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Religion and Power: A Comparison of Queen Elizabeth I and Catherine de Medici



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ABSTRACT

The religious upheaval of the sixteenth century resulted in widespread civil war and conflict throughout Western Europe. Although England escaped much of the turmoil, France was plagued by the French Wars of Religion. Queen Regent Catherine de Medici struggled to maintain political and religious control in France while Elizabeth I, Queen of England, successfully ruled a religiously diverse nation. The respective constitutional strength of their political situations combined with their religious policy decisions played a powerful role in the fates of the nations they ruled.

The sixteenth century witnessed vast changes in religion, transforming the religious and political landscape of Europe as the Protestant Reformation swept across the continent. Queen Elizabeth I of England (Elizabeth Tudor) faced a religiously divided nation, as did Catherine de Medici, Queen Regent of France. Yet while France descended into decades of civil war, England remained largely at peace. Queen Elizabeth was more successful at governing a religiously divided nation than Catherine de Medici for a variety of reasons. The domestic religious situation each faced and the policy decisions made during their reigns played a large role in influencing the religious situation in both nations. The fundamental power base each possessed also formed an essential aspect of the ability to dictate the national religious situation. Elizabeth Tudor successfully prevented England from falling into civil war while Catherine de Medici was incapable of preventing the outbreak of several religious wars over a period of more than thirteen years, culminating in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in August 1572. Yet, given the conditions experienced and the extent of her personal power, there was little Catherine would have been able to do to produce a domestic situation similar to that in England. The royal power enjoyed, or lack thereof, was vitally important in shaping the course of events in both nations over a period of more than thirty years.

As Queen of England, Elizabeth benefited from the expanded royal prerogative over religion established by her predecessors. Royal control over religion in England changed dramatically under King Henry VIII. In 1533, desperate for a divorce from his Spanish wife Catherine of Aragon, Henry led England into a seemingly irrevocable break with the Catholic Church. Royal control over religion was



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tentatively pioneered with this move, and royal control was further cemented in 1534 with the passage of the Parliamentary Act of Supremacy, which gave the monarch absolute control over religion within England and supported the break from Rome:

Albeit the king's Majesty is justly and rightfully is and oweth to be the supreme head of the Church of England, and is so recognized by the clergy of this realm...be it enacted, by the authority of this present Parliament, that the king...his heirs and successors...shall be taken, accepted and reputed the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England¹

With this Act, the monarch gained ultimate control over the Church of England in whatever form they deemed it should take. It required that the clergy also recognize the monarch's supremacy, giving a Protestant monarch a method of removing Catholic clergy from any position of power. With the passage of this act, royal control in England entered a new phase, one marked by expanded power over religion that would be used by King Henry's successors.

Expanded royal control over religion was solidified and used extensively by King Henry VIII's son, King Edward VI, and the Council of Sixteen ruling in the king's minority. Edward took the throne at the age of nine upon the death of his father in 1547, and effective control of the government passed to the Council of Sixteen established in King Henry's will.²

Under Edward and the Council of Sixteen, the Protestant Reformation reached new heights. In 1549, the Uniformity Bill was passed through Parliament, mass was abolished, and the Book of Common Prayer was introduced.³ The Reformation in England took on a strongly Protestant tone, further splitting England along religious lines. Edward and his Council faced multiple rebellions against royal authority; discontent simmered among Catholics until Edward's untimely death at the age of sixteen in 1553.⁴

Upon the death of Edward VI, the crown passed to Mary Tudor, Catholic daughter of King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon. English Protestants now faced a Catholic crown, one eager to reunite England with the Roman Catholic Church. Mary's reign marked a new phase of royal religious control in England; she used the machinery of royal control to undo its very foundation and return England to the Catholic fold. Following the defeat of the Protestant Queen Jane Grey in 1553, Mary faced little active resistance to her control. As monarch, she was accorded the powers created by her father and used by her brother. However, the one revolt she faced, Wyatt's Rebellion, challenged both her marriage to Prince Philip of Spain and attempted to replace the Catholic Mary with her Protestant half-sister. Mary used the royal prerogative established by her father and expanded by her half-brother to formally reconcile England with the Roman Catholic Church and reestablish Catholicism as the state religion. As stated by historian William Haugaard, "Mary,

wholeheartedly loyal to the papacy, could not avoid using the machinery of royal supremacy in order to undo it."⁵ In her attempts to restore Catholicism, Mary was forced to use her father's creation of royal prerogative to reunite England with the Roman Catholic Church. Her efforts were met with partial success: Catholicism was formally reestablished as the state religion, and mass was conducted throughout the country.

