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THE BATTLES OF THE FRENCH REFORMED TRADITION

Prof. Thomas G. Reid, Jr.

*Librarian and Registrar
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

Introduction

When John Calvin died in 1564, the condition of the Reformed Churches in his native France gave solid reasons for optimism about their future. In over two thousand places, Reformed worship according to the Scriptures was conducted each Sabbath; churches were especially numerous in the southwest and south-central regions. The total number associated with these congregations approached two million souls, almost a fifth of the total population.¹ French Calvinists were found in all strata of society, from the numerous peasants through the burgeoning middle classes on to the nobility and even to the royal family. The Psalms had been paraphrased into singable, metrical French by Clément Marot (1495-1544) and others, and had attained a popularity in one generation that is truly remarkable. In 1559, the national synod adopted one of the first clearly Calvinistic creeds, the Gallican or French Confession, the first draft of which had been authored by Calvin himself. This Synod also adopted a Rule of Discipline to guide the organization of the churches. The churches were organized into regional synods and a national synod, which met regularly. Reformed books were being printed in the language of the people, a language whose grammar and orthography had been greatly influenced by Calvin in his magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.² Professor Pierre Courthial writes, “The Reformed faith ... manifested itself in every area of human existence – in theology and philosophy, in the sciences and the arts, in town and country, in family and professional life[,] as well as in politics. And it appeared in all social classes ...”³ The Peace of Amboise of 1563 had brought a welcome relief from civil conflict. And by this time, French Protestants had acquired a nickname, Huguenots, an appellation first mentioned by Théodore de Bèze in a letter in 1560, but still a word of uncertain derivation.

The early years of the French Reformed churches had not proven to be easy ones, and, after Calvin’s death, the same situation prevailed. The young French Reformed Churches were unable

¹ At the time, France had not attained its now familiar hexagonal shape, since areas in the southeast adjoining Italy only became French during the Second Empire in the 1860s, and Alsace and Lorraine, and some adjoining areas, did not adhere to the French state until the nineteenth or even twentieth centuries. France had about twelve millions inhabitants within its contemporary borders at the time, the third largest nation in the world in population, after China and India.

² The first French edition of the *Institutes* appeared in 1541, the last in 1560.

³ Pierre Courthial, “The Golden Age of Calvinism in France, 1533-1633,” in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, c1982), 76.

to build on their initial burst of growth, for they soon faced the first of six major battles which have confronted them in the past 450 years.

First, the Battle with Political Romanism

During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic usurpation of the Christian religion in the western portion of the former Roman Empire had been closely associated with political intrigues to extend and reinforce the authority of the papacy over the emerging nations there. The patchwork quilt of these nations, which developed following the demise of the Roman Empire in 476, made the task of the political papacy all that easier, especially after the aggrandizing pontificate of Gregory “the Great” (540-604, reigned 590-604). France was the first of what would become the major nations of western Europe to be established and quickly became both the largest in extent and population, but also greatest in its association with the papacy. It was “Good” King Louis IX (born 1214; reigned 1226-1270) of France who championed the seventh and eighth of the tragic crusades to reconquer the so-called Holy Land for Christendom. And it is no wonder that the papacy moved to Avignon in southern France from 1308 to 1378, its only period based outside Rome in history. The kings of France and the popes in Rome enjoyed a symbiotic relationship which furthered the aims of each side; France was sometimes dubbed as “the elder daughter of the Church” and certainly thought of herself as such.

When the Protestant Reformation broke out, however, the cozy medieval consensus was severely compromised. In France, the nobility,⁴ chafing for centuries under the harsh hegemony of the kings, saw an opening to extend its authority and increase its wealth. Many nobles sided with the Reformers, some sincerely, many not, while almost all the noble families maneuvered to take advantage of the way the Reformation had broken the Medieval consensus for their own gain. The situation degenerated into what was essentially a civil war, usually termed the Wars of Religion, lasting from 1567 to 1593, in various phases.

The most spectacular event of these Wars was the infamous St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre of August 23, 1572, which actually continued for several succeeding days. At this time, the leader of the Protestants was Admiral Gaspard de Coligny (born 1517). Like many other Protestants and Catholics from the provinces, he was in Paris for the marriage of Henry III of Navarre (1553-1610) with Margaret of Valois (1553-1615), a union which further solidified the power of the French crown. At the behest of the queen, Catherine de Medici (1519-1589), Romanists attacked Protestants in their beds, slaughtering thousands in a blind fury that turned the Seine River red. De Coligny was stabbed and tossed from the window of his bedroom, dying on the street below.⁵

The Wars of Religion came to an end only a few years before Henry, a Protestant, came to the throne in 1598 as Henry IV, and the relative peace lasted through the reign of Louis XIII, from 1610 to 1643. Henry converted to Romanism before his accession, however, arguing that “Paris was worth a mass.” His cavalier attitude toward the truth was all-too-typical of the French Protestant nobility. Henry IV signed the Edict of Nantes, named for the large city near the mouth of the Loire River, where he was residing in the castle during a tour of his domains, at the

⁴ Noble families in France are distinguished from other families by some form of “de” at the beginning of their names. Reformed theologians Théodore de Bèze and Pierre du Moulin were from noble backgrounds, although the latter, especially, did not benefit financially from the family heritage. The most famous modern example is Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970), although more recently, another president of France was of noble birth, Valérie Giscard-d’Estaing (b. 1926).

