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In Medias Res, A Review Essay

Hilary J. Bernstein
University of California, Santa Barbara

The *French Historical Studies* Forum “Communities and Religious Identities in the Early Modern Francophone World, 1550-1700” comprises an excellent group of articles of very high quality in research and writing, and it is a privilege to be asked to offer an extended comment on it. As a whole, the Forum helps to shore up my faith in the ability of historians simultaneously to pursue their own lines of inquiry and to participate in a common enterprise. It also speaks to the important place that Barbara Diefendorf and her work have held within the field of early modern French history over several decades. In lamenting the fact that there are fewer younger scholars embarking on careers as *seizièmistes* than I would like, I have often thought that part of the problem is that model scholars such as Barbara have not found themselves in History Departments with the tradition and resources to train a significant number of graduate students. This Forum, though, clearly shows the influence that Barbara has had in developing significant historical questions and working actively with others to advance them. One need not have trained a horde of graduate students to have a significant impact!

This Forum strikes me as an important contribution to a scholarly work in process. It is self-consciously grounded in a series of questions about how groups with particular religious outlooks, whether Catholic or Reformed, are defined and maintained and what happens when disagreements erupt in cross-confessional violence. It may be because of this deep cushion of previous scholarship that the research articles in the Forum are not overly focused on defining terms: they certainly address the relationship between “community” and “religious identity,” but nowhere do they really attempt to nail down what is meant by either. Finally, just as these articles are very obviously in conversation with a body of scholarship focused on the nature of religious adherence, authority, and violence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, they also point the way to new directions in research and conceptualization of the field. We are, I would argue, in the midst of a noticeable re-periodization, where the divisions suggested by the end of the Wars of Religion, the accession of the Bourbon dynasty, and the application of the Edict of Nantes are coming to seem less determined than before.

As Barbara Diefendorf herself points to in “Reflections on Community and Identity,” essentially an introduction to the articles to follow, this Forum can collectively be seen as a contribution to an already extensive body of work focusing on how religious sensibilities shaped individuals’ social relationships and views of the world in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France and how religious differences fed interpersonal violence and civil war. Scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davis, John Bossy, and David Warren Sabean significantly broadened our understanding of the role that religious beliefs and practices played in the lives of early modern individuals by

highlighting the ways that views of sacrality and habits of worship helped to structure relationships—both with God and the wider community. Davis’s essay “The Rites of Violence” was particularly important in that it invested the continual outbreaks of religious violence during the French civil wars with meaning, incorporating them into a broader nexus of assumptions about justice and belonging rather than excluding them as irrational aberrations.¹ Yet, the problem with explaining religious violence too coherently is that it comes to seem inevitable. This is the issue addressed directly in the 2012 *Past & Present* supplemental issue “Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France,” in which the contributors sought to problematize and contextualize the role of religious violence, suggesting that it was not an inexorable result of religious difference but highly dependent on specific circumstances. Stuart Carroll thus set out to demonstrate how a host of micro-political and social relationships helped to dictate outbreaks of violence at Vassy, Sens, and Fumel, concluding that “[t]he formation of distinct and mutually hostile confessional communities was a consequence rather than a cause of the violence.”² This is a dynamic that Barbara Diefendorf also identified in her “Rites of Repair,” where she pointed out that religious violence “did not just prompt and perpetuate the religious quarrels,” but also led to a “fundamental rupture of the social body.”³ Violence could be disruptive or integrative, depending on circumstances.

This move from seeing religious cultures as determinant to focusing on how individuals worked continuously to formulate and revise group identities is also at the heart of Keith Luria’s *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early-Modern France* (2005). Seeking to explain why religious difference sometimes led to intense hostilities while people of different faiths could nevertheless get along on a daily basis, Luria posited a range of different kinds of boundaries, from the permeable to the absolute, prescribed by the crown but negotiated at the local level. For the seventeenth century, Luria argued for a shift in the kind of religious boundaries supported by the crown, from a “negotiated demarcation between the confessions” in the first decades of the century to a thorough separation and ostracizing of the Reformed community in the 1630s and from the 1650s forward.⁴ His model, though, demonstrates just how important context can be, since the “negotiated demarcation” that ensured a level of peace in the seventeenth century

¹ Natalie Zemon Davis, “The Rites of Violence,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 152-88; idem, “The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth-Century Lyon,” *Past & Present* 90 (1981): 40-70; John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); David Warren Sabean, *Power in the Blood: Popular Culture & Village Discourse in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). As much as these works shifted the focus of research on the Catholic and Protestant Reformations and their aftermath, it should be noted that earlier work positing “affinities” between theological positions and social and political configurations also assumed a significant social context for religious belief. See especially, Bernd Moeller, *Imperial Cities and the Reformation. Three Essays*, ed. and trans. H. C. Erik Midelfort and Mark U. Edwards, Jr. (Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1982). These essays were originally published in the 1950s and 1960s.