Upon her death in November 1558, Mary Tudor left behind a nation with an uncertain religious future. Although the Catholic Church had been nominally restored, its future rested upon the need for the English Crown to remain in Catholic hands. Childless, without a Catholic heir, Mary's dreams of fully restoring Catholicism died with her. The crown of England passed to Mary's younger half-sister, Elizabeth Tudor, daughter of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. When she became Queen of England in 1558, Elizabeth inherited a troubled nation. As stated by historian Wallace MacCaffrey, "The religious problem Elizabeth faced at her accession, like the rest of her untidy inheritance, was a product of her three predecessors' actions."⁶ Elizabeth faced a divided nation, split into dissenting religious factions, ranging from those violently Catholic to the extreme Protestants who in 1553 had attempted to place Lady Jane Grey on the throne in order to keep it in Protestant hands. At her accession, Elizabeth recognized an undeniable problem in need of royal control.

¹ A.G. Dickens and Dorothy Carr, ed., *The Reformation in England to the Accession of Elizabeth I* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968), 64.

² Christopher Haigh, *English Reformations: Religion, Politics, and Society under the Tudors* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 167.

³ Florence Higham, *Catholic and Reformed: A Study of the Anglican Church, 1559-1662*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), 3.

⁴ Haigh, 168.

⁵ William P. Haugaard, *Elizabeth and the English Reformation: The Struggle for a Stable Settlement of Religion*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1968), 20.

⁶ Wallace MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1993), 298.

When she became queen, one of Elizabeth's first concerns was to address the issue of religion. Elizabeth faced the decision to retain Catholicism or restore Protestantism as the national religion. Her personal convictions were nominally Protestant, but Elizabeth viewed the religious question from a political perspective, weighing the potential outcomes of her decision. Ultimately, the political and personal reasons to return to Protestantism succeeded. In his book, *The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth Late Queen of England*, commissioned by King James I, Elizabeth's successor, seventeenth century historian William Camden wrote, "In the first beginning of her Reign she applied her first Care...to the restoring of the Protestant Religion...by her own Judgement she perswaded her self to be most true..."⁷ As the head of state, Elizabeth reestablished the royal religious prerogative created by her father, expanded by her half-brother, and simultaneously used and abolished by her sister. In 1559, Elizabeth faced her first Parliament to restore the 1534 Act of Supremacy passed by her father. As stated by MacCaffrey,

The statutes of 1559 that provided the constitutional framework of Elizabeth's new order were straightforwardly political in character...an Act of Supremacy which re-established the Henrician legislation of 1534-6 and repudiated Roman authority.⁸

After much debate, a revised Act of Supremacy was passed, granting Elizabeth the same powers accorded her father:

For the repressing of the said usurped foreign power and restoring of the rites, jurisdictions and preeminences attaining to the imperial crown of this your realm, that it may be enacted by this present Parliament...that for the reviving of divers of the said good laws and statutes made in the time of your said dear father.⁹

By this act, Elizabeth was granted the title of Supreme Governor of the Church of England.¹⁰ Through the authority of Parliament, Elizabeth was able to repeal all statutes passed by her sister and restore the Anglican Protestantism created by her father in the 1534 Act of Supremacy.

