs. Prior to c. 1980, those historians who tackled the problem of Henri IV's conversion, in particular, and the whole question of the French religious wars, in general, tended to focus mostly on the political context, narrowly defined in a manner that seems rather two-dimensional to the modern reader. As a result, they rarely considered other factors of religious faith, personality, social behavior, economic conditions, institutional structures, and so on, which are necessary for understanding the multi-faceted dimensions of human action and decision-making.

During the last twenty-five years, however, a rich and varied historical literature has emerged to rehabilitate the central role of religion in early modern French history, in combination with important social, economic, and institutional developments, in a way that has broadened the historical perspective and steadily displaced the more traditional, political view. This research, whose origins may be traced as far back to Lucien Febvre's pioneering work, *La Problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (Paris: 1947) and Natalie Z. Davis' seminal article, "The Rites of Violence" (1965),^[1] not only reveals the intricate interconnection of religious life with social, political, and economic life as, perhaps, the essential defining focus behind personal, corporate, or community identities and confessional conflict in the sixteenth-century context. It also attempts to penetrate the thorny and often elusive issues of private-versus-public belief and the individual experience. In the process, historians have begun to examine such issues as atheism in an age of faith, and to identify the social, structural, and linguistic limitations in the formulation of contemporary religious, communal, and political perspectives as components of sixteenth-century French culture.^[2]

The discussion has broadened still further, meanwhile, to include the religiosity of specific constituencies, social groups (as defined by gender, status or some other qualifier), or political factions that adhered to a particular sectarian position. Some studies, for example, investigate the interconnection of confessional, social, and political life among the nobility, and the way in which these issues disrupted older ties of kinship and feudal loyalty that had bound together aristocratic society prior to the Reformation.^[3] The role of women in religious and social change during the early modern period has similarly become an object of systematic investigation.^[4] Still other scholars have begun to probe into the religious antecedents of the French civil wars, and, especially, into Catholic and Huguenot *mentalités* as expressed by their respective organizations and polemical works. Where more traditional treatments of French Calvinism concentrated, for instance, on the political aspects of the Huguenot struggle for legal recognition under the Valois and early Bourbon kings,^[5] newer studies explore the Calvinists' religiosity and the outward expression of faith that bound together their community and strengthened their resolve in the face of deadly opposition from the Catholic majority.^[6] Fresh assessments of the Guise-led League have similarly appeared, which portray it less as a rebellious political faction that threatened the social fabric, monarchy, and territorial integrity of

France, than as a quasi-reform movement that sought to safeguard the ancient constitution of the realm by opposing those factors that were perceived to endanger it: the spread of heresy and the absolutist centralization of the French state.^[7] Even more recently, the act of religious violence has become an object of intense scrutiny, most notably in Denis Crouzet's two-volume study, *Les Guerriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, vers 1525-vers 1610* (Seyssel: 1990). In each case, the conversion of Henri IV in July 1593 is regarded as a seminal event that had much wider ramifications for France, the French state, and French society beyond the merely political context.

Yet, in almost total disregard of the past quarter century of scholarship, to which the author makes scant reference, N. M. Sutherland returns to the more narrowly conceived political focus of older treatments of the subject in her new, two-volume book, *Henry IV of France and the Politics of Conversion 1572-1596*. In meticulous detail, Sutherland reconstructs in near-serial fashion the high-level discussions and endless maneuvers concerning the subject from the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 1572 down to the papal absolution of 1595. This is *histoire événementielle* of the most traditional sort. The author's purpose is "to chronicle the problems and difficulties which traversed the [final] conversion to Catholicism in 1593, and the Papal absolution in 1595, of Henry IV of France," but more particularly to place this "octopus subject" and its civil-war background into a wider European context, in order "to reach a fuller and more coherent understanding of Henry's conversion and absolution than has so far been attempted." Sutherland further asserts in a sweeping generalization that the great international significance of "these two distinct, yet indissoluble episodes, has never been elucidated." Above all, the author seeks to rehabilitate the political role of Rome in the events preceding the royal conversion, which "has consistently been divorced from the [papal] absolution and treated in isolation" (p. 1).

