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The French Wars of Religion and the Problem of Teaching Confessionally Partisan History

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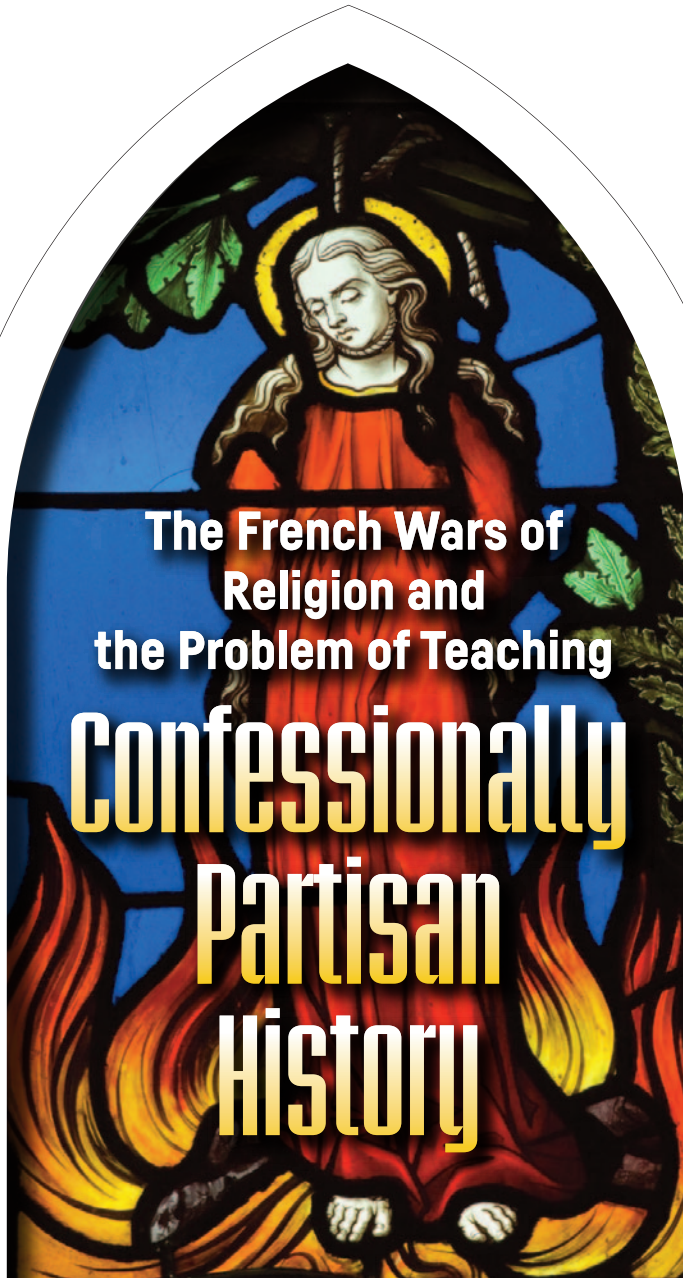
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Recommended Citation

Trim, David J. B., "The French Wars of Religion and the Problem of Teaching Confessionally Partisan History" (2021). *Faculty Publications*. 4361.

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How should Seventh-day Adventist scholars and teachers treat the historical events of a period of warfare, violence, and cruelty in the name of religion, such as the French Wars of Religion, when most of the violence and viciousness seems to come from one side? How do we do justice to the historical reality without seeming to perpetuate a triumphalist and polemical Protestant narrative of history? Can we model objectivity to our students and still honor the spirit of the Reformers?

A Problem With Teaching the Reformation

Seventh-day Adventist history teachers face a problem when it comes to teaching the Reformation. We are members of a denomination which, from its mid-19th-century North American origins, has always been suspicious of, when not downright hostile to, the Roman Catholic Church in general. Specifically, our view of both the 16th-century Reformers and the era bearing their name has tended to be essentially that of traditional Protestant historiography.¹ When it comes to the history of these events, we are confessionally partisan.

The French Wars of Religion and the Problem of Teaching Confessionally Partisan History

Yet the discipline of history, perhaps more than any other of the humanities, demands objectivity and distancing of teachers and researchers from their own assumptions about their subject. In English literature, as practiced today, it is perfectly legitimate for a text to be read from varied perspectives or to have multiple interpretations. In anthropology, the concept of “distance” between researcher and subject is increasingly perceived as a legacy of imperialism, and *reflexivity*, i.e., the effect a subject

group has on a researcher who becomes truly part of that group, is the new watchword.

