Marguerite’s network continued to operate through the 1540s in increasingly difficult circumstances. The examples discussed below show the impressive range of their activities, from playing gambits on the international diplomatic stage—often behind the scenes—to slowly and quietly building evangelical communities on the local level. While they were working on these fronts, Calvin took aim at the network’s leaders in several anti-Nicodemite works. His public stance against ‘religious compromise,’ as he would have it, has long been recognized as an important factor in the rise of an internally cohesive and strong Reformed movement within the realm. The choice of his targets points to one of the key dynamics in the development of the Reformation in France. In his ‘missionary strategy,’ Calvin appears to have attempted to extract evangelicals from under the wing of Marguerite and her network in order to gather them into a distinct religious community, one that was unambiguously allied to the ‘pure’ doctrines, practices, and church polities of the Protestants over the border.

“The Emperor is Hypocrisy and the Pope the Devil”: Evangelical Diplomacy at the Court of Francis I, 1540–1547

I have to love Prince Henry, for…he and I be both of the same religious opinion, for neither of us love the Pope; and I think the Pope would be glad to see both our destructions, for which purpose he practices with the Emperor, that is to say, with hypocrisy; for the Emperor is Hypocrisy and the Pope the Devil.¹

¹ Spelling and syntax are slightly modernized. This and the following quotations are from Paget to Henry VIII, from Paris, 26 February 1542, Letters and Papers 17, no. 128, 52–55. This edition of sources contains a potentially confusing mixture of summaries, transcriptions, and translations of original texts. In citing passages from Letters and Papers, single quotation marks are used for the editor’s summaries and double quotation marks for the text of the original documents.
Thus spoke Marguerite of Navarre in February 1542 when broaching a secret proposal to the English ambassador, William Paget, for an alliance of their two kingdoms. She predicted that an agreement sealed by the marriage of the two king’s children would bring “the greatest benefit that ever came to Christendom.” In effect, such a union would have established an anti-Hapsburg axis comprising England, France, the duke of Cleves (who was married to Marguerite’s daughter), and the duke’s allies, the Protestant princes of the Schmalkaldic League.

Invoking the religious stumbling block to past proposals of union, Paget objected that there was no greater popery than in France, where recently a dozen honest persons had been imprisoned for vilifying the bishop of Rome. Blaming the influence of the “maskers in red caps” (cardinals on the king’s council), Marguerite assured Paget that other “good Christians” at court, including Admiral Chabot de Brion and the Du Bellay brothers, could, with English help, send their enemies to the devil and bring France around to an alliance based upon a religious union.

This exchange draws attention to an important historiographical blind spot. The Placards Affair of 1534 is generally thought to have fixed the religious fate of France. Thereafter, while scholars have noted the rise of factionalism at the French court, they have argued for the diminishing influence of evangelical courtiers and in particular of Marguerite. Thus,

---

Marguerite’s partner in proposing a Franco-English alliance in 1542, Admiral Chabot de Brion, similarly called the pope the Devil, “Paget likens the Pope to “vice,” “Call you him vice?” quod he [the admiral], “he is the very Devil,”” Paget to Henry VIII, 22 April 1542, Letters and Papers, no. 263, 141–145. ‘Paget wished he might see the day that pardons were as little set by there as in England. “Par le corps Dieu,” quod he [the Admiral] cholerickly, “for my part I set nother by pardon nor Pope, et le Diable emporte et le Pape et tous les Papilions avecques.”’ Paget to Henry VIII, 15 May 1542, Letters and Papers 17, no. 328, 190–193.

As all contemporary observers noted, Francis I’s councillors exerted key pressure in shaping French policy, yet they were divided politically. This account will stress their religious divisions. Scholars date the rise of court factionalism in France to the mid-1530s; see Knecht, Renaissance Warrior, 483–486. See further, for French courtiers’ involvement in the fight against heresy, ibid., 508–518; and Richard Bonney, The European Dynastic States, 1494–1660, The Short Oxford History of the Modern World (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 107–109.

Pierre Jourda’s account of Marguerite’s political role is marred by contradictory and contentious arguments that underplay Marguerite’s evangelical commitments. This is particularly evident in his lack of treatment of her ‘evangelical diplomacy,’ which will be discussed below. For example, he barely mentions and fails to interpret her involvement during the period 1540–1546 in French overtures to the Schmalkaldic League and Henry VIII. See Jourda, Marguerite, 304, 309, and 313. See further Augustin Renaudet’s critical review of Jourda’s biography, “Marguerite de Navarre. A propos