Consequently, this book is not intended to be a biography of Henry IV *per se*, though the focus (claims Sutherland) "is deliberately placed on Henry of Navarre himself." Neither is the book intended to be the history of a specific reign or country, nor of France's civil-religious wars. Its scope, divided into three parts, is meant to be broader. Part I discusses the domestic and international context of Navarre's abjuration under duress in September 1572, his excommunication by Pope Sixtus V in 1585 nine years after Navarre's renunciation of his forced Catholicism in 1576, the rebellion of the Catholic League, and the efforts of Henry III to induce Navarre to abjure as presumptive heir to the French throne. Ultimately, the chief thrust of this portion of the book was the need, "first and foremost", of Henry IV to survive politically after his accession to the crown in 1589. Part II examines how the new king gradually overcame his contested succession and began to obtain recognition as rightful monarch. Here, the collapse of the League and the way in which the open declaration of war against Spain in 1595 affected negotiations in Rome for Henry's abjuration form the central part of the discussion. Part III focuses on the Bourbon king's subsequent reconciliation with the Catholic Church and his absolution granted in September 1595.

Sutherland's chief contention--that because of a tendency to overlook events at Rome after 1589 historians have omitted a significant feature in the debate over Henry IV's conversion of 1593 and its culmination two years later with papal recognition--is intriguing and not without justification. For the most part, previous scholars have tended to view the role of the popes during the French Wars of Religion through the lens of France rather than that of Rome. By concentrating, instead, on the course of events as viewed from the perspective of the Holy See, specialists of the period could contribute important new dimensions to the on-going discussion over the French Wars of Religion and their broader implications. Not only could this approach help to sort out the papacy's political position *vis-à-vis* its shifting responses to pressure from Philip II and its concern to ensure a Catholic French monarchy as a counterpoise to Spain at the same time, but also the popes' religious desire to restore unity to Christendom and the Christian Church through reform of the faith under their spiritual

leadership. But that shift in perspective would require a very different book with a very different focus from the volume reviewed here.

What Sutherland's book effectively represents is a continuation, perhaps even a culmination, of her earlier studies on the French secretaries of state and the Huguenot "struggle for recognition," for which she is so well known. Approaching the subject from the same political viewpoint that is characteristic of her earlier works, Sutherland represents Henry IV's conversion as a problem shaped more by international than by domestic considerations, and although she acknowledges the "paramount importance of religion," she does so only within the context of its "inter-penetration" with politics as reflected by the title of the book. Her perspective thus shifts back and forth from France to Spain and the Dutch Netherlands, with occasional forays into political affairs as they unfolded in Rome, as she seeks to unravel the tangled skein of events associated with the royal conversion and absolution. But this is handled in such a way that Henry IV and sometimes even Rome itself become almost incidental to the discussion, the author's claims in her introduction to the contrary.

The *raison d'écrire* for the book is based, furthermore, on a set of false premises that do not bear the weight of scrutiny. Chief among these are Sutherland's assertions about the "missing links" in recent historical treatments of the subject. "The two principal problems of interpretation," she writes (p. 2), "have been seen as the timing of the king's long-delayed conversion, and the sincerity versus opportunism of his action"—both of which she dismisses as "spurious" matters of debate because, in her opinion, they are ultimately unfathomable. She then claims that "a proper consideration of the feasibility of Henry's conversion, and of the circumstances in which he was to perform what so many thought...he ought to have done," is lacking from all previous studies (p. 5). Yet her contention is merely the question of timing and sincerity-versus-opportunism stated in different terms. Similarly, in contrast to the author's assertions, previous historians have long agreed that Henry IV could not have converted by simple decree or declaration, but needed ecclesiastical assistance and, preferably, the participation of the papacy to be accepted; that his excommunication in 1585, along with his desires, plans, and actions up to 1593, were constrained, in part, by political conditions; that Habsburg Spain was an ever-present menace to the Bourbon monarch's position, though recent research by Geoffrey Parker, especially, has demonstrated that it was not so powerful as Sutherland maintains; and that Henry wanted to avoid conversion before having established a "firm foundation" from which to command obedience, recognition, and power in France.[8]

