

The Age of Catherine de Medici

J.E.Neale

April 5-6, 2011

As a Lutheran one tends to identify the Reformation and Protestantism with Luther. This is clearly a parochial point of view, Calvin clearly is as important. Luther and Calvin were very different, and that difference became also manifest in the way their reform movements evolved. Luther was an intellectual, his attitude to religion was one of individual conscience and hence a matter only concerning the individual. In particular he never paid much attention to the organization of a new church. Hardly surprising as it was the Catholic Church as an ossified institution which he opposed. Thus, the author Neale claims, Lutheranism was hardly the creed to spur a revolution. In fact after the initial daring, Luther turned out to be a pretty conservative fellow, who made peace with the powers of the world. The reason that Lutheranism spread was due to a top-down approach, as the local princes of the German Reich saw how to take advantage of the creed for their own purposes. By embracing Protestantism they could confiscate the riches of the Church. This was particularly obvious in Scandinavia, where in Sweden the founding father - Gustavus Vasa, declared the country Lutheran early on in his reign, and then set about to create a strong central state based on the riches of the Church. Of course in retrospect there had to be other more religious explanations, and indeed as a boy one was taught the perfidy of Catholicism, although by the time I was born, much of that open hostility had been toned down. The result of the 'religious' rebellion of the German princes, was the collapse of the German Reich. But that did not really happen until the next century. In France the situation was different.

Calvinism is seen as a more exacting dogma than Lutheranism. Calvin was probably more of a fanatic than Luther, whose temperament was essentially jovial. Predestination was a key element in the Calvinistic creed. But above all Calvin was an organizer. He organized a Catholic Church outside of Catholicism. He was a lawyer, and with the temperament of one. His church consisted of ministers and elders, where the latter were to be seen as representatives of the laity, complemented with deacons for well-fare work. The ministers and the elders of a parish made up a Consistory, which met once every fortnight. They kept a very strict eye on their parishioners as well as on themselves, to make sure that life was led according to strict moral rules. Ministers were regularly criticized for dull sermons, or for not really towing the line. This does of course make one think of Communism during the 20th century. The comparison is rather apt. Above the Consistory was a Colloquay, and above the Colloquays were Regional Synods, and on top of that were a National Synod. Such an almost military hierarchy made for cohesion. The individual member was never isolated and alone, but were part of a larger structure. This gives strength.

Why did Calvinism have such an appeal? The state of the Church in France during the 16th century was abysmal. Ecclesiastical appointments were never made on ecclesiastical grounds, but were instead seen as either sinecures for enrichments given to favorites or

as offices to be auctioned out to the highest bidder to improve the finances of the state, which meant in practice the king. Thus many bishops held multiple sees, and absenteeism was rampant. In other words a thoroughly corrupt Church. To the King however, the arrangement was satisfactory, and he had no incentive unlike German princes, to confiscate the church. In a sense it was already done.

Among whom did we find the converts? Not among the peasants surely, as any Protestant movement was based and spread by the printed word, and presupposed literacy¹. Not surprisingly the appeal worked first among the intellectuals, i.e. those who could write and read, such as lawyers. Calvinism was a very bourgeois moment. Later on the Nobility became involved. This greatly increased the political strength of the Calvinist movement as it gave it military muscle. In the end it would prove to be fatal. In the end also some of the clergy converted, but that was of less momentous nature.

Now the year is 1559 and a peace has been settled. French Monarchy has exhausted itself financially from wars in Italy. As a result, the French promise no longer to meddle in Italian affairs (which in a sense makes Italy fade out of European history and revert to itself). The situation is of course precarious for the nation, surrounded as it is by a most powerful neighbor - Spain. The profligate King of France Henry II dies and leaves a child - Francis II to take over. A child cannot reign by himself and a regent is needed. It is here Catherine de Medici steps in. She is the mother of the infant king, in other words the Queen-mother. She is still young (forty) and dynamic, and very ambitious. Her position is weak and threatened by three powerful families - The Guise of the East, the Bourbons of the West and the Montmorency of the south and in the middle. In order to gain and maintain power, she needs to play them against each other. At that game she is quite adept, at least in the short run. She is not French, and she is not of royal blood, not even of nobility, stemming from a merchant family in Florence. But at one point an uncle of hers is the Pope, and that connection of course was pregnant with political potential, making the match desirable, in spite of being such an obvious messalliance. However, the papal connection is short-lived as the pope soon dies. The author points out that she lacks principles, although having a lot of political acumen, and is thus no statesman. She has no patriotic feeling for France, only for her family, meaning her children, whom she tries to foster upon as many royal thrones as possible.

