Reflections on Community and Identity

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How did the religious schism that grew out of the Protestant Reformation change the dynamics of community life in France? The question has been much debated by early modern historians and yet remains unresolved. One obvious problem is that the word *community* can be—and has been—defined in different ways. When Natalie Zemon Davis wrote in her seminal article "The Rites of Violence" that "ridding the community of dreaded pollution" was a frequent goal of religious riots, she used *community* in its common civil sense of people sharing mutual interests and living in a particular area or town.[1] The word had a quite different meaning for John Bossy in another influential article when he associated *community* with *communion*—common union—in the Eucharist. For Bossy, the Christian community in which the sacred and secular dimensions of the body social were bound together through the shared ritual of communion was irreparably ruptured when people separated into competing churches as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation.[2] Must we choose between these two meanings? Suzanne Desan suggests as much in "Crowds, Community, and Ritual" when she questions Davis's notion that religious riots were intended to restore community. "One could say," Desan ventures, "that violence over religious beliefs destroyed the existing community and tore it apart in a bloody struggle as each group fought to draw new religious boundaries."[3] This sounds a lot like Bossy, except that for Desan it was not separation from communion but religious violence that fractured the traditional bonds of community.

Drawing on all three scholars, I have argued elsewhere that Catholics and Protestants both maintained an ideal of Christian community in which the

1. Davis, "Rites of Violence," 157.
2. Bossy, "Mass as a Social Institution," esp. 53–61; Bossy, *Christianity in the West*, esp. 64–72, 168–71.
3. Desan, "Crowds, Community, and Ritual," 63–64, 65.

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sacred and secular were joined. Both also believed that the body social—the metaphorical representation of an idealized unitary community—had been dangerously polluted and needed to be purified of the errors that corrupted it. Attempts to repair this idealized community, however, only led to conflict as Catholics sought to purge the pollution of heresy and restore the sacred to its proper place in the city, while Protestants wanted to cleanse the city of sacrileges and create a new and godly society.[4] The "common union" inherited from the Middle Ages had broken down, I concluded, and

> a new understanding of community in which politics was separated from religion, and the civic from the sacred, would eventually grow out of the Crown's attempt to place itself above the quarrels as the sole guarantor of the common will. In the meantime, members of both faiths might learn to interact as fellow citizens, living together as neighbors, trading together, and participating together in civic assemblies, while worshiping separately.[5]

Although I would not back away entirely from this conclusion, I am less sanguine about it after five more years of research on the impact of France's religious quarrels in local settings. I have seen, for example, how difficult it was to separate the sacred from the secular in civic affairs in Montpellier, where Catholics, regaining political control after Louis XIII's successful siege in 1622, reversed decades of restrictions on their public presence by reviving old and inventing new religious celebrations in which city officials, dressed in their best red robes, took a prominent part. They reinstituted the celebration of mass as a part of election procedures, filled city streets with religious processions, and restored the Virgin Mary to the city's coat of arms from which the Huguenots had removed her. They rejoiced when the latter move caused Protestants to resign their offices in the biconfessional city government that Louis XIII had promised them and, as late as the 1650s, fought Protestant attempts to reinstitute a biconfessional consulate by claiming that this could allow the Huguenots to gain control of the city's militia, which would permit them to make themselves "entirely masters of the consulate by murder and the sacking and pillaging of the city, just as they did before."[6]

4. Here I paraphrase the argument outlined in Diefendorf, "Rites of Repair," 34.

5. Ibid., 51.

6. Paris, Archives Nationales (hereafter AN), TT 256B, p. 709, "Raisons des habitans catholiques de la ville de Montpellier, opposans au mi partement du Consulat de lad ville," and pp. 704–7, "Factum touchant l'affaire du consulat de Montpellier," which gives the Protestant side of the case. For background on the renewed demand for a biconfessional consulate, see also Archives Municipales de Montpellier, BB 10, Elections consulaires, fols. 260r–62v: proceedings of 1653. My broader argument about Montpellier is made in Diefendorf, "Religious Conflict and Civic Identity."

