

CATHOLIC MODERATES AND THE RELIGION OF COMPROMISE
IN LATE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

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Despite accumulating evidence and our increasing sophistication in treating historical problems, stereotypes die hard. We continue to cling to outmoded and often inaccurate concepts for the sake of convenience or because they aptly express our own prejudices towards the past. So it is with our conception of the politiques of the French Wars of Religion. Not only have we been unhistorical in persisting to regard the politiques as a cohesive party of moderates juxtaposed between warring factions of Catholics and Huguenots; but we have also been indiscriminate in accepting the harsh and biased characterizations of the group by their more fanatical contemporaries.

The term politique was used in the vaguest way by publicists and pamphleteers of the sixteenth century. In the early part of the century the word had, at the worst, an innocuous connotation and, at the best, a meaning signifying statesmanship; in the heat of the Religious Wars it was transformed into a general term of opprobrium.¹ Zealous Catholics used it to denote what they considered the lack of religious concern of moderates who sought a modus vivendi with the Protestants; and so the politiques were described as "those who prefer the peacefulness of the kingdom or their own repose, to the salvation of their souls."² As the wars progressed, the diatribes against the politiques became more frequent and more acerbic. Nowhere, however, is a meaningful definition or identification given; instead, politiques are referred to in general terms of disdain, such as "supporters of heretics", "atheists" or "Machiavellians."³

These epithets, of course, are not very informative and they reveal more about the attitude of the author than about the subject; yet they all point to a common accusation--that the politiques were non-religious, at least not orthodox Catholics, and that they subordinated religious considerations to political ones. One of the more subdued of the anti-politique tracts, bearing the title La Foy et Religion des Politiques de

ce temps,⁴ asserted that the politiques

are not quite manifest Huguenots, nor true and zealous Catholics, but are a mixed goods, a shop full of so many kinds of drugs so confusedly mixed together that it is very difficult and dangerous to set down a perfect definition of them.

Of one thing, though, the author is certain, that whenever one hears the cry of "the State, the State, Government, Government, without concern in the first place for religion," there is a politique.⁵

These accusations undoubtedly contain some element of truth, especially the charges of excess statism. Most of the Catholic moderates who spoke out for toleration or some form of accommodation with the Huguenots argued from the standpoint of expediency and the necessity of the survival of the state: To attempt to extirpate heresy by force, they claimed, would only bring on civil war and civic ruin. Whether or not the politiques, in so reasoning, developed the principle of raison d'etat, as some claim,⁶ is not of especial concern here; suffice to say that their opponents who argued that to permit the exercise of two religions would bring on the collapse of the French monarchy, are open to the same charge. More serious are the accusations which call into question the Catholic orthodoxy and even the Christian belief of these moderates.

The very approach of the moderates to the problems arising from the Reformation made them suspect of heretical leanings. They agreed with many Protestant claims concerning abuses in the Catholic Church; they emphasized the essential similarity of both religions; and they were willing to concede some form of religious toleration. If their friendships with influential Huguenots were not sufficient to taint their Catholic orthodoxy, then their occasional sympathies with Protestant ideas did. Charles de Marillac, Archbishop of Vienna, was accused of favoring Lutheran doctrines in the 1530's; the Gallican theorist, Pierre Pithou, was a convert from Calvinism; and Jean Bodin has been charged, though erroneously,⁷ with adhering to the new religion. The moderate Bishop of Valence, Jean de Monluc, of whom even Théodore de Bèze remarked that he "made a sort of mixture of both doctrines" (faisoit comme un

melange des deux doctrines), was tried at Rome for heresy and only avoided deposition through royal pressure.⁸ Chancellor Michel de L'Hôpital, by virtue of the fact that almost his entire family, including his wife, openly espoused the Calvinist creed and that he himself held some questionable opinions, was regarded by his detractors as leaning towards Protestantism. Even Montaigne, whose adherence to Catholicism was not really questioned in his own day, was criticized at Rome for quoting the poetry of Beze and Buchanan.⁹

