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Stairway to Heaven: Calvinist Grief and Redemption in the French Wars of Religion

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Ce que vous pouvez ordinairement voir par le sang espandu de quelqu'un de nos freres, qui sert de sémence pour en engendrer cent, voire mille autres, comme dit Saint Luc: les persecutions sont l'échelle par laquelle il nous faut monter au cieux.¹

The loss of almost the entire Huguenot leadership and of thousands of French Protestants in the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacres was initially experienced in a traumatic fashion as biblical punishment,² the manifestation of divine wrath on France but equally on the elect people, whose members "comported abominably even compared to atheists or cannibals".³ The foremost concern of the French Calvinist leadership, now gathered in Geneva, was, however, to put up with the dramatic fall in the numbers of the faithful in France. Under the guidance of Theodore Beza, the exiled French Calvinist leadership engaged in a publishing campaign for the consolation of distressed brethren and the recuperation of "lost souls".

The intensification of persecution and the ensuing multiplication of Protestant victims in France since the 1550s had led to the emergence of a martyrological discourse propounded principally by Antoine de Chandieu and Jean Crespin.⁴ Since its inception, Calvinist martyrology not only sought to strengthen the morale of the persecuted faithful by presenting them with edifying tales of courage and heroic martyrdom for the truth of the Gospel, but it actually attempted to offer a rational explanation, based on the Providential plan, for the

apparently impossible situation facing the French Protestant minority. As such, it evolved in accordance with the new circumstances, integrating the increasing number of martyrs into a general history of the Church of Christ, empirically founded on the new historical sources that represented the interrogations and confessions of faith of the martyrs.⁵ The outbreak of hostilities in 1562 created the need to enlarge the list of the few elect that chose martyrdom for the truth of the Gospel with the thousands of anonymous deaths from warfare, repression and hardship. They, too, were “soldiers of Christ”, dying under His banner; only this time, the diabolical enemy had resorted to a new type of accusation, convicting the faithful not only as heretics, but also as rebels to the king and their country.⁶

Apart from systematic recourse to Clément Marot’s Psalter, the Huguenot identification tag since the 1550s,⁷ the printed production of Geneva following the events of 1572 provided numerous tracts and pamphlets, whose rhetoric varied from the consolation of survivors in France and in other places where the French Protestants had sought refuge, to strong warnings of the evil that constituted “apostasy” and pressing appeals for the return to the word of the Gospel. In early December 1572, the Genevan company of ministers called from every church in the city all those “who had been infected by idolatry in order to save their lives” to present themselves on their own will before the city council and confess their error. Around a hundred persons conformed to the appeal in the following three weeks, a number that showed that the sense of private shame and, primarily, of the *vulnerability* of the persecuted French Protestants, weighed more than the campaign for the collective cleansing of the community from Catholic blasphemy.⁸

Strategies of overcoming

In the hymn composed on the occasion of the massacre by the French refugee noble Etienne de Maisonneuve, dated 30 August 1572, the subjugation of personal experience to the Calvinist martyrological discourse becomes apparent. The first two stanzas describe in dramatic accuracy the extent of the disaster and the collapse of Calvinist morale: “Our voices turned into cries / our lamps extinguished / our temples demolished / our churches dispersed / our unions dismantled and our prayers abolished / our houses pillaged / our laws violated / our mansions destroyed / our books turned into ashes / our hearts ready to give in / our spirit defeated.” Yet, the final verses of the hymn present an appeal to perseverance and the certainty of divine vengeance on the tyrants: “As for us, I predict / that the Leader of our Church / Who resides in heaven / if we are patient / will avenge us / before the year passes.”⁹ The “sea of blood” that inundates the faithful is the prelude to the final triumph of the elect, the end of time, when the children of God, following on the steps of the people of Israel, will come out of their Egyptian captivity, their weakness turned into power, their fear into joy and assurance, their serfdom into liberty.¹⁰ De Maisonneuve’s personal response to calamity, his feeling of fear and despair thus finally recedes, effaces itself by being assimilated into the all-encompassing interpretive framework put forward by Calvinist martyrology.¹¹