As queen, Elizabeth was largely able to structure the government to her needs and to conform to her religious policy. This aided greatly in consolidating royal control over the religious situation. Upon Queen Mary's death in November 1558, all Privy councilors and many governmental officials lost their authority.¹¹ As stated by historian J.E. Neale,

There was a momentary vacuum in administration, and to fill this—to appoint Privy Councilors and to reconstitute the administrative machine—was one of the tasks confronting Elizabeth at her accession...¹²

As queen, she could choose her appointments according to her needs and create a government focused on her policies. Elizabeth, as monarch, required all bishops and officials to take an oath affirming the queen as supreme governor and head of the church. All but one of the Marian bishops refused and resigned their offices, enabling Elizabeth to replace them with bishops of Anglican persuasion.¹³ Many other government officials who had not lost their position upon Mary's death similarly refused to swear the oath, resigning their offices instead. Elizabeth faced a relatively easy path of restructuring the government with Protestant officials. Her choices reinforced her religious policy; many appointees were moderate Protestants experienced in government, having either served in her father's nominally Protestant government or in her brother's strongly Protestant administration.

Elizabeth was able to fully dismantle the Catholic Church in England, ridding the Church of relics and mass, and reinstating the 1549 Book of Common Prayer with the 1559 Act of Uniformity.¹⁴ Elizabeth viewed her actions as creating a model to be followed, instituting a permanent church to replace the Roman Catholic Church. She was not inclined to view religion and the church as a fluid, constantly changing entity. As stated by MacCaffrey, "Of one thing Elizabeth was certain...the process of change must end...she saw what was to be done as the final stage of a cycle of reform..."¹⁵ The Anglican Church returned to the

⁷ Wallace MacCaffrey, ed., William Camden, *The History of the Most Renowned and Victorious Princess Elizabeth Late Queen of England*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 11.

⁸ MacCaffrey, 299.

⁹ Gerald Bray, ed., *Documents of the English Reformation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 319.

¹⁰ Susan Doran, *Elizabeth I and Religion, 1558-1603*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 14.

¹¹ J.E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments, 1559-1581*, (New York: British Book Centre, Inc., 1953), 33.

¹² Neale, 33.

¹³ Higham, 7.

¹⁴ MacCaffrey, 299.

¹⁵ MacCaffrey, 298.

status established under Edward VI, and it was clear there would be little further reform. As queen, Elizabeth was able to assume absolute control over religion and dictate the terms on which a national church would be established.

Queen Elizabeth's ability to dismantle the Roman Catholic Church played an important role in establishing her control over religion. She was able to undermine any control the Catholic Church had over the population by replacing it with a new institution. Many Catholics throughout England either fled to the continent to preserve their religion or converted to Anglicanism. Elizabeth did not face any full, organized Catholic resistance to her policies. Shortly into her reign, she publicly denounced any desire to pursue a course of persecution that had destroyed her sister's reign, declaring that she had no wish to "make for herself a window into men's souls."¹⁶ She required law-abiding behavior from all her subjects, but she did not wish to actively enforce loyalty to the Anglican Church. Elizabeth denounced any persecution or harassment from her subjects of either religious persuasion. Three years after her coronation, in response to reports indicating harassment of Catholics, she announced:

We know not, nor have any meaning to allow, that any of our subjects should be molested...in any matter either of faith...or of ceremonies...as long as they shall in their outward conversion show themselves quiet and comfortable.¹⁷

Elizabeth pursued a course of moderation, deliberately attempting to

maintain peace within her realm. She assumed royal control over religion, but she did not openly pursue and persecute Catholics throughout her realm as her sister Mary had persecuted Protestants.

In no other role than as the sole monarch would Elizabeth have been able to control the religious situation as she did. Much of her personal power came from that accorded to the crown, granted only to the monarch. Elizabeth refused to marry and share that power, knowing that through marriage, her personal power and control would be largely diminished.¹⁸ As Queen of England, she was protected by the unassailable position of the Crown and supported by Parliament. Legal precedent gave her the power to wield large control over religion. Without the power of the crown to support her position, Elizabeth would not have been capable of instituting the reforms she did or ushering in an era of religious peace. Although Elizabeth's many political decisions and actions played a large role in the success of her reign, her ultimate power rested on her status as the anointed monarch of England.

