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Philip Benedict, *Season of Conspiracy: Calvin, the French Reformed Churches, and Protestant Plotting in the Reign of Francis II (1559-60)*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society Press, 2020. xi+224 pages. Bibliography, index, illustrations, and appendix. \$37.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1606180853.

Review by Michael W. Bruening, Missouri University of Science and Technology.

Thirty years ago, Mack Holt published a review essay entitled, “Putting Religion Back into the Wars of Religion.” Evaluating works by Denis Crouzet, Barbara Diefendorf, and others, Holt noted that approaches to the French Wars of Religion had shifted. Earlier scholarship, he pointed out, essentially concluded that political and economic factors were at least as important as religion in shaping the Huguenot movement, which left us with “a Wars of Religion *sans Dieu*.”<sup>[1]</sup> This view was shaped by the political and economic approach to history that dominated the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What changed, Holt observes, was the rise of social and cultural history in the 1970s, with the work of scholars such as Natalie Davis. The new cultural focus perhaps inevitably brought religion back into view.

Philip Benedict is among the generation of historians trained in the cultural history of that era and has dedicated his career to developing a deeper understanding the Huguenot communities and their activities in the sixteenth century. In *Season of Conspiracy*, he continues the trend, perhaps now better described as standard historical practice going back nearly half a century, of “putting religion back into the wars of religion” with regard not to the wars themselves but to their prelude: a series of Protestant plots in 1560 that included most famously the Conspiracy of Amboise. Benedict takes aim at two historiographical traditions: first, the tendency to see such conspiracies as stemming from rivalries and scheming among the French nobility, and second, the confessional tradition that has sought to insulate John Calvin from complicity with or even knowledge of the plots. Against the first, Benedict demonstrates that many commoners and pastors, likely driven at least in part by religious devotion, participated in the conspiracies. Against the second, he convincingly shows that Calvin and his close associate Theodore Beza knew about the Amboise conspiracy and actively assisted a lesser-known plot for the Huguenots to seize Lyon, known as the Maligny Affair. These conspiracies, plotted during the short reign of Francis II (July 1559-December 1560), mark a key stage in the early history of the institutional French Reformed churches, the narrative history of which constitutes Benedict’s current long-term research project.

Benedict devotes a great deal of attention to the historiographical traditions behind the conspiracies, and his lengthy exposition in chapter two takes up more than a third of the book.

Immediately after the Conspiracy of Amboise, Calvin and Beza in Geneva sought to hide their role by squelching rumors that they had in any way supported the action. Moreover, Huguenot tracts published soon afterwards set the tone for much of the historiography ever since. The plot was, they claimed, merely a political attempt to remove the nefarious influence of the Catholic Guise family over the young king. As such, the action was not seditious but, in fact, would have rendered a great service to the king. A little later, the tradition developed that there were two kinds of Huguenots, political and religious. The conspiracies, this tradition insisted, were carried out by political Huguenots, not by the devout religious Huguenots. Two of the most influential books on this period published in the sixteenth century, Jean Crespin's *Histoire des martyrs* and Beza's *Histoire ecclésiastique*, simply copied large sections from these earlier works, thus ensuring the continuation of the historiographical tradition that Amboise was a venture of the nobility.

In the era of modern scholarship, the collected works of Calvin, published in the nineteenth century, included new letters that could have shed new light on Calvin's clear complicity in the Maligny affair, but these were either explained away by Calvin's defenders (such as Émile Doumergue) or were noted by Genevan historians (such as Amédée Roget) but subsequently ignored by French historians and thus omitted from the grand narratives of the Wars of Religion.<sup>[2]</sup> Benedict notes that one of the first scholars to get Calvin's and Beza's roles in the conspiracies right, particularly Calvin's efforts to help fund the Maligny affair, was Alain Dufour in 1963, but Dufour published his findings in a relatively minor regional journal and thus had virtually no impact on the larger historical field.<sup>[3]</sup> Benedict concludes the long historiographical chapter with a lesson for historians: Far from being a discipline that builds a clearer image of the past through the steady accumulation of additional evidence, "the actual history of scholarship about virtually any given historical topic tends to reveal a far messier story of starts and stops, blind alleys, and the eternal recurrence of debates, interpretations, anecdotes, and *topoi* established early on" (p. 77).

Benedict then proceeds to set the record straight, diving into the details of the surviving evidence to present a clearer picture of what happened and, perhaps more importantly, who was involved. His most important piece of evidence, which was discovered in the 1880s by Alphonse de Ruble but subsequently ignored, is the testimony (included as an appendix in the book) of a cabinetmaker named Gilles Triou, who was arrested in connection with the Maligny affair. Benedict's discussion of Triou's testimony forms chapter three of the book. This piece of evidence is crucial because it reveals the active engagement in the conspiracies of merchants, artisans, deacons, and pastors, as well as the significant impetus for the plots coming from Geneva. Not only did Calvin himself help to finance the Maligny plot, but his closest friends also played a major role in the planning.