These commonplaces thus raise the problematic question as to what, precisely, is novel about Sutherland's contribution. The answer, regrettably, is little. To begin with, there is no discernable thesis to sustain the book or to carry forward the discussion to a conclusion that explains in coherent form the significance of the author's central assertion and its context. As a result, the book ends suddenly, without any clear resolution. The closest that Sutherland comes to offering a final assessment of the subject appears in her introduction, where she comments on the unfortunate coincidence between the promulgation of the papal absolution and the opening of a "desperate stage" in Henry's declared war against Spain. "Consequently, this consummation, so devoutly desired and so doggedly pursued as the supreme necessity failed to contribute to the general settlement of all his affairs of church and state to which Henry of Navarre had always aspired. Such a felicitous outcome eluded him, then and forever [.]" (p. 10). If, therefore, the issue of the papal absolution of 1595 contributed so little to the king's ultimate political success, and if Sutherland is unable to offer anything more concrete by way of conclusion, then what was the point of undertaking this study at all?

Perhaps this explains why most previous historians have focused on the royal conversion itself and the episcopal absolution granted at St. Denis, whose importance Sutherland largely overlooks. Yet, that absolution not only allowed the defenders of the king's conversion to tie the episcopal act to the liberties

of the Gallican Church; it also sufficed for these men to move forward with Henry's coronation at Chartres in 1594. Certainly, there was significance to the failure of the pope's absolution to produce more immediate results, which helped to sustain the war with Spain and a few League die-hards in France until 1598 when, confronted by the double threat of a new Huguenot rebellion by French Calvinists resentful over the king's "wonderful mutation"—coupled with his apparent failure to reward them with the religious liberties they felt were their due—and national exhaustion in the conflict with Philip II, Henry agreed to the treaties of Nantes and Vervins. But that significance is never elucidated. Instead, that the French kingdom was largely pacified by the time of the papal absolution in 1595 despite the continuing conflict with Spain suggests that the pope's recognition of the Calvinist-turned-Catholic king was far less essential to the conclusion of the Wars of Religion than Sutherland would have her readers believe.

In the absence, therefore, of real analysis of the issues or substantial interpretation of events, the great historical question "So what?" remains unanswered. Nor is the author's devotion to unrelenting detail a substitute for this oversight. On the contrary, her meticulous descriptions of discussions and maneuvers, no matter how trivial or inconsequential they might have been to the outcome of events, both slows her narrative and renders her discussion opaque, while adding nothing substantial to the historical debate. Take, for example, Sutherland's explanation of Navarre's excommunication by Sixtus V in 1585. "This dramatic event," she writes, "had been vigorously canvassed in Rome by Spain and the League. Henceforth, Navarre's fortunes were to be the subject of constant, hostile manipulation in Rome where—in respect of France—Papal politics were largely dominated by his worst enemies [.]" (p. 103). These observations are followed with a blow-by-blow account over the next twenty pages of the issue as it developed at Rome, from which the reader essentially learns that the "rift between France and the Papacy was widening," while Navarre's fortunes were the subject of constant hostile manipulation at the Holy See, where papal politics were largely dominated by his worst enemies. Sutherland's ability to work her way through the intricate negotiations, political maneuvers and back-stairs intrigue surrounding the events described in her book is indeed impressive. The problem arises, however, when all events of the kind that interest her are accorded an equal place in the narrative, in what can only be explained as her scrupulous desire to leave nothing out. The reader is thus left to ponder just what discussions or maneuvers mattered most, or which ones mattered not at all.