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Montpellier's Catholics also used their newly acquired power to try to shut down the town's Reformed churches as early as 1634. They did not succeed at this time but did get the second church, the Petit Temple, demolished in 1670.[7] Catholic militancy may have been greater in Montpellier than in parts of France that had not experienced a renewal of religious war in the 1620s, but this was far from the only town where Catholics waged a concerted battle against Protestant worship long before the surge of persecution usually associated with the final years before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Solange Deyon has identified more than 150 Protestant churches—over 20 percent of the Reformed churches then existing in France—that were demolished as a result of local initiatives in the years 1661–64 alone.[8] This makes me wonder just how thin, in fact, was the veneer of religious coexistence that has been the object of much recent research.[9]

Keith P. Luria uses Niort as his most extended example of successfully negotiated communal coexistence in his pathbreaking book *Sacred Boundaries*, yet he also tells us that crowds rushed into the Protestant church in Niort as soon as they learned of the order for the church's closure in 1684. Screaming and blowing horns, people proceeded to destroy Bibles and smash furniture; someone even defecated in the pulpit.[10] Luria presents these riotous events as evidence that a firm religious boundary, one that completely separated Protestants from Catholics, had replaced the more flexible boundary resulting from an earlier "negotiated demarcation between the confessions," and he attributes the change to policies of persecution initiated by the state and aggressively fostered by militant Catholic clerics and lay *dévots*.[11] The argument is persuasive but fails to account for the immense popular anger vented in rites of violence reminiscent of the opening stages of the religious wars. Was this anger really just stirred up by militant preachers and *dévots* in the last years before the Revocation? Or should we look to long-smoldering animosities and a desire for retribution effectively freed for expression when state-orchestrated policies of persecution permitted (and even encouraged) it? These are questions that future research on early modern Francophone communities must address.

I use the word *communities* here in a double sense. France and Francophone Switzerland were composed of thousands of distinct towns, parishes, and

7. AN, TT 256B, "Requête" of Mar. 7, 1634, and Protestant reply of Mar. 13, 1634; "Livre des titres et documents de l'Eglise chrestienne réformée de Montpellier."

8. Deyon, "La destruction des temples," 241–43.

9. Among other works stressing the relatively peaceful nature of confessional coexistence under the Edict of Nantes, see Sauzet, *Contre-réforme et réforme catholique*; Dompnier, *Le venin de l'hérésie*; Labrousse, *Une loi, un roi, une foi?*; Hanlon, *Confession and Community*; Benedict, "*Un roi, une loi, deux fois*"; and Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*.

10. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries*, 19–21, 36–46, 310–12.

11. For a summary of Luria's boundary definitions, see ibid., xxx–xxxi.

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communes, each of which formed a unique "community" with its own particular history of confessional relations. We need to honor their diversity of experience and be wary of overgeneralization. But we need also to acknowledge that, even before the Protestant Reformation, people were quite capable of identifying themselves as members of multiple communities. They already used the word to describe groups that shared common interests at the level of the family and the state, as well as at a local level and as members of Bossy's idealized "Christian community."[12] Religious schism forced a greater separation between the sacred and secular foundations of what people understood as the "civic community," but it did not destroy the common social, economic, and political interests that linked people at the local level. If it resulted in the creation of distinct and bounded "communities of faith," it did not mean that members of these groups no longer aspired to an ideal of Christian community. We do not need to choose between Davis and Bossy; rather, we can recognize that people could identify simultaneously with a "civic community" and a "community of faith," even while regretting the loss of Christian unity. The essential question, then, is not whether one form of community replaced another but what happened when the allegiances that a person owed to more than one community came into conflict.

Given the diverse experiences of different towns and regions, as well as the changes that occurred over time, there can be no simple answers to this question. Rather than seek a common response or overarching theory, we should welcome the opportunity to explore the intersection of community and religion from a variety of perspectives, to rethink old assumptions and form new hypotheses. The articles in this forum do just that, as they explore the construction, destruction, and evolution of community bonds on a variety of levels. They ask how religious schism and civil war affected the relationships people had with family members and neighbors but also explore ways in which doctrine and practices of piety inculcated a sense of solidarity and collective identity among adherents to a faith.