The religious situation in sixteenth-century France varied sharply from that in England. Throughout the latter half of the century, France was torn apart by repeated civil war and internal strife. Catherine de Medici, widow of King Henry II and Queen Regent during her children's minorities, proved incapable of controlling or preventing the escalating violence, resulting in the outbreak of religious war and culminating in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in 1572. Upon the unexpected death of King Henry II on July 10, 1559, the crown of France

passed to his sickly fifteen-year-old son, the new King Francis II.¹⁹ For the first time in several generations, there was no absolute, adult monarch firmly in control of the government. The power of the crown now rested in the hands of the Guise family, through their niece, Mary Queen of Scots, who was married to the young king.²⁰ Control over the impressionable young Francis, and the power of the crown with him, was now held by an ultra-Catholic noble family. There was little Catherine, as Queen Mother, could do to change the situation; her power at this point rested solely on her ability to influence her son. She had no legal power to exercise in her own right. Through the actions of the Guise family, Catherine largely lost control over her son, greatly diminishing any political power she might have been able to exercise.

The Conspiracy of Amboise, a Protestant attempt to take control of the government and King Francis II in March 1560, provided a turning point in governmental religious policy. The government, made aware of the Protestant plans, removed to the heavily fortified castle of Amboise, an easily defensible position. In March 1560, Protestant forces attempted to seize control of Amboise and the royal court. However, their attempt failed miserably, resulting in the death of the leader and the eventual execution of fifty-seven Huguenot leaders. Although the conspiracy actually failed to achieve its goals of taking control of the king and removing the Guise family from court, many changes did actually take place. Catherine, although favoring a policy of moderation, followed through with the executions that were demanded. The

¹⁶ Higham, 5

¹⁷ Higham, 6

¹⁸ Alison Plowden, *Marriage with My Kingdom: The Courtships of Elizabeth I*, (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, Inc., 1977), 82.

¹⁹ Stuart Carroll, *Noble Power during the French Wars of Religion: The Guise Affinity and the Catholic Cause in Normandy*, (Cambridge: The Cambridge University Press, 1998), 90.

²⁰ Carroll, 90.

atmosphere at court began to shift, and Catherine took advantage of this. As stated by historian James Westfall Thompson,

These changes had the double effect, first, of persuading the queen to take the management of affairs upon herself and endeavor to remove the Guise from court; second, in giving the Huguenots...the opportunity of strengthening themselves.²¹

Catherine, although previously either unwilling or unable to involve herself in the management of the kingdom, began to take an active role in shaping religious affairs.

Immediately following the Conspiracy of Amboise, Catherine and the government met at an emergency council to prepare an official response. In the Edict of Romorantin resulting from this conference, King Francis II stated:

...We, with the advice of our most honoured mother...and men of our Council have decided to restore matters to their old form and state in the hope that...as God in olden times brought an end to sects and diversity of opinion in His Church...so will He do now...we have prohibited and forbidden...all illicit assemblies and public armed gatherings, declaring those who have held them or will attend them...subject to the penalties for treason...²²

Through this edict, the king attempted to cement a policy toward all seditious Huguenots throughout the kingdom.

However, the original intent of repressing all unrest through this edict failed. As stated by historian Barbara Diefendorf,

Even the Edict of Romorantin, intended as a repressive measure, had weakened the ability of Parlement to prosecute religious deviance by separating the religious aspects of heresy from the secular...²³

Catherine's first attempt at intervening in religious policy produced a situation far different than expected. Rather than producing a firm governmental stance, the attempt at some moderation created a situation far out of her control.

