

The Huguenots

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Reviewer: Vivienne Larminie

The study of religious minorities and their experience of persecution is sadly topical. In his preface to *The Huguenots* Geoffrey Treasure evokes an all too familiar picture of refugees (in this case in the late autumn of 1685) – men, women and children anxiously negotiating the rain, mud and first snows of Alpine passes towards an uncertain future, apprehensive of military checkpoints along the way and of the ghastly consequences of capture. Treasure's subject, as he suggests, is liable to resonate 'beyond family tradition and pride' and to be 'of great interest and wide significance' (p. xii). None the less, it is 'not least' to the descendants of the Huguenot diaspora that he addresses himself in his quest to supply 'the absence of a comprehensive study of the Huguenots in their native land' (p. xiii).

The result is quite evidently a labour of love. Not only is it grounded on nearly 40 years of digesting vast quantities of published literature to inform classroom exposition and to produce classic textbooks, but it also evinces a profound respect for the 'inspiring' story of the 'faith and courage' of this beleaguered people (pp. xii, xiv). It rests squarely on secondary sources, with occasional recourse to modern editions of contemporary texts. In tackling a century and a half of French history in this manner, the author is conscious that he has 'exposed a long flank to the attention of the very many specialists along the way' and, in gratitude to them, he seeks their 'forbearance' (p. xii). This is disarming, and indicates that the main focus of any review should relate to the wider audience.

The Huguenots – which might have been titled more accurately, *The Huguenots in Early Modern France*, a scope perfectly justifiable in its own terms – is a big book. This in itself presents a challenge for the general reader or the newcomer to the subject. 37 chapters are organised into five sections. The first, 'Europe falls apart', contains nine chapters which between them set the scene for the emergence of the minority community. Ambitiously conceived, it discusses successively: the regional characteristics and the social and governmental structures of early modern France; renaissance kingship and the factious nobility over which it presided; the long-standing 'Special relationship' between the French king and his people; 'The power of the word' – mostly an introduction to Lutheranism; the radical reformation of Zwingli and others; humanism and 'pre-reform' in France; early Protestantism and the checks it encountered at the court and elsewhere; the theology of John Calvin; and the Genevan 'experiment' which was to nurture the missionaries who took Calvin's message to France. One can see the logic behind the scheme: it could work well as the first two

months of lectures in a traditional year's curriculum for able sixth-formers. However, negotiating it requires considerable patience and concentration. Calvin has only a brief appearance before chapter eight; by this time the reader has ranged as far back as Germanic tribes and Merovingian kings. Yet for all the wide chronological compass, there is no room for what might have been illuminating direct comparisons between France and other polities facing religious diversification. Treasure introduces the undeniably important theme of national unity under the monarch, which he later develops as monoculturalism emanating from and dictated by the king, but even without exploring multicultural dimensions elsewhere, it risks being overwhelmed.

Part two traces in seven chapters the formation of a Calvinist church in France from nascent Protestantism in the 1540s to the blood-bath on St Bartholomew's day in 1572. In 'Why be a Huguenot' (chapter 11) it pauses the narrative for some effective consideration of the Huguenot phenomenon and the social and regional differences which affected the reception of Calvinist theology and the Reformed way of life. This brief period saw the peak of Calvinism's popularity in France – 1,200 congregations with about 1.8 million members (p. 106). The church expanded rapidly thanks to its cohesive ranks of Genevan-trained pastors and its orderly structure. But against a backdrop of political instability its association with noble affinities and its disassociation from the mass of ordinary people drew it into tit-for-tat atrocities and terrorism, and made it vulnerable to periodic mob violence. Even as the church gained power, the 'abusive behaviour of both sides' (p. 155), fed rumour, fear, brutality and the perception that Huguenots were outsiders. Faced with 'Battle, murder and deadly consequences' (chapter 15), the author wonders whether, 'for clarity's sake in the bigger picture should we pass quickly by the incidents of these years ... to the cumulative effect and conclusion...?', but having confessed this temptation, declines to yield, on the ground that 'the chronology matters' (p. 156). This reviewer would not disagree with the last statement, but it requires a firm hand to steer a coherent narrative through the many scenes and many actors in this violent drama. Periodic repetition and the sometimes apparently arbitrary chapter divisions here and later can contribute to a sensation of drowning in detail. None the less, the particular horror of the August 1572 massacre retains its power. At least 2,000 Huguenots perished in Paris, and another 3,000 to 4,000 in the provinces (p. 172), and, inevitably, the impact of the pogrom reached far beyond its immediate victims.

