Sixteenth-century France might not seem like the most promising context for an exploration of the dynamics of multiconfessionalism. The French religious wars were among the most bloody and hard-fought conflicts of the era and were characterised more by division and confrontation than by harmony and coexistence. That said, recent studies have suggested that, in the interests of stability and security, substantial efforts were made at both a central and a local level to establish some form of *modus vivendi* between the faiths.\(^1\) Nevertheless, major obstacles still remained and were to pose a formidable challenge to the peace-making measures employed by royal commissioners and local officials alike throughout the kingdom. Not least of these was the sheer variety and complexity of local circumstances and the necessity for negotiation and mediation between different interest groups. Achieving parity of provision on a nationwide scale, such that both faiths were able to practice their worship on equal terms, was an impossible task. The provincially-minded nature of the French polity weakened royal efforts to establish uniformity in the day-to-day practicalities of religious coexistence within communities. As Ben Kaplan has remarked, “Looser state structures, like those of the empire and confederation, could accommodate multiconfessionalism more easily” than could centralized monarchies, such as France.\(^2\)

Above all, such tensions played out in an urban context, for it was in the towns of France that the majority of the Protestant or Huguenot population was concentrated. Within some of these communities, Huguenots were able to form a substantial enough minority to assert

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themselves and, so, might be perceived to pose a threat to public order. Thus, the “one town, two faiths” of my title is not just a play on the ancien régime aphorism “one king, one law, one faith”, but a reference to the strain of upholding urban unity in the face of confessional division. It therefore reflects the situation in which the ruling elites of many French towns found themselves during the wars, struggling to maintain the peace which, as a result of religious tensions, the actions of inhabitants of both faiths threatened to disrupt. At the same time, royal authorities put pressure on municipal officials to reconcile local differences. Despite the controversy it generated, the promotion of confessional harmony was a policy pursued by the crown from early in the wars. The practical measures designed to achieve this end would, however, prove controversial and shall be the focus here. Special commissioners were sent to the provinces to implement the edicts as well as to resolve resulting disputes in situ. As tensions increased, so the conditions of such provision became increasingly circumscribed and difficult to enforce. Partly, this was due to the fact that the crown never envisaged toleration as anything other than a temporary solution to an intractable problem. This was explicitly stated in the Edict of January and in subsequent legislation, “in order to maintain our subjects in peace and concord, until God permits us to reunite and return them to the same fold”. The ultimate goal was the restoration of religious, specifically Catholic, unity.

Although toleration was viewed in the 16th century in this restrictive and conditional way, its promotion by the monarchy was nevertheless contentious. It was embodied in a series of royal edicts, legislative pronouncements produced at intervals prior to as well as throughout the wars, which sought to resolve the confessional conflicts within the kingdom. In order to enforce the required measures, while attempting not to enflame local tensions, the authorities had to tread warily.

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3 On their deployment, see Foa, “Making Peace” and Roberts, “Royal Authority and Justice”.
6 Most notably in the early 1560s; then in 1563, 1568, 1570, 1576, 1577, 1579, 1580, and 1598—the so-called edicts of pacification. See Stegmann, Édits. Full texts of the edicts can be located at: http://elec.enc.sorbonne.fr/editsdepacification/