

Sovereignty, Sediton, and Sacrament in the Affair of the Placards (1534–1535)

JULIA REED

Julia Reed is a Teaching Assistant in History of Science at Harvard University.

jmreed@fas.harvard.edu

18 October 1534 was a Sunday morning, and many Catholics in France on their way to Mass were confronted with a startling sight. Placards had been posted overnight in public places in Paris, Blois, Rouen, Orléans, and Tours – one was even posted outside the bedchamber of King Francis I (1494–1547) at the royal castle in Amboise – attacking the Mass as blasphemy and transubstantiation as the devil’s doctrine. The placards decried

the pompous and vainglorious Papal Mass by which the world is and will be totally ruined, lost, and desolated – unless God comes to our rescue – since in it our Lord is so outrageously blasphemed and the public misled and blinded. [...] In this wretched Mass, almost the whole population has been provoked into public idolatry [...] Those miserable sacrificers have in their frenzy taught that it shall no longer be bread or wine, but since they speak those great and miraculous words, by transubstantiation Jesus Christ is hidden beneath the appearance of the bread and wine, which is a diabolical doctrine, against all truth and contrary to Scripture.¹

1. *Articles veritables sur les horribles, grandz, et importables abus de la messe papalle, inventee directement contre la saincte cene de Jesus Christ*, Neuchâtel 1534. The pamphlet is reproduced in full in Gabrielle Berthoud et al. (eds.), *Aspects de la Propagande Religieuse*, Geneva 1957, 114–119. My translation.

This so-called “Affair of the Placards” figures prominently in histories of the Reformation in France. According to Donald Kelley, the affair was

a turning-point in the fortunes of French Protestantism, which from this time became a largely underground movement; it displayed the irreversible polarization of French society in painfully obvious terms and intensified it by provoking more extreme statements on both sides, ranging from Calvin’s *Institutes* [which Calvin began composing when he fled to Basel, after the placard affair] to Guillaume Budé’s *Transition from Hellenism to Christianity*, which defended the royal policy of persecution.²

Most importantly, according to Kelley, the affair doomed any future reconciliation between France and German Lutheranism. The diplomat Guillaume du Bellay (1491–1543) had been attempting to arrange a debate between Philipp Melancthon (1497–1560) and Sorbonne theologians in the presence of King Francis, but after the posting of the placards in October and a second posting the following January, the debate would never take place.³

Whatever the specific impact of the placards on the course of reform in France, however, the response to the attack on the Mass and the doctrine of the real presence of Christ’s body in the Eucharist expressed a particularly French anxiety about secular and sacred sovereignty. At the very least, official royal support for reformers ended after the posting of the placards and galvanized the administrative transfer of prosecutions of heresy from the ecclesiastical courts of the Roman Catholic Church to the *parlements*, the highest judicial appellate bodies in the French kingdom. The Edict of Fontainebleau in July 1540 declared that all royal officials could investigate charges of heresy, and prosecutions increased across France, peaking after the establishment of the special branch of the *parlement* of Paris dedicated to investigating and trying heresy, the “Burning Chamber” (*Chambre Ardente*), in October 1547.

Given the rich history of institutional, cultural, and theological expressions of the special role of France and French kings in Christian salvation history, the placards’ attack on the Eucharist struck at both ecclesiastical and

2. Donald Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology: Consciousness and Society in the French Reformation*, Cambridge 1981, 15–16.

3. Pierre Imbart de la Tour, *Les Origines de la réforme: 3. Évangélisme*, Paris 1914, 560–565, 577; Francis M. Higman, *Censorship and the Sorbonne: A Bibliographical Study of Books in French Censured by the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris, 1520–1551*, Geneva 1979, 33–34.

secular hierarchies, and, ultimately, threatened the political significance of eucharistic theology and ritual. Through an interpretation of the immediate responses to the placards, I argue that the strident and widely disseminated attacks on the Mass mobilized political consolidation around the seditious character of sacramentarian heresy in early modern France. Responses to the placards invoked the special role of the French monarchy in Christian salvation history as embodied in the sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist, fusing heresy and sedition as a crime against two sovereign bodies – the King’s and Christ’s.