The eight chapters of part three are devoted to 'Religious wars', taking the story onwards from 1572. They encompass not just the civil strife between Catholics, Huguenots and the crown in the later 16th century to which the term is most conventionally applied, but also the accession to the throne as Henry IV of the protestant ruler of Navarre, his conversion to Catholicism, the Huguenots' royal indulgence for limited toleration which was the Edict of Nantes, and the Huguenot rebellions of the 1620s. The text is most helpfully informative when it abandons chronological exposition to consider 'The regime of the edict' (chapter 21) and 'The Catholic Reformation' (chapter 22), although the latter is confusingly invaded towards the end by fractious Huguenot leaders (pp. 251–3). It is less clear (chapters 23 and 24) in tracing the exploits of the dukes of Rohan, Lesdiguières and Soubise, and the response of Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu. While Treasure is surely wise to conclude 'we do not need to follow Richelieu all the way' (p. 262), a coherent digest of his policy, informed by concise reference to Anglophone and Francophone works addressing Anglo-French or Franco-Savoyard/Swiss relations would give the reader a helpful context for the respective sections on campaigns around protestant strongholds at La Rochelle and in the south-east.

Tellingly, part four, '1629–1661: a golden age', is short – only four chapters – and even then, the vulnerability of the Huguenots in this period is palpable. The Edict of Alès (28 June 1629) ushered in a period of relative peace, but the political and military rights which had undergirded the minority after the Edict of Nantes were cancelled, and it was dependent on grace extended by the king for permission to worship and pursue other collective activities. As the government's attention turned to more pressing matters elsewhere, 'The little flock' (chapter 25) was shielded but emasculated. In 'The eye of the storm' (chapter 26) its numbers declined, the predominantly urban-dwelling Huguenots being proportionately more susceptible to disease than the population at large. With the advent of Louis XIV's personal rule, the danger to the community at first was less of greater external pressure than of an internal 'Pastoral and spiritual crisis' (chapter 27), characterised by lethargy (p. 290), stoicism (p. 302), and puritanism (pp. 303, 305) and

(chapter 28) theological dissension. As Treasure demonstrates, there were battles between Catholics too (p. 309), and certain doctrines and approaches appeared on both sides of the Protestant / Catholic divide. The implications of this patently complicated theological context for the health of the Huguenot community is opaque.

Part five is devoted to the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes – to the erosion of liberties, pressurised conversions, ‘progressive exclusion’ (p. 341) from public life and mounting violence which preceded it; through the government’s pronouncement in the Edict of Fontainebleau (18 October 1685) that the ‘Religion Prétendue Réformée’ (‘the religion which claims to be Reformed’) effectively no longer existed and thus did not need to be officially accommodated; to the aftermath of its suppression and to the sufferings of exile and persecution. The basic narrative has been chillingly replicated in succeeding centuries. The leader – here Louis XIV – who, freed of distractions elsewhere and isolated in his palace, decides that national unity requires uniformity (chapters 29, 30) and that his reputation would be enhanced by decisive and popular action (chapter 32). A momentum that gathers speed (p. 352). The drama is palpable, but it still lacks a certain authorial control of sub-plots, which for some readers might make up for the absence – notable throughout the book but perhaps most especially regrettable here – of evaluation of different interpretations of events, of direct engagement with rival historiographies. The importance of the king’s person is asserted (pp. 317–8, 346–7) and, as suggested, seems intended to be an underlying theme of the book, but is this view completely uncontested?

Returning to analytical mode in the final chapters devoted to the fall-out from the Revocation (chapters 34–7), the author’s approach is once again rather more effective. It is dismally convincing to learn that ‘the policy of coercion ... failed even within its own confessional terms’: ‘four or five’ Huguenots for every one who emigrated remained in the country to be a distrusted fifth column of pseudo-Catholics (a figure unfortunately not supported here by a footnote, p. 362). Thinking men in France perceived the problem. Treasure quotes (regrettably without a date) the ‘striking words’ of François Fénelon to his friend Bishop Jean-Bénigne Bossuet that, ‘If we wished to make them abjure Christianity and follow the Koran we would merely have to send in the dragoons ... It is an awesome fount for future ferment within the realm’ (p. 362). Treasure does not, at this point, mention the experience which rendered Fénelon’s comment even more *picquant*: from 1679 he was director of the *Nouvelles Catholiques* in Paris, where Huguenot girls removed (forcibly) from their families learned to be good Catholics; after the Revocation he was in the vanguard of a preaching campaign to convert through persuasion. The second great consequence of the Revocation was the economic and cultural loss to France through emigration – around 20,000 mostly skilled and educated people (pp. 359, 373). Exact numbers may never be known; the calculation of dis-benefit to France and of benefit to other countries is fraught with difficulty; and the decision (e.g. p. 375) to pursue the story abroad only briefly is defensible in view of the vast canvas. All the same, a brief sketch of the limits of historiographical debate on profit and loss would set the interested reader on the road. Instead, as ‘Huguenotism recovers its soul’ (chapter 36) there is some rather elliptical discussion of the French prophets of the Cévennes (considered heretical by some Huguenots) and speculative reflection on the fate of the faithful orthodox ‘Sous la croix’ [Under the cross] (chapter 37), suffering (believably) ‘fearful’ but sporadic persecution. Finally, the brief ‘Afterword: strangers and citizens’ selects representatives to illustrate the variety of experience in the Huguenot diaspora, although inevitably it is the successful and the eminent – craftsmen, merchants, bankers, physicians, scientists, army officers – who appear and who linger in the reader’s mind.

