CHAPTER TWO

THE HUGUENOTS AND THE ST BARTHOLOMEW’S MASSACRE*

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The awful violence of the massacre of St Bartholomew’s Day, 24 August 1572, continues to be an event both of history and, in a sense, of memory, for, unlike some great historical episodes, it is still relatively well known today – it is remembered. Estimates of the numbers killed in 1572 vary. The more conservative estimates suggest between 2,000 and 3,000 were killed in Paris in the course of a week. In the aftershock of the next six weeks at least another 3,000 were killed in other French towns, mainly in the North. A probable total of some 6,000 deaths in all, although it could have been as many as 8–10,000; far short of the 70,000 claimed by nineteenth-century Protestants, but appalling just the same.¹ The death toll of all the massacres certainly exceeds those of, for example, all the Islamist terrorist atrocities of the twenty-first century and even beyond the impact on the Huguenot community of such large-scale mortality, the memory of the bloody events of St Bartholomew’s unquestionably shaped subsequent French and Huguenot history in profound ways. The events of late summer and autumn 1572 continue to generate considerable historiographical controversy among scholars; and they had the power to stir wider

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¹ Philip Benedict, ‘The St Bartholomew Massacres in the Provinces,’ HJ 21 (1978), 207; Barbara B. Diefendorf, Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), for Paris. It seems clear that from the very first years after the massacres Protestants on the whole exaggerated the numbers, while after a time Catholics minimised them, so that by the nineteenth century Protestants were claiming 90,000 dead while some Catholic writers were talking of a few hundred! Even today we cannot be sure of the numbers: Denis Crouzet, La nuit de la Saint-Barthélemy: un rêve perdu de la Renaissance (Paris: Fayard, 1994), gives 8,000, J. H. M. Salmon, Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century (London: Methuen, 1975), 187 suggests as many as 13,000. I stick with the most conservative figure for the present.
controversy in France into the 1990s. The memory of St Bartholomew’s, in sum, has not yet faded.

This essay is a synthesis of recent scholarship, rather than of original research. It seeks to understand why the St Bartholomew’s massacres occurred and it examines their legacy, which subsequent generations of Protestants, within and without France, memorialised. It argues that the massacres have to be seen in the context of the religious violence that escalated into three civil wars in the 1560s, in which Huguenots tended to attack objects, rather than people – the mass, images, shrines – though also sometimes the priests who kept the system going; Catholics, on the other hand, tended to attack the persons of heretics, because of the prevalent concept of heresy as a deadly infection and pollution. However, the nature of cities and towns as well as the communal nature of religion also contributed to the possibility of violence. Ceremonial processions, whether to thank God for victory, to show penitence in defeat, to ward off dangers of a more local kind, or to mark Corpus Christi day, had all shown, before the advent of Protestantism, a united community at work in resolving the endemic early-modern problems of famine, epidemic and poverty. The unwillingness of Protestants to take part in these important rituals – and their occasional willingness to attack them – created divided communities in which Huguenots were regarded as the reason and cause not only of disunity, but also of whatever troubles befell the city or parish in which they lived, and therefore made them targets.

But the pre-existence of religious and communal violence is only one of the roots of the massacre of 1572. In the summer of 1572 Paris, a city whose civic identity had traditionally revolved around its role as the heart of a sacral monarchy (a point discussed below), was flooded by Huguenot noblemen and their retinues, come to witness the marriage of Henry of Navarre to the sister of the king – the marriage of a Protestant to a Catholic. Parisians and staunchly Catholic nobles regarded the marriage as symptomatic of the king’s failure to act as the ‘first son of the pope’ ought, and crush heresy. Each of the three civil wars had ended, not in victory, but in concessions to the heretics. The Parisians had already shown their disapproval of the terms of the peace treaty of 1570 by a tax strike. The marriage brought these passions to the boil, aided by preachers who warned their congregations that God would not let the marriage and failure to punish heretics go unpunished. A general eschatological excitement and anxiety raised the temperature still higher. Appalling violence was the tragic result, and a