Virginia Reinburg's essay on the pilgrimage shrine of Notre-Dame de Garaison in southwestern France illuminates the convergence of social, economic, and religious interests as foundational elements of local community prior to the Reformation. As Reinburg shows, the pastoral economy of Monléon, a small town in the central Pyrenees, encouraged its residents to work together to manage livestock and water resources, while local lore and a shared Catholic faith

12. An ARTFL-FRANTEXT search turns up 267 examples of the word *communauté* in French writings dated 1260–1700 (artflsrv02.uchicago.edu.ezproxy.bu.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/showrest_?kwic.6.1.1898.0.99.frantext0513, accessed Oct. 30, 2016).

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brought the town's consuls to erect a shrine at a nearby fountain believed to have healing powers. Reinburg also tells how the purely local shrine became a popular pilgrimage attraction in the wake of the religious wars, as Catholic clerics publicized the miracles reported there in a new genre of "shrine books" that reaffirmed the cult of the saints and other doctrines contested by Protestant reformers. The "holy place" created by a "local community" thus became part of "a big Catholic story" intended to reinforce Catholics' confessional identity in a region where Protestantism had made deep inroads. Yet the books, blending history and legend, also reasserted a local Catholic identity by evoking "the entire community" as witnesses to the miracles and promoters of the cult. The representation of community, however mythologized, played an essential part in making the "big story" of the Virgin's apparition believable.

Christian Grosse's essay also takes a longitudinal approach to the problem of confessional identity and shows how church leaders used religious practices to inculcate a sense of community among believers. As Grosse convincingly argues, prayer helped create "a liturgical space to express spiritual solidarity" among Reformed communities that were geographically dispersed and lacked a strongly centralized ecclesiastical structure. The essay focuses on the way in which Reformed church leaders used prayers of imprecation—prayers calling on God to destroy the Protestants' enemies—to build a shared identity and sense of solidarity among Reformed communities. Not surprisingly, Grosse finds that imprecatory prayers became most acceptable during the most violent phase of the Wars of Religion but faded from use once the wars had ended. If the temptation to call on God to exterminate one's enemies rose again with the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, the period also witnessed a new irenicism among Reformed elites, who cited the gospel's call to love one's enemies and sought to purge their psalters of prayers containing curses.

It is fair to assume that the spiritual solidarity that French Protestants nurtured through their practices of prayer provided moral sustenance once the country dissolved into war. At the same time, their self-identity as God's "true" faithful battling enemies who were also enemies of God would have encouraged them to understand these battles largely in terms of religious truth or error. Jérémie Foa's essay departs radically from this view, not to evaluate the origins of the wars, which he leaves unstated, but to focus on the trauma they provoked at the local level. For Foa, the conflicts that engulfed France in the second half of the sixteenth century are best viewed not as "Wars of Religion" but as civil wars. It is the rupture of the civil norms of community and not the fracturing of Christian unity that preoccupies him in his essay on surviving in times of civil war. He shows readers a world not just turned upside down but blown apart by a fundamental rupture of the tacit mutual understanding and unspoken premises on which traditional community relations were built. He unveils a world

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of deceit, of masks and denunciations—a world in which you could no longer trust your neighbors to reveal their true beliefs, much less to conduct themselves honorably or according to traditional notions of neighborly behavior.

Foa's conclusion briefly addresses Henri IV's attempt "to pacify society by pacifying language," prohibiting both invective and allusions to past quarrels, but the relative successes and failures of that royal policy lie outside the scope of the article. Foa's vision of community norms ruptured thus remains a frightening one and reminds us how hard it must have been for fractured localities to recover from such profound levels of discord and distrust. He gives us a new appreciation for the difficult job that Henri IV's peace commissioners undertook when they sought to negotiate communal coexistence in divided towns like Niort or Montpellier. His analysis helps explain, for example, why Protestant leaders in the latter city could be absolutely convinced that Capuchin monks were tunneling under their church so as to blow it up one Easter morning after more than a decade of ostensible peace, or why the Protestant citizenry of the Loire Valley town of Saumur, the subject of Scott M. Marr's essay, could fear massacre when their Huguenot governor was forced from office in 1621, even though Protestants and Catholics had coexisted relatively peacefully there for more than two decades.[13]

