

FROM THEOLOGY TO HISTORY:  
FRENCH RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY AND THE  
REVOCATION OF THE EDICT OF NANTES

ELISABETH ISRAELS PERRY

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*by*

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IN MEMORY OF  
NORTHLEIGH

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## PREFACE

Toutes ces belles controverses  
Sur les religions diverses  
N'ont jamais produit aucun bien:  
Chacun s'anime pour la sienne;  
Et que fait-on pour la chrétienne?  
On dispute, et l'on ne fait rien.  
– Saint-Evremond, 1614-1703.

This book asserts, contrary to Saint-Evremond, that religious controversy on the eve of the Enlightenment was far from sterile or antichristian. In reconstructing a French religious debate of the era of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, it shows how the debate allowed both lay and clerical thinkers of the late seventeenth century to discuss the critical issues of their own day. The Revocation era was an era of crisis not only for French Protestantism, but for Protestantism in general: the final acts of the English Revolution were played out during these years, and the northern maritime alliance against the Catholic Louis XIV took shape. The Revocation era was also a period of exciting intellectual ferment in religion, morality, politics and science. Although the topic of the religious debate in France was historical – the history of the Reformation, the discussion of the topic reflected both the crisis and ferment of the times. The debate also gave rise to a new kind of defense of Protestantism in which changing spiritual values and emerging secular attitudes came into play. As a whole, while the debate took its form and material from the past, it brought to this material contemporary techniques, insights and values, and in certain ways pointed towards future cultural attitudes. Its most important revelation was the irreconcilability of the Protestant and Catholic positions in Louis XIV's France. Indeed, the debate revealed a gap so wide that what began, for Protestants, as an attempt to forestall persecution, ended as an excuse for intolerance on the part of Catholics.

My study of this debate stems from a long-time interest in the Reformed of France in particular and the problems of religious minorities in general. As a graduate student I read the works of Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), a French Protestant philosopher and refugee in Rotterdam, and became intrigued with his wit and seeming contradictions. During the 1950s and 1960s a number of scholars were changing the traditional view of Bayle as a "skeptic." They argued that his espousal of the cause of free inquiry was not incompatible with faith. Among these scholars was Richard Popkin who suggested to me as a research topic the debate between Bayle and the Jesuit Louis Maimbourg on the history of Calvinism, a topic which appealed to me because it spanned both centuries of active French Protestantism. I soon discovered that the debate involved many more writers than Bayle and Maimbourg, and that it had begun long before either wrote and lasted long after they were silent. In the end, my research covered the most critical years of the debate, from 1671 to 1691, and incorporated the ideas and arguments of about ninety published works which appeared during those years on the history of the Reformation and related matters.

Over the past few years I expanded, reorganized and reinterpreted much of the material of the historical debate. For help in this task I owe many friends and relatives my profound thanks. Professors Andrew Lossky (Los Angeles), Walter Rex (Berkeley), Elisabeth Labrousse (Paris), Jacques Solé (Grenoble), and Orville Murphy (Buffalo) deserve special mention: all gave me invaluable advice and criticism, and I profited immeasurably from conversations with them. Grants from the United States Government (Fulbright), the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Colorado made possible my use of European libraries. Special thanks are due Pastor Henri Bosc of the Bibliothèque de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français, who was generous of his time and assistance. The professional criticism and continual encouragement of my husband, Lewis Perry, is paralleled only by the efforts of my late friend Northleigh Yorke-Lodge, of Leamington Spa, England: both have seen me through to the end.