

# GLIMPSES

OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY

200 400 600 800 1000 1200 1400 1600 1800 2000

1680–1705: 180,000 HUGUENOTS FLEE FRANCE



As repression became a way of life in France, Huguenots faced three choices: convert, go underground, or risk everything to reach *le Refuge*.



## ESCAPE FROM BABYLON

In the 1660s, France's King Louis XIV launched a crusade to convert his Protestant subjects to Catholicism. For years, legal and religious harassment alternated with financial measures to entice Huguenots (the name given to French Protestants of the 16th and

17th centuries) back into the Catholic fold. The Huguenots were heavily influenced by Frenchman John Calvin and were, therefore, a part of the Calvinist stream of the Reformation.

### NEW BABYLON

Huguenots, who often compared themselves to

CONTINUED . . .

the remnant of Israel, felt that they were living in the New Babylon, ruled by an oppressive Nebuchadnezzar.

Early royal measures aimed to restrict Huguenots' freedom of worship. In 1663 Huguenots were told they could not conduct their funerals during the day, and the next year processions were limited to 10 people. Then the crown prohibited ministers from serving multiple churches and outlawed psalm singing outside the church.

Church services came under royal surveillance

### DID YOU KNOW?

Huguenot worship centered around the Sunday sermon, the teaching of the catechism, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper four times per year.

and censorship. In each Huguenot temple, pews had to be reserved for Catholic observers, who were allowed to interrupt services and challenge the pastor.

In addition to people

and practices, the monarchy targeted Huguenot property. Authorities tore down churches and imposed severe restrictions on cemeteries.

Huguenots faced professional restrictions too. By 1865 Protestants could no longer be barbers, wigmakers, printers, booksellers, notaries, bailiffs, apothecaries, midwives, surgeons, or doctors.

### "BOOTED MISSIONARIES"

Eventually, Louis XIV lost his patience with passive coercion and turned to a military solution, the *dragonnades*. In these campaigns, Catholic soldiers called "dragoons" swarmed Protestant communities and attempted to force conversions to Catholicism. Huguenots called the troops "booted missionaries."

Dragoons placed enormous financial burdens on their Huguenot hosts. One man had to entertain 18 of them, who lived in his home "until they had destroyed or

sold everything, even the bolts on the doors."

When property attacks fell short of the goal, dragoons inflicted physical and emotional abuse.

### FROM BAD TO WORSE

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 made the Huguenots' already desperate situation even worse. With this act, Louis XIV outlawed Protestantism, leaving the 700,000 Huguenots still living in France three choices: convert, enter the underground church, or flee. The last two choices carried the risk of death.

France forbade Huguenots to leave the country—except pastors, who were given two weeks to relocate or convert. Protestants who refused to submit could be imprisoned, sentenced to the galleys, deported to the Caribbean, or even executed.

Most Huguenots—about 500,000 of them—avoided these risks by renouncing their faith. Of the 200,000 Hugue-

nots who fought their fate, about 10,000 were sentenced between 1685 and 1787. Nearly 4,000 of these were women, and most (6,500) were imprisoned. From 1685 to 1715, about 1,500 Huguenots were sentenced to life in the galleys.

## TO FLEE OR NOT TO FLEE

The French crown cracked down especially hard on Huguenots who tried to leave the country. A 1669 decree sentenced fugitives to confiscation of property and to death. Other laws condemned those who helped Huguenots escape. Still, a determined minority of the Protestant community risked all to reach *le Refuge*.

Most early refugees, including John Calvin, fled to nearby Protestant cities, mainly Geneva and Strasburg. Others traveled to England, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. No more than 20,000 Huguenots left France between 1520 and 1660.

The late-17th-century

## DEFENDING THE HUGUENOTS

In the preface to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin explained to the French King that his book was, in part, a defense of the French Protestants he was persecuting.

“To his most Christian Majesty, the most mighty and illustrious Monarch, Francis, King of the French, his Sovereign: John Calvin prays Peace and Salvation in Christ.

“Sire,—When I first engaged in this work . . . my intention was only to furnish a kind of rudiments, by which those who feel some interest in religion might be trained to true godliness. And I toiled at the task chiefly for the sake of my countrymen the French, multitudes of whom I perceived to be hungering and thirsting after Christ . . . .

“But when I perceived that the fury of certain bad men had risen to such a height in your realm, that there was no place in it for sound doctrine. I thought it might be of service if I were in the same work both to give instruction to my countrymen, and also lay before your Majesty a Confession, from which you may learn what the doctrine is that so inflames the rage of those madmen who are this day, with fire and sword, troubling your kingdom. For I fear not to declare, that what I have here given may be regarded as a summary of the very doctrine which, they vociferate, ought to be punished with confiscation, exile, imprisonment, and flames, as well as exterminated by land and sea.”

exodus, in contrast, was massive, brief, and

permanent. Historians estimate that about



180,000 Huguenots left France between 1680 and 1705.

## GETTING AWAY; STAYING CLOSE

Resolving to abandon relatives, friends, and the comforts of home was undoubtedly difficult, but making that decision was easy compared to carrying it out. Escaping from

Fugitives paid guides, who knew how to safely reach the coast or the border, and fishermen, who provided passage to English or Dutch ships anchored off a French harbor. Fugitives also bought maps with itineraries and lists of inns and homes where Protestants were welcome.

Ready employment and established exile communities attracted many Huguenots to large foreign cities. Because most displaced Huguenots possessed education and labor skills, they were embraced nearly everywhere.

## THE ONES WHO DISAPPEARED

The longer the Huguenots remained shut out of France, the more they adapted to their new countries. This was especially true among those who settled in British North America.

Once settled, Huguenot

families strove to blend in with their new communities. Most of the refugees' children abandoned Calvinism and the use of the French language. They obtained large amounts of land, abandoned their traditional occupations to take up agriculture, and intermarried with British and Dutch settlers. They even Anglicized their names.

In every country of *le Refuge*, however, including America, Huguenot identity re-emerged in the second half of the 19th century. This new identity, best conveyed by the Huguenot societies founded in New York, South Carolina, Great Britain, and Germany between 1883 and 1890, represents a durable legacy. Two hundred years after the French king revoked their freedoms and took their property, Huguenots came out of hiding and began to search for what they had lost.

## PRAYER JOURNAL

"O gracious Father! Restrain, we humbly beseech thee, the efforts of our enemies, and save us from the perils and evils of war . . . . May glory to God and good will to men prevail upon earth, that we and all people may praise and serve thee, in all quietness."

—From the Liturgy of the French Protestant Church

France required courage, perseverance, ingenuity, and luck—plus plenty of money and contacts.

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