





QUATERCENTENARY CELEBRATION

OF

*The Promulgation of
The Edict of Nantes*

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Securing Pluralism amid Intolerance: The Edict of Nantes and Its Antecedents

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IN JANUARY 1562, the queen mother and regent of France, Catherine de Medici, embarked on a remarkable experiment. With a brief edict containing 16 major provisions, the so-called Edict of Saint-Germain or Edict of January, she decreed that, until God saw fit to reunite all Frenchmen in a single sheepfold, "which is our chief desire and principal intention," those belonging to what she called the "new religion" would be free to assemble for worship wherever they chose outside the walls of the kingdom's walled cities and towns. At the same time, all of the country's churches were to be given back to those of the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman faith, who were to be allowed to continue to practice their religion unmolested throughout the kingdom. In short, two religions were to be allowed to be practiced in France, at least until the schism between Protestants and Catholics could be ended.

This measure was to a certain extent forced upon Catherine by the circumstances in which she found herself. In the six years prior to January 1562, the "new religion" had grown with dizzying speed. Independent churches with a liturgy and an institutional structure similar to those that Calvin had instituted in Geneva were first established in France in 1555. By late 1561, over a thousand such

churches had been formed, with a total membership that can be roughly estimated at between 1.5 and 2 million people, or about 10 to 15 percent of the total population of what was then the largest country in Europe. The movement was especially strong in the cities and among the nobility, and the combination of the speed of its growth and the prominence of many of its converts was such that many contemporaries were convinced that far more than 15 percent of the population had been won over to the new faith, perhaps half the country's population or more. In a few towns in southern France, the partisans of the new faith had even gone so far as to seize the local churches for their own use and to drive out the Catholic clergy and the members of the local religious houses. In many more localities, violence had broken out between members of the two religious parties. Meanwhile, an attempt had been made to repair the growing religious schism by bringing together the leaders of the Reformed church with the leading Catholic prelates at the colloquy of Poissy, but little common ground had been found between the two sides on the most contested theological questions, and this attempt at mediation had failed. In this context of proliferating Protestant churches, growing disorder and the failure of attempts at reconciliation, we can understand why Catherine de Medici and those around her thought it wisest to decree that members of both faiths were to be allowed to gather in peace to worship.

Still, the granting of toleration to two faiths in France was a bold step that flew in the face of all of France's strongest political traditions at the time. Throughout Europe, it was widely accepted in the 16th century that one of the central purposes of government was to protect and uphold the true religion, and to prohibit and punish false belief. In the best tradition of Saint Augustine, rulers who punished heretics were seen as serving both God and the common good. In punishing heretics and heresy, they upheld God's honor, they protected society against dangerous doctrines, and they even helped the heretics themselves, since punishment administered to them the sort of sanction that often helped people abandon erroneous ways and enter into the true path to salvation. General political wisdom also agreed that it was unwise to allow two religions in

one country for the simple political reason that turmoil and division would inevitably follow. Religion "is the great bond of common affection and human association; and there is no stronger bond of concord and community than unity of religion," the great Swedish statesman Axel Oxenstierna remarked early in the 17th century. These views were commonplace throughout Europe, but the view that rulers should ensure unity of the faith and punish heresy were particularly strongly held in France, where powerful myths of national identity linked the welfare of the kingdom indissolubly to its fidelity to Christianity. According to these myths, which were central to the late medieval emergence of a kind of nationalism in the country, France had entered into a special covenant with God at the time of Clovis that guaranteed its survival and prosperity so long as it remained faithful to Christ and his Church. The French kings bore the proud title of Most Christian Kings, and from 1215 onward they swore in their coronation oath that they would act diligently to expel heresy from their lands. For these most Christian kings to grant permission to a faith that had been considered legally heretical until the very eve of the Edict of January was thus in the eyes of their Catholic subjects to break their coronation oath, to fly in face of long-standing monarchical tradition and to put the very survival of the country at risk. We can see why the Edict of January represented such a bold policy.