This list of examples can be extended considerably, and understandably so, for Calvinism pervaded the upper levels of French society and was especially marked among clerics and intellectuals. The temptation to flirt with Protestant ideas was undoubtedly very strong among sensitive Catholics concerned with the reform of ecclesiastical abuses, and these Catholics were always attentive to the charges of corruption made by the Reformers. In their readiness to listen, however, did they, as some of their contemporaries alleged, expose themselves to seduction by Protestant doctrines? This may have been so in some instances. Monluc, for example, in his desire to conciliate the Huguenots, was ready to introduce major doctrinal modifications. In a series of sermons and instructions published between 1557 and 1561 he not only attacked the cult of images and the invocation of the saints, but he also questioned the Catholic position on the Eucharist, purgatory, free will, and the efficacy of works;¹⁰ during the Colloquy of Poissy Monluc refused to receive communion from the Cardinal of Armagnac, preferring to take it in both kinds in the Genevan fashion.¹¹

It must be noted, though, that Monluc's deviations from orthodoxy occurred while the results of the Council of Trent were still in doubt. After 1564 he ceased his doctrinal pronouncements and he died a good Catholic. In the case of Marillac, whatever inclinations he had towards the new doctrines appeared in the 1530's when Protestantism was first beginning to gain converts and when the policy of Francis I towards heresy was anything but consistent. His biographer claims that during the remainder of his life Marillac demonstrated no attachment to, nor any particular sympathy for, the Reformation.¹²

As for Chancellor L'Hôpital, the accusations of heretical tendencies were not without circumstantial evidence. Apart from his belief in toleration and the defections within his own family, L'Hôpital's Christianity is largely evangelic and scriptural and in his writings there is no affirmation of specific Catholic dogmas and traditions. At the Colloquy of Poissy the Chancellor refused to consider the Calvinists as heretics, for, he argued, "they believe in God, the Trinity, acknowledge Holy Scripture and seek no salvation other than in the Lord Jesus Christ."¹³

With one exception, L'Hôpital reveals nothing more of his doctrinal attachments, and that exception is an assertion of predestination, savouring of Calvinism, that is found in a letter to Margaret of Savoy (1572-73): "Nobody", he wrote,

reaches heaven by his own virtue, in spite of his piety and his innocence; no one can be his own guide. It is the grace of God that summons us and directs us. All that we receive is from Him who chose at the beginning of the world the elect whom He would associate with His Empire.¹⁴

Is this statement, appearing late in his life, final proof of the former Chancellor's Protestantism? Actually, as an affirmation of Calvinistic predestination, it is incomplete. God is described as the initial cause and His grace a sine qua non of man's salvation; but nowhere is God described as the sole active means and man the passive recipient of salvation, as with Calvin.¹⁵ Moreover, in another letter of the same period L'Hôpital asserts that everyone is "punished or rewarded according to his works."¹⁶ What emerges then is a fairly orthodox Catholic view of predestination, not unlike that described by Loyola in Rules 14 and 15 For Thinking With the Church,¹⁷ in which predestination does not rule out free will and human merit. Thus, in the absence of more concrete evidence to the contrary, one must accept the fact of the Chancellor's Catholic orthodoxy.¹⁸