In chapters four and five, Benedict leads us through the conspiracies themselves. He does not devote much attention to the Conspiracy of Amboise since that event is generally well known. One of his chief goals in the book, however, is to note that Protestant plotting did not end with the failed Amboise plot. It continued throughout 1560, thus constituting the titular "season" of conspiracy. The central goal of the Protestants was to get Antoine de Bourbon, king of Navarre and first prince of the blood, to declare himself openly as Protestant and to seize the reins of government from the Guise to ensure a favorable atmosphere for the Huguenots in France. The Maligny affair (named for the leading conspirator) was an attempt to seize Lyon as a Huguenot base of operations, from which Antoine could then summon an Estates-General that would bring the Guises to justice and eliminate their influence at court. Benedict concludes chapter four

highlighting once again the weakness of the noble-rivalries explanation of the conspiracies by noting that “the strategy may have been that of the Geneva reformers more than of Antoine and [Louis de Bourbon, Prince de] Condé” (p. 130). When a stockpile of arms was discovered in Lyon, however, the conspirators were forced to flee the city and scuttle the plan. Even this did not bring an end of the plotting, however. New plans emerged to provide Antoine with the show of force he needed to march on Orléans, where the Estates General had been summoned, remove the Guises from power, and take the leading position in the king’s council. In the end, Antoine entered Orléans submissively, and his brother Condé was arrested. Francis II’s death in December 1560 brought an end to the season of conspiracy, for the accession to the throne of the child king Charles IX, with his mother Catherine de Medici as regent, ushered in a new era that demanded new Huguenot strategies for recognition.

With the brief narrative of the events concluded—it takes up just thirty-eight pages in the book—Benedict turns to the question of the motives of the conspirators through a detailed investigation of several known participants who lived in or near Geneva. Scholarship has tended to portray the conspirators as malcontents and military adventurers, but Benedict finds that many (though not all) of them appear to have been religiously devout. Along with the participation of Calvin and Beza, this suggests that the conspiracies were driven at least as much by hopes for a religious resettlement in France as by any other factor.

In a concluding chapter, Benedict highlights what he sees are the most important lessons from his examination of the evidence. First, he emphasizes that Protestant plotting did not cease after the failed Conspiracy of Amboise, but instead continued throughout Francis II’s reign. Second, Calvin’s clear support after Amboise for what Benedict calls the “action faction” that pushed for an aggressive confrontation with the king and the Guises needs to be better appreciated. Calvin scholars have tended to emphasize Calvin’s denunciation of the Amboise plot and ignore his support for the Maligny affair, creating the misleading idea that he was against potential uprisings in France. Third, the pastors, commoners, and leaders of the Reformed churches in France actively supported the plotting throughout the season of conspiracy. The old narrative of the conspiracies stemming entirely from rivalries among nobles is no longer tenable.

Benedict is largely successful in what he sets out to do in *Season of Conspiracy*. As he acknowledges, much of the information he presents is not new, including the evidence for Calvin’s funding of the Maligny affair and the testimony from Gilles Triou. As he adeptly shows in his lengthy historiographical exposition, however, new evidence is effective in the long term only if other scholars use it, which has not been the case with the information presented here. Benedict’s investigation in chapter six of the participants from Geneva and their motives is the most significant new evidence presented, and the cross-section of conspirators he examines reveals their diverse nature. His discussion of Calvin himself is not quite as innovative. The scholarly literature on Calvin is enormous, including a significant subset of works on the theme of “Calvin and the right to armed resistance.” Too much of this genre is focused on Calvin’s theoretical ideas as stated in his great work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Much of it, however, does concern his actions, hopes, and correspondence with regard to his belief that Antoine of Navarre should seize the reins of government and openly support Protestantism in France. Still, Benedict is quite right that most scholarship has tended to see Calvin as a supporter of law and order and has downplayed the evidence for his role in supporting the conspiracies of 1560. Benedict’s most important contribution here is to prove definitively that the conspiracies were not, in fact, the noble misadventures described in both Huguenot and modern political historiography. He

effectively brings together a wide variety of sources to demonstrate the significant and continued participation of the Huguenot pastors and rank-and-file. As with the trend identified by Holt thirty years ago, Benedict effectively puts religion back into the Huguenot conspiracies, despite the best efforts of the Calvinists themselves to keep it out.

## NOTES

[1] Mack Holt, "Putting Religion Back into the Wars of Religion," *French Historical Studies* 18 (1993): 524-51.

[2] John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia* (Braunschweig: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900). Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin. Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, 7 vols. (Lausanne: Georges Bridel, 1899-1927); Amédée Roget, *Histoire du peuple de Genève depuis la Réforme jusqu'à l'Escalade*, 7 vols. (Geneva: Jullien, 1870-1883).

[3] Alain Dufour, "L'affaire de Maligny (Lyon, 4-5 septembre 1560) vue à travers la correspondance de Calvin et de Bèze," *Cahiers d'Histoire* 8 (1963): 269-80.

Michael W. Bruening  
Missouri University of Science and Technology  
[bruening@mst.edu](mailto:bruening@mst.edu)

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