Jean de Léry’s *Histoire memorable de la ville de Sancerre*, composed as a chronicle of the dramatic siege and final surrender of the Huguenot stronghold of Sancerre between January and August 1573,¹² represents a more eloquent example of the clash between self exploration and

Calvinist emotional management.¹³ De Léry served as minister of the faith in the besieged community, comforting the distressed brethren with the Calvinist message of final redemption. He witnessed bravery before the Catholic forces, then acute famine and despair, culminating in scenes of depravity, when a family in the town was arrested and sentenced to death for having cooked and consumed the body of their little daughter, a victim of the famine. To Léry's mind, the "tragic story of Sancerre" acquires apocalyptic dimensions, becomes a world turned upside-down, as the extreme harshness of their daily life pushes the inhabitants to the limit of their endurance and forces some to commit acts of perversion.¹⁴ De Léry decides to break up with the Calvinist intransigents and plays a crucial role in the negotiations that led to the town's surrender to the royal forces.

His narrative then constitutes a double apology: a reaction to the Catholic charge of treason and sedition on the part of the people of Sancerre and, equally, to the normative order of emotions set by the Calvinist martyrological discourse.¹⁵ In this day-to-day narrative of hardship, endurance, bravery and despair, however, the Calvinist presentation of the self is not lacking; modelling himself on Flavius Josephus, de Léry narrates yet another episode of the siege of Jerusalem/Sancerre by the Roman/Catholic forces.¹⁶ The historian-turned-prophet provides detailed information of the town, its fortified walls, the condition of the Protestant garrison as well as of the Catholic army, recounts the various skirmishes, and even suggests a total number of canon shots fired against Sancerre and provides a list of the known dead and wounded.

Yet, the heroic stance of the fighting "children of God" does not prevent them from succumbing to human weakness and it actually ends in capitulation. De Léry presents himself ready to legitimise, like the biblical prophets, the acceptance of the disaster; all calamities coming from God and directed against the town of Sancerre as well as other Calvinist communities in the kingdom are punishment for the sins and the moral degradation of the faithful. Still, the sinful inhabitants of Sancerre become martyrs of the faith, soldiers of the *Ecclesia militans*, as their cause is right. It is "the cause, not the pain inflicted, that makes the martyr".¹⁷ The cause provides the Calvinist interpretive framework, as it turns defeat into triumph, absolves sin through the final redemption. At the same time, de Léry exonerates the inhabitants of the town – and himself – from the charge of apostasy, of succumbing to the diabolical enemy. The people of Sancerre fought like inspired soldiers of Christ. In the end, however, they were only human and had to accept the harsh realities of defeat. God wished them to do so.¹⁸

Expression and exploration of the self as opposed to total immersion in the collectivity of the elect becomes emblematic in Agrippa d'Aubigné's dark poem *Les Tragiques*.¹⁹ The product of a long gestation (1577–1616), the poem offers a highly personalised account of the French Wars of Religion and of the fate and fortunes of the French Calvinist minority, in a tense and often antagonistic relationship to the Calvinist master narrative. On first view a martyrology like Crespin's, *Les Tragiques* quickly subordinates factual history to a highly selective personal narrative, culminating after seven books in the final apocalyptic *Jugement*. Instead of the dry, impersonal style of the Genevan compiler, d'Aubigné's authorial presence – and emotions – can be felt throughout the poem. *Les Tragiques* is ultimately a text about election,²⁰ where the lives of the martyrs and the interventions of the author himself serve as "pointers" for the intended readers.

In the fourth book of the poem, entitled *Feux*, a highly dramatised account presents the martyrs of the faith as triumphing over death in the Calvinist martyrological fashion. Facing a tyrannical monarch serving the papal Church, the faithful choose a heroic exodus through the “burning ladder”, the “pyramid of fire” which carries them to heaven.²¹ In an era of total distress, the martyrs become beacons of divine light.²² This era of heroic courage is however succeeded by the dark times described in Book V, *Les Fers*, when the younger generation of Huguenots are ready to trade with the Devil in order to reach a compromise with the Catholic foe. This climate of bewilderment and of Protestant defeatism also includes the author, who seeks redemption in the ensuing *Vengeances*, confessing his weakness and cowardice before the victorious enemy.²³ All ends in ecstatic manner in the concluding *Jugement*, where the poet, cleansed and speechless, faces his Creator.

