

Conflict and Change in Early Modern Communities

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Community is built on shared values and common goals, but also in opposition to different understandings of the same issues and how they might best be addressed. The Protestant Reformation effectively reconfigured the notion of community, establishing new solidarities as well as new boundaries and points of contention. Minority status is crucial; how groups are treated by the authorities and by their neighbors, and how successfully they are integrated within the dominant community, can tell us a great deal about social relations. Barbara Diefendorf's scholarship has helped enormously to shape our understanding of the relationship between communities and religious identity in early modern France, in Paris in particular.<sup>1</sup> While an apt and worthy tribute to Diefendorf's influence, this forum engages more with the themes of her work than directly with her scholarship. In their exploration of the impact of confessional conflict in a variety of settings, and using a variety of sources, the essays present new research which allows us to think about the definition of community and its transmutability and state of flux according to both local context and to changing circumstances. This forum also demonstrates that community involves "a process of constant negotiation" in which unity is often transient and hard won.<sup>2</sup> Above all, communities are not fixed, static entities; they are fluid and adaptable to change even when they do not appear receptive to it.

Yet, as Diefendorf herself acknowledges in the introduction, community is a fraught and freighted concept (p. 383). As Peter Burke has put it, "'Community' is at once an indispensable term and a dangerous one, whether we are practicing history or sociology or simply living our everyday lives."<sup>3</sup> Today, we are told that we belong to a more connected, but also a more atomized world. People think in terms of multiple identities and communities (as they always have), based on shared interests and values, some of which are traditional and others a reflection of current times. They include family, neighborhood, and regional ties; workplaces, clubs, and groupings of various sorts, as well as the formation more recently of online communities; and various ethnic, cultural, religious, or sexual identities which may be imposed upon or embraced by us. We all belong to multiple communities, but any of us can also feel, rightly or wrongly, temporarily or permanently, excluded from them. The formation of a Huguenot minority as a result of the French Reformation, despite efforts at coexistence and

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<sup>1</sup> Notably in her *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); and *Paris City Councillors in the Sixteenth Century: The Politics of Patrimony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1983).

<sup>2</sup> Karen E. Spierling and Michael J. Halvorson, "Introduction: Definitions of Community in Early Modern Europe," in Michael J. Halvorson and Karen E. Spierling, eds., *Defining Community in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate 2008), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Burke, *Languages and Communities in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 5.

inclusion, unsurprisingly produced elements of exclusion within urban communities in particular, as Jérémie Foa's essay in this forum makes clear.<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Karen Spierling and Michael Halvorson provide a simple definition of community as "a group of people who perceived themselves as having common interests and, thus, a common identity or self-understanding," but they also acknowledge that "conflict was inherent within most early modern communities."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, conflict is inherent in *any* community. We need only consider the deep political and ideological divisions which have recently riven both the United States and the United Kingdom, despite government claims to represent the people and calls for national unity. The rejection of multiculturalism and political correctness, as well as the upsurge in "hate crimes," represents a cultural backlash in both countries in response to these divisions. It is clear that the resulting split cannot be healed overnight nor even perhaps in the longer term. By contrast, France seems to have come together under a new president and appears, for the time being, united in its common desire for political change, but community divisions and tensions still remain.

These contemporary analogies are made in order to demonstrate that the human experience of community, as both a source of comfort and of conflict, has many continuities as well as historical specificities which are the concern of this collection. David Nirenberg has argued that, well before the Reformation, "violence was a central and systematic aspect of the coexistence of majority and minorities" and should not be seen as indicating an irrevocable split between groups or unwillingness to accept diversity.<sup>6</sup> It is important to bear this in mind when considering the Huguenot position in early modern France during and after the religious wars. Christian Grosse shows us one way in which the changing dynamic of the movement can be traced through the Protestant use of prayers that curse the enemy.