The first section of this piece outlines the history of French legends and iconographies of the salvific role of Frankish kings since Clovis I (c. 466–511) and the unique status of the Roman Catholic Church in France – what is often referred to as the Gallic church or the Gallican independence of the French church and monarchy from Rome. I show how the history of the French understanding of salvific exceptionalism was expressed in the royal procession through Paris on 21 January 1535, after the second posting of the placards and the ban on new printing. I then turn to the significance and scope of the transfer of heresy prosecutions to the *parlements* by the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1540. Finally, I argue that the official published response to the placards by the Sorbonne theologian Jérôme de Hangest (c. 1480–1538) was addressed to a literate public at risk from the dangerously seditious and heretical propaganda disseminated by the placards. In this sense, the responses to the placards expressed a nationalist identification of the French nation – made up of a public under the protection of a divinely anointed monarch – with the state that protected the nation.

Gallican Corpus Christi

The response and aftermath of the placards must be situated at the intersection of two historical trends in early modern France: first, sixteenth-century expressions of the special role of France and French monarchs in Christian salvation history, and second, legal reforms in the Edict of Villers-Cotterets of 1539 that streamlined and standardized criminal procedures and promoted French as the legal language of the kingdom. I will return to the latter below in my discussion of the Edict of Fontainebleau and the transfer of heresy prosecutions to the *parlements*, in the context of the legacy of the Christian God’s special covenant with the dynasty of Frankish kings since Clovis.⁴ According to the ninth-century legend first popularized by Hincmar, the archbishop of Rheims (806–882), Clovis was crowned and

4. Christopher Elwood, *The Body Broken: The Calvinist Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in Sixteenth-Century France*, Oxford 1999, 18–26.

baptized alongside several thousand Franks in the cathedral of Rheims with chrism from an ampulla delivered to Saint Remigius (c. 437–533) by the Holy Spirit in the beak of a dove in the late fifth or early sixth century, invoking contemporaneous legends of Christ’s baptism by John the Baptist. Aiming to popularize Remigius’s cult and establish Rheims as the spiritual capital of the Frankish empire, Hincmar claimed to possess the same chrism and ampulla at the ceremony to coronate Charles the Bald (823–877) the king of Lotharingia in 869.⁵ Hincmar’s retelling of the legend of the coronation of Clovis combined the sacral kingship of France – baptism, anointing, and coronation – and its special covenant with God through the anointing of the monarch as the successor to the Kings of Israel. Remigius’s ampulla first appears in the record of the coronation of Louis VII (c. 1120–1180) in 1131, and, by the end of the thirteenth century, royal coronation and anointing were referred to as the “eighth” sacrament.⁶

The particular form of the French divine right of kings as embodied in the monarch, therefore, carried specific historical and sacerdotal meanings, namely that the nation was covenanted to the Christian God and that the sovereign’s body was the meeting point between the spiritual and temporal realms. While they were not official members of the clergy capable of administering the sacraments, French sacral monarchs occupied a liminal position between laypeople and the clergy, with specific healing powers of the royal touch for the king’s evil or scrofula (a type of tuberculosis infection thought to be cured by touching the king’s body) – a power conferred by the holy unction at coronation and traced back to Clovis, Philip I (1052–1108), or Louis IX (1214–1270). As Marc Bloch (1886–1944) has shown, royal healing rituals inspired popular devotion to the miracle-working powers of the king’s body between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries; as early as Guibert of Nogent’s (c. 1055–1124) *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus* (*On the Saints and their Relics*), royalist chronicles celebrated the power of the king’s touch. In Guibert’s account, there was popular demand for the healing touch of Louis

5. The first papal anointing of the French Roman Catholic king dated from a later ceremony in which Pope Stephen II (c. 714–757) recognized Pepin the Short (c. 714–768) in 754. On Hincmar’s promotion of the legend of Clovis’s baptism and the Holy Ampulla, see Edward Roberts, “Flodarard, the Till of St. Remigius and the See of Rheims in the Tenth Century”, *Early Medieval Europe* 22 (2014), 201–230, <https://doi.org/10.1111/emed.12053>; Colette Beaune, *The Birth of an Ideology: Myths and Symbols of Nation in Late-Medieval France*, Berkeley, CA 1991; Jacques Le Goff, “Reims, City of Coronation”, in Pierre Nora & Lawrence D. Kritzman (eds.), *Realms of Memory – The Construction of the French Past: 3. Symbols*, New York 1998, 199–200.