⁵ Another prominent victim of the Massacre was Pierre de la Ramée or Ramus (born 1515), the well-known philosopher and mathematician, whose Reformed convictions were compromised by a rationalistic tendency. See Courthial, “The Golden Age of Calvinism in France,” 86-87.

time the edict was ready to receive his signature. The Edict proclaimed freedom of worship, so that the national government now protected both true Reformed worship and the false worship of the Romanist mass. France was tired of civil strife, and so, as one early twentieth century scholar has put it, “Religious toleration became a fashionable philosophy under Henry IV.”⁶ Nevertheless, at this point, a striking thing happened: French Protestantism stopped growing, never to be restored to its size and strength to this day.

When confronted with an armed foe, French Calvinists had taken up the sword to protect themselves, their property, their churches, and their faith. They did not opt for the pacifism of the so-called Radical Reformation. Because they were not under a Protestant ruler, they could not enjoy his protection, as did so many Lutherans in the German states and Scandinavia. But once a Christian movement determines to use violence to protect and even advance its cause, that movement creates a situation in which the furtherance of the gospel becomes more complicated and difficult. And that leads to the second battle of the French Reformed tradition.

Second, the Battle with Amyraldianism

Following the death of Calvin, theological leadership within the Reformed world devolved upon Théodore de Bèze (1519-1605), also a Frenchman, born in Vézelay in Burgundy.⁷ By the time de Bèze died, his position as chief theologian for the French Reformed movement had been assumed by Pierre du Moulin (1568-1658).⁸ As a child, du Moulin survived the St. Bartholomew Day’s Massacre hidden by his family’s Roman Catholic maid under straw and blankets. After studies in Cambridge with William Whitaker (1548-1595), du Moulin served as professor of philosophy at Leiden from 1592 to 1598, where he taught the notable Remonstrant, Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). In 1599, Du Moulin became a pastor in Paris. In 1621, du Moulin began teaching at one of the two theological seminaries of the French Reformed Churches, in the independent city-state of Sedan, near the Belgian border. Jean Cadier has described du Moulin as “a vigorous controversialist.”⁹ Moreover, though “occasionally harsh as a controversialist, du Moulin was an outstanding shepherd of souls.”¹⁰ He was delegated to the Synod of Dordt in 1618, but the French government forbade any French representatives from attending that conclave, so he remained at home. The national synod in Alès in 1620 adopted the Canons of Dordt; du Moulin served as moderator of the synod.¹¹ It was likely this decision which set off the chain of events to which attention must now be paid.

Strong opposition to the consistent Calvinism of Dordt surfaced at the other French Reformed Seminary, situated in Saumur along the Loire River in central France. The first professor there

⁶ Donald Culross Beattie, *Vence: Immortal Village* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, c1945), 126.

⁷ For many years, the standard work in English on de Bèze has been: *Henry Martyn Baird, Theodore Beza: The Counsellor of the French Reformation, 1519-1605* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970), originally published in 1899.

⁸ Not much has appeared in print about du Moulin in English. In French, consult Lucien Rimbault, *Pierre du Moulin, 1568-1658: Un pasteur classique à l’âge classique* [Pierre Moulin: A Classic Pastor in the Classic Age] (Paris: J. Vrin, 1966).

⁹ Jean Cadier, “Pierre du Moulin,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Edwin H. Palmer (Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1972), 4:469.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4:470.

¹¹ John Quick, *Synodicon in Gallia Reformata: On the Acts, Decisions, Decrees, and Canons of Those Famous National Councils of the Reformed Churches in France* (London: T. Parkhurst and John Robinson, 1692), 2:37-38.

to question the doctrine of double predestination was Paul Testard of Blois (1596?-1670), in his work, *Eirenicon seu synopsis doctrinae de natura et gratia*, published in 1633.¹² But the dominant figure in Saumur was Moise Amyraut (1596-1664), born near Saumur, who taught from 1626 until his death. Theologically, Professor Roger Nicole observes that Amyraut was “particularly deeply influenced by John Cameron,”¹³ the English theologian noted for his rejection of Calvinistic theology and Amyraut’s own theological professor. Furthermore, David Sabeau maintains that “Amyraut was a rationalist[,] in the sense that he submitted all truths to the test of reason.”¹⁴ The promiscuous proclamation of a definite atonement must, therefore, be jettisoned, and Amyraut believed that he had found the way to do it.

Amyraut’s controversial career developed in three phases. The first phase, from 1633 until 1641, particularly concerned his work, *A Brief Treatise on Predestination and the Principal Things Which Depend Thereon*, published in 1634.¹⁵ In this work, Amyraut maintained that Jesus Christ died equally for all mankind, on the condition of faith, a sort of “hypothetical universalism” which cut out the Reformed doctrine of unconditional election and decimated its doctrine of definite atonement. Theologians in Holland¹⁶ and Geneva¹⁷ wrote against this heresy, as did du Moulin and André Rivet (1572-1651) in France. Du Moulin and Rivet appealed against Amyraut’s doctrines to the French Reformed Synod, which determined, at its meeting in Alençon in 1637, that: first, Amyraut and Testard were guilty of dissimulation in trying to mask the unacceptable nature of their doctrine; second, that they deserved censure for the language they used in expressing their ideas; and third, following the suggestion of the Swiss, that further discussion of the matter was prohibited. The last decision could not be enforced, since writers residing outside of France were under no obligation to heed the authority of a French Synod. In 1641, Amyraut published a work defending reprobation in an attack on Samuel Hoard

¹² Pierre Courthial believed that “the golden age of Calvinism in France” came to an end with the publication of Testard’s book, because “this was the first work of a theologian of the Reformed churches in France to undermine”, even if only “in a covert way, the faith of these churches as declared in their Confession of 1559 and the Canons of Dordrecht accepted and ratified by their National Synod at Alès.” “The Golden Age of Calvinism in France,” 75.