Furthermore, we should not think that it was only France's Catholics who would have seen the Edict of January as an abdication of the king's basic duty to keep his realm free from heresy. To be sure, as the chief beneficiaries of the Edict of January, the leaders of the emerging Protestant movement in the country quickly positioned themselves as the defenders of this law against the Catholics who opposed it. But they were by no means defenders of the general principle that dissident religious movements deserved legal toleration. On the contrary, Calvin and the majority of French Calvinists shared with Catholic theologians the view that magistrates had a right and a duty to punish heretics. Just a few years previously, Michael Servetus had been burned in Geneva for his heresies. In most of those towns of southern France where the Protestant move-

ment had already grown strong enough prior to the Edict of January for the Protestants to take over Catholic churches for their own worship and gain the support of the local authorities, the Protestants did not tolerate Catholic worship alongside their own. Instead, they put an end to what they saw as the idolatrous abominations of the Roman Mass and closed down the religious houses of the Catholic religious orders. The great hope of the movement in this period was that the king of France would make the true Reformed religion the religion of state and drive the false Roman idols out of the temple. *That*, in their view, would be acting as a true most Christian king. In short, this was an age when, on both sides of the religious divide opened up by the European Reformation, the dominant understandings of the proper ends of government supported intolerance and the maintenance of one single religion. Even if powerful political forces were pushing the French crown toward allowing two faiths in the kingdom, establishing such a solution would be anything but easy.

In fact, the fate of the Edict of January would prove just how hard this was. The edict was a pitiful failure. It survived for less than six months. The high courts of the land balked at registering it, claiming that it defied everything the king stood for. The leading Catholic noblemen declared their opposition to the edict. On March 1, one of these noblemen, the Duke of Guise, broke up a Protestant worship service in Vassy and killed many of those present. Meanwhile, in the Protestant-dominated towns of the South, stone-throwing crowds disrupted attempts to restore the Catholic Mass. Soon, mistrust on both sides spiraled into open civil war, during the course of which both sides ignored the provisions of the Edict of January.

The later 16th century in France was an age of passionate and almost irreconcilable antipathy between the partisans of the new religion and the partisans of the old. For the Huguenots, the rituals of the Roman Church were a standing affront to the honor of God, illustrations of the worst sort of idolatry castigated in the Bible; such rituals deserved to be purged from the land along with all the tattered hypocrites who performed them. For the Catholics, the

Huguenots were seditious profaners of the most sacred mysteries of the faith, whose abominable acts of iconoclasm and disruption threatened the very security of the community, since they were likely to prompt God to pour down his anger upon so wicked a land. The pamphlets and sermons in which each side attacked the other quite literally demonized the other party: They presented it as the Antichrist, as the offspring of the Devil. The civil war that broke out in 1562 only added to the antipathy between the two groups, since, as civil wars will do, it bred a further harvest of persecution and violence that embittered its victims and generated longings for revenge. The civil war of 1562 ended in a stalemate, and it was concluded by an edict of pacification that was somewhat longer and more detailed than the Edict of January and that once again permitted both Protestant and Catholic worship in France, albeit under somewhat different terms. This edict lasted longer than the Edict of January—four years—then it, too, failed to hold. Another civil war followed, then another edict of pacification, then another civil war, with hideous massacres, then another, still longer edict of pacification. Ultimately, eight civil wars and eight edicts of pacification succeeded one another until finally, in April 1598, 400 years ago this month, the Edict of Nantes brought the cycle to an end. The Edict of Nantes did not prevent all further violence between Protestants and Catholics. A further, limited renewal of the civil wars occurred in the 1620s. The edict nonetheless lasted for 87 years as the basic instrument for defining the terms of a legal coexistence of two faiths in France. The provisions that it laid down allowed Protestants and Catholics to live side by side with relative peace, despite the strong differences in their religious sensibilities that so frequently sparked clashes between them in the late 16th century and the bitter memories that each side had of the injustices done to it by the other during the civil wars.