In history, however, objectivity is still vital. This is not to say that historians imagine that they come to a subject without preconceived ideas; but the historian must do all in her or his power to put those preconceptions to one side and be objective. This is not only an issue for those Adventist historians who publish actively; so intrinsic is objectivity and scholarly detachment to the discipline that schoolteachers, too, inevitably seek to model it in the classroom—or else they are not teaching actual history.

A particular problem with objectivity comes when the Adventist teacher or researcher engages with the

European wars of religion that followed the Reformation, and which raged roughly from the early mid-16th century to the later mid-17th century. Not only are teachers confronted with a range of atrocities, all carried out in the name of Christianity; they also find that the bulk of the murder and mayhem had its origin with the adherents of the Church of Rome. Is there a way we can be equally true to our discipline, the evidence, and to our faith?

BY D. J. B. TRIM

I think there is, and this article explores one approach, taking the example of the *guerres de religion*: the French Wars of Religion (1562-1598). My approach to how these might be taught draws not only on the historical evidence but also on a frank recognition of my own background and consequent biases.²

My approach reflects, too, my belief that neither Seventh-day Adventists in particular, nor Protestants in general, have a unique monopoly on a relationship with God. And while an integral part of being a Seventh-day Adventist is recognizing that God has revealed to us truths ignored by members of other Christian denominations, it is nevertheless clear that we do not yet have a complete grasp of divine truth, either. In consequence, when we are in the classroom, it is inappropriate to teach either a triumphalist or a hostile narrative about any individual Christian tradition. We should acknowledge that God has been honored by (and will ultimately honor) people from all denominations.³

This approach allows us to honor both professional standards (by teaching and publishing objective history) and Christian standards. The two can be complementary, rather than contradictory, even when considering the Reformation or wars of religion.

Personal Preconceptions

My first acquaintance with the French Wars of Religion came as a boy, and my view was shaped by two similar but different formative influences. My father was a second-generation Seventh-day Adventist pastor, and so the family's history books that I consumed as a child and adolescent made it very clear that Protestants were the good guys and Catholics the bad guys. But there was an additional, specific influence on how I thought about the Reformation in France—one I am sure I share with many other Adventist high school and college teachers.

Walter C. Utt, the distinguished long-time Pacific Union College-based historian, did not turn his detailed re-

search on the Huguenots of Louis XIV's reign into scholarly monographs; instead, he wrote two carefully accurate historical novels for adolescents and older children, vividly capturing the French Reformed world in the mid- to late-1680s, when religious liberty in France was destroyed. These books were very popular. I grew up reading them, and as a result, the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes was a recognizable event to me from a very young age.

Utt's novels were set decades after the end of the Wars of Religion, but because of their content, my boyish imagination was captured by the heroism and drama of the Huguenots' battles; my sympathies were also captured by the fact that it seemed as if *the right side won*. Thus, I instinctively identified Huguenots as doubly the "good guys." When I first read that the Prince de Condé's cavalry at the Battle of Dreux (1562) were

mostly clad in white (probably cassocks, over their full-plate armor), it seemed only appropriate. Utt thus certainly influenced how I viewed the earlier period.

As I grew older and studied early modern history at college and then researched the French Wars of Religion for my PhD, of course I discovered that the campaigns of the wars were filled with bloody deeds of cowardice, cruelty, and brutality, and that alongside the formal warfare, informal, communal violence was endemic, in which brutality and cruelty were even more common. So, to what extent do the influences of my youth still affect me? To some extent, it need not matter. Historians of the Reformation era have tended to come from clear confessional positions, but so long as they recognized this (and allow for it), it has not made their work less credible or historically respectable. In any case, very few modern Christian histo-

Sidebar 1

Duty to Scholarship and Faith

This article has focused on 16th-century France but offers an example of how teachers can approach either the Reformation in other countries or other wars of religion. Accepting that there is good and ill on both sides does not mean a retreat into postmodernist relativism. The Huguenots strayed into violent and unchristian behavior themselves, but they did so in resisting Catholic violence, and in their enthusiasm to communicate to their fellow citizens a correct understanding of God's love for humanity.

