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Ronald S. Love, *Blood and Religion: The Conscience of Henri IV, 1553-1593*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001. xii + 457 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7735-2124-0.

Review by Raymond A. Mentzer, University of Iowa.

By the end of the present decade, two important observances--the celebration of John Calvin's birth in 1509 and the commemoration of Henri IV's assassination in 1610--will have drawn substantial attention to the religious and political themes that inspire this volume. Love's sympathetic exploration of Henri of Navarre's religious loyalties from the years following his birth in 1553 to his final conversion to catholicism forty years later underscores the lively engagement of confessional identity, dynastic aspirations, and the imperatives of the monarchic state during the second half of the sixteenth century. Yet discussion of the royal conscience is never a straightforward matter. The subject is infinitely more complicated for a figure who changed religion several times and who has often been judged indifferent and opportunistic in his confessional stance. The central debate is over the king's ultimate conversion to catholicism in July 1593. Other scholars, notably Michael Wolfe, have emphasized the broad political forces surrounding the office of monarch in the conversion process. Henri IV's personal convictions are, according to this view, less critical and, in any event, extremely difficult to discern. Love, much to the contrary, argues that the sovereign's personal, longstanding religious views are at the heart of the matter. Consequently, he offers an extensive and sensitive examination of Henri's childhood, military and political career, and accession to the throne, all the while highlighting the place of religious belief and practice. This longer perspective, Love maintains, yields a better understanding of the first Bourbon monarch and the question of his confessional allegiance.

Henri's mother, Jeanne d'Albret, queen of Navarre, was an early and sincere convert to the Reformed faith. She raised her son accordingly. The queen took a direct and abiding interest in the boy's academic and religious training. He acquired a keen appreciation for his future role as king of Navarre and first prince of the blood within the neighboring kingdom of France. He also realized the inseparability of his christian faith from the affairs of state. Henri drew upon these deeply rooted lessons when in early adulthood he confronted a series of sudden tragic events. Over the span of three months from June to August 1572, his influential mother died, he married Marguerite, the sister of King Charles IX, in an ill-fated attempt to pacify France, the Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre led to the death of thousands of Huguenots, and in connection with the butchery Henri converted. Henri publicly abjured Reformed christianity and adopted catholicism. Yet the change was coerced, and Henri resisted for more than a month. Even then, he was, in Love's expression, no more than a counterfeit catholic, who returned to the Reformed church at the first opportunity. Thus, Henri successfully concealed his true religious views from the royal court until February 1576 when he escaped his captors and rejoined the Huguenot forces. Now king of Navarre, Henri gradually emerged as a formidable military and political leader in the years that followed. His initial training, above all in Reformed doctrine and devotion, coupled with subsequent political experience prepared Henri for yet another turning point in the mid-1580s. The death in 1584 of the duc d'Alençon, the remaining Valois brother, together with the childlessness of King Henri III propelled Henri of Navarre to center stage. The protestant king of Navarre became heir presumptive to the French throne.

In light of his new role, Henri softened the religious rhetoric, even as he advanced the Huguenot cause through force of arms and political maneuvering. Interests of state dominated. He recast the religious antagonisms in France as civil wars. The assassination of King Henri III and the extinction of the Valois line in 1589 only intensified the struggle. Henri of Navarre inherited a crown that many, perhaps the majority, of his subjects believed only a catholic could wear. For the moment, the Bourbon king was evasive on the issue of conversion, preferring instead to secure his throne through battlefield victories. The strategy soon proved ineffective, and another approach seemed inevitable. Henri's "sincerity of religious scruple" (p. 219) had to this point precluded another abjuration of his Reformed faith. Royalist catholics and other supporters eventually persuaded him of the need to become catholic. Still, it was a slow process, constrained as he was by the "crisis of his conscience" (pp. 220-21). Conversion meant a sacrifice of religious principles for political stability and dynastic triumph. Love cautions that the choice between religion and blood was by no means easy. Make no mistake. It was Henri's pragmatism, not opportunism which eventually won out. The mass of his subjects and most vociferously the members of the ultra-catholic Holy League insisted upon the catholicity of the throne. The impasse demanded a political solution, but this does not mean that the king failed to agonize over the decision. When Henri finally abjured on 25 July 1593, the process had reached its painful, if necessary, conclusion. Political reconstruction could begin.