Marr's essay on the legal disputes that erupted when twelve-year-old Elisabeth Liger defied her Protestant parents by announcing her desire to live as a Catholic offers a rare glimpse into confessional coexistence at the intimate levels of the family and the neighborhood. The child of well-respected members of Saumur's Reformed church, Elisabeth played with Catholic children in her neighborhood and even visited nearby Catholic churches without her family's knowledge. As Marr explains, "Her social milieu, like that of her parents and other Huguenot townspeople, was populated with people of the rival religion." Significantly, though—and this is Marr's main point—members of the rival confessions did not live together on equal terms, for the Edict of Nantes, while creating a viable framework for confessional coexistence, also "served as a tool for asserting the legal dominance of France's Catholic majority." Elisabeth's mother and father learned this to their sorrow when the Catholic magistrates who heard their daughter's legal case used the law, along with a confessionally charged understanding of divine inspiration, to affirm Elisabeth's desire to follow her conscience, even though it meant overturning long-standing traditions of parental authority. Marr's essay helps show how an imbalance of power in towns where Catholic majorities dominated civic and judicial office undermined

13. Archives Municipales de Montpellier, BB 395, fols. 180v–81r, 182v–83r, proceedings of Aug. 14–15, 1612.

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the negotiated compromises on which communal coexistence depended, making it easier to shutter Reformed churches once royal policy shifted to favor religious uniformity.

Keith Luria's essay, like Marr's, examines a situation in which confessional priorities came into conflict with social mores. Luria's setting, however, is not a biconfessional community in the French heartland but Vietnam, where Christianity was a foreign import, some of whose key tenets ran decidedly counter to local social and cultural values. From the perspective of the missionaries, one of the most troublesome areas of cultural conflict was the clash between Catholic and Vietnamese marriage practices. This is the area that Luria explores as he examines the missionaries' often frustrated attempts to create a Catholic community united by a common adherence to the church's rules of marriage in a society that not only tolerated the dissolution of marriage but actively encouraged polygyny among elites, for whom multiple wives were marks of wealth and status, as well as providers of sons to carry on the family line and ensure the veneration of ancestors. Instead of the strictly bounded Catholic community the missionaries hoped to create, they had to settle for "a permeability of religious boundaries," as Vietnamese converts adapted church teachings to the social imperatives that were the "customs of the country."

Luria's suggestion that Vietnamese converts constructed a Catholic community that satisfied their needs, even if it did not satisfy French missionaries, is a good reminder that it would be wrong to overestimate the unity in any comm*unity* (my emphasis). Individuals have different levels of commitment to community ideals, and their relationships to a given community are not fixed but change over time. "Community includes both negative and positive elements, both sharing and conflict," as David Warren Sabean has observed and the essays in this forum show.[14] If Reinburg and Grosse demonstrate how participation in ritual practices built confessional identity in communities of faith, Marr shows how hard it remains to judge the quality of an individual's engagement with the belief system at the heart of a faith.

In contrast to the other articles' emphasis on community building, even if they also show limits or strains, Foa's essay focuses intently on the element of conflict and leaves readers wondering whether communities fractured by civil war could ever truly be repaired. In a telling comparison with Davis's analysis of religious riots, Foa writes that the acts of violence that characterize civil war "should be understood less in terms of ritual culture or a biblical worldview . . . than in the sense of radical unpredictability and the absence of recognizable rules." The point is worth making: the rules changed—or were

14. Sabean, *Power in the Blood*, 29; more broadly on community, 27–30.

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abandoned—when religious riot gave way to full-fledged civil war. The memory of atrocities committed by neighbors or acquaintances would make these ruptures of community exceptionally difficult to repair. The era of relatively peaceful confessional coexistence that followed the Edict of Nantes testifies to the success of royal pacification policies in bringing an end to the wars. It would nevertheless be an error to assume that past injuries were forgiven or forgotten or to mistake the routine interactions that scholars have observed in biconfessional cities for concord.

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