Modern Western society gives offense to Muslims because of its crass materialism; Western political leaders often exercise power cynically, and with little regard, outside their own borders, for the freedoms they claim to hold dear. Neither of these shortcomings is the slightest justification for the murders of adults and children of various nations, races, and faiths. But they should make teachers and students alike think about how we, as Christian citizens, ought to act in the future.

In teaching the history of confessional disputes or conflicts, or in teaching the modern clash of faiths, it is our duty as teachers to make students aware when all sides are at fault; yet where one side is more responsible for violence than the other(s), it is also our duty as teachers to make that clear. But we shouldn't fear to point out the flaws of past generations of Protestants, or of our own present-day nations and societies, for, in so doing, we simply make students aware of the nature of fallen human beings. In that, we do justice to the demands both of scholarship and of our faith.

rians, regardless of their formative influences or instinctive prejudices, carry over the historical confessional enmities they study into the present day or their personal lives.

If most Seventh-day Adventists are, like me, still cheering (in some part of our minds) for the Reformers and their followers when reading historical accounts of the 16th and 17th centuries, probably many of us would like reconciliation with Roman Catholics, at a personal level, albeit not at the institutional, ecclesiological, or theological levels. Then, too, those who practice the discipline of history, whether at high school or college level, are well aware of the professional imperative to be objective.

There are many factors, then, that lead Christian historians of Reformation Europe to seek to distance themselves from the people they study. However, the French Wars of Religion pose a particular problem to Protestant historians because in their studies of the Wars of Religion, historical fact and personal prejudice seem to coincide.

Catholic Repression and Persecution

When considering the record of religious violence in late 16th-century France, guilt seems to lie overwhelmingly with those on the Roman Catholic side.

In the 1540s, there were mass executions of Protestants in many French towns. Although these were quasi-judicial proceedings against people convicted of heresy, they are striking because of the numbers killed. And they were succeeded by less formal and more massive acts of brutality. In 1561, for example, when convicted heretics were released by royal decree as part of a short-lived attempt to achieve compromise, in the town of Marsillargues, a Catholic crowd rounded them up “and executed and burned them in the streets.”⁴

Then in 1562, the First Civil War/War of Religion was triggered by the slaughter of a whole congregation of Huguenots worshipping in a barn outside the small town of Vassy. It was the

first of many massacres, of which the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre in Paris (August 24, 1572) is only the best-known and most horrific. In less than 24 hours, some 3,000 Huguenots, including women and children and the elderly, were murdered (something Pope John Paul II carefully avoided apologizing for during his visit to Paris in August 1997 when he provocatively celebrated a public mass *on* St. Bartholomew’s Day).

In the weeks that followed the massacre in Paris, between two thousand and five thousand more Huguenots were killed across France as the news of the massacre arrived in the country’s cities. This set off copycat massacres of the local Protestant populations. At Bordeaux, the killings occurred after a Jesuit preached a sermon “on how the Angel of the Lord had already executed God’s judgment in Paris, Orléans and elsewhere and would do so in Bordeaux.”⁵

Elsewhere, though, massacres often did not take place in the hot blood of religious fervor—the degree of calculation is sometimes chilling. In Rouen, for example, many of the Huguenots were in prison, and Catholic zealots broke into the jail “and systematically butchered them.”⁶ In Lyons, the lead-

ing Catholic killers made public display of their bloodied clothing in the streets, being boastful rather than regretful.

Where Catholics lacked the numbers or confidence to attempt to put all their confessional rivals to the sword, they used other tactics. Thus, at Sens, in 1562, a mob, drawn from both the town and nearby villages, confronted the Calvinists coming out of church and engaged them in “a bloody battle.”⁷ In Lyon the same year, Catholic boys stoned Protestant worshippers on their way to service. At Pamiers in 1566, a youth society performing a ritual in honor of Pentecost entered the Calvinist quarter as the local pastor was preaching, then began to sing “kill, kill,”⁸ and serious fighting began that was [to last] for three days.⁹

The violence spilled over even into the organized campaigns of the civil wars in which, in theory, the rule of war ought to have applied. But Louis I de Bourbon, prince de Condé, leader of the Huguenot cause up to 1569, was murdered as he tried to surrender after being unhorsed in the Battle of Jarnac in March 1569. Two other Huguenot generals, Montgomery and Briquemault, were denied the rights of pris-

Sidebar 2

Ideas for Teaching the Wars of Religion

- For college-level courses: the great Renaissance English playwright, Christopher Marlowe, wrote a play about the St. Bartholomew’s Massacre, *The Massacre at Paris*. The great 19th-century French novelist, Alexandre Dumas, wrote a famous novel with the massacre and religious conflict at its center, *La Reine Margot* (sometimes published in translation under this title, sometimes as *Queen Margot*). For a particularly capable group of students, studying the historical evidence about the massacres along with these classic literary texts will be enriching and prompt reflection about the nature of historical evidence and of history itself.