¹³ Roger Nicole, “Amyraldianism,” *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Edwin H. Palmer (Wilmington, Delaware: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1972), 1:185. Cameron lived from 1579 to 1625.

¹⁴ David Sabeau, “The Theological Rationalism of Moise Amyraut,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 55, no. 2 (1964): 204.

¹⁵ Moise Amyraut, *Brief traité de la prédestination et de ses principales dépendances* (Saumur: Lesnier & Desbordes, 1634).

¹⁶ The Theological Faculty in Leiden wrote a letter to the Synod against Amyraut’s formulations. “Furthermore[,] the Synod received the *Synopsis* of Rivet[,] together with the expression of approval of it[,] rendered by the Theological Faculties of Leiden, Franeker, and Groningen.” Roger Nicole, *Moise Amyraut (1596-1664) and the Controversy on Universal Grace: First Phase, 1634-1637* (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard University, 1966), 107, n5.

¹⁷ “From Geneva came a lengthy and very pompous letter indicating the concern of the church in the destinies of the Reformed people in France. It encouraged the National Synod to deal firmly with any heresy that might develop which would run counter to the Reformed Confessions, and specifically[,] to the Synod of Dort. The main solution that was suggested for the present difficulties was to impose ‘un profond silence’ to all parties that were eager to explore the secrets of God’s counsels. The letter also contained a complaint to the effect that both the Swiss cantons and Geneva were displeased at the use made of the names and writings of certain Reformers of the previous century to support views of universal grace that they not hold. The letter was signed by J. Diodati and T. Tronchin, who had been Geneva’s delegates to Dort, and three others.” *Ibid.*, n6.

(1599-1658)'s book *God's Love to Mankind*.¹⁸ Amyraut's thinly-disguised effort to pose as an orthodox Reformed theologian to deflect criticism from his own views should have been apparent to everyone.

The second phase of the Amyraldian controversy ran from 1644 to 1649. Frederic Spanheim (1600-1649), a German who had become professor of theology at Leiden in the Netherlands, prepared some theses against universal grace and had a student publicly read them on 25 May 1644.¹⁹ Amyraut believed, accurately, that he was the object of the attack, and responded with *Dissertationes Quatuor* in 1645,²⁰ followed by a second edition in 1660.²¹ Spanheim wrote *Exertationes de gratia universali*, a mere 2,600 pages in three volumes, in response to the first edition.²² Amyraut wrote haughtily to Spanheim in order to gain sympathy as supposedly the undeserving objects of the attacks of ecclesiastical bullies. Du Moulin and Rivet and others also published works against Amyraut. The Acte de Thouars of 1649 brought public polemics largely to a close. But a distinguishable "Saumur School" had emerged, in which Amyraut and Testard had been joined by two other theologians antagonistic to Reformed orthodoxy: Louis Cappel (1585-1658) and Josué de la Place (1596-1655).²³

The third and final phase of the Amyraldian controversy lasted from 1655 to 1661. Two Parisian pastors, David Blondel (1590-1655) and the more famous Jean Daillé (1594-1670), published works defending Amyraut's doctrines. Even du Moulin's son Louis (1606-1680), professor of history at Oxford University in England, got involved in the polemics against Blondel and Daillé. Amyraut himself chose to remain silent. At the Synod of Loudun in 1659, Daillé was elected moderator, and he and Amyraut were recognized as orthodox. Loudun was the last French National Synod until 1872, for reasons which will be mentioned later.

The popularity of Amyraut's doctrines in France kept increasing during his lifetime, for several reasons. First, Amyraut trained more and more of the French Reformed pastors at the seminary in Saumur, effectively buying their loyalty to their professor's heresy. Second, many of his abler opponents died off: Spanheim in 1649, Rivet in 1651, and du Moulin in 1658, when he was ninety. Third, some of Amyraut's opponents concluded that the differences they had with him stemmed merely from differing language or methodology, and they sinfully fell silent. Fourth, some Huguenots were seduced by Amyraut's argument that his recasting of Calvinism would, by softening its hard edges, promote union with the Lutherans and lessen the danger of Calvinists abjuring their faith and turning or returning to Romanism. Fifth, many Huguenots believed that the whole controversy was a personal spat which had developed between the aging theological

¹⁸ Samuel Hoard, *God's Love to Mankind* (London: no publisher stated, 1633). John Davenant (1570-1641) and the more orthodox William Twisse (1578?-1646) also wrote against the theology of the same volume.

¹⁹ Apparently, professors used their students to make statements in this way. The theses were published later in Friedrich Spanheim, *Exercitationes de gratia universali* (Lugduni Batavorum: Maire, 1646), 1-20, and still later in Friedrich Spanheim, *Disputationum theologicarum miscellaneorum pars prima et secunda* (Genevae: Petri Chouet, 1652), 230-236. See: F. P. van Stam, *The Controversy over the Theology of Saumur, 1635-1650: Disrupting Debates among the Huguenots in Complicated Circumstances* (Amsterdam: APA-Holland University Press, c1988), 190-195.

²⁰ Saumur: Isaacum Desbordes.

²¹ Saumur: Isaacum Desbordes.

²² Leiden: J. Maire, 1646.

²³ Courthial, "The Golden Age of Calvinism in France", 76.

giant Du Moulin and the upstart theologian Amyraut.²⁴ Sixth, many thought that the orthodox Calvinists of Sedan and the cutting-edge revisionists of Saumur were conducting an institutional fight rather than a theological one. And seventh, many French Reformed pastors and elders feared a schism, which they believed would disastrously weaken the Protestant movement during a period when its persecution by the French government was increasing year by year under Louis XIV.