What contemporaries mistook for Calvinistic sympathies was nothing more than L'Hôpital's humanistic conception of Christianity which favoured simplicity over formalism, morality over theology, and Holy Scripture over philosophy-- a conception which might aptly be termed Erasmian. L'Hôpital,

moreover, was not alone among the French moderates of this period to partake of the Erasmian tradition; in one way or another the great majority of those labelled politiques were spiritually indebted to this Christian humanist. Perhaps, though, a note of caution should be inserted at this point concerning the use of the adjective "Erasmian." Ever since the publication of the pioneering works of Renaudet, Bataillon and Phillips,¹⁹ there has been a tendency to consider Erasmus as a ubiquitous spirit influencing religious moderates everywhere in Europe. Unfortunately, the nature of a spirit is such that it is not readily discernible; and too often similarity of ideas is mistaken for influence. By the onset of the Wars of Religion only a few of the older French humanists could have had personal contact with Erasmus or with his contemporaries; hence the possibility of direct influence was remote. What joins the politiques to Erasmus is a continuing stream of French Christian-humanistic thought which nurtured their ideas--ideas that may be termed Erasmian only because Erasmus represented their apotheosis.

In the case of L'Hôpital the ties with Erasmus were more direct, for the two humanists enjoyed a number of common friendships and associations.²⁰ No other French moderate of this period endorsed the religious sentiments of Erasmus so strongly; L'Hôpital, like Erasmus, conceived of Christianity as essentially moral and pious living modelled upon the Scriptures and the life of Christ. Religion had to be spontaneous, sincere, simple and devoid of ostentation. "We must not adore the unique Eternal God," he wrote to Claude d'Espence

...by the varied concert of our songs, by harmonious poems praised by the masses...Our style must be simple, without preparation, without refinement, without ornament, but filled with a serious dignity. It is enough to express the sentiments innate in our hearts under the inspiration of a natural sincerity....

Questions of dogma, scholastic arguments, and inquiries into the finer points of Christian doctrine had no real place in L'Hôpital's religious system; in words that could easily have come from the pen of Erasmus, he lamented the preoccupation of theologians with such matters:

Here it is nearly six hundred years that Aristotle reigns in the temple of Christ and that Saint Paul was chased from it. Apes of all sects walked in strange garb and supplied us with Greek philosophy and not the religion of Jesus. 22

As a Christian humanist L'Hôpital saw no contradiction between Christianity and the classics, but he was hardly as reverent of Cicero and the pagan classics as was Erasmus; nor did he display the same optimism about human achievements and free will.

Perhaps L'Hôpital most clearly resembles the great humanist in his attitude towards the Reformation. He refused to admit that the religious split was irrevocable or that the gulf which separated Catholics and Protestants was especially wide. Before the Estates-General at Orleans he pleaded: "Let us get rid of these diabolical words, names of parts, factions and seditions, Lutherans, Huguenots, Papists: Let us not change the name of Christians."²⁴ As an Erasmian, L'Hôpital was unwilling to concede the idea of a dismembered Church; but he ruled out force as a means of restoring religious unity and he was far from optimistic about the ability of colloquies and doctrinal debates to heal the schism: "You say that your religion is better, I defend mine: What is more reasonable, that I follow your opinion, or you mine?"²⁵

The root cause of heresy, as L'Hôpital saw it, was moral degeneration within the Church--the preoccupation of the clergy with luxury, worldliness, and power. Only through internal church reform, through moral purification, could the underlying reasons for religious dissidence be removed. Then reconciliation would follow as a matter of course and other differences could be worked out later. This is the program that the Chancellor had in mind when he wrote to the Cardinal of Lorraine at Trent:

Let morals be reformed first, beliefs reformed later on.
There is the best means to prepare and assuage minds. You sow good grain in vain if the earth is not ready to receive it; you will reap only tares and bad herbs. 26

Was this not also the program of Erasmus?