- Use role-play: Divide the class into three groups. Assign one the part of 16th-century French Catholic nobles; the second, the part of ordinary Catholic citizens; and the third, the part of Huguenots. Have the students do background reading, then come to class ready to explain and to justify why their historical counterparts took the actions they did in massacres and violence. Students will start to see beyond their own preconceptions.

oners after being captured in 1574, and instead were executed by being broken on the wheel—judicially tortured to death.¹⁰

As the distinguished American historian Natalie Zemon Davis has highlighted in her important study of religious violence in the *guerres de religion*, Catholic violence went beyond the grave—not only were Huguenot lives taken, but their corpses were also desecrated. In Normandy and Provence, “leaves of the Protestant Bible were stuffed into the mouths and wounds of corpses.”¹¹ In 1568, when word spread that a Huguenot was about to be buried in a consecrated cemetery, “a mob rushed to the graveyard, interrupted the funeral, and dragged the cadaver off to . . . the town dump.”¹²

The dead body of Admiral de Coligny, the celebrated Huguenot leader, whose murder was one of the first actions of the St. Bartholomew’s Massacre, was mutilated, stoned, and hanged on a gibbet before finally being burned. At Provins in 1572, a Huguenot corpse had ropes tied to its neck and feet and was then made the subject of a tug-of-war competition between the boys of the town, before they dragged it off to be burned.¹³

Elsewhere, it was commonplace for Huguenot bodies to be thrown into rivers or burned, but bodies were also mocked and derided as they were dragged through the streets to their fate, and frequently “had their genitalia and internal organs cut away.”¹⁴

All this is not simply the stuff of propaganda; it is well-documented historical fact. It is easy, then, to portray the Catholics in the Wars of Religion as a malign force—as oppressors and persecutors, with Calvinists as victims who eventually defended themselves. A confessionally partisan interpretation of late 16th-century France seems to conform to the evidence.

Protestant Aggression and Intolerance

The conundrum, then, is this: How we do justice to the historical reality of the Wars of Religion without falling

into one of two traps: on the one hand, perpetuating the very divides that resulted in brutal and bloody conflict in late-16th-century France, which would for most of us be inconsistent with our personal morality; but on the other hand, seeming simply to be elevating partisan views to the level of scholarly conclusion, which is professionally unacceptable. How are Adventist educators to teach the period in a fair and open-minded spirit, when the worst excesses were on the Catholic side?

It is important to remember that the Huguenots were not guiltless—they were an active ingredient in the combustible recipe that produced the explosion of violence in late 16th-century France. In Rouen, just in 1560 and 1561, “there were at least nine incidents variously described in the documents as ‘tumults’, ‘riots’, and ‘seditions’: . . . all of them arising out of actions”¹⁵ by the Huguenots. In Agen in 1561, Protestant artisans systematically destroyed the altars and statues in the town’s Catholic churches. At Lyon, a Calvinist shoemaker interrupted the Easter sermon being preached by a Franciscan friar, crying out “You lie”—a claim punctuated by the gunshots of Huguenots waiting outside in the square.¹⁶

Across France, Protestants would frequently interrupt masses or Corpus Christi processions to seize the host and then crumble it before indignant Catholics (for whom, because of their belief that it was Christ’s literal body, this was a horrible blasphemy), proclaiming it “a god of paste” or “a god of flour,” rather than the real body of Christ.¹⁷ Similar patterns were repeated often: Catholic religious processions were regularly showered with rubbish; they, like church services, were disrupted by psalm-singing, whistling, or slogan-chanting Protestants; and frequently, churches were “cleansed,” with offending objects deliberately desecrated with spit, urine, and excrement before being smashed. Priests, monks, and friars, or officers of the law holding Protestant prisoners, were often beaten

or killed, and occasionally even tortured to death.¹⁸

It is not only what the Huguenots *did*; it is what they did *not* do. They were unwilling to accept that Catholics were also sincere Christians and were unwilling to compromise on any points. The most influential 16th-century French proponent of toleration of other Christians was a Roman Catholic, Michel de L’Hospital, chancellor of France in the 1560s. He came to believe, genuinely and passionately, that toleration was what was right for followers of Christ, who, as de L’Hospital wrote, “loved peace, and ordered us to abstain from armed violence . . . ; He did not want to compel and terrorise anybody through threats, nor to strike with a sword.”¹⁹