As a call for the continuation of the fight against Catholicism, *Les Tragiques* was obviously out of fashion for the French political realities of the early seventeenth century; as a treatise in self-consciousness, however, *Les Tragiques* truly revolutionised Calvinist self-perception. By associating salvation with writing and by stressing the fictional dimension of his narrative, d'Aubigné broke up with a tradition of “invisible authorial style”, as established primarily by Theodore Beza; a ban on literary fiction as a construction of the sinful self, interposing itself between God's Word and the soul, as opposed to the impersonal style of Calvinist exegetical works, serving only to magnify God's Word.²⁴ In his opening address to his readers, d'Aubigné appears outspoken: “We have had enough with books which instruct; we need books which stir the emotions.”²⁵

Calvinist self-perception was founded on an *effacement of the self*; the persecuted brethren were instruments of God, vehicles echoing divine will. Focus on one's sinful self detracted from meditation on the divine²⁶ and, on a more worldly approach, undermined the inner cohesion of a minority fighting for its survival. Against this, d'Aubigné adopts what Catharine Randall Coats has described as “a strategy of self-inscription”, “writing himself into” his text. In his mind, election sanctifies self-expression; moving away from Calvinist martyrological discourse, d'Aubigné speaks about himself as an individual self and not as a self subsumed into a larger, ideological system.²⁷



If we approach Calvinism following the interpretative framework proposed by William Reddy, that is, as a strict emotional regime which sought to impose strong emotional management tools, based on the bipolar construction of sin and redemption,²⁸ at the expense of allowing greater scope for self-exploration and navigation on the part of the members of the community, then the reaction of the anonymous thousands to the appeal of the Genevan Company of Pastors in early December 1572 attests to the fundamental inability of the system in dealing with human *vulnerability*.²⁹ Against this normative order for emotions, but staying within the framework of Calvinist self-perception, d'Aubigné attempts to craft his own personal way to salvation.