This brings us, finally, to the matter of sources. Research for the book was based almost entirely on the standard printed primary materials, such as the collected correspondence of the prominent Huguenot leader Philippe Duplessis-Mornay and the diplomatic dispatches of the Venetian ambassadors and papal nuncios. There are very few references to any archival materials—indeed, the number of citations of this sort can be counted almost literally on the fingers of two hands—and none at all to printed pamphlets. To be sure, the published letters, memoirs, and other documents used by Sutherland are essential sources that still contain surprises, no matter how often they are consulted. But, given her claims to originality of perspective on the subject and her approach to the role of the papacy in the French Wars of Religion, archival research—especially among the rich resources contained in the Vatican Library—are surely indispensable. To limit the range and depth of research to standard printed materials is especially surprising in a professional historian of Sutherland's stature. Her decision to treat the *déroulement* of events at the highest levels of decision-making without reference to popular polemic or public opinion also effectively confines her discussion to a political vacuum, in which the centrality of the religious dimension to everyone involved, whatever his social status, political position, or personal ambitions, is made to appear irrelevant.

As a result, Sutherland's approach departs widely from recent scholarship on Henry IV and the Wars of Religion, any discussion of which is largely absent. Nowhere, for example, is the work of Denis Crouzet, or recent work by any other French historian for that matter, cited in this study. This notable omission ought to have been accounted for somewhere in the introduction. Though some of these titles are listed

in the author's bibliography, numerous biographies of the king published in France during the past two decades by Jean-Pierre Babelon, Yves Cazeau, and Janine Garrisson, just to name three, are similarly overlooked.[9] Meanwhile, the recent work of only two North American scholars, who grapple with many of the same issues of interest to Sutherland, was consulted: *The Conversion of Henri IV: Politics, Power, and Religious Belief in Early Modern France* (1993) by Michael Wolfe, and *Blood and Religion: The Conscience of Henri IV, 1553-1593* (2001) by Ronald S. Love. But these two books, along with Thierry Wanegffelen's *Ni Rome ni Genève: Des fidèles entre deux chaises en France au XVIe siècle* (Paris: 1997), are used chiefly as introductions to Sutherland's own discussion and rarely appear thereafter. Important new research by Mack Holt, Annette Finlay-Croswhite, William Beik, Michel De Waele, and numerous other American and Canadian scholars in recent years appears nowhere in the author's references or bibliography.[10] Otherwise, most of the secondary materials from which she draws were published before 1980 and thus have a largely political focus, including her own body of work which is far and away cited more often than anything else. But by excluding much of the more recent historiography on the French Wars of Religion, Henry IV and the confessional crisis that pervaded all levels of life and society during the sixteenth-century age of reform, Sutherland is able to side-step confessional considerations or issues of conscience that might have mattered to contemporary players in the events she describes on her reductionist argument that international, not domestic considerations shaped Henry IV's conversion and the papal absolution, while religion had little or no bearing on the civil conflict or political affairs even at Rome, though it still represented the spiritual center of Christendom.

Ultimately, the major flaw of this book, to which all the others may be attributed, is its regrettable lack of craftsmanship, despite the amount of work the author clearly devoted to her task. That Sutherland did not publish with an academic press suggests that her original manuscript was unacceptable in its current form, and likely would not have been printed without substantial revisions that took into account recent scholarship in the field; that significantly broadened the research base to include much more archival material; that developed a coherent central argument; or that condensed the manuscript by focusing on the issues that really mattered.

NOTES

[1] Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1965).

[2] For examples of studies of religious faith during in early modern France and Europe published prior to 1980, see: D. C. Allen, *Doubt's Boundless Sea: Skepticism and Faith in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1964); G. E. Aylmer, "Unbelief in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Puritans and Revolutionaries*, ed. by Donald Pennington and Keith Thomas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); François Berriot, *Athéismes et athéistes au XVIe siècle en France*, 2 vols. (Lille: A.N.R.T., 1977). For more recent works on the subject, see: M. J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Jean Delumeau et al., *Croyantes et sceptiques au XVIe siècle: Le dossier des épicuriens* (Strasbourg: Librairie ISTR, 1981); John Edwards, "Religious Faith and Doubt in late Medieval Spain," *Past and Present*, CXX (1988): 5-25; Alan C. Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[3] See, for example: John Salmon, *Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century* (London: E. Benn, 1975); June Shimizu, *Conflict of Loyalties: Politics and Religion in the Career of Gaspard de Coligny, Admiral of France, 1519-1572* (Geneva: Droz, 1990); Jean-Marie Constant, "La Pénétration des idées de la

Réforme protestante dans la noblesse provinciale française à travers quelques exemples,” in *Les Réformes: Enracinement socio-culturel, XXVe colloque international d'études humanistes* (Paris: 1985); Kristen B. Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-Century France* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1989); Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de revolt: La noblesse française et la gestation de l'état modern, 1559-1661* (Paris: Fayard, 1989).