The question that I want to explore today with you is the obvious one suggested by the narrative of events that I have just spelled out for you. Just what were the provisions of the Edict of Nantes that made this an enduring religious peace in a land where previous religious peaces had failed? Or, to put the question in more abstract

terms, just how did successive French rulers construct the legal conditions that maintained a successful system of religious pluralism in a society where virtually nobody believed as a matter of principle that people should be left free to worship their God as they pleased, and where bitter differences and partisan memories created conditions that were highly conducive to violence between the two religious parties? We remember and commemorate the Edict of Nantes, not the Edict of January or the Peace of Beaulieu. This is not because it was the first edict of toleration issued in France in the wake of the Reformation, but because it was the most enduring edict of toleration. What sort of an edict was it, and why did it endure?

Having posed my question this way, let me say at once that the specific legislative provisions of the Edict of Nantes are not the only reason, or even necessarily the chief reason why this edict of pacification lasted so much longer than all of the previous ones. To a very large extent, it succeeded for a simple reason unrelated to the specifics of the edict: the country's sheer exhaustion. At various moments in the civil wars, especially in the wake of the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre, when thousands of Protestants had been killed and many more had fled or converted in terror, the Catholics had hoped that the stain of heresy might be eliminated completely. But the Huguenot movement never broke, and from their strongholds in the South and West the Huguenots were always able to mount against considerable odds a heroic resistance that thwarted all attempts to defeat them conclusively. At a few points, especially in 1562 and again when Henry of Navarre acceded to the throne in 1589, the Protestants had likewise hoped that they might carry the day, but Catholic resistance always defeated these hopes. The outcome of the wars had thus thwarted each side's hopes for the triumph of its cause. Meanwhile, the civil wars brought untold suffering. Ultimately, more than three decades of fighting taught the lesson that it was better to tolerate two religions in the kingdom, no matter how distasteful that might be, than to endure the violence that would be required to do away with one or the other. A measure of stability also was restored because over the course of the three decades of civil war a certain geographic sorting

out of the two religions occurred. In 1562 Protestants were a large and threatening minority in many communities and a majority in a few. Over the course of the civil wars, the Huguenots either established a firm political dominance of certain local communities or saw their numbers sharply reduced through conversion and flight, so fewer localities were sharply divided between important populations of Protestants and Catholics. This reduced some of the friction between the two communities.

Having said that, I do want to insist at the same time that the legislative effort that went into the Edict of Nantes also was of significance in accounting for its success. The Edict of Nantes was a far longer and more complex document than the Edict of January or the other early edicts of pacification. Where the Edict of January contained 16 basic points, the Edict of Nantes consisted of a main edict with 92 clauses, a further document of 62 secret articles, and two supplementary *brevets*. The Edict of Nantes regulated a far wider range of aspects of life that were susceptible to generating conflict between Protestants and Catholics than did the Edict of January, and, as we shall see, it was a very elaborate combination of assurances of basic rights, grants of special privilege and protection, and regulatory measures designed to eliminate flash points of conflict. The complexity of the Edict of Nantes, and its success, cannot be attributed to the particular genius of those who negotiated this peace. Most of the fundamental provisions of the Edict of Nantes reiterated clauses that had already been contained in earlier edicts of pacification. The Edict of Nantes is best understood as the distilled wisdom of over three decades of grappling with the problem of how to legislate terms that would permit the effective coexistence of groups that literally demonized the other, that believed the other were the forces of the Antichrist or of the Devil.

When one lays the various edicts of pacification issued, from the Edict of January to the Edict of Nantes, end to end, one sees that these grew steadily longer and more elaborate. Gradually, with time, more and more of the provisions that ultimately would come to be contained in the Edict of Nantes make their appearance in earlier edicts of pacification and prove their worth, while other pro-

visions are tried out and fail. As a result of this process of trial and error, those who drew up the Edict of Nantes were able to draw upon the accumulated lessons of three decades of trying to legislate successful terms for peace between Protestants and Catholics, and define the terms of a peace that worked. The Edict of Nantes was the legislative distillation of a generation of peacemaking.

