CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE MEMORY OF THE HUGUENOTS IN NORTH AMERICA:
PROTESTANT HISTORY AND POLEMIC

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‘Persecution cannot last for ever. Like all things human it wears itself out’.¹ The words Hannah Farnham Lee used to conclude her two-volume history, The Huguenots of France and America, epitomised not only the condition of French Protestants by the early nineteenth century, but also the process by which Americans viewed their plight. Nearly half a century later, Charles W. Baird produced the first definitive work on their entrance into, and impact on, American society. When nineteenth-century historians of American religion focused their attention on Huguenots, it was not a new field of historical study but merely a new tack on the importance of this underrepresented but arguably over-emphasised group of religious refugees. Huguenot numbers do not seem to justify the focus showered on them in over the three centuries since the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. There are few time periods since the establishment of English Colonies in North America in which some voice has not found the ephemeral image of the Huguenots a useful figure with which to foment agendas ranging from anti-Catholic animosity to the promotion of millenarian apocalypticism. American historians, preachers and politicians from the early seventeenth century to the present have found the study of Huguenots an important element in their polemics.

Huguenot history and European presence in the Americas parallel one another in numerous ways. The short-lived settlement of Fort Caroline, near present-day Jacksonville, Florida, established in 1562 as a refuge for Huguenots, was destroyed by the Spanish in 1565. Fort Caroline exemplifies the unique, if precarious, nature of Huguenot settlement in North America. As early as the mid-seventeenth century, the story of Huguenot persecution in France and the exile which

eventually contributed to their presence in America caused prominent American Protestants to celebrate their story as both an example of Catholic evils as well as a reminder that not even the Atlantic Ocean should make American Protestants complacent about the dangers Catholicism posed. From the earliest Huguenot immigrants to America, the story of their persecution fit them within the American landscape. New England’s Puritans saw in their story one similar to their own: a small group of believers whose adherence to a set of Reformed principles led to persistent persecution for their beliefs. The polemical use of Huguenots, particularly by New England clergy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, helped to make an argument against Catholicism, but often seemed less concerned about the actual experience of those French refugees. Despite their place in Colonial American polemics, by the mid-seventeenth century, in most parts of the Colonies, Huguenot assimilation into American culture both economically and religiously was complete. Their presence in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, after nearly complete adaptation into American culture makes their presence in that literature nearly as important as their physical presence.

Most recent historiography of America Huguenots focused on the rapid nature of their assimilation into, and largely disappearance from, the religious landscape of Colonial America. Within this short period of time, Huguenots found numerous alternatives to the ethnic segregation of the French Churches established by the earliest immigrants. While Huguenot communities are largely grouped into three geographically diverse regions in New England, New York and South Carolina, almost all experienced the same alternatives in their quest for religious expression. By the 1710s, many of the most economically successful Huguenots gravitated to the Anglican Church. Many found alternatives within various Reformed denominations fulfilled the yearnings of their religious quest. The fact that Huguenots in all three geographical strongholds essentially disappeared by the middle of the seventeenth century is not surprising considering the rather small number of refugees who decided to journey across the Atlantic. 

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