Calvin actually condemned violent action by the Huguenots, urging them not to resist but to suffer persecution according to the New Testament model; it was the great nobles, who he felt had a duty and responsibility in the French polity, on whom he urged action on behalf of the French Reformed churches. But Calvin condemned the leading Calvinist advocate of toleration, Sebastian Castellio, for his views, and leading Huguenot pastors did likewise.²⁰

For that matter, Henry de Navarre’s willingness to compromise on some points in order to end conflict was an important factor in ending the wars, but in so doing he provoked the condemnation of many of the Huguenots, both leaders and rank and file. Of course, Henry acted as he did partly to advance himself, in order to be unchallenged king of France (which he became as Henry IV). However, he also did genuinely want to end decades of confessional conflict; and it seems likely that this could not have been achieved without some compromises.

Many Huguenots felt that Henry should instead have had faith in God, defied human logic, and a miracle might have been worked. My own instinct, indeed, is to say, with Peter and the other apostles, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (NKJV).²¹

Yet ultimately, Henri's willingness to abjure was vital in ending religious violence. Which course of action, then, was the more in keeping with the example of our Lord? It's a perplexing question.

The Nature of Early-modern French Religious Violence

None of this changes the fact that the Huguenots were much more sinned against than sinning in 16th-century France. The intolerance of the Roman Catholic majority was the motor that drove religious conflict in France.²² As Natalie Zemon Davis pointed out nearly 30 years ago, there was a clear qualitative difference between the violence of Calvinists and Catholics.²³

Calvinists wanted to change the mind of the majority population, and so they destroyed sacred objects to show they were not actually sacred, and killed priests because they perceived them to be leading the people astray. Catholics, however, wanted to rid themselves of a large proportion of the population whom they regarded as pollution or a cancer. This is why some 3,000 Huguenots could be killed in Paris in 24 hours on August 24 and 25, 1572—a chilling parallel to the nearly 3,000 killed in three attacks on September 11, 2001.²⁴ For French Roman Catholics, the Huguenots were the problem—killing them was the first step toward recovering divine favor. In short, whereas Catholic violence was directed against *people*, Calvinist violence was largely directed against *things*. It was therefore inherently always more limited than Catholic violence.

Yet the crucial facts are that Calvinists still perpetrated violence: They murdered priests, and they were guilty of intolerance and oppression. While the distinction between the two forms of violence is an important one, we are, as it were, talking here about the lesser of two evils, not of a contrast between good and evil.

Helpful Resources

On religious wars and religious persecution in the post-Reformation period:

Philip Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Richard Bonney and D. J. B. Trim, eds., *Persecution and Pluralism: Calvinists and Religious Minorities in Early Modern Europe, 1550-1700* (New York, Oxford, and Bern: Peter Lang, 2006).

Keith Cameron et al., eds., *The Adventure of Religious Pluralism in Early Modern France* (New York, Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang, 2000).

Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-century France," *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 51-91; reproduced in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975).

Anabaptists. Website devoted to the denominational descendants of the Anabaptists and their beliefs, which includes a number of primary and secondary sources: <http://www.anabaptists.org/>.

De Bello Belgico. Website devoted to the Eighty Years' War, containing a wide range of primary sources, lists of important figures with brief biographical information, some scholarly essays, and bibliographies. English-language version: <https://dutchrevolt.leiden.edu/english/Pages/default.aspx>.

Hanover College, Internet Archive of Texts and Documents—The Protestant Reformation. This provides links to a wide collection of electronic primary sources, including texts by Luther, Calvin, and others: <http://history.hanover.edu/early/prot.html>.

General works on "wars of religion," especially between Christianity and Islam:

M. J. Akbar, *The Shade of Swords: Jihad and the Conflict Between Islam and Christianity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000).

_____, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014). Armstrong's book is somewhat biased against evangelical Christianity, so must be used carefully. However, it is full of interesting information and insights: valuable for teachers, but perhaps not appropriate for students.