² Stuart Carroll, “The Rights of Violence,” in *Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France*, ed. Graeme Murdock, Penny Roberts, and Andrew Spicer, *Past & Present* 214, suppl. 7 (2012): 161.

³ Barbara B. Diefendorf, “Rites of Repair: Restoring Community in the French Religious Wars,” in *Ritual and Violence*, 33.

⁴ Keith P. Luria, *Sacred Boundaries: Religious Coexistence and Conflict in Early Modern France* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2005), especially xxviii-xxxi.

was a major factor in promoting violence in the sixteenth. Much recent scholarship has clearly shown that the edicts of pacification, with their specification of limited Reformed rights of worship, could spark religious conflict rather than abating it.⁵

Several articles within the current Forum speak directly to these issues in highly productive ways. In “Who Goes There? To Live and Survive during the Wars of Religion, 1562-1598,” Jérémie Foa directly addresses the question of how the experience of violence and conflict disrupted everyday experience in French cities, thus reshaping relations with neighbors and understandings of urban space. Here, Foa, implicitly following Diefendorf, points out how intimacy facilitated violence, since fluent knowledge of neighbors’ habits and living conditions could provide a basis for attack. In this environment of uncertainty, language took on special force, since a password could prove the difference between life and death (“Qui vive?”), and a significant element of royal attempts to end the civil wars definitively was to impose a new “dictionary” of meaning (p. 435), in which party labels perpetuating conflict were erased and stable meanings were reinforced.⁶ This focus on the details of lived experience during the French Wars of Religion will no doubt have a broad impact, as historians seek to generalize beyond specific historical circumstances to understand the broader patterns of civil war and religious violence.⁷

Foa also points to the way that labeling opposing groups reifies the boundary between them, a concern vividly demonstrated by Christian Grosse. In his “Praying against the Enemy: Imprecatory Prayer and Reformed Identity from the Reformation to the Early Enlightenment,” Grosse traces the call for Reformed prayers entreating divine punishment against enemies of the faith. He roots the practice in the 1550s—the first period of Reformed militancy, as Philip Benedict and others have forcefully demonstrated—and posits its growing frequency during the Wars of Religion, from the 1560s through the early seventeenth century.⁸ Here, the relationship between violence (or the desire for violence) and community definition is evident, as religious war prompted an increasing emotional gulf between confessional groups and as heightened group identities no doubt fed the continuing conflict. Scott M. Marr also invokes the concept of confessional boundaries in his article, “Conversion, Family, and Authority in Seventeenth-Century Saumur,” although in this case

⁵ Penny Roberts, “The Most Crucial Battle of the Wars of Religion? The Conflict over Sites of Reformed Worship in Sixteenth-Century France,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 89 (1998): 247-66; idem, “Peace, Ritual, and Sexual Violence during the Religious Wars,” in *Ritual and Violence*, 76-79; Mack P. Holt, “Religious Violence in Sixteenth-Century France: Moving beyond Pollution and Purification,” in *Ritual and Violence*, 52-74. On attempts to impose peace through the edicts of pacification, see Jérémie Foa, *Le tombeau de la paix. Une histoire des édits de pacification (1560-1572)* (Limoges: Pulim, 2015).

⁶ In pointing to the intimate knowledge of neighbors in directing religious violence, Foa is clearly building on Barbara Diefendorf’s analysis in *Beneath the Cross*, where she explains, “The common people who were victims of the massacres may seem anonymous from a distance of four hundred years, but they were not anonymous to their murderers.” See *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 86.

⁷ For example, see the “AHR Roundtable: Ending Civil Wars,” including Allan A. Tulchin’s article, “Ending the French Wars of Religion,” *American Historical Review* 120:5 (December 2015): 1696-1708.