NOTES

- 1 *Memoires de Condé, servant d'éclaircissement et de Preuves à l'histoire de M. de Thou, contenant ce qui c'est passé de plus mémorable en Europe*, London and Paris: Rollin, 1743, vol. II, pp. 288–289.
- 2 “Ode de M. de Chandieu sur les misères des églises françaises qui ont esté par si longtemps persécutées”, *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 33 (1884), p. 84.
- 3 Jacques Gaches, *Mémoires sur les guerres de religion à Castres et dans le Languedoc, 1555–1610*, Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1879, pp. 110–111; Henri Lancelot Voisin de la Popelinère, *L'Histoire de France, enrichie des plus notables occurrences survenues sur les provinces de l'Europe et pays voisins, depuis l'an 1550 jusqu'à ce temps*, La Rochelle: Abraham H[a]ultin, 1581, vol. II, p. 100.
- 4 Antoine de Chandieu, *Histoire des persécutions et martyrs de l'église de Paris, depuis l'an 1557 iusques au temps du roy Charles neufoiesme*, Lyon: Duplain, 1563; Jean Crespin, *Histoire des vrays tesmoins de la verité de l'évangile, qui de leur sang l'ont signée, depuis Jean Hus iusques au temps present*, Geneva, 1570.
- 5 Jean-François Gilmont, *Jean Crespin. Un éditeur réformé du XVIe siècle*, Geneva: Droz, 1981, pp. 166–179; Charles H. Parker, “French Calvinists as the Children of Israel: An Old-Testament Self-consciousness in Jean Crespin's *Histoire des martyrs* before the Wars of Religion”, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 24:2 (1993), pp. 228–238; Frank Lestringant, *Lumière des Martyrs. Essai sur le martyre au siècle des Réformes*, Paris: Champion, 2004, pp. 36–38; Catharine Randall Coats, *Subverting the System. D'Aubigné and Calvinism*, (= *Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies* 14), Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1990, pp.87–88.
- 6 Crespin, “Conclusion”, in idem, *Histoire des vrays tesmoins de la verité de l'évangile*, pp.709–709b.
- 7 The tract of the refugee minister Jean de l'Espine, *Traicté de l'apostasie*, cited extended passages from the Psalter, in an effort to “reunite” the lost brethren with their recent past. Barbara Diefendorf, “The Huguenot Psalter and the Faith of French Protestants in the Sixteenth Century”, in Barbara Diefendorf and Carla Hesse (eds), *Culture and Identity in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)*, University of Michigan Press, 1993, pp. 48–54.
- 8 In his *Briefve et chrestienne remonstrance aux François Révoltez* (1574), the minister Simon Goulart warned the “apostates” of the hardships that awaited them, calling them to “abandon the synagogue of the Antichrist and return immediately to the Church of God”. Goulart's text was included in a new edition of Crespin's martyrology, edited by Goulart himself, published in Geneva in 1597. Scott M. Manetsch, *Theodore Beza and the Quest for Peace in France, 1572–1598*, Leiden: Brill, 2000, pp. 43–45.
- 9 Henri Léonard Bordier, *Le Chansonnier Huguenot du XVIe siècle*, Paris: Librairie Tross, 1870, pp. 288–294.
- 10 “Ode de M. de Chandieu sur les misères des églises françaises”, pp. 84–85.
- 11 Joanna Bourke, “Fear and Anxiety: Writing about Emotion in Modern History”, *History Workshop Journal* 55 (2003), p. 119.
- 12 Géralde Nakam, *Au lendemain de la Saint Barthélemy. Guerre civile et famine. Histoire mémorable du Siège de Sancerre (1573) de Jean de Léry*, Paris: Éditions Anthropos, 1975.
- 13 William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling. A Framework for the History of Emotions*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001, pp. 124–126.
- 14 Nakam, *Au lendemain de la Saint Barthélemy*, p. 177.

- 15 Lestringant, *Lumière des Martyrs*, pp. 103–105; Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, p. 124.
- 16 Nakam, *Au lendemain de la Saint Barthélemy*, pp. 136–139.
- 17 Ibid., pp. 184–185.
- 18 Lestringant, *Lumière des Martyrs*, pp. 105–109.
- 19 Agrippa d'Aubigné, *Les Tragiques*, ed. Frank Lestringant, Paris: Gallimard, 2003.
- 20 Catharine Randall Coats, *(Em)bodying the Word. Textual Resurrections in the Martyrological Narratives of Foxe, Crespin, de Beze and d'Aubigné*, New York: Peter Lang, 1992, p. 124.
- 21 This metaphor of a "stairway to heaven" was used in Calvinist apologies since the early 1560s. *Complainte Apologique des Eglises de France, 1561. Au Roy, Roine-Mere, Roy de Navarre, & autres du Conseil*, in *Memoires de Condé*, vol. II, pp. 288–289.
- 22 D'Aubigné, *Les Tragiques*, pp. 189–228.
- 23 D'Aubigné, *Les Tragiques*, pp. 26 (F. Lestringant, Preface), 229–272, 273–304.
- 24 Randall Coats, *Subverting the System*, pp. 1–6.
- 25 D'Aubigné, "Aux lecteurs", *Les Tragiques*, p. 53.
- 26 Randall Coats, *Subverting the System*, p. 190.
- 27 Randall Coats, *Subverting the System*, p. 54–55; *(Em)bodying the Word*, p. 141.
- 28 Peter Marshall provides an interesting discussion on the parallel management of the "fear of God" by Catholic and Protestant theologians, as well as on its inherent difficulties, in the case of the English Reformation: Peter Marshall, "Fear, Purgatory and Polemic in Reformation England", William G. Naphy and Penny Roberts (eds), *Fear in Early Modern Society*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997, pp. 150–166.
- 29 Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling*, p. 126.