6. On the history of royal unction, see Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges: Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale*, Strasbourg 1924; Richard Jackson, *Vive le Roi: A History of the French Coronation from Charles V to Charles X*, Chapel Hill, NC 1984. On royal coronation as the eighth sacrament, see Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, 224–230.

VI (1081–1137), whose personal piety was said to enhance his miraculous abilities.⁷

The honorific of the “most Christian king” was routinely given by the papacy in correspondence with medieval monarchs, but it took on special national meaning in medieval France in the late thirteenth century during the conflict over appointments and taxation between Philip the Fair (1268–1314) and Pope Boniface VIII (c. 1230–1303). Philip’s councilor and keeper of the seals, Guillaume de Nogaret (c. 1260–1313), was the principal architect of a campaign to promote the French king as the defender of the faith and the divinely chosen protector of Christendom against a heretical pope. Juridical treatises, diplomatic correspondence, and popular sermons during the late thirteenth century frequently referred to France as the holiest Christian kingdom of God’s chosen people, protected by the most Christian king.⁸

Arguments for the Christian exceptionalism of the French kingdom, king, and people continued to spread in the fourteenth century during the Avignon papacy (1309–1376) and the Great Schism (1378–1417), with the Avignon and Roman popes each claiming papal supremacy. When Jean Gerson (1363–1429), a popular preacher and later the chancellor of the University of Paris, began delivering public sermons on ending the schism in the 1390s, he appealed to the special historical role of the French king to unify Christendom, armed by the Holy Spirit and chosen by God among all the temporal princes.⁹ Gerson was a member of the generation of patriotic royalists in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries during the reigns of Charles V (1338–1380) and Charles VI (1368–1422) who promoted the supernatural status of the monarch through legends as well as political arguments for royal supremacy. The *fleur-de-lis*, for example, had been incorporated into the official iconography of French kings, at least since Philip I. Later mid-fourteenth-century legends, however, connected its theological,

7. Guibertus de Novigento, *De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, in Robert B.C. Huygens (ed.), *Quo ordine sermo fieri debeat. De bucella iudae data et de veritate dominici corporis. De sanctis et eorum pigneribus*, Turnhout 1993; Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges*, 224–230. On Guibert’s text, see Caroline Walker Bynum, “Bodily Miracles and the Resurrection of the Body in the High Middle Ages”, in Thomas Kselman (ed.), *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*, Notre Dame, IN 1991, 68–106.

8. On Guillaume de Nogaret, see Julien Théry-Astruc, “The Pioneer of Royal Theocracy: Guillaume de Nogaret and the Conflicts between Philip the Fair and the Papacy”, in William Chester Jordan & Jenna Rebecca Phillips (eds.), *The Capetian Century, 1214–1314*, Turnhout 2017, 219–259, <https://doi.org/10.1484/M.CELAMA-EB.5.112974>. On medieval France as the Holy Land, see Joseph R. Strayer, “France: The Holy Land, the Chosen People, and the Most Christian King”, in Theodore K. Rabb & Jerrold E. Seigel (eds.), *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of E.H. Harbison*, Princeton, NJ 1969, 3–16, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400876068-001>.