Few of the moderates present so complete a picture of their religious feelings, but the glimpses that they reveal indicate a striking

similarity of views. There were different embellishments and shifting emphases, as might be expected, but these were largely variations on the same theme. A distinctive pattern, though, emerges: The church is considered a spiritual institution, whose rites and ceremonial are of a secondary religious significance: "The essence of religion," wrote Pierre Gravelle, "does not lie in external things, but in the observance of the positive and certain commandments of God."²⁷ Theology is more or less ignored, while the essential feature of Christianity becomes the exemplary moral life, lived in imitation of Christ: "Let us learn to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves," urges one politique, "and let us learn charity which is the whole substance of religion;"²⁸ and another asserts "that the greatest and principal commandment is charity....which we must acquire during this life, as it is the perfection of the Christian man."²⁹

The restoration of church unity, whether for political, social or religious reasons, was a matter of prime concern to the moderates; their formulas for achieving it, though, varied widely. None would accept the use of force, and some form of limited toleration seemed a necessity; but what sort of sacrifices had to be made? Did unity have to be at the expense of Roman Catholic doctrine? Of course, the answer depends upon one's definition of Catholic doctrine, and these Erasmian moderates tended to construe doctrine loosely. Still, a considerable number of them would permit no meddling with Catholic beliefs. L'Hôpital, for example, was hostile to dogmatic modifications mainly because he was afraid that theological discussions would lead to a disregard for religious essentials.³⁰ To Étienne Pasquier, who fervently desired Christian reunion, any attempt at doctrinal compromise would only upset the Church. In an apologia written to Nicholas Brûlart, he disparaged past efforts of Church Councils to establish articles of faith, and added:

Our faith was...established by Holy Scripture, the authority of the Holy Fathers, as well as by the traditions of the Church. If there are some abuses they should be removed without uprooting that which we held to for so long. If you open the door to disputes there is not an article of faith that ill-bred and vicious persons cannot call in question. 31

Even Montaigne, whose religious zeal has been laid open to doubt, criticized the willingness of more conciliatory Catholics to compromise on dogma:

They fancy they are behaving like moderate and prudent men when they concede to their opponents some of the articles in dispute... We should either wholly submit to the authority of our ecclesiastical government or altogether dispense with it. It is not for us to determine what degree of obedience we owe it. 32

Underlying this refusal to seek a doctrinal rapprochement with the Protestants was the belief that their defection could be attributed entirely to ecclesiastical abuses. Despite the wide diffusion of Calvin's Institutes, despite the redaction of Reformed Confessions of Faith, and despite the anathemas of Trent, politiques continued to maintain throughout the Religious Wars that institutional reform of the Catholic Church would remove the major obstacle to religious reunion. L'Hôpital, Pasquier, François de Montholon and Pierre du Belloy, as well as many other anonymous politique pamphleteers, all expressed this conviction, while Etienne La Boétie went so far as to make it the basis of his solution to the problem of religious disunity.

As La Boétie saw it, doctrine had played a negligible role in producing the schism, for those who left the Catholic Church, if they considered its doctrines at all, had mistaken the lax morality of the priests for false belief. "They separated not because they thought that we hold a false opinion," La Boétie claimed, "for they understand neither ours nor theirs; often, hearing them speak of it, they speak as much against their doctrine as against ours."³³ The vast majority of those who had joined the Reformed churches did so because of dissatisfaction with aspects of Catholic ceremony and observances; and these matters could easily be compromised without sacrificing Catholic doctrine. Thus, as a means of bringing back the dissidents, he would, among other things, reform the lives of the clergy, redefine iconographic policies, and alter the method of administering the sacraments.³⁴

Although La Boétie displays considerable insight into the causes of the French Reformation, the solution that he offers for the problem of religious division was too simplistic for the majority of Catholic moderates. To them the question of doctrine could not be brushed aside

so easily; reform of abuses would be ineffective unless accompanied by some measure of doctrinal concord. They were willing, therefore, to enter into theological discussions with the Protestants, and they applauded Catherine de' Medici when she called leading Catholics and Calvinists together at Poissy in 1561 to find a doctrinal basis for uniting the French churches. Unfortunately, the Cardinal of Lorraine, who led the Catholic prelates, insisted that agreement be reached first on the thorny question of the Real Presence in the Eucharist; hence the Colloquy was doomed to failure from the start.