The reader who seeks a series of well-informed impressions, situations which echo down the centuries or striking examples should find in this book plenty of food for thought and vignettes to recount. Those new to the subject may if they wish profit hugely from the ample suggestions for further reading in English and in French on the Protestant Reformation and early modern France (pp. 441–50); so too may students and historians whose grasp of the area is a little rusty and who seek a handy annotated bibliography (for them, probably, the book’s greatest value). For those who read French, however, and to a limited extent for those who do not, there is one dimension missing from an otherwise wide-ranging catalogue as well as from the text (e.g. cf. p. 58). That is, the growing corpus of online material for the study of the Huguenots and their

context, and above all 'The Huguenots Online', which 'offers a comprehensive survey of the original writings of the French Huguenot authors, from the radical dissent in the 1530s through to the end of the century' and which 'privileges first and foremost original writings of authors writing within France and for an exclusively French audience'.⁽¹⁾ This is of course a subscription resource, most easily accessible via academic libraries, but since a majority of people interested in Huguenot ancestry are probably accustomed to web-based research, this may not be an insuperable obstacle. For those in academe it is surely essential reading. Alongside this, the website of La Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français is also a useful starting-off point, just as the date of its foundation (1852) is a clue to the continuing Huguenot narrative.⁽²⁾ Nearer home and – at least at the beginning of the trail – in English, there is the website of the Huguenot Society of Great Britain and Ireland, with more subscription material but also links to other resources like the Virtual Museum of French Protestantism.⁽³⁾

From the viewpoint of the more inquisitive reader, the lack of consideration to competing interpretations has already been mentioned; for the undergraduate or A level student who seems to be at least part of the target audience this will probably be a disincentive to consult an expansive text. The endnotes may perhaps please no-one for very long, although that is common. The physical/visual demands on the reader by their location may attributed to frequent publishing practice. But there is also inconsistency in content. Sometimes the note proves to be full of helpful information, such as that emanating from the narrative of 'intensifying struggle' in the 1580s which reviews recent work on the Catholic League (chapter 18, note 3: p. 418). But this is not always the case. Quotations and seemingly contentious statements do not always seem to be supported, yet there is room to explain Arianism (chapter 3, note 13: p. 401) and Frederick the Wise (chapter 4, note 13: pp. 401–2) and to reference 'one of Luther's greatest spiritual heirs, Friederich Bonhoeffer' [i.e. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45)] (chapter 4, note 19: p. 402).

The enormous cast of characters in the drama might have daunted any author. All the same, tighter narrative and footnoting could have mitigated this. The long-lived and high-profile theologian and controversialist Pierre du Moulin appears to slip through cracks between text, endnotes and index (e.g. note 9, p. 306, directs the reader fruitlessly to p. 321), compounding the confusion as to whether this is always the father (1568–1658) or sometimes his son, Pierre/Peter (1601–87). The style is uneven – sometimes reflective and beguiling; sometimes complicated and challenging to follow; occasionally a little awkward (Marguerite d'Angoulême and Calvin each 'came out as a protestant', pp. 66, 77; Jeanne d'Albret, queen of Navarre, 'came out as a Calvinist', p. 130). Few historians, however, would dissent from Treasure's comments on the importance of women to the formation and continuation of the community (e.g. p. 127), despite Calvin's equivocal stance on their role.

Ultimately, this is a worthy and largely well-informed attempt to explore a worthwhile and topical subject. Until others take on the formidable task, it occupies uninhabited territory in the area of overall synthesis. It will offer something to many readers, some of whom may capture the author's vision, and both explore the subject further and ponder the latent parallels with other groups' experience.

Notes

1. *Huguenots Online*, ed. A. Pettegree (Leiden and Boston, 2008) < <http://primarysources.brillonline.com/browse/huguenots> [2]>[accessed 28 January 2015].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. <http://www.shpf.fr/page.php?ref=editorial> [3]>[accessed 28 January 2015].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. <http://www.huguenotsociety.org.uk/> [4]>[accessed 28 January 2015]; < <http://www.museeprotestant.org/> [5]>[accessed 28 January 2015].[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/historybookreviews/10245249/The-Huguenots-by-Geoffrey-Treasure-review.html> [6]

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/26/huguenots-geoffrey-treasure-review> [7]

Spectator

<http://www.spectator.co.uk/books/books-feature/8998471/the-huguenots-by-geoffrey-treasure-review/> [8]

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