9. Jean Gerson, *Opera omnia*, Antwerp 1706. On Gerson’s role in the schism, see Brian Patrick McGuire, *Jean Gerson and the Last Medieval Reformation*, University Park, PA 2010.

heraldic, and historical meanings – respectively, as a symbol of the Holy Trinity and the Virgin Mother, its singular use by French royalty, and the accounts of its miraculous origins on Clovis’s shield before his baptism and coronation, on the banner of St. Denis (as in Gerson’s account), or delivered by an angel to Charlemagne (747–814) – as a polysemous symbol of French sacral kingship.¹⁰

By the early fifteenth century, the title of “most Christian king” was claimed by French royalists as the special designation of a divine right given directly to French monarchs that circumvented papal primacy. In the aftermath of the Avignon papacy and the Great Schism, the conciliar movement in the fifteenth century supported various interpretations of Gallicanism, or the informal independence of the French church and the French monarchy from Rome. The conciliar promotion of the precedence of church councils as a check to papal power underscored both monarchical independence and clerical claims of “Gallican liberties” – namely, the sovereignty of the French monarch from papal temporal jurisdiction and the right of the French church to elect its bishops and be exempt from papal taxation. The Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges (1438), issued by Charles VII (1403–1461), declared the supremacy of a decennial council over the pope and limited the pope’s temporal jurisdiction, including requiring royal permission for the circulation of papal bulls. During the reign of Francis I, however, and approximately eighteen years before the posting of the placards, the Concordat of Bologna (1516) renegotiated the balance of power between the pope, the French monarch, and the Gallic church. Francis and Pope Leo X (1475–1521) agreed to let the monarch nominate ecclesiastical appointments and tithe clergy, while the papacy retained the right to collect annates (the first year’s revenue of a benefice), and to be the supreme governor of the church above any ecumenical council.¹¹

The body of the French king thus carried a specific significance as the implied target of the sacramentarian arguments of the placards. In the influential terms of Ernst Kantorowicz’s (1895–1963) study of medieval political theology, by the early sixteenth century, the French monarch had one body rather than the English monarch’s two bodies – for the English monarch, a natural body (*corpus naturale*) that lived and died differed from the political body tied to the king’s office and sovereign authority.¹² More precisely, the

10. See Beaune, *The Birth of an Ideology*, 201–225; Jean-Bernard Cahours d’Asprey, *Des fleurs de lis et des armes de France: Légendes, histoire et symbolisme*, Biarritz 1998.

11. On the Concordat, see Jules Thomas, *Le concordat de 1516: Ses origines, son histoire au XVIe siècle*, Paris 1910; Jotham Parsons, *The Church in the Republic: Gallicanism and Political Ideology in Renaissance France*, Washington, DC 2004, 32–38.

12. Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*,

French monarch's body was a *corpus naturale* that defended the body politic of a shared territorial fatherland, which Kantorowicz argued was a secularization of the *corpus mysticum* – the body of Christ as the body politic of the Church (as opposed to the earlier meaning of the body of Christ in the Eucharistic sense, as the sacrament of the altar). After the eleventh-century debates about the real presence of Christ's body in the Eucharist, official Church doctrine stressed and codified the Eucharist as Christ's true body, the *corpus verum*, *corpus naturale*, or *corpus Christi*, canonizing the doctrine of the transubstantiation of the substance of the bread and wine into the substance of Christ's body and blood in the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. In the mid-thirteenth century, the feast of Corpus Christi to honour the real presence of Christ in the sacrament was established in Liège and officially instituted by the Church in 1264. According to Kantorowicz, the late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century conflicts between Philip the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII further transformed the meaning of the *corpus mysticum* into the social corporation headed by Christ, as distinct from the individual *corpus Christi* revered in the sacrament, and as having a secular counterpart, the *corpus mysticum* of the fatherland (*patria*) or kingdom:

Whereas the *corpus verum*, through the agency of the dogma of transubstantiation and the institution of the feast of *Corpus Christi*, developed a life and a mysticism of its own, the *corpus mysticum* proper came to be less and less mystical as time passed on, and came to mean simply the Church as a body politic or, by transference, any body politic of the secular world.¹³

In France in particular, Guillaume de Nogaret's campaign against the papacy and the Knights Templar appealed to the *patria* of France, to which all French people belonged with the monarch as its head. The secular *corpus mysticum* of the fatherland, in other words, defined members of the Gallic *patria* as a temporal polity protected by, and serving, the monarch as their sovereign head. For Kantorowicz, this was a sociopolitical development that supported the political theology of the emergent French nation in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, composed of the three estates of the clergy, nobility, and peasantry under the sovereign protection of the king.¹⁴

Kantorowicz's arguments have been widely discussed and critiqued; assessing his historical account of the emergence of a secular Gallic

Princeton, NJ 1957, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400880782>.

13. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 206.

14. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 218, 259.

corpus mysticum is beyond the scope of my argument here. For my purposes, Kantorowicz's distinctions between Eucharistic, individual, and corporate bodies (both spiritual and secular) help define the key elements of the political theology expressed in the response to the placards. Scholarly studies of medieval and early modern Gallicanism, such as those by Tyler Lange and Alain Tallon, have argued that the political, social, and cultural commitments to royal and ecclesiastical independence were significant barriers to Protestant reform in France.¹⁵ According to Lange, earlier supporters of the conciliar movement allied with the royalist anti-papal camp in a "first" French reformation that developed "two modalities of royal power, the king's defense of [Christian] orthodoxy, and the embodiment of the polity in his human body" that effectively prevented a "second" Protestant reformation.¹⁶ Tallon has also emphasized Gallican exceptionalism as the bulwark against Protestant reform, but specifically as a "counter" identity that distinguished royalist, ecclesiastical, or juridical autonomy at different times in the service of France's special role as the nation and people chosen to safeguard the purity of the Christian faith.¹⁷ As Lange has argued concerning the distinction between the bodies of the French and English kings, by the early sixteenth century, "the king of England, body natural, could be opposed to the king of England, body politic, [while] in France the inescapably unitary, simple royal person could only either incarnate or be opposed to the nation".¹⁸ The sacramentarian arguments against the Mass were, in this sense, at once threats to the secular *corpus mysticum*, the king as its head and incarnation of the state, and to the veneration of the sacrament as the foundational ritual of both the sacred and secular bodies politic. The king's individual natural body (*corpus naturale*), in other words, both embodied and defended the *corpus mysticum* of the state and the *corpus verum* of the Eucharist.

These relationships were embodied in the massive royal procession, Mass, and burning of heretics on 21 January 1535 in response to the placards, which had been posted in Paris for a second time on 15 January.¹⁹ The

15. Tyler Lange, *The First French Reformation: Church Reform and the Origins of the Old Regime*, Cambridge 2014; Alain Tallon, *Conscience nationale et sentiment religieux en France au XVI^e siècle: Essai sur la vision gallicane du monde*, Paris 2002.

16. Lange, *The First French Reformation*, 111.

17. Tallon, *Conscience nationale*, 19–20. See also Alain Tallon, "Gallicanism and Religious Pluralism in Sixteenth-Century France", in Keith Cameron, Mark Greengrass & Penny Roberts (eds.), *The Adventure of Religious Pluralism in Early Modern France: Papers from the Exeter Conference, April 1999*, Berne 2000, 15–30.

18. Tyler Lange, "Constitutional Thought and Practice in Early Sixteenth-Century France: Revisiting the Legacy of Ernst Kantorowicz", *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 42 (2011), 1022.

19. For contemporary chronicles recounting the procession, see Théodore Godefroy & Denys Godefroy, *Le ceremonial françois*, vol. 2, Paris 1649, 934–935; Georges Guiffrey, *Chronique du Roy François premier de ce nom*, Paris 1860, 113–130; *Procession generale faict à*