This forum also highlights the ways in which local, regional, and international definitions interact. Benedict Anderson's highly influential work on *Imagined Communities* is constructed around the concept of the nation. It highlights, in particular, the importance of the role of vernacular language and print in the establishment of conformity and the idea of nationhood by the end of the eighteenth century. Interestingly, these same factors were central to galvanizing the Reform movement which, however, presented itself variously in both regional and supranational terms. This universalist tendency was already evident in the sixteenth century, both in the development of humanism and the Calvinist international (for both of which Latin remained a living and common language). The experience of Reformation within different territories varied, however, with France particularly marked by deep division and explosions of hostility and violence. Quite localized peculiarities also determined that experience, as Scott Marr's essay demonstrates for the apparently successfully-mixed faith communities of seventeenth-century Saumur. Bonds of community did not entirely collapse as

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<sup>4</sup> On this, see also Penny Roberts, "One Town, Two Faiths: Unity and Exclusion during the French Religious Wars," in Thomas Max Safley, ed., *A Companion to Multiconfessionalism in the Early Modern World* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), pp. 265-85; Barbara B. Diefendorf, "Rites of Repair: Restoring Community in the French Religious Wars," 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.

<sup>5</sup> Spierling and Halvorson, "Introduction: Definitions of Community in Early Modern Europe," pp. 2 and 5.

<sup>6</sup> David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 245.

a result of the Reformation, but were rather displaced and reconfigured by a new set of solidarities which, importantly, were not just confessional.

Most notably, of course, in France the Catholic League posed a threat to the survival of the Catholic monarchy, or at least clashed with the supporters of the crown's conciliatory stance and sought, above all, to prevent a Protestant taking the throne. Diefendorf and others have shown the role which genuine religious devotion played in this apparently political split.<sup>7</sup> Nor was the Protestant minority united in its opposition to the Catholic majority, with more radical and conservative voices vying at different times for dominance, just as they did in the League. These divisions, which emerged within the national movement, reflected those within local communities. As with the Catholic converts in Vietnam, who Keith Luria discusses, the churches struggled to ensure conformity and discipline among their congregations, as was the case when Huguenots attended Catholic dances and other festivities or carried out acts of iconoclasm in defiance of their ministers. Whether Catholic or Protestant, local or supranational, faith communities were challenged internally by social and cultural difference and contested sensibilities. It is important to acknowledge this fragmentation within as well as between groups. The notion of a "true" community with a common identity is an elusive ideal, since it can never exist without internal and external pressures forcing it to adapt and change.

This forum considers in various ways the impact of the encroachment by the center or the establishment, whether church or state, on local communities. It also reinforces the degree to which communities differed and, indeed, to which each individual experience was unique. At the same time, it shows that these experiences were shaped by external factors and the decisions of others seeking to shape their community in response to their actions. In rural Bigorre in the Pyrenees, we see how local people might determine their own destiny, but then find it hijacked by the official Church for its own purposes, but that resistance to such impositions was also a part of community. Early modern Paris, too, as Diefendorf has shown, was a distinctive community, both in how it was treated by the crown and in its self-perception and subsequent willingness to challenge authority. This forum allows for the exploration of both the unique features of the communities studied as well as awareness of the issues and tensions which divide.

Barbara Diefendorf remarks that contemporary notions of "the Christian community," "communities of faith," and "the body social" all need to be understood, scrutinized, and challenged as expressions of an idealized world (p. 386). We might add to this list the "body of believers" as a further interpretation of contemporary sensibilities.<sup>8</sup> The impact of confessional conflict on francophone communities led in some cases to their recalibration, but could also blow them irredeemably apart. The *longue durée* of these tensions, with the renewal of the religious wars in France under a different guise in 1630s leading to a Catholic resurgence, reveals that popular anger and violence were still simmering under the surface. Protestant versus Catholic tensions were bound to result in the fragmentation of community and a struggle

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara B. Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity: Pious Women and the Catholic Reformation in Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> This term is most commonly associated with Mack Holt and the contemporary distinction between "a body of believers rather than a body of beliefs," that is a social rather than theological understanding of religious community during the religious wars. See Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 2; and his review article, "Putting Religion Back into the Wars of Religion," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 534.

for control which transformed communal bonds. As Suzanne Desan surmises, “At times the two groups seem to battle within the community for control of the sacred; at other times they act as two opposing communities at war with one another” in a struggle that was inevitably social and political as well as ideological.<sup>9</sup> Diefendorf, too, has concluded that the faiths could not be reconciled “because the very meaning of community was contested in their quarrels.”<sup>10</sup>

