

The French Wars of Religion and the Problem of Teaching Confessionally Partisan History

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Introduction

How should Seventh-day Adventist scholars and teachers treat the historical events of a period of warfare, violence, and cruelty in the name of religion, such as the French Wars of Religion, when most of the violence and viciousness seem to come from one side? How do we do justice to the historical reality without seeming to perpetuate a triumphalist and polemical Protestant narrative of history? Can we model objectivity to our students and still honor the spirit of the Reformers? This study addresses the duties of scholarship and faith and presents ideas for teaching the Wars of Religion.

Teaching the Reformation

- Seventh-day Adventist history teachers face a problem when it comes to teaching the Reformation.
- We are members of a denomination which, from its mid-19th-century North American origins, has always been suspicious of, when not downright hostile to, the Roman Catholic Church in general.
- When it comes to the history of these events, we are confessionally partisan.
- Yet the discipline of history, perhaps more than any other of the humanities, demands objectivity and distancing of teachers and researchers from their own assumptions about their subject

The Conundrum

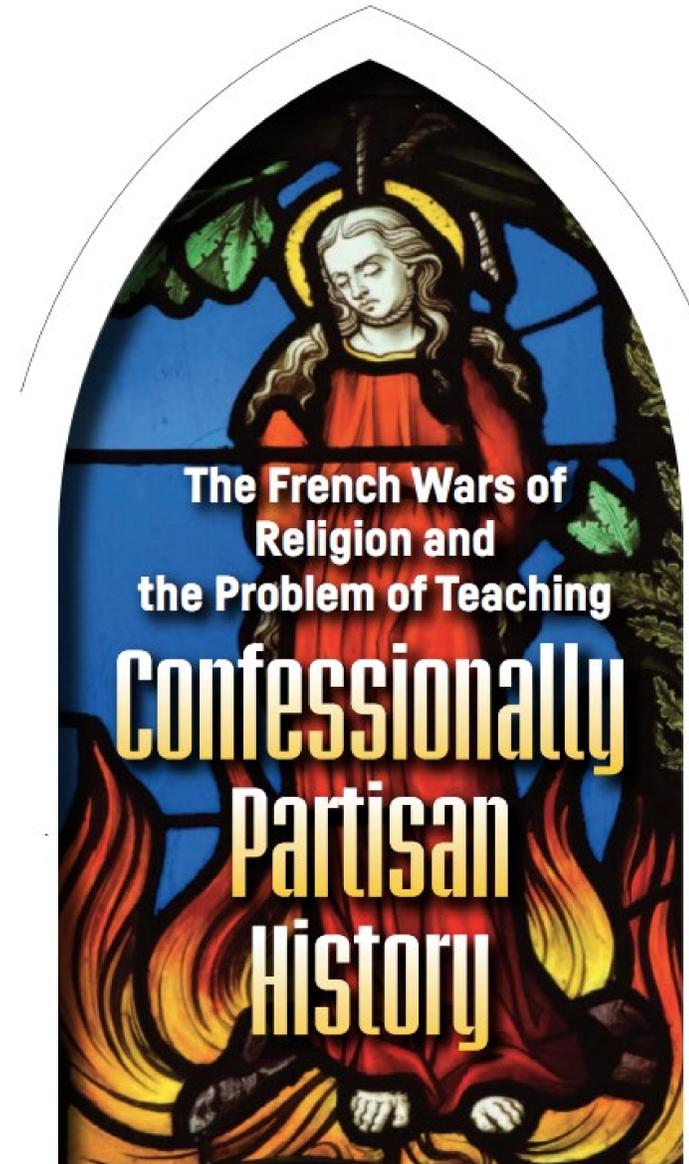
- Examples of Catholic persecution and repression, and Protestant aggression and intolerance are well documented in the historical record. An objective approach is necessary if instructors are to fulfil their duty to scholarship and faith.
- How, then, do we do justice to the historical reality of the Wars of Religion without falling into one of two traps: perpetuating the very divides that resulted in the brutal and bloody conflict in late-16th-century France, or seemingly elevating partisan views to the level of scholarly conclusion, which is professionally unacceptable.
- How are Adventist educators to teach the period in a fair and open-minded spirit, when the worst excesses were on the Catholic side?

Duty to Scholarship and Faith

This article has focused on 16th-century France but offers an example of how teachers can approach either the Reformation in other countries or other wars of religion. Accepting that there is good and ill on both sides does not mean a retreat into postmodernist relativism. The Huguenots strayed into violent and unchristian behavior themselves, but they did so in resisting Catholic violence, and in their enthusiasm to communicate to their fellow citizens a correct understanding of God's love for humanity.

Modern Western society gives offense to Muslims because of its crass materialism; Western political leaders often exercise power cynically, and with little regard, outside their own borders, for the freedoms they claim to hold dear. Neither of these shortcomings is the slightest justification for the murders of adults and children of various nations, races, and faiths. But they should make teachers and students alike think about how we, as Christian citizens, ought to act in the future.

In teaching the history of confessional disputes or conflicts, or in teaching the modern clash of faiths, it is our duty as teachers to make students aware when all sides are at fault; yet where one side is more responsible for violence than the other(s), it is also our duty as teachers to make that clear. But we shouldn't fear to point out the flaws of past generations of Protestants, or of our own present-day nations and societies, for, in so doing, we simply make students aware of the nature of fallen human beings. In that, we do justice to the demands both of scholarship and of our faith.



Ideas for Teaching the Wars of Religion

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- For college-level courses: the great Renaissance English playwright, Christopher Marlowe, wrote a play about the St. Bartholomew's Massacre, The Massacre at Paris. The great 19th-century French novelist, Alexandre Dumas, wrote a famous novel with the massacre and religious conflict at its center, *La Reine Margot* (sometimes published in translation under this title, sometimes as *Queen Margot*). For a particularly capable group of students, studying the historical evidence about the massacres along with these classic literary texts will be enriching and prompt reflection about the nature of historical evidence and of history itself.
- Use role-play: Divide the class into three groups. Assign one the part of 16th-century French Catholic nobles; the second, the part of ordinary Catholic citizens; and the third, the part of Huguenots. Have the students do background reading, then come to class ready to explain and to justify why their historical counterparts took the actions they did in massacres and violence. Students will start to see beyond their own preconceptions.

Link to Notes and References

<https://jae.adventist.org/2021.83.3.3>

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