procession began in the Church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, named for Saint Germanus, whose tomb was the legendary site of the conversion of Clovis and his wife, Clotilde (c. 474–548). Contemporary chronicles and correspondence described overfull streets, closed shops, and people hanging out of windows and off balconies; around seven in the morning, the different parishes and religious orders of the city brought their relics to Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois for the procession. The relics of Saint-Chapelle, including the crown of thorns, fragments of the True Cross, the Holy Lance, and drops of Christ's blood, were carried in front of representatives of the Sorbonne and French cardinals. Swiss guards played a Eucharistic hymn by Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), "Pange lingua gloriosi corporis mysterium", and behind the clerical representatives the bishop of Paris, Jean Du Bellay (1492–1560), carried the Eucharist in a gold monstrance, covered by a canopy adorned with *fleur-de-lis* carried by the king's sons. At the rear of the procession behind the canopy, King Francis walked in a black robe and bareheaded. Small altars were placed along the streets, where the king would kneel and adore the Eucharist, prompting public weeping and prayer. On the Pont Notre-Dame, banners and tapestries depicted the divine gift of the *fleur-de-lis* to France and the salvific exceptionalism of France above other Christian kingdoms, as well as Eucharistic miracles (such as bleeding hosts) and prayers for the protection of the Eucharist from God's enemies. The procession ended at Notre Dame, where Du Bellay conducted Mass and decried the heretics threatening the holiest Christian kingdom. In the evening, six heretics were executed in the Rue St. Honoré and at the Paris market to mark the end of the ceremony.

One of the most elaborate and chronicled events in sixteenth-century France, the procession incorporated elements of royal processions and Corpus Christi festivals, the latter of which would have been familiar to the population of Paris since the late thirteenth century as extravagant communal rituals of public Eucharistic devotion. Barbara B. Diefendorf has suggested that the procession was most likely the first in France to make use of the Eucharistic monstrance outside of Corpus Christi celebrations.²⁰ The centrality of the Eucharist – the elaborate organization of the secular and ecclesiastical authorities around it, as well as local and royal relics preceding it – marked the special role of the French state and Gallic church in safeguarding Eucharistic orthodoxy, with the most Christian French king as the most pious and fiercest defender of the faith. The Eucharist was positioned in the procession as Christ's true and natural body, protected and

Paris, le Roy estant en personne: Le XXii jour de Janvier. Mille cinq centz trente et cinq, Paris 1535.

20. Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris*, Oxford 1991, 46.

adored by the king, whose own body was both natural and the embodiment of the Gallic body politic as the holiest Christian kingdom. According to Christopher Elwood, the procession thus expressed the profound sacramental and political character of the French state and sovereign:

An attack upon the holy sacrament, according to the logic of the symbolism employed in the procession, presents a direct threat to the sacral character of the community, to the nation's well-being, and hence amounts to an oblique attack on the person of the sovereign. Given the close association established between the sacrament and the monarch, it is no wonder that those implicated in the affair of the placards were regarded as being guilty not only of heresy but also of *lèse-majesté*.²¹

At the palace of the bishop of Paris following the Mass, King Francis proclaimed the threat to the secular *corpus mysticum* a Eucharistic heresy: just as he would sacrifice his arm or his children if they were afflicted with a fatal disease, so too was his kingdom at risk of the disease of heresy and needed secular and ecclesiastical coordination to expel it.

***Lèse-majesté* and Seditious Heresy**

The crime of “treason” in late medieval France evolved both from the Germanic tradition of *treubruch*, which largely concerned the betrayal of feudal obligations of vassals to lords, and the Roman tradition of *maiestas*, which punished those who injured people invested with public authority.²² In the literary tradition of *chansons de geste* – accounts of heroic deeds – cognates of “traitor” and “treason” described false knights who betrayed their temporal lords and heretics who betrayed their eternal Lord. The Roman tradition of *laesa maiestatis*, codified in the *lex Julia maiestatis* and in the *lex Quisquis* from the Justinian legal code, by contrast, referred to crimes against public security.

By the mid-thirteenth century, these two traditions of treason – one against a feudal lord and the other against the public – came together in laws against injuring the sovereign. Philip IV (1268–1314) and Guillaume de Nogaret made frequent use of *lèse-majesté* as treason against the king and kingdom to consolidate royal power. When Nogaret accused Bernard

21. Elwood, *The Body Broken*, 30.

22. On treason in medieval France, see Simon H. Cuttler, *The Law of Treason and Treason Trials in Later Medieval France*, Cambridge 1981, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511562396>. On the Germanic and Roman traditions of defining and punishing treason, see Floyd Seyward Lear, *Treason in Roman and Germanic Law: Collected Papers*, Austin, TX 1965, <https://doi.org/10.7560/734135>.

