

H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 79

Allan A. Tulchin, *That Men Would Praise the Lord: The Triumph of Protestantism in Nîmes, 1530-1570*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xxii + 287 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-19-973652-2.

Review by Barbara B. Diefendorf, Boston University.

With a population of approximately 10,000 people in the mid-sixteenth century, Nîmes was a city of only middling size and economic importance. As an early and persistent bastion of Protestantism, it nevertheless played a role entirely out of proportion to its size in the religious conflicts of the sixteenth century. The Reformation in Nîmes is well documented, thanks to the survival of detailed city and consistory records, and has been the subject of several good dissertations.^[1] Among these, only Allan Tulchin's has at last been transformed into a book. As the subtitle "*The Triumph of Protestantism in Nîmes, 1530-1570*" indicates, the work is a study of the rise of Protestantism in the city and concludes at the point that Nîmes's Protestants had secured an enduring dominance. The book's real focus, however, is on the period between 1560 and 1562, when the Reformed Church established formal institutional structures in Nîmes and enjoyed the formidable growth in membership that placed the city securely in Protestant hands by consolidating its position among the urban elite. Although Catholics briefly regained control of city government after the negotiated peace that terminated the first religious war in 1563, Tulchin rightly views this political reversal as just a brief interlude—albeit an unsettling and important one—in a longer history of Protestant domination. The Protestants' sense of grievance at watching Catholics not only assume political control, but also reestablish a public presence in the city after being driven out in the first religious war, was largely responsible for the vengeful murder of several dozen prominent Catholics in the infamous Michelade, plotted to coincide with the renewal of war in the fall of 1567.

Tulchin's attention to the crisis years of the late 1550s and early 1560s, when the Protestant movement experienced tremendous growth in France, is particularly welcome. We still know too little about this volatile period or about the underlying reasons for the massive number of conversions that occurred at this time, despite the movement's illegality and the dangers to which its members were exposed. The days when historians could simply attribute this growth to the power (and, at least implicitly, the truth) of the Protestant message and the compelling rhetoric of its preachers have long been gone, but a coherent explanation for Protestantism's appeal at this particular juncture in French history remains elusive. Clearly, the more moderate policies adopted by Catherine de Medici when she became regent on the death of Francis I in December 1560 contributed to this growth by permitting the nascent church to emerge from the fearful secrecy that had kept it underground. However, this can serve as only a partial explanation for the phenomenon of mass conversion, since it fails to address the questions of what drew people to the movement in the first place and why it became dominant in some locales but not in others. Tulchin's book has the merit of offering cogently-argued answers to these questions in the context of a local study from which the elements of a broader model of religious conversion in sixteenth-century France can then be extrapolated. His use of notarial contracts to establish data on social status and social networks gives a strong empirical base to the work.

Tulchin argues that the Protestant Reformation succeeded in Nîmes largely because its early leaders “skillfully exploited the local political situation. They identified arguments that resonated with Nîmes’s elite” (p. 181) and drew them into the movement, thereby gaining the support and leadership needed to maneuver the emergent church into a dominant position in the town. A key element in the cooptation of Nîmes’s elite was the *cahier de doléances* drafted by members of the Protestant movement in March 1561 with the intention of presenting it first at the Estates of Languedoc and then at the Estates General scheduled to meet in Melun in May (the meeting was eventually held in Pontoise in August).^[2] The cahier offered an extensive program of economic and political reforms intended to resolve the king’s great debts, prevent future deficits, eliminate judicial abuses, and restore good order in the kingdom. It also contained a program of religious reforms, on the ground that the Christian religion is the “foundation [on which] all other reform is built” (p. 105). In Tulchin’s analysis, the cahier transmuted economic worries resulting from a wave of bad harvests and anger about the oppressive costs of the Valois wars into a positive platform for renewal by identifying moral corruption as the root of the kingdom’s problems and prescribing thoroughgoing reform as their remedy. “The cahier provided an outlet for all of the frustrations that Nîmes’s elite had been feeling” (p. 104). As such, it not only contributed to the goals the Protestant movement had set for itself at the Estates General of 1561, it also “proved to be a superlatively successful organizing tool at the local level.” It is “therefore crucial to the history of the Reformation in Nîmes because it is the fullest exposition of Protestant ideas and because the struggle to adopt it was crucial to the success of the Protestant movement” (p. 102).