Catherine's official power as Queen Regent was only established following the death of her son King Francis II and the succession of her ten-year-old son Charles IX to the throne in December 1560. Shortly after Charles' accession to the throne, Catherine was declared Queen Regent and granted much of the power of the crown during her son's minority. Through a negotiated compromise with Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, Catherine assumed joint control of the government. As stated by historian James Westfall Thompson,

She found means to have it arranged...that she and the king of Navarre...should rule jointly...this move gave Catherine exclusive guardianship of...Charles IX...and assured her at least an equal power in the regency.²⁴

As Queen Regent, Catherine was able to exercise the power of the crown. She had the authority to negotiate with ambassadors, appoint persons to office, and kept the royal seal within her possession.²⁵

Although regarded as the queen regent and in joint control of the government, Catherine was not regarded as the actual queen. She was not granted the unchallenged power of the crown; as stated by Thompson, "...the absolute authority of the crown was still personal..."²⁶ and granted only to the anointed monarch. Following the death of Henry II, that absolute authority was greatly diminished. As stated by contemporary historian Jean du Tillet in one of his Five Tracts on the religious situation in France, "Under Henry II...there was division in the realm...but little, if any religious sedition...this erupted under Francis II and increased because of the kings' youth."²⁷ Although granted many of the day-to-day powers of the crown, Catherine was not able to assume total control. Catherine's inability to exercise absolute authority, as Elizabeth did, played a large role in undermining governmental authority in both the religious and political arenas in the sixteenth century. Elizabeth, as queen, was the sole monarch in charge; although she was forced to contend with Parliament, she was able to make many final decisions. Catherine, although granted the title of Queen Regent and many of the duties attached with it, was not given the absolute power accorded an adult monarch.

Much of Catherine's inability to control the religious situation within France stemmed from her lack of absolute authority. Matters brought

²¹ James Westfall Thompson, *The Wars of Religion in France, 1559-1576*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1909), 44.

²² David Potter, fed. and trans., *The French Wars of Religion: Selected Documents*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 24-5.

²³ Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 173.

²⁴ Thompson, 72.

²⁵ Thompson, 73.

²⁶ Thompson, 73.

²⁷ Elizabeth A.R. Brown, ed., *Jean du Tillet and the French Wars of Religion: Five Tracts, 1562-1569*, (Binghamton, NY: The Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1994), 79.

before the Queen Regent were also put before the Privy Council, a group of ruling nobles vying for control of the government. Catherine was not able to determine many of the members of the Council as Elizabeth Tudor did, nor did she have as much power over them as did Elizabeth. Catherine faced a group of powerful, at times rebellious, group of nobles—something that Elizabeth did not experience. Historian N. M. Sutherland described the power struggle within the Council,

The rivalry between the nobles centered on the control of the council through which the authority of the crown was exercised when...the king was ineffective...After the establishment of the regency of Catherine de Medici...all three interests, crown, catholics and protestants, struggled to dominate the council...the crown above all to safeguard peace, law and order...and to impose persecution or secure toleration respectively.²⁸

This struggle for power existed because of the lack of an absolute, adult monarch firmly in control of the government.²⁹ Catherine was unable to fully assume absolute control of the government because of the political situation within the country and her status as queen regent and not the ruling monarch. The Prince of Conde and the Duke of Guise actively worked to undermine Catherine's authority and to usurp royal power. Factional differences

and family goals within the council undermined any coherent policy the government attempted to make, and Catherine proved unable to overcome these obstacles in her attempt to negotiate a settlement between the groups.

Catherine's religious goals differed from those of her late husband, King Henry II. Instead of intensifying religious persecution, as her husband had intended and the Guise family had pursued, Catherine instead sought a course of moderation.³⁰ Catherine's course of moderation manifested itself in a series of edicts and proclamations designed to alleviate social and religious tension; however, her actions had an opposite effect. Although such a policy of toleration proved effective in Elizabethan England, many devout French Catholics and Protestants were unwilling to negotiate such a course of action. There was no support or even acceptance of such a government policy, and Catherine was unable to enforce a plan hated by much of the population. Such a policy succeeded in England due to the combined force of a monarchical decree and the population's support for such a position.