Saisset (c. 1232–c. 1314), the bishop of Pamiers, of heresy, for example, Nogaret declared the right of the French king to replace the pope when necessary, citing the papal definition of heresy from Innocent III's (c. 1160–1216) decretal letter *Vergentis in senium* (1199) as high treason against God, which had provided the legal basis for punishments of death and the confiscation of property against accused heretics.²³ Attempting to justify the charge of heresy against the bishop to Pope Boniface VIII, Nogaret defined heresy as treason against both the sacred majesty of the church and the temporal majesty of the king; more importantly, given the special role of the French king as a defender of the faith, heresy was also an injury to the king himself, and thus both a spiritual and temporal crime.

From the early fourteenth century onward, heresy was often defined in French legal texts as the union of injury to the human and divine sovereigns, but it was not until the Edict of Fontainebleau in 1540 that secular courts were charged with prosecuting heresy. The year before, the Edict of Villers-Cotterets had enacted comprehensive reform to centralize and streamline judicial and administrative procedures. Critiquing Latin as obscure and elitist, two articles of the edict declared that all legal documents – registers, contracts, commissions, sentences, and wills, most importantly – be written in the “French mother tongue [*en langage maternel françois*]”.²⁴ The ordinances also shortened judicial procedures to avoid delayed and lengthy trials: local prosecutors and judges were ordered to arrest suspected criminals swiftly, and those who were indicted were immediately imprisoned. During criminal trials, moreover, defendants were not allowed counsel or any assistance in answering the charges against them.²⁵ With the prosecutorial reforms the year before, the Edict of Fontainebleau was issued when the number of criminal cases in French royal courts was increasing – according to William Monter's careful study of court archives, within twenty years the *parlements* were hearing two or three times the number of

23. On the decretal letter, see Walter Ullman, “The Significance of Innocent III's Decretal *Vergentis*”, in *Études d'histoire du droit canonique dédiées à Gabriel Le Bras*, vol. 1, Paris 1965, 729–742. On Philip IV, see Clément de Vasselot de Régné, “Un succès méconnu des derniers Capétiens: L'annexion des domaines des Lusignan et l'usage du concept de lèse-majesté (1308–1327)”, *Revue historique* 2019/4, 833–858, <https://doi.org/10.3917/rhis.194.0833>; Julien Théry, “A Heresy of State: Philip the Fair, the Trial of the ‘Perfidious Templars’, and the Pontification of the French Monarchy”, *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures* 39 (2013), 117–148, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jmedirelicult.39.2.0117>.

24. For the language of the Edict, see Isambert, Decrusy & Armet, *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises, depuis l'an 420 jusqu'à l'an Révolution de 1789*, vol. 12, Paris 1828, 676–683.

25. Arlette Lebigre, *La justice du roi: La vie judiciaire dans l'ancienne France*, Paris 1995, 180–200.

cases they had heard before 1540 – and the criminal justice system was being reorganized to expedite prosecutions.²⁶

The language of the Edict itself defined heresy as a treason against God and the king, sedition against the people of the kingdom, and a disturbance of public order. The ten articles of the Edict ordered that all “Lutherans” and “sacramentarians” be prosecuted before all other crimes, that prosecutions should be conducted against both laity and clerics, and that the *parlements* should determine whether the trial should be transferred to an ecclesiastical court. Most importantly, the edict defined heresy as a crime of “both divine and human *lèse-majesté*, sedition against the people, and disturbance of the state and public peace [*en soy crime de lèze majesté divine et humaine, sédition du peuple, et perturbation de nostre estat et repos publique*]”. This was not, crucially, the reduction of heresy to sedition, administratively speaking, but the expansion of the secular judiciary apparatus to prosecute heresy as the crime which posed the greatest threat to the sovereign, state, and public. All subjects of the kingdom, both secular and ecclesiastical, the edict declared, were enjoined to report suspected Lutherans and sacramentarians to criminal authorities, just as “everyone must run to put out a public fire [*comme un chacun doit courir à esteindre un feu publique*]”.²⁷