There is strife between the leading families. This is exacerbated by the complications of divided religious allegiance. The Huguenots start to form a state within the state. Catherine tries to mediate between warring factions, but according to the author, she treats it as court intrigue, laboring to establish truces without ever going to the heart of the matter. Her successes are short-lived, and in the long run she manages to deepen and confirm hostilities rather than to dissolve them. A sequence of religious war burst out, involving massacres and atrocities on both sides. There are in fact three of them. The first were fought between angles, the second between men, and the third between devils.

¹ It also worked sometimes worked the other way around. As a result of the reformation in Sweden there was a big pressure that the individual should be able to read the Bible for himself. Thus universal instruction were administered, not through the school system, which only involved a minority, but through the regular contact of the minister with those of his parish. This also became a way to detect among the peasantry youth of intellectual ability.

As the saying went. One does not know about the angles, but definitely about the devils. The comings and goings are very confusing, and it is far from clear why one should even try to commit it to memory. Catherine is seen as being partisan as far as the Huguenots are concerned, and by the latter not supportive enough, at least not to the level they had been led to expect. Her attempts of reconciliation have obviously backfired. Catherine is what one calls unscrupulous. She does not shrink away from ordering an assassination, when it literally misfires (the aimed arrow does not pierce the intended victim - Coligny, only crushing a finger), she has all the actors collected in Paris, and have them all killed in a massacre that goes on for several days, and is known to history as the St-Bartholomew night. This is something we all learned as children at school, although we may not always have understood the context. It was not really a religious massacre, not to be confused with a pogrom, but a purely political atrocity. However, Catherine was lauded for her deed in appropriate circles. The Pope in particular approved. So after all one may, if one so wants, detect certain religious overtones.

Francis II died at a young age. He was succeeded by Charles IX, another son, who also died young. Then there was Henry III, who had previously been sent to Poland to assume its crown, but was called back. He was supposedly her favorite son. We are now talking about the late eighties. Catherine is no longer young but bedridden. But she tries to direct events even as she is fading. But it is far too difficult. All kinds of mistakes are being made. She eventually dies, and her son, survives her with a few months. And then the crown is taken over by the legendary Henry IV. Finally a strong forceful man on the French throne, the author exclaims, obviously out of exasperation. Henry is an Huguenot as we all recall, but famously converted to Catholicism, figuring that Paris was worth a Mass. Some of the rights earlier granted to the Huguenots but later rescinded are resumed again by the edict of Nantes. Eventually Richelieu would unroll all of that, and under Louis XIV France will be united under one Faith. That is history. And as we know many of the Huguenots fled France for Germanic lands, bringing Calvinism with them. Some of their surnames survive until this very day. History did not happen too long ago.

Now the author claims, that had the Huguenots been so much militarized and played such an obvious role in power politics, France may have gone Protestant on its own accord, so corrupted was the Catholic Church. But by their conspicuous meddling in politics, people had enough, and the rebellious movement lost its moral edge.

Those lectures were held in 1938, and the author reluctantly had them published in 1943. Contemporary events figure in the presentations, and many analogies are being drawn with current affairs. I must say not very felicitous. What is learnt by comparing the Huguenots to the Nazis? Not very much, if anything. The reason for this rather farfetched idea being that like the Nazis, the Huguenots abetted by the nobility who had joined them, formed groups that went on rampage and provoked counter groups made up by Catholics, just as the Nazi gangs provoked Communists gangs. It must all have seen rather innocent from the horizon of 1938.