Richard Bonney, *Jihad: From Qu'ran to Bin Laden* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). Bonney was originally an historian of early-modern Europe and thus brings an interesting perspective.

Norman Housley, *Religious Warfare in Europe, 1400-1536* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Bridges the gap between the Crusades and the Reformation.

Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003).

Peter Partner, *God of Battles: Holy Wars of Christianity and Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

Conclusion

There is a part of me that thrills when I read the narrative of the Battle of Coutras by Agrippa d'Aubigné (the distinguished Huguenot historian, who was recording events in which he had participated),²⁵ knowing that both the overweening arrogance of the Catholic League's army and the overwhelming numerical superiority on which it was based were about to be shattered by the moral superiority of the outnumbered but zealous Huguenot cavalry, chanting the 118th Psalm as they charged. But there is also a part of me that thrills when reading Michel de L'Hospital's heartfelt, gospel-based plea for acceptance of alternative points of view—and that recognizes that de L'Hospital, a devout follower of Rome, was closer to the spirit of the Gospels than many followers of the Reformation.

Is there then a fundamental point about the French Wars of Religion, which we, as Christians, should bear in mind as we research, and to which we should draw our students' attention as we teach? I suggest it is that Protestants and Catholics alike failed to live up to the high standards of our Lord and Savior who declared: "You have heard that it was said ' . . . hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you."²⁶ My own recurrent failures to live up to this ideal should make me slow to condemn either side as being less Christian than I. The right course, perhaps, both as a Christian and as an historian, is instead to try to understand why so many firm believers could act so contrary to the wishes of Christianity's Founder and foundation. The result of such an approach will be sensitive and objective history that produces an enhanced understanding of the past. It will also, I believe, be history that is genuinely Christian. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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Recommended citation:

D. J. B. Trim, "The French Wars of Religion and the Problem of Teaching Confessionally Partisan History," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 83:3 (2021): 10-15.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. See Reinder Bruinsma, *Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes Toward Roman Catholicism 1844-1965* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1994).
2. This article builds on a previous exploration of these issues, undertaken at the invitation of the Dutch Society of Christian Historians: D. J. B. Trim, "De Franse godsdienstoorlogen en de uitdaging voor partijdige geschiedenis," *Transparant: Tijdschrift van de Vereniging van Christen-Historici* 17:3 (2006): 4-8.
3. See Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1946), 35, 60, 63-65.
4. Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-century France," *Past and Present* 59 (1973): 51-91; re-

produced in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), which is the version cited here (from page 163 onward) and hereafter.

5. *Ibid.*, 167.
6. *Ibid.*, 165.
7. *Ibid.*, 172.
8. *Ibid.*, 173.
9. *Ibid.*, 183; Philip Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 128.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Davis, "The Rites of Violence," 157.
12. *Ibid.*, 162.
13. *Ibid.*, 163.
14. *Ibid.*, 179; Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion*, 64, 67.
15. Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion*, 58.
16. Davis, "The Rites of Violence," 163, 164.
17. E.g., *ibid.*, 156, 157, 171; Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion*, 61.
18. Davis, "The Rites of Violence," 157, 158, 160, 171, 173, 174, 179-181, 183; Benedict, *Rouen During the Wars of Religion*, 60-63, 67.
19. Quoted by Loris Petris, "Faith and Religious Policy in Michel de L'Hospital's Civic Evangelism," *The Adventure of Religious Pluralism in Early Modern France*, Keith Cameron, et al., eds. (New York, Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 137.
20. See Hans R. Guggisberg, *Sebastian Castellio, 1515-1563: Humanist and Defender of Religious Toleration in a Confessional Age* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003).
21. Acts 5:29. All Scripture quotations in this article are quoted from the *New King James Version*® of the Bible. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
22. As Ellen White identified; see *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), 276, 277.
23. Davis, "The Rites of Violence," especially page 174.
24. Cf. H. H. Leonard, "The Huguenots and the St. Bartholomew's Massacre," *The Huguenots: History and Memory in Transnational Context: Essays in Honour and Memory of Walter C. Utt*, David J. B. Trim, ed. (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011), 65, 66.
25. Théodore-Agrippa d'Aubigné, *Histoire Universelle*, Alphonse de Ruble, ed. (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1893), 7:161. Originally published between 1616 and 1620).
26. Matthew 5:43, 44.