What then were the terms of the Edict of Nantes? How did a 16th-century ruler build a pact that would keep the peace between two faiths whose members mistrusted and abominated one another?

The very first thing they did was to order both sides to forget the past. This feature of the French edicts of pacification seems very surprising in our late 20th century, when so many people see truth commissions and calls to bring war criminals to trial as fundamental to restoring a rule of law and justice. All French edicts of pacification from 1563 onward nonetheless insisted that the inhabitants of the country had to put the past behind them and not seek justice or retribution for any wrongs done to them in the course of the conflict. People were to be allowed to reclaim property that might have been seized from them or offices they had been forced to abandon. But in the words of the Edict of Nantes, "the memory of all past events on both sides (in the recent conflict) and in all preceding troubles will be extinguished and suppressed (*demeurera éteinte et assoupie*), and it will not be permitted to our solicitors general or any other person, private or public, to initiate a trial in any court for any related event. Likewise, we forbid all our subjects, of whatever estate or station they may be, to renew the memory, attack, insult or provoke one another through reproaches for past events . . . but to live together peaceably like brothers, friends and fellow citizens, on pain of punishment as infractors of the public peace." These principles were slightly modified by a later clause of the Edict of Nantes that did exempt from this general principle the "execrable" crimes of rape, arson and murder through ambush outside of the normal course of conflict and simply to settle personal scores. One event of the Wars of Religion was also so horrible that its victims were deemed by two earlier edicts of pacification to deserve compensation for what they suffered: the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre.

Edicts of pacification of 1576 and 1577 granted widows and children of those who perished in the massacre an exemption from taxes for six years. Otherwise, the basic principle was forgive and forget. One can't help wondering if this principle is not both morally nobler and politically wiser than the modern therapeutic belief that confronting the past directly best heals raw wounds.

Like all of the edicts of pacification from 1563 onward before it, the Edict of Nantes was thus one part measure of amnesty. It was also one part specification of who would enjoy rights of public worship, and where. Like all preceding edicts of pacification, it first specified that Catholic worship was to be permitted everywhere in the kingdom. It then specified that what it called "the so-called Reformed Religion" (*religion prétendue réformée*) would be permitted to gather for worship in specified categories of localities that it required 34 articles to set forth. The preamble to the edict made it clear that the crown considered the presence of more than one religion in the kingdom an evil that ideally was to be avoided, but that had to be tolerated provisionally in the name of peace, until God might someday reunite all of the kingdom's subjects in a single religion. Two basic features of these provisions deserve to be highlighted. First, there was no statement of any general principle that all people ought to be free to worship God as they saw fit. The Edict of Nantes, like all of the edicts of pacification that preceded it, was an edict of toleration in the 16th-century sense of the word, which is to say it was an edict that granted specific groups the right to gather for worship. Only one religious group benefited from this grant, the Reformed Protestants. It was not a general grant of religious toleration. In this, it was very much of its time and place. Virtually all of those who defended the edict after it was promulgated likewise argued for it, not on the grounds that religious toleration was generally desirable, but on the grounds that where two religions had come to be solidly established in a single territory, and where it would cost too much bloodshed to eliminate one or the other, it was better to tolerate both than to attempt to restore religious unity by force. Only a few very brave and very marginal figures argued for general religious toleration in this period. As I've mentioned as well,

the edict continued to suggest that unity of religion was the ideal situation, even if an unfortunate exception had to be made in this case. There is no hint that diversity of religion might be a positive good for a community.

Second, the state made no pretense that it stood as a neutral party with respect to the two religions that it permitted within the kingdom. On the contrary, Catholicism was permitted everywhere in the kingdom, and "the so-called Reformed religion" only in a restricted number of localities. The very phrase *religion prétendue réformée*, which was soon required to be used in all legal documents involving references to the religion, showed the crown's refusal to recognize the claim of the Reformed religion to have effected a purification of religion according to God's word. Catholicism remained the religion whose truth claims were given greater sanction and whose practice was allowed a wider berth.