Love unquestionably has energized the debate over Henri IV's religious posture, arguing that the king's personal views do matter. His reexamination of the evidence and reassessment of previous interpretations is methodical and stimulating. Will this fresh interpretative perspective topple the reigning orthodoxy regarding Henri's pragmatism and political savvy? The author certainly makes a fervent case. Yet the contention that Henri is best understood in sincere religious terms will likely meet resistance. Additional rethinking and reorganization of the material might have strengthened Love's position. The study is largely a narrative of military campaigns and political affairs among the Huguenot nobility. The matter of Henri's conscience, however central to the author's thesis, is now and again obscured amid the myriad of other details. Greater focus on the king's religious statements and practices would have made for a tighter, more convincing argument. Love does not ignore the evidence. He offers excerpts from Henri's correspondence and other texts. One suspects, however, that the written record is not as rich as Love might like. Henri's actions, which are not always straightforward and uncomplicated, must fill the gaps. Take, for instance, Henri's many hesitations and delays as he struggled with conversion to catholicism in 1572 and 1593 or recommitment to Reformed protestantism in 1576. Are they fundamentally soul-searching moments as Love would have them? Could the pauses and reticence have been part of a calculated political strategy? Love claims that sentiments expressed in the concise passages he cites from Henri's letters and other official writings were heartfelt. Might these comments also have been meant for political consumption? In this vein, closer, more extensive investigation of Henri's instruction in catholicism during late July 1593 would have been enormously helpful. What did the king willingly accept? What caused him anxiety? Love certainly considers the king's tutoring in catholicism, an event that took place on the eve of his final conversion. Could a bit more have been teased from the episode?

The king's struggle with his conscience, even if we grant its deep religious tones, may not have been entirely confessional in our current understanding of the term. As the Wars of Religion wore on, thoughtful Huguenots everywhere in the kingdom began to see catholicism as the only reasonable solution to the fratricidal bloodshed. The circumstances called for the much cherished and, in their minds, supremely christian value of peace. Only a stable monarchy could resolve the difficulties. As a Huguenot from Gascony put it, his heart was with the Reformed church, but his sword was with the monarchy. Another element missing from this account is a thorough exploration of the multivalent practice of conversion in late sixteenth-century France. What, in short, was the larger religious context for understanding the king's wrestling with his conscience? In any event, a more flexible, less assertive approach—one designed to raise questions rather than prove (to borrow from the author's vocabulary) a claim—would have been more persuasive on what is surely a thorny and uncertain subject.

Throughout his investigation of the king's political ambitions and religious principles, Love presents a challenging and thought-provoking interpretation. To this end, he frequently and pointedly takes issue with other scholars and other perspectives. There is a compulsion to comment upon nearly every reading of Henri. It may result, in part, from the fact that the Bourbon monarch has inspired so broad a range of opinions. Another possibility is that Love wants to stake out his own view in unambiguous and vibrant tones. Still, the discourse can be a bit jarring and is perhaps less measured than the author intends. Related to this matter is a failure to transform fully the dissertation into a monograph. A number of elements retain the strong flavor of a thesis. The book is too long and occasionally unwieldy. The many digressions, while interesting, seem unnecessary and do not always add to the study. In addition, Love covers a lot of ground that is familiar to most readers or could be better presented in summary form. The entire effort might have been better focused and reduced to a more economical presentation of argument and evidence with considerable benefit to the reader.

The study also has a combative quality that distracts from its purpose. At the outset, for example, Love objects to the label protestant when describing Henri IV and his coreligionists. The word is admittedly imprecise. There were a number of protestants in the eastern reaches of the realm who would be properly labeled Lutherans. Love's preference for French Calvinist, however, also raises questions. Henri and others may have been adherents to a religious tradition established in part by John Calvin, but they were members of the French Reformed movement or, precisely speaking, the Reformed Churches of France. In an altogether more troublesome vein, Love repeatedly employs the word sect to describe catholic and Reformed versions of sixteenth-century French christianity. These competing groups were without question confessional churches. Sect is wholly inappropriate in this context, and Love's employ of the term ignores a long tradition of scholarship on religious typography. People's expressions of their confessional identity may have been fierce and extreme, but that does not mean that they were sectarian. Thus, characterizing Jeanne d'Albret as "sectarian, not denominational" (p. 19) is misleading and, at the very least, lacks subtlety and nuance. Not unexpectedly, Henri did not, in Love's view, share his mother's zealous and sectarian approach. His experiences from childhood through the adult years led him to regard religion as a private arrangement and personal choice. He was open to the tolerance and moderation embodied in the Edict of Nantes and promoted throughout his reign. The comparison has rhetorical advantage but comes at a price.

In the end, Love's contribution to our view of Henri IV is significant. He raises fundamental questions about prevailing interpretations and does so through an exhaustive examination of Henri's career to the conversion of 1593. The thesis is likely to be controversial, and the claims may be slightly exaggerated. Despite its professed emphasis upon the king's conscience, the analysis is for the most part confined to the military and political arenas. Treatment of Henri's religious position is evocative and tantalizing, but the sources are open to variant readings and are less abundant than scholars might wish. For the present, ambiguities will linger, as will disagreement about Henri and the character of his religious commitment.

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