Another approach to doctrinal compromise was presented to the delegates at Poissy in the form of a pamphlet by the Belgian irenicist, Georg Cassander. This was the De officio pii ac publicae tranquillitatis vere amantis viri in hoc religionis dissidio (1561) which had been written as a solution to the problem of German religious division. Cassander was unquestionably an Erasmian: He apparently had read the major works of Erasmus and was much impressed with the Enchiridion; his basic Christian impulse was ethical; and he valued morality far above dogma. But Cassander realized the futility of attempting a religious rapprochement without some concession to Protestant liturgical practices, and, more important, without an agreement on a fundamental theological creed.

Thus, he proposes that both sides agree to a brief statement of the essential doctrines of true Christianity, which would reflect a belief in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.³⁵ When this is accomplished the door to unity would be open, for "those who are bound together by a correct feeling about Christ...even though they disagree over certain opinions and rites," must not be considered heretics or schismatics.³⁶ And Cassander goes on to state that

every church which rests on the foundation of the true and apostolic doctrine contained in the brief symbol of the faith, and which is not separated by an impious schism from the communion of other churches, ..I regard... as a member of the true church and the catholic church of Christ. 37

Actually, Cassander is attempting to circumvent the theological impasse to religious unity by defining as essential Christian beliefs

only those doctrines that the churches already held in common. The finer theological tenets, those dogmas which had been the subject of heated Reformation debates, he considers more or less adiaphora, and he classifies them as rites and ceremonies rather than as doctrines. Yet he was orthodox to the degree that he would not reject any doctrine or observance of the Catholic Church. These he accepts because they are based on tradition; and, unlike Erasmus, he would not abolish such abused practices as the veneration of saints, the cult of relics and indulgences. His only concern was that those who object to them not be considered heretics.

The Cassandrian prescription for reaching Christian concord by agreement on a minimum of essential dogmas became a favorite recipe of the French-Catholic moderates in their search for a cure for religious disunity.³⁸ His formula of reductio ad brevissimum ac simplicissimum could have been expected to pose some difficulty for French Catholics after the Council of Trent completed its work in 1564; however, the publication of the Tridentine Decrees in France was delayed until 1615, making it possible for moderates to ignore the pronouncements of the Council and to proclaim that Catholics and Huguenots were sufficiently in agreement on doctrinal matters to effect a national religious unity. Despite all the rancour produced by thirty years of acrimony and strife, a Catholic, writing as late as 1591, was able to argue that both religions confess to the same foundations of faith, and they only diverge "on certain differences, and not in contrarieties;"³⁹ while another, in a tract published just a few years earlier, optimistically elaborated the positive reasons for union:

We are all Christians, we have the same symbol in the articles of catholic faith, we use the same prayer that Christ taught us, we have the same law and Decalogue, we recognize the same Bible and a single Scripture, we hope for the same salvation through the death and passion of our Savior, and await a same Paradise: the summation of both our Religions is the same, that is, to love God with all one's heart and one's neighbour as oneself.⁴⁰

This line of reasoning, naturally, was appreciated by moderate Huguenots, who used it in their appeal for a policy of religious toleration; and it is not surprising to find almost the identical phraseology in the Anti-

the Averroism that was carried north from Padua before the middle of the sixteenth century. Paduan skepticism or Pyrrhonism was the rage among French humanists in the latter part of the century, and it undoubtedly influenced some Catholic moderates.⁴² Guillaume Postel, who went through numerous religious phases, was always seeking to evolve a rationally constructed religion. It was rational skepticism that led the moderate Pierre Charron to question the immortality of the soul⁴³ and that steered Montaigne in the direction of religious relativism. Montaigne remained a Christian by virtue of his fideism and a deep-seated social conservatism.⁴⁴ Jean Bodin, on the other hand, did not. In his unpublished dialogue, the Heptaplomeres, Bodin demonstrated that Christianity could not stand up to rational scrutiny; and, as he was too much a rationalist to substitute faith for reason in his own religious thought, he ended up espousing the cause of natural religion.⁴⁵