This is an intriguing argument and Tulchin is surely right to call attention to the need for more study of the role that the 1560-1561 meetings of the Estates General may have played in the growth of French Protestantism, despite the failure of these Estates to enact serious reforms.^[3] Pending further research, however, his conclusions about the pivotal role the Nîmes cahier played in promoting the Reformation in that city must be considered more suggestive than conclusive. Tulchin cites a “draft memorandum listing possible provisions” for a platform Protestants wanted local communities to include in their *cahiers de doléances* and says that the Nîmes cahier is “particularly similar” to this draft (p. 102), but he does not say what these similarities are. This makes it hard to gauge the extent to which the Nîmes cahier represented a concerted Protestant platform. In any case, the broader context is important here. Nîmes’s cahier was produced at a moment when people all across France harbored great ambitions for reform, and even solidly Catholic cities offered radical proposals for economic and political reforms, as well as manifesting an intense anti-clericalism. The Nîmes cahier does show clear Protestant influences in its language (referring, for example, to “temples” and “ministers” instead of “churches” and “priests”), but, as Tulchin points out, there is little here that moderate Catholics could not have supported (p. 105). While it is thus entirely plausible that Nîmes’s cahier attracted some reform-minded Nîmois elites to look to the Protestant movement for the sort of moral regeneration they deemed necessary in the kingdom, proving that this document played a pivotal role in the growth of Protestantism in Nîmes is nevertheless difficult. It was drafted at a moment when Reformed church membership was growing rapidly in a great many places, at least in part, as Philip Benedict suggested thirty years ago, because “the political situation looked increasingly promising for the Protestant cause after 1559, while the degree of risk involved in joining the movement declined.”^[4] The general mood of optimism that pervaded France in 1560-1561 may have had as much to do with the greater willingness on the part of Nîmes’s elite to align themselves publicly with the Protestant cause as the town’s *cahier de doléances*.

Tulchin’s attempts to directly link the cahier to a growth in membership in the Reformed church are unconvincing. The fact that the church organized a consistory just eight days after the cahier was approved does not demonstrate a causal link between the two events, despite Tulchin’s claim that “the

proximity between the two events indicates how formative the cahier campaign was for the Nîmes Protestant movement” (p. 122). We have no way of knowing how many of the men who signed the cahier converted to Protestantism in the months prior to the document’s creation or how many supported the cahier but never joined the Reformed church. Tulchin argues that the social profile of the Protestant movement changed between 1560 and 1562 and that, when measured in terms of occupational percentages, the movement’s social profile in 1562 is “quite similar” to the social profile of those who signed the cahier. Given that the occupations of only forty-seven Nîmois Protestants can be identified for the entire period up to 1560, any statistics based on this data are bound to be shaky. But even ignoring the small statistical base, the fact that members of the legal professions made up only 9 percent of known Protestants prior to 1560, as compared with 15 percent of cahier signers, 15 percent of Protestant leaders in 1560, and 18 percent of known Protestants in 1562, cannot tell us that these lawyers converted to Protestantism because they were attracted to the political program in the church’s cahier (p. 201). Nor do such figures “make it clear why the town council was no longer willing or able to repress the Protestant movement,” as Tulchin claims (p. 123). A different sort of evidence would be required to prove these points.

In placing so much emphasis on a single causal factor to explain Protestantism’s cresting appeal in Nîmes, Tulchin inevitably slights other messier, less quantifiable, dimensions of religious change, as well as neglecting arguments that contradict the chronology that he lays out. According to Ann Guggenheim, “Huguenot governing councils and consular advisory commissions on which noble commanders sat” were founded as early as 1560; the militia formed in Nîmes in that year “already constituted a clandestine Huguenot military organization,” and without its support “overt Huguenot control of the consulate and *présidial* seat would not have been possible in 1561.”^[5] If Guggenheim is correct, the Protestant movement established itself both earlier and in a different fashion than Tulchin proposes, and it is surprising that he fails to address this thesis, if only to refute it.

Tulchin’s understanding of Protestant conversion flows directly from the role that he assigns Nîmes’s *cahier de doléances*. As he sees it, the cahier generated “enormous enthusiasm and prominent new converts” (p. 121). At the same time, “many of those who had signed the petition for the cahier were not yet completely committed to the new church, were not necessarily knowledgeable about its doctrines or ceremonies, and did not have clear identities as Protestants” (p. 121). The church needed to create formal structures to handle this rapid growth. “This was particularly important since there were so many new members, who did not necessarily know what their new community expected of them” (p. 123). For Tulchin, then, Protestant social and political ideas and not religious teachings or doctrine, offer the key to the mass conversions that occurred in Nîmes. When the Estates General of Pontoise was dismissed without adopting any of the radical proposals presented there, Nîmes’ Protestants had to regroup. They moderated their political demands and offered the king desperately needed financial support in exchange for religious concessions (pp. 117-118). In Tulchin’s opinion, this indicates that “while political discontent may have motivated some people to join the movement, their new religious identity became sufficiently important that they were prepared to forgo the very political reforms that had motivated them initially. . . . They had accepted a community not just a program, and only with time did they fully come to understand the precise dogmas and rites of their new faith and recognize that their previous religion had been idolatry” (p. 118).