Catherine's first steps toward a moderate course of toleration began in 1561 with the Colloquy of Poissy. Intended to resolve theological differences between the Catholic Church and Protestants, primarily Calvinists, the colloquy itself was a miserable failure. Neither Calvinists nor Catholics were willing to negotiate a peace, and the colloquy ended as divided as it had

begun, presenting the government with the dilemma at hand. As stated by historian J.H.M. Salmon, "The failure of the colloquy itself confronted the government with the choice of enforcing the law against heresy or of legally tolerating the existence of dissent."³¹

Catherine's first attempt at constructing a compromise resulted in further division along religious lines. Following the failure of the colloquy, the government issued the Edict of Saint-Germain, also known as the Edict of July, which largely restated the terms set forth in the Edict of Romorantin, although it granted Huguenots limited toleration. This edict, as stated by historian Elizabeth A.R. Brown, "horrified confirmed Catholics, and the Parlement of Paris did not register it until 6 March, after a prolonged struggle with...the queen mother."³² Catherine continued on a course disavowed by the government and hated by the population, both Catholics and Protestants. Catherine was forced to resort to a tool such as the Colloquy in an attempt to negotiate a compromise, something Elizabeth was never required to do. The use of the Colloquy served to demonstrate the lack of absolute authority over the government exercised by the queen regent. Little was resolved by this edict, and tensions escalated.

As queen regent, Catherine faced a divided council with disparate goals. Nobles sought to use the council to fulfill personal goals, further religious aims, or achieve better political standing. This dividing influence played a large role in forming the policies

²⁸ N.M. Sutherland, *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew and the European Conflict 1559-1572*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, Inc., 1973), 10.

²⁹ Thompson, 19.

³⁰ Carroll, 90.

³¹ J.H.M. Salmon, *Society in Crisis: France in the Sixteenth Century*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 141.

³² Brown, 16.

issued by the government before and during the French Wars of Religion. As stated by historian N. M. Sutherland, "This three-tiered struggle... may be directly traced through the... contradictory terms and confusing outcome of the... religious edicts issued between January 1561 and January 1562."³³ Catherine was unable to fully control the council or to dictate its policy decisions, a dilemma Elizabeth rarely faced. While Catherine was largely incapable of controlling the council, Elizabeth was able to use it as a tool to construct her policies. Catherine's course of moderation failed to accomplish any of its goals, instead escalating the friction between the groups and within the government. Her efforts at moderation were not well received by Protestants or Catholics. James Westfall Thompson explains, "Every day Catherine's determination to maintain an even balance of the two religions was producing greater tension and more heat."³⁴ Catherine's efforts at tempering a volatile situation through governmental edicts and actions failed; neither side was willing to discuss any potential settlement, as evidenced by the failure of the Colloquy of Poissy in 1561.

Tensions between Catholics and Protestants erupted beyond Catherine's control in March 1562, resulting in the outbreak of the first civil war.³⁵ It demonstrated Catherine's inability to prevent the escalation of tensions into full civil war even when exercising control as queen regent. Powerful noble families, divided along religious lines, dominated the civil war as a whole. The

war began as a result of a Huguenot attack on the Duke of Guise in the town of Vassy, in which more than thirty Huguenots were massacred. Noble families quickly took advantage of the lack of royal control, dividing into two distinct groups headed by the Duke of Guise and the Prince of Conde, sparking an indecisive civil war that would last a year and produce little results, except to demonstrate the inability of the crown to retain authority and power, and cause the death of the leading Catholic crusader, the Duke of Guise. Although the crown futilely attempted to reassert control, there was little that Catherine, in her role as Queen Regent, could do to prevent the outbreak of war or halt it once it had begun.

Following the end of the first civil war in March 1563, Catherine de Medici once again attempted to regain control over the tumultuous religious situation within France.³⁶ She immediately set about trying to reorder the kingdom, dealing with every form of decision before her. In order to personally ascertain the condition of the kingdom, Catherine organized a prolonged progress of the country that began in 1564. She intended that the presence of the royal court in heretofore disobedient provinces would reinstate royal control. Her efforts proved partially successful, resulting in an uneasy peace that lasted nearly three years after the Progress began, only to be broken by the outbreak of hostilities in fall 1567.³⁷

In an effort to reunite the two sides, Catherine attempted to negotiate a truce between the two with a royal marriage.