The results of the Amyraldian heresy were as stark as they were foreseeable and preventable. First, the confessional integrity of the French Reformed churches was lessened, encouraging further dismantling of the attainments of the Calvinistic Reformation. For instance, Claude Pajon (1626-1685) was soon able to get away with denying “that there is any direct[,] internal operation of the Holy Spirit in regeneration.”²⁵

Second, the French Reformed churches became weaker against the renewed onslaught of political Romanism as the seventeenth century progressed, rather than stronger, culminating in the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes by King Louis XIV (1638-1715) in 1685.

Third, as Roger Nicole observes, “as far as can be seen,” Amyraldianism “did not in fact help to promote any basic union with the Lutherans, nor did it materially assist in preventing abjurations to the Roman Catholic faith.”²⁶ The practical advantages envisioned by the recast Calvinism of Amyraut failed to materialize.

Fourth, Nicole, who studied Amyraut for his doctoral dissertation,²⁷ continues by observing sadly that, despite the desires of its supporters, the theology of Amyraldianism “did provide a bridge toward Arminianism and perhaps toward the Semi-Pelagian tendencies of the Church of Rome. The advantages which Amyraut had envisioned failed to materialize, and the dangers against which his opponents had warned did in fact eventuate.”²⁸ Confronted with the historical record of a theologian who worked so hard for so long to obfuscate his teachings, one wonders if that bridge toward Arminianism was not Amyraut’s intention all along.

When the church speaks with a divided voice, it fails to rally its troops to the cause of Christ. Such was the situation of the French Reformed churches in the mid-seventeenth century, and they were therefore weakened as they entered into their next battle.

Third, the Battle with Hysterical Subjectivism

As the pace of governmental regulation and persecution increased during the seventeenth century, many French Protestants emigrated. King Louis XIV, one of the most despicable despots of human history, came to spend one-third of the gross national product of France on his precious Versailles domain. Cut off from his own people, who were starving so that he could prance through life surrounded by sycophants of various pathologies attracted to him like a

²⁴ Such an excuse may have been in many minds in minimizing the important theological differences involved in other, later theological controversies within the Reformed Churches, such as Louis Berkhof (1873-1957) supposedly being challenged by Herman Hoeksema (1886-1965) or Klaas Schilder (1890-1952) being perhaps usurped by G. C. Berkouwer (1903-1996).

²⁵ Nicole, “Amyraldianism”, 191.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁷ Much of the bulk of the dissertation is devoted to the first major attempt at a complete bibliography of Amyraut, including locations in libraries worldwide.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

moth to light, he was led to believe that the brilliance of his nation's Roman Catholic leaders had led every single one of his subjects into the fold of Rome. Thus, Louis XIV signed the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 because he erroneously thought that its protections were unnecessary. Yet if so, why did the Revocation make it a capital crime to remain a Protestant within France or to flee the country for religious freedom as a Protestant elsewhere? Hundreds of thousands of Huguenots fled anyway, mostly to the Germanic states, the Low Countries, and the British Isles, but some to more distant locales like South Africa, South Carolina, and even St. Helena Island. Since Protestants were over-represented in the productive, middle class, the French economy was devastated, leading to the rapid decline of French power throughout the world, including the loss of the enormous North American colonies of France in 1763.²⁹ At the time of the tercentenary of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, French President François Mitterand (1916-1996) spoke at the official recognition of the anniversary and openly admitted as much.³⁰ The health of the Reformed Churches can very much affect the destiny of nations, for both good and ill.

Those Protestants who remained in France responded in several different ways to the new reality. In certain localities, local nobles provided protection from the worst effects of the persecution, such as in the Poitou in west central France. The irregular terrain in the Cevennes Mountains of south central France, full of natural caves and isolated gullies, protected other Huguenots. To this day, these two areas are the historic heartlands of French Protestantism.³¹ Family worship was conducted clandestinely by the remnant, since public worship was all but impossible. Sadly, by the hundreds of thousands, other French Protestants recanted and returned to Rome, although a goodly number no doubt maintained their Protestant beliefs privately. It is fascinating to compare the experience of the French Huguenots with that of the Scottish Covenanters. During the 1680s, the former were entering into the worse persecution they would ever experience, while the latter were leaving their Killing Times, although the Covenanters could not know it until around 1689.

Virtually all the Protestant church buildings, called temples, were torn down as a final indignity; only a dozen or so still exist from before 1685, having been maintained for other purposes.³² Pastors worked underground at great personal danger; when discovered, they were tried, convicted, and stripped and publicly executed, usually by being tied to a wheel and slowly beaten to death with metal rods.³³ For decades, no regional meetings of church judicatories could meet, leading to further theological and practical decline among the remnant French Protestants. These times were truly the wilderness years for French Reformed Protestantism.

²⁹ This defeat cemented France's ceding of world domination to Great Britain, with enormous repercussions, including the domination of the English language.

³⁰ "Allocution de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République, aux cérémonies du tricentenaire de la Révocation de l'Édit de Nantes, sur la tolérance en matière politique et religieuse et l'histoire du protestantisme en France, Paris, Palais de l'UNESCO, vendredi 11 octobre 1985" [Speech of Mr. François Mitterand, President of the Republic, at the Ceremonies concerning the Tricentenary of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, about Toleration in the Matters of Politics and Religion and on the History of French Protestantism, Paris, Palace of UNESCO, Friday 11 October 1985]

³¹ Although the later acquisition of Alsace added a third area of Protestant strength, albeit one historically speaking Alsatian, a German, not French, dialect.