A major contribution to the existing scholarship is made by the essays in this forum through their presentation of both the strength and resilience, as well as the contingency and fragility, of community in response to the religious wars. Virginia Reinburg’s rich and evocative description of Pyrenean life describes how the relative autonomy of rural communities was crucial to their sense of identity. This is a tale of bonds of community which held strong in the face of external encroachment and a resurgent Catholicism which might, in other circumstances, have effaced local custom and tradition. In this case, it served rather to strengthen the importance of local devotions and the pious vitality of the community. Christian Grosse presents a different, but similarly vehement, form of solidarity within the Protestant faith in his study of the changing role of Huguenot cursing prayers during the wars and after. He demonstrates how, at a time of open conflict, the legitimacy of seeking divine intervention was embraced and community identity was forged. Not only did the prayers assist the development of a Protestant collective identity, but they also hardened the boundaries between the faiths, thereby assisting the process of separation and entrenched confessionalization. As a result, this was a sort of double predestination in prayer, whereby the focus was on the triumph of the kingdom of God over the reign of the anti-Christ, whereas the later seventeenth century saw a greater emphasis on reconciliation.

In contrast, Jérémie Foa focuses on the destabilizing effect of confessional conflict for relations between the faiths within urban communities. At the same time, he urges that pre-Reformation communal relations not be idealized, for “even during times of peace, communities are constantly riven by tensions and resentments and sometimes by hatred, jealousy, and violence”(p. 426). Yet he demonstrates compellingly how there was an increase in suspicion and distrust of the other faith and an erosion of confidence and surety as a result of the religious wars. Primarily, he sees the danger to the community as domestic or internal, with some towns irreparably torn asunder by their inhabitants’ experience of a gradual process of separation.<sup>11</sup> Scott Marr presents a very different picture to that of Foa in considering the relative concordance and harmony of a confessionally-integrated community in the western French town of Saumur. Nevertheless, he also identifies an important point of fracture. Marr points out how the differences in legal status and political power of the two faith communities, both locally and nationally, were crucial. Conversion to the dominant religion trumped the pre-eminence of parental authority, and, thus, the apparent integration of the well-established Protestant minority became meaningless in these circumstances, revealing its political and judicial marginalization. Foa and Marr demonstrate, in very different ways, how faith communities sought to establish a degree of coexistence with one another, but also the circumstances in which the majority might seek to establish domination and control.

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<sup>9</sup> Suzanne Desan, “Crowds, Community and Ritual in the Work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis,” in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 65-6.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara B. Diefendorf, “Rites of Repair: Restoring Community in the French Religious Wars,” 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.

<sup>11</sup> For a fuller discussion of this point, see also Diefendorf, “Rites of Repair,” pp. 30-51.

Keith Luria, who has written so eloquently on the sometimes-fraught experience of the mixed faith communities of seventeenth-century France, turns his attention to a different kind of attempt at cultural integration in Vietnam. The missionaries' wish to establish a "true" Catholic community based on discipline and morality ran counter to the local adaptation of Christianity to their needs and established traditions. Such problems made the Church's requirements impossible to enforce in the face of social realities and communal imperatives. As in Europe, unpopular ecclesiastical regulations were resisted and a compromise had to be reached for the sake of stabilizing and strengthening community. Community remained a contested and vulnerable commodity. Ideal and practice were often hard to reconcile because of the multiple pressures exerted by indigenous tradition and exogenous demands.

The changing nature of conflict and its impact on community over time is scrutinized beautifully by the series of vignettes which make up this forum. It might appear, and is certainly suggestive in the discussion here, that after the turbulence of the civil wars, seventeenth-century France began gradually to erode points of conflict between neighbors. Thus, scars remained, but wounds had largely healed. The complexities that this conceals, however, underlines how careful we have to be as historians not to overstate such comparisons and contrasts. As these essays uncover, individual and communal experiences are rarely as black and white as such conclusions may suggest. Presuppositions about the mellowing of attitudes during the seventeenth century, in fact, produce very mixed results, as the 1685 Revocation would reveal. The ebb and flow of community tensions is evident; as contexts and circumstances changed so, too, did confessional relations. Despite Foa's bleak picture of ongoing suspicion, the faiths were neither unremittingly hostile to one another during the wars, nor completely appeased thereafter, as Marr highlights. Tensions could always resurface given the right conditions. Within faith communities, too, as Reinburg, Grosse, and Luria in their very different studies show, issues were contested, mutable, and negotiable according to circumstance. Communities showed themselves to be dynamic and having agency. In the early modern period, there was grudging acceptance of change, but also adaptation and resistance by communities which strove to maintain a sense of common identity whether confronted by pressures from crown, church, or another faith. As a result, a community's identity was ultimately forged from both within and without.

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