In Tulchin’s analysis, it was these newly converted Protestants who were responsible for the attacks on Catholic churches that occurred at least four times in the fall of 1561. Along with listening to sermons, participating in iconoclastic acts was an important element in the development of a Protestant identity on the part of these new converts (p. 138). Troubled by memories of their Catholic past and by their new knowledge that “they had worshiped at the temple of Baal only a short while before,” iconoclasts

attempted to rid themselves of the guilt they felt—to resolve their cognitive dissonance—by striking out at the objects that prompted these uncomfortable memories (p. 141). Protestant iconoclasm was thus, in Tulchin’s analysis, an “attempt at self-purification” rather than “an attempt to purge the community by ridding it of idolatry,” as previous historians have proposed (pp. 133-134). The notion of that the violence was self-directed is an interesting one. Tulchin nevertheless misconstrues the point made by previous historians when he says that, because of their majority position, Protestants in Nîmes did not need to “drive out others to purify the community” (p. 133). In other cities, as in Nîmes, the principal aim of Protestant iconoclasts was to destroy the symbols they considered idolatrous, and not to drive Catholics out.[6]

Tulchin also misconstrues the work of previous historians when he calls the work of scholars who have stressed the religious origins of the Wars of Religion “naive in its simplicity” and insists that “individuals rarely do anything for one single reason” (p. 182). None of the historians who sought to “put religion back into the Wars of Religion” tried to take politics out, much less to offer a mono-causal explanation for a complex phenomenon.[7] A similar distortion occurs when, after recounting the horrible massacre of Nîmois Catholics in the Michelade, Tulchin cites Natalie Davis and Denis Crouzet as exemplars of a supposedly general view that French Protestants were inherently less murderous than Catholics. In her classic essay on “The Rites of Violence,” Davis does say that Calvinist crowds were “the champions” at destroying religious property and the Catholic crowds “the champions” in bloodshed, but she also says that “Protestant rioters did in fact kill and injure people, and not merely in self-defense; and Catholic rioters did destroy religious property.”[8] In the case of Denis Crouzet, the passage Tulchin cites concerning Protestant violence refers quite specifically to the period prior to the outbreak of war in 1562, “before a perversion that issued naturally from the rituals of war”—a qualification that applies directly to the 1567 Michelade, which, in any event, Crouzet explicitly calls “a separate case” (p. 176). It is hard to imagine either Davis or Crouzet taking exception to Tulchin’s conclusion that “the Michelade shows that Protestants could be just as violent as Catholics in sixteenth-century France” (p. 177).

Allan Tulchin’s study of the Reformation in Nîmes contributes in important ways to our understanding of religious change and religious conflict in sixteenth-century France and should be seen as a complement, and not a corrective, to current scholarship. It offers a good case study of Nîmes, probing the social and political context in which the mass conversions of 1559-1562 took place in ways that show the unique character of the city, but also permit useful points for comparison to emerge. The concluding chapter, which attempts to extrapolate from the Nîmes case a general model of religious conversion in sixteenth-century France, is particularly useful in this regard. The book deserves the close attention of scholars in the field, even if certain aspects of the argument about how and why the Protestants successfully came to power in Nîmes are less than entirely convincing.

NOTES

[1] Ann H. Guggenheim, “Calvinism and the Political Elite of Sixteenth-Century Nîmes” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1968); Joshua E. Millett, “A City Converted: The Protestant Reformation in Nîmes” (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 2000); Allan A. Tulchin, “The Reformation in Nîmes” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2000).

[2] The best coverage of this neglected meeting of the Estates General remains J. Russell Major, “The Third Estate in the Estates General of Pontoise, 1561,” *Speculum* 29: 2 (1954): 460-476. The Nîmes cahier, as presented to the city council in March 1561, has been published in Léon Ménard, *Histoire*

civile, ecclésiastique et littéraire de la ville de Nîmes: Preuves de l'histoire, vol. 4 (Nîmes: Typographie Clavel-Ballivet, 1874), pp. 267-282.

[3] Tulchin says that Philip Benedict is undertaking a broader study of the campaign apparently undertaken by the Protestant movement to influence the Estates by presenting a common platform for reform (p. 246). Benedict has confirmed in a private communication that, in collaboration with Nicolas Fornerod, he is finishing a volume of documents on the organization and activities of French Reformed churches (1557-1563), which will include the proposed common set of grievances and also provide a wider contextualization for this document. The volume should make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the greatest period of Protestant expansion.

[4] Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 53-54.

[5] Ann Guggenheim, "The Calvinist Notables of Nîmes during the Era of the Religious Wars," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 3/1(1972): 81; 88. Tulchin does say that the officer corps of the urban militia formed in October 1560 "had distinct Protestant tendencies" (p. 93), but this is a far milder claim and ignores Guggenheim's implication that Huguenot military commanders were playing a role in Nîmes's religious politics.

[6] Tulchin contradicts his description of Nîmes as a city in which Protestants were in the majority when churches were seized in the fall of 1561, when he describes the Protestants as "still a minority, but a large one" in 1562 (p.144). More important than absolute numbers, however, would seem to be the fact that Protestants considered theirs the dominant faith in the fall of 1561.

[7] See Mack Holt, "Putting Religion Back into the Wars of Religion," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 58-93. Personal disclaimer: I count myself among this number. My book, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), is one of the works discussed in Holt's article.

[8] Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975): 173.

Barbara Diefendorf
Boston University
bdiefend@aol.com

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