In 1572, she successfully arranged the marriage of her daughter and sister of the king, Margaret of Valois, to with Henry of Navarre, Huguenot leader. The wedding was intended to represent a truce between the two groups, and thousands of Huguenots came to Paris to witness the spectacle. However, the truce was to be broken by the assassination attempt on the leading Huguenot Gaspar de Coligny on August 22, 1572.³⁸ The government, believing an attempt to seize the king was underway, quickly ordered an increased guard and secluded itself. Catholics seized Coligny in his home and murdered him, dragging his body through the streets. The death of the Huguenot leader at Catholic hands caused the beginning of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.³⁹ The government was unable to prevent the slaughter of thousands of Huguenots throughout the city on the night of August 24, 1572.⁴⁰ Catherine has long been assumed to be the person responsible for ordering the assassination attempt; however, modern historians have recently reexamined that conclusion.⁴¹ The assassination attempt contradicted her efforts at negotiating peace and undermined the progress made with the royal marriage. Shortly after St. Bartholomew's Day, the fourth civil war began. Catherine's failure to prevent war was complete. For more than twelve years, her efforts were frustrated at every turn.

Throughout their reigns, both Elizabeth Tudor and Catherine de Medici confronted religious strife and

³³ Sutherland, 10.

³⁴ Thompson, 126.

³⁵ Sutherland, 20.

³⁶ Salmon, 338.

³⁷ Salmon, 338.

³⁸ Thompson,

³⁹ Thompson,

⁴⁰ Salmon, 338.

⁴¹ For example, see Hugh Ross Williamson, *Catherine de' Medici*, (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1973), 176. Historians such as N.M. Sutherland in *The Massacre of St. Bartholomew and the European Conflict 1559-1572*, (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, Inc., 1973), and Barbara Diefendorf in *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), have opposed the traditional view of Catherine as the principal agent behind the assassination attempt.

turmoil. However, a comparison of the fundamental differences between the two nations provides insight into the circumstances each ruler faced. Both rulers faced divided nations split along religious lines: Catholic and Protestant. The causes for Elizabeth's successes when dealing with the religion question provide similar causes for Catherine's inability to control the religious situation. Both rulers required a fundamental power base from which to exercise control over all matters religious within their realms. However, while Elizabeth Tudor enjoyed the power accorded the anointed English monarch, Catherine de Medici was denied that similar measure of power because of her status as queen regent rather than the actual monarch.

Elizabeth Tudor gained control over the religious situation within England for a variety of reasons, including her power base as monarch and her ability to undo the actions of her predecessors. The establishment of royal control over

religion under her father King Henry VIII created a precedent that proved invaluable. Elizabeth, as monarch, was using a royal prerogative that had been established by her predecessors and validated by parliament. It had been used to solidify the Protestant Reformation under her half-brother and also used by her sister to reinstate Roman control. Her return to Anglican Protestantism was further solidified by her ability to replace the Marian Catholic bishops with those of the Anglican persuasion. Only royal authority could be used to demand an oath of allegiance from all clergy, one that no Catholic official would be willing to take. The rights enjoyed by Elizabeth were frequently denied to Catherine. Elizabeth was granted the absolute power of the anointed monarch. She was also able to peacefully transition from Catholicism to Protestantism due to the precedent established by her father. As queen, she exercised rights Parliament already

granted to the monarch. She retained the religion established by her father and solidified by her brother. However, without the basis of absolute power granted to a monarch, she would not have been able to accomplish these feats. Catherine, as queen regent, did not enjoy that absolute power. This lack manifested itself in a series of edicts, proclamations, and meetings designed to negotiate a compromise. However, she faced a divided council, a hostile people, and two groups unwilling to discuss a truce. Her success was dependent on the cooperation of both Huguenots and Catholics, something she was never granted. Her crowning achievement, negotiating a marriage between her daughter and Henry of Navarre, was blighted by the assassination of Gaspar de Coligny and the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. While Elizabeth successfully achieved a period of peace and stability, one may also say that Catherine exercised all of her power in pursuit of the same goal.

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