Bodin, however, was hardly typical of the vast majority of politiques, whose religious inspiration was Erasmian and not Paduan. Their Christianity was based neither upon scholastic reason nor upon religious or spiritual insight. Their aversion to theology was particularly strong; and even those who insisted that Catholic dogma remain intact throughout the efforts at religious reunification probably did so more out of fear of innovation than out of dogmatic conviction. It is no surprise that there is rarely a reference in their writings to the more contentious theological questions of the Reformation--those involving faith and works, the sacraments and Eucharistic doctrine, and the authority of Scripture; but this does not justify their opponents' claims that they were without religion, lacking piety, or even bad Catholics. One does not have to be a theologian or take part in theological debates in order to develop a set of religious doctrines; the fact that the French moderates did not always elaborate fully what they meant by "the articles that are necessary to our salvation" is no proof that they lacked an orthodox creed. Most of the evidence points to the contrary. Erasmus,⁴⁶ after all, who tried to avoid

doctrinal formulation, professed a reasonably orthodox interpretation of the Apostle's Creed and, when pressed, was ready to accept the Church's view on other points of doctrine; it is not assuming too much to say that the politiques on the whole held to at least as much.

Footnotes

1. The more traditional meaning of the word politique approximated that of a person well versed in the art of governing. The extent to which the meaning degenerated during the Religious Wars is indicated by the following verses written by the arch-enemy of the politiques, Louis d'Orleans:

"Ce nom de Politique estoit vn nom d'honneur,
C'estoit le iuste nom d'vn juste Gouverneur,
D'vn prudent magistrat, qui par raison civile
Scauoit bien policer les membres d'vn ville,
Et qui sage, & accord par accordants discords
De citoyens diuers tiroit de bons accords....
Auiourd'huy ce beau nom fouillé de mille vices
N'est plus qu'en nom d'horreur qui destruit les Polices,
Vn nom plein de vergongne, & qu'on a mesprisé
Par le crime de ceux qui en ont abusé."

Le banquet et après disnee dv Conte d'Arete, ov il se traicte de la dissimvlation du Roi de Nauarre & des moeurs de ses partisans (Arras, Iean Bourgeois, 1594), pp. 21-22.
2. Gaspard de Saulx-Tavannes, Mémoires de Gaspard de Saulx-Tavannes, in Petitot, Collection complete des memoires relatifs a l'histoire de France, depuis le regne de Philippe-Auguste, jusqu'au commencement du dix-septieme siecle (1822), XXIV, p. 322.
3. A typical anti-politique writer points to the "atheist Machiavelli" as the "Evangelist of the politiques." La contrepoison contre les Artifices et Inventions des politiques & autres ennemis de la religion Catholique.... (Paris, Anthoine le Riche, 1589), p.13.
4. Paris, Guillaume Bichon, 1588. The author was a Benedictine monk. See also Le Karesme et meovrs dv politique, où il est amplement discouru de sa maniere de viure, de son Estat & Religion. (Paris, Pierre Mercier, 1589); Le Martel en teste des Catholiques françois. Où est amplement discouru de la cause des miseres de ce pauvre Royaume, & le vray moyen d'y donner remede (Paris, Rolin Thierry, 1590); and Memoires semez par quelques Politics avx Estats, qui se tiennent, en la ville de Bloys, avec la response Catholique a iceux (Paris, 1588).
5. La Foy et Religion des Politiques de ce temps, Aii v^o and p, 6.
6. See Friedrich Meinecke, Die Idee der Staatsrason in der neueren Geschichte (Munchen und Berlin, R. Oldenbourg, 1924), pp. 24, 71, 190-91 and John Neville Figgis, Studies of Political Thought From Gerson to Grotius, 1414-1625 (Cambridge, 1923), pp. 28, 96. and 103.