³² Yves Krumenacker, "Les temples protestants français, XVIe – XVII siècles" [Protestant Church Buildings, 16th and 17th Centuries], *Chrétiens et sociétés* num. sp. 1 (2011), note 2.

³³ One of the most prominent Reformed pastors, Claude Brousson (1647-1698), suffered such a gruesome end at Montpellier.

In the Cevennes Mountains, some of the Protestants took up arms to protect themselves and their families. For several years, these men held the forces of the most powerful king on earth at bay, disappearing along mountain paths into the caves and crevices where the army hesitated to follow them. These fighters were nicknamed Camisards, after the French word for the white shirts they wore into battle.³⁴ Their leader, Pierre Laporte (1680-1704), took as his nom de guerre Roland; his family home in Mialet has been used, since the nineteenth century, for the most important historical museum of French Protestantism. Today its grounds are used for an annual conference which attracts over ten thousand Huguenots each September.

The Revolt of the Camisards embarrassed Louis XIV sufficiently that he replaced his generals and ordered the demolition of all the villages in the High Cevennes, even if they were inhabited by Romanists; about twenty thousand people were thus displaced, and considerable opprobrium fell upon the aging dictator. Through various intrigues, the Revolt was finally ended.

But, the resort to arms of the French Huguenots occurred not only because of those who were driven to respond in kind to the intense persecution of which they were the objects. The Camisards were encouraged to fight by the testimonies of many Protestants who maintained that they were modern prophets and, especially, prophetesses, able to envision the result of the armed opposition to the King and his forces, which Alan Clifford describes accurately as “a desperate but deceptive remedy for the oppressed.”³⁵ The prominence of certain women among the sorely persecuted Huguenots helped to open up the French Reformed churches in succeeding centuries to the ecclesiastical leadership of women, rather than seeing in these dreamers a warning of what not to do.

One woman who defied the king, but in a more appropriate fashion, Marie Durand (1711-1776),³⁶ has entered into the French consciousness. She was incarcerated in the Tower of Constance in Aigues Mortes for thirty-eight years (1730-1768), surviving the experience by a few years. At any time, she could have been released from custody if she had embraced the pope’s false religion. She refused, laboriously chiseling into the stone floor of her dungeon one word: *resistez* [resist]. People still flock to the Tower of Constance to gaze at this intrepid woman’s testimony down the centuries.

Another more wholesome response to the excesses of the Camisards and the visionaries was the establishment of a theological seminary for French Reformed pastors in Lausanne, Switzerland, headed by Antoine Court (1696-1760).³⁷ The seminary was established in 1730 and lasted until 1812. Court intended to inculcate a Reformed theological vision into the young men who studied under him, so that they could take that message to those who were increasingly being guided by emotion rather than Scripture and the Reformed confessions. While the level of persecution began to ebb after the death of Louis XIV in 1715, a death which was celebrated throughout France and its empire, the seminary was nicknamed the “School of the Martyrs”. Most of its graduates did end their ministries executed by their own government for their religion.

³⁴ Modern women may wear a “cami” or “camisole”, which is from the same French root.

³⁵ Alan C. Clifford, *Sons of Calvin: Three Huguenot Pastors* (Norwich, England: Charenton Reformed Publishing, 1999), 53.

³⁶ D. Benoit, *Marie Durand, prisonnière à la tour de Constance, 1715-1768: Son temps, sa famille, ses compagnes de captivité* [Marie Durand: Prisoner in the Tower of Constance, 1715-1768: Her Times, Her Family, Her Companions in Captivity] (Dieulefit, Drôme: Nouvelle société d’éditions de Toulouse, 1935). For a recent biography, written in English for the young, consult Simonetta Carr, *Marie Durand* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2015).

³⁷ Clifford, *Sons of Calvin*, 54-62.

The official end of the persecution occurred in 1787, under King Louis XVI (1754-1793), with a Declaration of Toleration. But it was too little, too late. Two years later, the king had to call the Parliament into session in order to fund his government, with unforeseen repercussions. The French Reformed Churches had eked out an existence in certain locations, but the damage had been done. First, they were a fraction of the size they once had been. Second, they were beset by theological error, both Amyraldianism and Emotionalism. Third, they had few ministers and elders to lead them. Fourth, they had lost all their institutions and buildings. And fifth, they were a despised minority, subject to the whims of the Roman Catholic majority in unsettled times. All these factors left them greatly weakened in the face of the next battle which they were to face.

Fourth, the Battle with Growing Secularism

The French Revolution proclaimed the rights of man without recourse to the God of the Bible as establishing them. The revolutionaries enshrined the motto of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* [liberty, equality, fraternity], as the essence of the ethos of the French nation. Simply put, France replaced an authoritarian man with an authoritarian ideology, secularism. While French Protestants did not suffer the same depredations as did Roman Catholics,³⁸ it was only after 1815, when Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) definitively left the leadership of the nation, that Protestants began to emerge from their long period in the wilderness.

The French Reformed churches have been hobbled, however, by an enduring legacy of the Napoleonic Age, his legal code, which remains largely intact to this day in France. Two features loomed particularly important. First, all churches are defined legally as “associations”, like the garden club or a literary society. The government decrees that anyone who pays a nominal amount annually, an amount set by the government of the day, can be a member of the association, even be eligible for leadership posts within the association. The French Reformed Churches have accepted these standards; they were far too weak to oppose them at the time they were adopted. As a result, church membership has become too nominal, ecclesiastical discipline has proved almost impossible, and little effective ruling eldership has developed.

Second, the Reformed Churches were recognized, along with Roman Catholicism, as state churches. Ministers were paid by the government, and church buildings were erected where there were sufficient numbers of Protestants to justify doing so. From one end of France to another, rectangular buildings, often in prominent places, were erected. The benches centered on a high pulpit under a sounding board, with a communion table on the floor in front of the pulpit. The French Reformed Churches became financially, and psychologically, dependent upon the State.