One of the subjects on which there was the greatest variety from one edict of pacification to the next was the matter of in just how many different communities Huguenot worship was to be permitted. The Edict of January had allowed the Protestants to gather for worship wherever they chose except inside the walls of fortified cities, but every subsequent edict of pacification, except one, adopted the principle that Reformed worship should only be allowed in certain kinds of localities, with some extending the range of localities more widely than others. The one late edict that did once again allow the Huguenots to worship wherever they wanted quickly provoked so much Catholic resistance that it was among the most short-lived of all of the peaces. With the Huguenots being only a minority, it proved to be the case that to allow them to assemble for worship wherever they wanted was too much of a provocation and generated too much of a Catholic backlash, but if rights of worship were restricted too greatly, this provoked Protestant disobedience and also failed. The Edict of Nantes was something of a middle point in terms of the generosity of its provisions with regard to the Protestants. It combined three different sorts of principles in determining just where the *religion prétendue réformée* could assemble for worship: 1. The principle of geographical extension, allowing

Protestant worship in two localities in each bailliage or *sénéchaussée* (approximately equal to an American county). Thus, it guaranteed that Protestants anywhere in the country might have some place in vicinity to which they could travel for worship. 2. The principle of prior possession whereby in all those areas of Protestant strength where Reformed already gathered for worship in the years 1577 or 1596-1597, they were allowed to continue worshipping. Protestant worship didn't have to be dismantled in Protestant strongholds where this was likely to induce violence. 3. The principle of noble prerogative, whereby all noblemen possessing rights of high justice could hold worship services on lands, open to all who wished to attend. This recognized the authority of nobility and the role that many noblemen played as protectors of the Reformed religion.

The definition of just what sorts of communities Protestant worship ought to be permitted in, was one of those areas where the Edict of Nantes can be seen as the fruit of three decades of experimentation with different formulae. Another domain in which the Edict of Nantes represented the fruit of experience was in the guarantees that it contained granting the Protestants access to certain kinds of public services or rights and protecting them against punitive measures because of their faith. Just as experience soon taught the French crown that allowing Protestant worship everywhere generated a Catholic backlash and that it was wisest to restrict the number of localities in which Protestant worship would be permitted, experience likewise showed that just granting the Protestants rights of worship was not enough to grant them genuine freedom of worship, since in communities in which they were in the minority they might find themselves being subjected to punitive taxes, being barred from public offices and so forth. Beginning with the 1570 peace of Saint-Germain, virtually every edict of pacification responded to this problem by specifying that all schools, hospitals and other charitable institutions were to be open to members of either faith without any distinction of religion, that royal and municipal offices were to be open to all without distinction of religion, and that no special taxes were to be levied exclusively on the Protestants. Beginning with the 1576 Edict of Beaulieu, the edicts specified that parents could not

disinherit children of theirs who had chosen the other religion from theirs strictly "for hatred of the religion." These measures were all reiterated in the Edict of Nantes. If the Edict of Nantes was one part measure of amnesty and one part grant of limited rights of freedom of worship to one specific minority, it was also one part civil rights measure guaranteeing that minority access to certain kinds of public institutions and accommodations and protecting it against punitive taxation or disinheritance.

All this was well and good for the Huguenots, but could they count on the courts to protect these rights when they were violated? Most of France's judges and appeals courts remained staunchly Catholic, and the Protestants consequently lost faith in their impartiality. From 1570 onward, another feature that began to appear in successive edicts of pacification was measures intended to enable the Protestants to obtain trustworthy judges in cases involving them. From 1570 onward, they were granted the right to require judges whose bias they feared to step down from cases involving them. The 1576 Edict of Beaulieu established special bi-confessional chambers within appeals courts located in the regions where the Protestants were most numerous to hear cases pitting members of one faith against another. These measures were likewise reiterated by the Edict of Nantes. Another feature of the Edict of Nantes was thus the institution of a special court system created to mollify Protestant fears.