⁸ Philip Benedict, “The Dynamics of Protestant Militancy: France, 1555-1563,” in *Reformation, Revolt and Civil War in France and the Netherlands 1555-1585* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1999), 35-50; and Hugues Daussy, *Le parti huguenot. Chronique d’une désolution (1557-1572)* (Geneva: Droz, 2014).

it is the boundaries that are legally determined and the behavior in light of them that is up for grabs. Where the Huguenot community in Saumur had certain rights defined by the Edict of Nantes and even though Protestants and Catholics clearly associated with each other on a daily basis, this negotiated boundary (in Luria's model) nevertheless reinforced the power of Catholic elites to interpret the request of a twelve-year-old Protestant girl to convert to Catholicism favorably to their own interests and to do figurative violence to her family's claim to define her religious identity.

As is evident from what has already been said, each of the Forum articles actively engages with the concept of "community," without always meaning the same thing or specifically defining the term. (This is no doubt what led Barbara Diefendorf to discuss the many possible meanings of "community" in her own reflective piece.) This may result from the fact that numerous studies have already examined how French urban communities experienced the divisions of the Reformation and the Wars of Religion and have delineated how (usually Catholic) religious practices and political assumptions were closely intertwined. "Community" can also be a difficult concept to define, if one means more than simply a political conglomeration such as a town or village. In my own book, *Between Crown and Community*, I did not spend much time defining what I meant by the term, beyond a set of shared political assumptions and common language that made it possible for inhabitants of Poitiers of different social groups to see themselves as part of a common enterprise in spite of well-defined hierarchies of power and privilege.⁹

For Virginia Reinburg, the concept of community is closely tied to the local. In "Storied Place: Land and Legend at Notre-Dame de Garaison," she fruitfully demonstrates how specific clerical supporters of Catholic Reform in the early seventeenth century drew on pre-existing stories about a local shrine in establishing authority over the site and publicizing its miraculous powers through historical publications. Although the process can only be glimpsed through later accounts, the shrine of Notre-Dame de Garaison was intimately tied to family identities, as the Virgin Mary was said to have appeared to a specific shepherdess, and to political authority, as the consuls had taken an active role in promoting the structure. Yet as a canon lawyer and a theological controversialist appropriated the site to make their own arguments about the importance of intercessory prayer against Reformed detractors, they consulted records and incorporated a previous history of local stories and miraculous events, thus demonstrating the complex process of interaction between different strains of Catholic belief over time. The same sources could no doubt provide insight into how definitions of local community may have changed with the arrival of Catholic reform, but this is understandably not a focus of Reinburg's study. One could make the same observation in regard to the vision of community in Grosse's examination of imprecatory prayer. It is far easier to see how calling for divine vengeance against enemies helped to define a Reformed religious community that stretched beyond individual congregations to include the entire body of the faithful than to imagine how calls for charity and tolerance by the late seventeenth century affected that same group. In particular, I am led to wonder if we are still talking about one, united community or whether, by the later period, elites who called for an end to imprecatory prayer could be seen to identify with a different notion of Reformed belief?

⁹ Hilary J. Bernstein, *Between Crown and Community: Politics and Civic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Poitiers* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).

This attention to varieties of religious practice, whether Catholic or Reformed, and the ways that religious beliefs intersected with community is also evident in Keith Luria's article "Catholic Marriage and the Customs of the Country: Building a New Religious Community in Seventeenth-Century Vietnam." Exploring missionaries' frustrations with the habit of Vietnamese Catholics to defy their views of the marriage sacrament by marrying non-Catholics or practicing polygyny, Luria interestingly suggests that this was not a case of European clerics failing to establish a Catholic community, "but, rather, [that they] had established one they could not recognize," where Vietnamese Catholics adapted religious teachings to their wider social needs (p. 459). Here, Luria seems to step away from his own previous formulation of permeable confessional boundaries in *Sacred Boundaries* to create a different notion of religious identity. Vietnamese Catholics seemingly rejected the very idea of separate communities of faith reinforced by the sacrament of marriage and formulated their own ideas of community that drew on religious belief and notions of social hierarchy simultaneously.