This semi-Erastian system lasted for about a century. In the 1890s, France was convulsed by a controversy connected to the conviction of a Jewish army officer, Alfred Dreyfus (1859-1935), for treason with France’s arch-enemy Germany. Roman Catholic leaders looked upon the Dreyfus Affair as a God-given opportunity to reassert their declining influence on secularizing French culture and to marginalize Protestants as well as Jews. Mass protests from one end of France to the other viciously attacked both groups, judging them as traitors to the nation.³⁹ After years of controversy, it became clear that Dreyfus had been framed by his military superiors, only because of his religious beliefs, in the rush to identify the traitor. The secularists in turn saw their opportunity against the discredited Roman Catholic faith, and, coming to

³⁸ Many priests and nuns were killed (usually guillotined), and Roman properties were seized and redistributed to those favored by whoever led the current regime.

³⁹ Prof. Pierre Birnbaum, in *The Anti-Semitic Moment: A Tour of France in 1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003), has described in great detail such incidents focused on just one year, 1898.

dominate the government, cut off all religious groups from its financial subsidies in 1905. French Catholics survived the shock pretty well, but French Protestants did not. Their national system of schools closed down, ministers' salaries were slashed, and the plethora of Protestant institutions erected in the nineteenth century were largely abandoned.⁴⁰ The secularists had won a decisive battle in favor of their doctrine of *laïcité* (laicism).

The pairing of Jews with Protestants, so evident in the Dreyfus controversy, highlighted a real affinity between the two religious traditions, for so long despised minorities in a rough sea of bigoted Roman Catholicism. During the German occupation of France during the Second World War, twelve Reformed villages in the northern Cevennes Mountains centered on Chambon-sur-Lignon successfully hid thousands of Jews, mostly children, from the Germans, as well as members of other groups threatened by the collaborationist Vichy Regime of Marechal Philip Petain (1856-1951).⁴¹ But both groups, Jews and Huguenots, have largely succumbed to the siren song of secularism, becoming largely indistinguishable from the secularists around them, since another battle had engulfed them.

Fifth, the Battle with Post-Kantian Liberalism

The rise of the destructive criticism of the Bible and the resulting development of anti-Biblical and anti-confessional theology in the nineteenth century did not leave French Protestants unscathed.⁴² In the chaos which followed France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 and the end of the Third Empire of Napoleon III,⁴³ a national synod was able to convene without government interference. This synod adopted a "Declaration of Faith" which the liberals rejected, leading them to form a national synod separate from the "conservatives" or "evangelicals". The latter had been training ministers in a seminary in Montauban, in southwestern France. The liberals had been training their pastors in the theological faculty of the University of Strasbourg in the region of Alsace, now cut off from France by the German victory. Thus, the French liberals cooperated with the French Lutherans in creating a new seminary in Paris in 1877, where imposing facilities were built for the seminary two years later.⁴⁴

In October 1906, an effort was made by some church leaders to mend the split, calling for a joint synod to meet in the small town of Jarnac, in the Charente Department of western France.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ For the Universal Exposition in Chicago in 1893, Frank Puaux prepared a large volume to describe them: *Les œuvres du protestantisme français au XIXe siècle* [The Activities of French Protestantism in the 19th Century] (Paris: Comité Protestant Français, 1893).

⁴¹ Philip Hallie brought world-wide renown to Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, in his 1979 book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon and How Goodness Happened There* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). Numerous books, articles, and even films have added further light to this remarkable story; see Patrick Henry, "Le Chambon-sur-Lignon: 1979-2015," *The French Review* 89, no. 3 (March 2016): 83-96.

⁴² "Ses représentants en France ont pour nom [Timothée] Colani [1824-1888], [Félix] Pécaud [1828-1898], [Edmond Henri Adolphe] Scherer [1815-1889], [Athanasie Josué] Coquerel [1820-1875]." Maurice Longeiret, *Églises réformées évangéliques: Les leçons de l'histoire* [Reformed Evangelical Churches: Lessons from History] (Nîmes, France: Éditions "Lumière des Hommes," 1997), 4.

⁴³ A nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, born in 1808, he became president in 1848, ruled as emperor 1852-1870, and died in 1873.

⁴⁴ The Seminary is located in the 14th Arrondissement in southern Paris on the Left Bank of the Seine River near the university quarter.

⁴⁵ Wilfred Monod (1867-1943), a member of a prominent French Protestant family, championed this effort.

Jarnac proved to be a double failure: not only was the breach not healed, but a third synod emerged from it, although this Jarnac Synod merged with the liberal synod in 1912.⁴⁶ By 1938, weakened by liberalism within and the ravages of World War I without, particularly on the Reformed Churches located in the battlefield areas of northern France, the Liberal Reformed Church, most of the Evangelical Reformed Churches and Methodist Churches, and some of the Free Churches, merged to form l'Église Réformée de France (the Reformed Church of France). The doctrinal agreement that permitted this union is vague – and non-binding anyway.⁴⁷ By 1948, the united church had begun ordaining women to the ministry. Eventually, the Reformed Church in France merged with the much smaller Lutheran Church to form the United Protestant Church of France in May 2013.