[4] Although older, Nany L. Roelker's study, *Queen of Navarre--Jeanne d'Albret, 1528-1572* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), made an important contribution to the theme of women and the French Reformation. For more recent examples, see: Evelyn Berriot-Salvatore, *Les Femmes dans la société française de la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 1990); Wendy Gibson, *Women in Seventeenth-Century France* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).

[5] See, for example: N. M. Sutherland, *The Huguenot Struggle for Recognition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), and by the same author, *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew in the European Conflict* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973); Henry M. Baird, *History of the Rise of the Huguenots of France*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1900), and by the same author, *The Huguenots and Henry of Navarre*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribners, 1886); James W. Thompson, *The Wars of Religion in France, 1559-1576* (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1957).

[6] See, for example: Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), and by the same author, “The Huguenot Psalter and the Faith of French Protestants in the Sixteenth Century,” in *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500-1800)*, ed. by Barbara B. Diefendorf and Carla Hesse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); Janine Garrisson, *Les Protestants au XVIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

[7] Among the most prominent revisionist works on the League, see: Élie Barnavie, *Le Parti de Dieu: Étude sociale et politique des chefs de la Ligue parisienne, 1585-1594* (Louvain: Éditions Nauwerlaerts, 1980); and with Robert Descimon, *La Sainte Ligue, le Juge et la Potence: L'assassinat du président Brisson (15 Novembre 1591)* (Paris: Hachette, 1985); Frederick J. Baumgartner, *Radical Reactionaries: The Political Thought of the French Catholic League* (Geneva: Droz, 1976); Robert Descimon, *Qui étaient les Seize? Mythes et réalités de la Ligue parisienne, 1585-1594* (Paris: Hachette, 1983); Robert R. Harding, “Revolution and Reform in the Holy League: Angers, Rennes, Nantes,” *The Journal of Modern History*, XLIII (1981):379-416.

[8] These issues are dealt with specifically in such recent biographies of the king as: David Buisseret, *Henry IV* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984); Jean-Pierre Babelon, *Henri IV* (Paris: Fayard, 1982); Janine Garrisson, *Henri IV* (Paris: 1984) Michael Wolfe, *The Conversion of Henri IV: Politics, Power, and Religious Belief in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Ronald S. Love, *Blood and Religion: The Conscience of Henri IV, 1553-1593* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill University Press, 2001) Among Geoffrey Parker's numerous works that illustrate the eroding power of Philip II's Spain are: *The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road, 1567-1659* (Cambridge: Ca 1972); *The Dutch Revolt* (London: Allen Lane, 1977); *Spain and the Netherlands, 1559-1659* (London: Fontana Press, 1979); *The Thirty Years' War* (London and New York: Routledge, 1984).

[9] Babelon, *Henri IV*; Yves Cazaux, *Henri IV ou la grande victoire*, 2 vols. (Paris: A. Michel, 1977); Garrisson, *Henri IV*, (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1984).

[10] Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and by the same author, “Putting Religion Back into the Wars of Religion,” *French Historical*

Studies, 18:2 (1993):524-51; *Society and Institutions in Early Modern France*, ed. by Mack P. Holt (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Annette Finlay-Croswhite, *Henry IV and the Towns: The Pursuit of Legitimacy in French Urban Society, 1589-1610* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); William Beik, *Urban Protest in Seventeenth-Century France: The Culture of Retribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Michel De Waele, *Les Relations entre le parlement de Paris et Henri IV* (Paris: Publisud, 2000).

Ronald S. Love
University of West Georgia
rlove@westga.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172