Just as these articles engage actively with important trends in recent scholarship, they also suggest promising avenues for future development, particularly with regard to the nature of the continuities between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in French religious belief and lived experience. To be sure, a process of re-periodization is already underway. It is now over twenty years ago that Mack Holt chose to extend his study of the Wars of Religion to 1629, the year in which the Peace of Alais was signed, and as Jim Collins recently pointed out, Nicolas Le Roux adopted this same periodization in his volume on *Les guerres de Religion, 1559-1629* in the more recent *Histoire de France* series put out by Belin.¹⁰ If scholars approach the seventeenth century from the perspective of what came before, important continuities will emerge. Barbara Diefendorf's work has gone far to help illustrate this phenomenon, as she grounded the highly ascetic Catholic piety that women embraced in the early seventeenth century in the devotional styles of the Catholic League and noticed that many seventeenth-century policies designed to discipline and enclose the poor had direct antecedents in the preceding century.¹¹ Grosse's examination of Reformed imprecatory prayer reveals similar continuities, in that he finds that the practice continued past the traditional end of the Wars of Religion and only faded from spiritual works after the 1620s (p. 417). Reinburg's article also suggests a certain level of continuity in local experience, as the historians of Notre-Dame de Garaison interwove the new concerns of Catholic Reform with the testimonies and legends of the shrine's earlier existence. This is not to say, however, that consideration of the period after the official end of the Wars of Religion in light of previous experience will always highlight continuity. Indeed, Foa's point is that the civil wars provoked a serious rupture in assumptions of community that the edicts of reduction and the Edict of Nantes sought unsuccessfully to repair (p. 436). Whether the reign of Henri IV was fundamentally restorative or

¹⁰ Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*, 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Nicolas Le Roux, *Les guerres de Religion, 1559-1629* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 2009). Jim Collins drew my attention to the dates of this work in remarks he made at the French Historical Studies Annual Meeting at Washington D.C. in April 2017.

¹¹ Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), especially chapters 1-2; idem, "Civic Engagement and Public Assistance in Sixteenth-Century Paris," in *Social Relations, Politics, and Power in Early Modern France. Robert Descimon and the Historian's Craft* (Kirksville, Mo: Truman State University Press, 2016), 184-211.

constituted a major departure in politics, society, and religion is a question that has received noticeably different responses of late.¹²

At the end of his piece, Foa calls for increased attention to the ongoing impact of the civil wars on French communities in the seventeenth century (pp. 436-37), and this is certainly a line of inquiry pursued by much recent work focusing on the memory of Wars of Religion. Although there were certainly efforts to sanitize previous evidence of hostility, as Thierry Amalou points out for Senlis, the process of rebuilding was a long one as at Orléans, and commemorative practices from civic processions to portrait galleries could actually preserve and reignite disagreements rather than allay them.¹³ In my own study of urban history writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I have found that many of the disagreements that fueled the Wars of Religion in French towns were very much alive decades afterward, and Barbara Diefendorf also suggests that her recent work on Montpellier has led her to similar conclusions (p. 384). Just as the label, “absolutism,” once channeled scholarship into certain, limited lines of inquiry in the political sphere, an over-emphasis on a shift from religious war to the “century of saints” may have imposed similar blind spots. This Forum proves particularly helpful in that it not only builds on important trends in French early modern scholarship to date but also points to exciting new areas of inquiry. In doing so, it pays a fitting tribute to Barbara Diefendorf, who has made a significant contribution to many of those trends and who continues to ask leading questions.

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¹² On the restorative side, see Michel de Waele, *Réconcilier les Français. Henri IV et la fin des troubles de religion (1589-1598)* (Quebec : Les Presses de l'Université de Laval and Éditions du CIERL, 2010); and S. Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Henry IV and the Towns : The Pursuit of Legitimacy in French Urban Society, 1589-1610* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For arguments for a more resolute shift, see Robert Descimon, “L'échevinage parisien sous Henri IV (1594-1609): autonomie urbaine, conflits politiques et exclusives sociales,” in *La ville, la bourgeoisie et la genèse de l'état moderne (XIIe-XVIIIe siècles)*, ed. Neithard Bulst and Jean-Philippe Genet (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1988), 113-50; and idem, « Le Catholicisme corporatif des temps de la Ligue : Témoignages de testaments parisiens des XVIe et XVIIe siècles, » in *Pierre Chaunu historien*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bardet, Denis Crouzet, and Annie Molinié-Bertrand (Paris: PUPS, 2012), 169-88.

¹³ Thierry Amalou, *Le Lys et la Mitre. Loyalisme monarchique et pouvoir épiscopal pendant les guerres de Religion (1580-1610)* (Paris: Éditions du CTHS, 2007), 374-79; Andrew Spicer, “(Re)building the Sacred Landscape: Orléans, 1560-1610,” *French History* 21 (2007): 247-68; Philip Benedict, “Divided Memories? Historical Calendars, Commemorative Processions and the Recollection of the Wars of Religion during the Ancien Régime,” *French History* 22 (2008): 381-405; and David van der Linden, “Memorializing the Wars of Religion in Early Seventeenth-Century French Picture Galleries: Protestants and Catholics Painting the Contested Past,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 70 (2017): 132-78.