The theological liberalism of the Reformed Churches prompted liturgical experiments which moved the churches far from their Genevan roots. First, musical instruments, usually harmoniums, were introduced into worship, to replace the a cappella singing in worship inherited from Calvin three centuries earlier. Second, with the development of a French hymnody during the nineteenth century,⁴⁸ the Psalms were gradually supplanted as the text for singing the praises of the Lord. Third, liturgical elaboration bloomed, destroying the simple, spiritual, dialogical worship of the Reformed tradition. Late in the century, the Reformed Church of the Spirit in western Paris developed a highly liturgical form of worship, with homilies replacing sermons, extemporaneous prayers giving way to read prayers, and the authoritative reading of Scripture transformed into responsive readings.⁴⁹ The churches, even the evangelical ones, gradually embraced these changes. The liberals found the detailed liturgy very useful, as it permitted them to mouth orthodox formulations while personally disbelieving the normal sense of the words. The effects of this liturgical revolution were devastating: pastors became tied to their liturgical books; worship became overly formal; liberalism advanced through subterfuge; and the people stopped attending the boring ceremonies. The average French Reformed Church today has an attendance of about ten percent of its overall membership.

The neo-modernism of Karl Barth (1886-1968) swept into France beginning in the mid-1920s,⁵⁰ and had become the most popular form of theological liberalism by the eruption of World War II in September, 1939. Jean Baubérot explains its popularity as follows: “By closely mixing orthodoxy and dialectic, [Barthianism] gave to the members of the middle class of Protestant intellectuals (and especially the new generation) a possibility to master secularization and to

⁴⁶ Daniel Langlois-Berthelot, “Documents: de l’Assemblée de Jarnac (1906) à l’Union des Églises réformées de France’ (1912)” [Documents: From the Assembly at Jarnac (1906) to the Union of the Reformed Churches of France (1912)] *Bulletin de la Société de l’histoire du protestantisme français* 140, no. 2 (avril-juin 1994): 285-291.

⁴⁷ The theological statement of the 1872 synod was not as strong, but was required of ministers. The 1938 statement (written in 1936) was optional for them. How is that progress?

⁴⁸ Some hymns were written from a liberal perspective, others from an evangelical one (see the next battle).

⁴⁹ A later iteration of this liturgy has been helpfully translated into English as: *The Sunday Service of the French Reformed Church* (London: French Protestant Industrial Mission, circa 1950).

⁵⁰ The first work of Barth to appear in the French language appears to have been *Parole de Dieu et parole humaine* (Paris: Librairie Protestante, 1924); translated into English as *The Word of God and the Word of Man. L’Épître aux Philippiens* [The Epistle to the Philippians] followed in 1926, published by Labor et Fides in Geneva.

move towards ... ecumenical dialogue.”⁵¹ As in other countries, Barthianism became passé in the tumultuous 1960s and has been replaced by more radical theologies. The most prominent late-twentieth century theologian at the Paris Seminary was Georges Casalis (1917-1987), whose motto was: “A conclusion is a prison.”

Theological liberalism became closely associated with socialist politics by the end of the nineteenth century, in part as a reaction to the perceived Romanism of the more conservative parties. In May 1968, the famous student revolts against the French system began among students at the Paris Protestant Seminary. These students even managed to have Dr. Frank Michaeli (1907-1977) removed from the chair of Old Testament; as a Barthian, he was considered a reactionary, and they, as fascists, felt free to put him in the unemployment queue. Meanwhile, another battle was being fought by the French Reformed Churches.

Sixth, the Battle with Pragmatic Evangelicalism

The French Reformed Churches had hardly emerged from centuries of persecution when they faced a new challenge from the evangelical movement. Spawned in the Great Awakenings of the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Anglo-American world, this challenge spread to other countries.

The evangelical revival entered France via Switzerland, where a pair of remarkable Scottish brothers spearheaded the effort. Robert Haldane (1764-1842) and James Haldane (1768-1851) centered their work in the city of Geneva.⁵² Their most important convert was César Malan (1787-1864), pastor of St. Peter’s Church in Geneva, the congregation served earlier by John Calvin himself.⁵³ Malan was removed from the pulpit when he continued to preach election and related Biblical doctrines, despite the Geneva Consistory’s instruction to the contrary. Malan became an itinerant preacher throughout Switzerland and France and even beyond. Today, Malan is best known as the “French Isaac Watts”, as he wrote a large number of hymns in order to replace the Psalms of Scripture in the worship of God. Other leaders of the revival work were Jean Henri Merle d’Aubigné (1794-1872), an important church historian, and Louis Gaussen (1790-1863), a theologian who wrote an often-republished work on the inspiration of Scripture, *Theopneustia*, as well as an important work on *The Canon of the Holy Scriptures from the Point of View of Science and Faith*.

The closest the French Reformed Churches came to a Reformed theologian in the nineteenth century was Professor Emile Doumergue (1844-1937) of the Protestant Seminary in Montauban, author of the monumental, seven volume set, *Jean Calvin: les hommes et les choses de son temps*.⁵⁴ However, Prof. Doumergue’s interest in Calvin was more antiquarian than theological. This Seminary moved in 1919 to the university city of Montpellier in south central France and was paired with the Protestant Seminary in Paris into an Institute of Protestant Theology in the 1970s.

⁵¹ “L’émérgence d’une orthodoxie nouvelle au XXe siècle: Les causes de l’apparition du mouvement barthien en France” [The Emergence of a New Orthodoxy in the Twentieth Century: The Causes for the Emergence of the Barthian Movement in France], *Études théologiques et religieuses* 66, no. 3 (1991): 397.

⁵² See Alexander Haldane, *The Lives of Robert and James Haldane* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), and, more broadly, Kenneth J. Stewart, *Restoring the Reformation: British Evangelicalism and the Francophone “Réveil”, 1816-1849* (Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2006).