If religious division was such a threat to social stability in 16th-century Europe, this is because religious rituals were woven deeply into the fabric of everyday life, and the Protestant challenge to Catholic practice included the rejection of many rituals whose maintenance Catholics saw as fundamental to the proper honoring of God. Conflict also often arose because the performance of basic rituals often involved one group or the other progressing through the public spaces of the city streets and squares, where these rituals might give offense to those of the other faith, or those participating in these rituals might insist that passersby do them honor in ways that they were not willing to do. There were thus numerous everyday encounters that might give rise to religious conflict. Working

out conditions of religious coexistence thus meant developing rules to govern these situations where the principles of one faith clashed with the sensibilities of the other. Much of the multiplication of the specific clauses of the later edicts of pacification has to do with devising principles to govern these cases.

To cite just a few examples, the Catholic calendar of holy days included some 40 to 50 feast days and holidays, during which believers were expected to refrain from work, but the Reformed rejected saints' days as a false form of worship. From 1562 onward, it was specified that, their convictions notwithstanding, the Protestants had to close their shops on Catholic feast days, lest they give offense to their neighbors by working on what they considered to be a holy day. They were, however, allowed to work behind closed doors so long as the noise of their labor was not audible from the street.

An issue that caused particular trouble was the burial of Protestants in the hallowed ground of an existing cemetery. Since Reformed deathbed and burial rites included none of the ceremonies that accompanied Catholic burial, the Catholics understood the interment of a heretic in hallowed ground as deeply polluting and often tried either to prevent Protestant burials by force or to dig up Protestant cadavers after they had been buried and to drag them to the town dump instead. Such incidents recurrently disturbed the peace. From 1570 onward, the edicts of pacification specified that the Protestants had to acquire cemeteries of their own and that the royal officials should watch to ensure that no scandals accompanied the conveying of bodies to these cemeteries.

A high point of the Catholic liturgical calendar in the 16th century was the feast of Corpus Christi, on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, when the consecrated host was carried through the city or village in an elaborate procession, while all property owners along the procession route hung out their best tapestries in front of their houses, in order to create an appropriately sumptuous route for God's body. The Protestants considered this ritual a particularly egregious example of the Catholics' proclivity to surround their "God of flour" with false rituals. They wanted to have nothing to do with this ceremony, but the undraped houses along the procession

route were in turn a grievous wound to the Catholics' desire to see God's true body properly venerated, so incidents where undraped houses were pelted with rocks or pillaged were far from unknown. By a provision first instituted in 1580, it was decreed that Protestants living along procession routes could not be compelled to drape their houses or forced to pay for doing so, but that they did have to allow the local officials to drape their houses for them. Other comparable measures decreed that the Protestants respect the canonical rules governing marriage between cousins, that they contribute their share of all tithes and that they not trouble Catholic clergy while they performed the rituals of their religion. Still others protected the Protestants against being required to contribute to the cost of constructing Catholic churches and specified that they did not have to participate in any ceremonies or swear any oaths in a manner that was contrary to their conscience. These measures all also found their way into the Edict of Nantes.

To prevent violence between the two faiths, the edicts of pacification not only tried to regulate potentially contentious public rituals and religious obligations; they also regulated public speech and printing. Already in the Edict of January, one clause prohibited the members of each faith from insulting the ceremonies or otherwise provoking the members of the other. Another clause forbade the sale of defamatory pamphlets or placards. These measures were taken up again in the Edict of Nantes, which also forbade the Protestants from selling religious books of their creed outside those localities in which they were permitted to gather for worship, and from holding schools in such localities. The Edict of Nantes thus also entailed both measures against what we would call today hate speech, and restrictions on freedom of speech and the press that were particularly constraining to the Protestant minority.

Last of all, as a clear minority of the population, the Protestants were often loath to put down their arms and give up the strongholds they controlled at the end of a civil war, since they feared that once they were disarmed, they would be subject to further violence. Beginning with the 1570 peace of Saint-Germain, the crown therefore allowed the Protestants to hold on to certain fortified towns as *places*

de sûreté, or places of refuge to which they could repair in the event of further conflict. The number of such *places de sûreté* was increased in the peaces of 1576 and 1577, and the secret articles of the Edict of Nantes were still more generous yet in granting such strongholds, giving the Huguenots control of no less than 150 garrisons and subsidy of 180,000 crowns per year to pay for the troops in these garrisons. Another secret article of the edict promised the Protestants 45,000 crowns to aid in supporting their ministers and schools. Because these grants were made in the secret articles of the edict rather than in its main body that was ratified by the sovereign courts of the realm, these grants had less legal solidity and were more dependent upon the goodwill of successive French kings. The latter subsidy was never paid more than intermittently and soon disappeared. The Huguenots' control of 150 *places de sûreté* ended in 1629 as punishment for the renewed fighting of the 1620s. So long as these provisions remained in force, however, they made the Protestants a corporate body, within the state, endowed with special military and political privileges that even the Catholics as a corporate body did not possess.

In certain traditions of liberal Protestant historiography, the Edict of Nantes long enjoyed prominent mention as an early monument of religious toleration and liberty. In one of his less restrained moments, the great 19th-century American historian of the Huguenots and a frequent speaker before the early meetings of the Huguenot Society of America, Henry Baird, even went so far as to assert in *The Huguenots and Henry of Navarre* that the Edict of Nantes enunciated a "doctrine of complete religious liberty." What I have tried to suggest to you today is that the Edict of Nantes was in fact at once something less and something more than a codification of modern or eternal principles of religious liberty. In fairness to Baird, he did not always depict the Edict of Nantes in such gushing terms. He was more accurate when he told this society on the 200th anniversary of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in October 1885, "The Edict of Nantes was not a perfect law. It was based on no ideal theory of the proper relations of the various religions subsisting in a single commonwealth . . . The 16th century

knew no such doctrine." As we have seen, if the Edict of Nantes permitted the members of two religions to worship as they saw fit in France, it did not extend this right to the members of all religions, and it saw this permission as an unfortunate concession, an evil to be accepted rather than a good to be embraced. Only gradually, through many twists and turns—one of the more important of which was in fact the revocation of the Edict of Nantes 87 years later and the manner in which that event subsequently came to be seen as both an injustice and a disaster—did the ideal of generalized religious freedom that was held by a tiny number of 16th-century thinkers come to be widely accepted among opinion makers. Not until the 18th century would general ideals of religious toleration and religious freedom come to exercise considerable sway over Europe's and America's legislators.

And yet, if no "doctrine of complete religious liberty," the Edict of Nantes was nonetheless a complex, impressive, largely successful and even topical piece of lawmaking. One part measure of amnesty and injunction to forgive and forget, one part charter of rights of worship to one powerful religious minority, one part guarantee of certain basic civil rights for that same minority, one part grant of extraordinary military and judicial privileges for that group's protection, and one part charter of rules designed to minimize the points of friction between two deeply antagonistic religious communities, rules that included restrictions upon both speech and press, the Edict of Nantes was a highly elaborate set of provisions that can be seen as the distilled wisdom of three decades of experimenting with the formulae for a lasting peace between two bitterly antagonistic groups. It proved to be largely successful in defining conditions according to which those groups could coexist for the next 87 years, in a time and place where few people as yet accorded positive value to the principles of toleration or freedom of worship. In our own late-20th-century world, a world in which the 16th century's admixture of resurgent fundamentalisms, religious conflict and bloody civil war seems all too familiar, it seems appropriate to pay some attention to the provisions of the Edict of Nantes, which procured one country a relatively lasting settlement of such antagonisms. In our contempo-

rary context, the Edict of Nantes seems very much to be a measure that deserves to be commemorated 400 years after its promulgation, not necessarily as the magical formula that can help us today to end civil wars and sectarian divisions around the globe—historical situations always vary too much from one another for simple lessons to be transposed from one situation and applied without change to another—but as an illustration of how one country grappled with the problem of ending such divisions and finally managed to do so through a pragmatic solution that required the warring parties to modify certain of their deepest convictions about how the political order ought ideally to be structured.