⁵³ Solomon Caesar Malan, *The Life, Labours, and Writings of Caesar Malan* (London: James Nisbet, 1869), and often reprinted.

⁵⁴ *John Calvin: The Men and the Events of His Time*, published by G. Bridel in Lausanne between 1899 and 1927, but never translated into English.

But the early emphasis on election in the evangelical movement should not obscure the fact that many of the evangelicals were Amyraldian at best in their theology. And, as already noted, the revivalists embraced changes in the Reformed liturgy which had originated among the theological liberals.

The Reformed Churches were hobbled in their response to these tendencies by the refusal of successive governments, of widely-differing political tendencies, to permit a national synod to meet. But, the Churches were sufficiently Reformed to prompt frustrated evangelical believers to secede. The Free Churches left in 1849,⁵⁵ followed by the Baptists a year later, and the Methodists in 1868. While inevitable in many ways, and even desirable, these secessions removed some of the most dynamic and anti-liberal members and leaders from the Reformed Churches at a critical time in their battle against Post-Kantian Liberalism.

The Pentecostal Movement came to France in the early twentieth century and created the usual unrest within all the churches, including the French Reformed Church, before and after 1938. The French Assemblies of God, organized in 1932, had become the largest non-Romanist denomination in France by the late 1970s, in terms of actual attendance at Sabbath worship.

During the 1920s, a revival movement swept through many of the Reformed parishes in the Alps, particularly in the Department of the Drôme; the movement was nicknamed “The Brigade of the Drôme”. Quasi-Calvinists, they experienced, as is usually the case, rapid decline after the initial enthusiasm of the revival wore off. Their most important leader was Jean Cadier (1898-1981), author of *The Man God Mastered: John Calvin*,⁵⁶ and later a professor at the Seminary in Montpellier.

Following World War II, a wave of missionaries from the burgeoning Evangelical Movement in North America and the British Isles came to France, establishing congregations in the cities and producing a large number of denominations and a few institutions.⁵⁷ Already, evangelicals under the leadership of Ruben Saillens (1855-1942), had established a Bible college at Nogent-sur-Marne, east of Paris, in 1921.⁵⁸ Later evangelicals created a seminary in Vaux-sur-Seine in 1965; its most prominent leader has been Henri Blocher (b. 1937), a Reformed Baptist from a distinguished French evangelical family, who is now retired.

The Charismatic Movement emerged in the post-war period and has influenced the worship of the French Reformed Churches towards a greater informalism and emotionalism. With the surge of African and Caribbean evangelical immigrants into the Reformed churches in recent decades, such tendencies have been amplified and imitated.

⁵⁵ Frédéric Monod (1794-1863) led the Free Churches out of the Reformed Churches; the denomination continues today. *L'union des Églises évangéliques libres de France: Ses origines, son histoire, son œuvre* [The Union of Free Evangelical Churches of France: Its Origins, Its History, Its Work] (Paris: Chapelle Taitbout, 1899). Claude Baty, *Les églises évangéliques libres, 1849-1999* [The Free Evangelical Churches, 1948-1999] (Valence: Édition spéciale L.L.B., 1999).

⁵⁶ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960.

⁵⁷ Allen V. Koop, *American Evangelical Missionaries in France, 1945-1975* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, c1986). Missionaries from the British Isles and other parts of Europe also came to France.

⁵⁸ Almost two thousand students have graduated from Nogent during almost a century of instruction there. The standard biography of Saillens was written by one of his daughters, Marguerite Wargenau-Saillens: *Ruben et Jeanne Saillens, évangélistes* [Ruben and Jeanne Saillens, Evangelists] (Paris: Les bons semeurs, 1947), reprinted in 2014 by Éditions Ampelos. Despite the title, it is almost totally focused on Ruben Saillens.

The growth of evangelical churches in France in recent years has been so obvious that *Christianity Today* devoted a cover story to the phenomenon in 2005.⁵⁹ The temptation for Reformed believers and churches is to mimic the theology and practices of evangelicals in order to experience similar growth, failing to recognize that this growth has come largely by transfer from the flood of evangelical immigrants joining established French congregations or founding their own churches. As a result, a certain pragmatism has been affecting the French Reformed Churches.

Conclusion

The French Reformed Churches have fought these six major battles since the mid-sixteenth century. Where do these battles leave these Churches today? They are confused (when not contradictory) in their theology and practice, uncertain of the goals for their cash-strapped ministries, divided in their vision for future witness, and withdrawn into themselves with little impact upon the highly-secular society around them.⁶⁰ The sad reality is that the French Reformed Churches have abandoned much of what is good in their tradition as a result of their responses to the six great battles which they have faced over the past four and a half centuries. The only bright spot is a certain Calvinistic reform movement that has, in the past century, taken shape and advanced, but remains too much an abstract idea rather than an ecclesiastical reality. A future address will consider this movement's founder, Auguste Lecerf (1872-1943), as well as the movement itself.

⁵⁹ Agnieszka Tennent, "The French Reconnection: Europe's Most Secular Country Rediscovered Its Christian Roots," *Christianity Today* 49, no. 3 (March 2005): 28-35.

⁶⁰ Nonetheless, "Protestants" have been found in many prominent positions since the nineteenth century, especially in business and the military, although some have also been found in politics. The Protestant Peugeot family created one of the major French automobile manufacturers; after they sold their interest in the company, they watched helplessly as the quality of the cars which were produced in their name declined. Three prime ministers of the Fifth Republic (established in 1958) have been Protestants in religious background, although not in personal belief and practice: Maurice Couve de Murville (1907-1999, served 1968-1969); Michel Rocard (born 1930, served 1988-1991); and Lionel Jospin (born 1937; served 1997-2002).