The Edict does not explicitly mention the attacks against the Mass, however, nor Eucharistic heresies specifically. In fact, Eucharistic heresy does not seem to have been overrepresented in the prosecutions after 1534, when the placards were posted, or after the secular courts began prosecuting heretics in 1540. Yet as Monter has documented, “sacramentarian” was the most persecuted kind of heresy in the seven months after the posting of the placards and through 1541, and the term “sacramentarian” (*sacramentaire*) and sacramentarian arguments were associated with the publications by Pierre de Vingle’s (1495–1536) newly established press in the Swiss city of Neûchatel.²⁸

The Placards and the Reading Public

Thanks to a well-coordinated effort across a secret network of French reformers, the placards had been printed in Neûchatel by Vingle’s press – the publisher of the first French Bible translated from Hebrew and Greek, the Olivétan Bible, less than one year later – and smuggled into France

26. William Monter, *Judging the French Reformation: Heresy Trials by Sixteenth-Century Parlements*, Cambridge, MA 1999, 23.

27. Isambert, Decrusy & Armet, *Recueil général des anciennes lois françaises*, 680.

28. Monter, *Judging the French Reformation*, 69; Elwood, *The Body Broken*, 181, n. 25; David J. Nicholls, “The Nature of Popular Heresy in France, 1520–1542”, *The Historical Journal* 26 (1983), 271, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00024067>.

by allies of their anonymous author Antoine Marcourt (c. 1490–1561), the Reform pastor in Neûchatel and a follower of Huldrych Zwingli's (1484–1531) Eucharistic theology. Neûchatel had legally adopted Reform Christianity four years earlier under the influence of the evangelist and reformer Guillaume Farel (1489–1565); Marcourt, Farel's successor as pastor, authored works attacking the clergy and the Eucharist, including the first edition of his influential *Livre des marchans* (1533), a sharp satire of Roman Catholic clergy as deceitful middlemen peddling spiritual goods they had no right to sell, and ending with attacks on the Mass similar to what would appear the next year in the placards, and only four years after the Marburg Colloquy where Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Zwingli failed to come to an agreement about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.²⁹

Marcourt's placards were among a number of publications from Vingle's press, including *Livre des marchans* and the 1534 publication expanding on the sacramentarian arguments in the placards, *Petit traicte tres utile et salutaire de la sainte eucharistie de nostre Seigneur Jesuschrist* (A small useful and beneficial treatise on the holy eucharist of our Lord Jesus Christ), that were addressed to a vernacular and popular audience, and which mobilized official anxiety about public Eucharistic discourse. Although vernacular religious literature was by no means novel in the 1530s – French readers would have had access to a variety of broadsheets, portable Lutheran catechisms, devotional manuals, and vernacular Bibles from printers in Paris, Basel, and Antwerp, for example – the publications from Vingle's press were uniformly critical of the papacy, clergy, and Mass.³⁰ The well-organized dissemination of the placards, and their strident and polemical arguments attacking the Eucharist in broad terms, indicated their intended audience of a literate French public. As Torrance Kirby has observed, the placards were thus a decisive event in the history of Christian reformation in France and in the development of a public audience for theological arguments:

By calling for radical religious reform through an open appeal to popular judgment, Marcourt played a key role in precipitating a controversy that was to alter decisively (and perhaps irrevocably) the Reformation in France, and serves to highlight the emergence in the early modern period of a new and popular sense of “public” over against a much

29. Genviève Gross (ed.), *Le Livre des Marchans d'Antoine Marcourt: Une satire anticléricale au service de la Réforme*, Paris 2016. On Marcourt, see Gabrielle Berthoud, *Antoine Marcourt, réformateur et pamphlétaire du “Livre des Marchans” aux placards de 1534*, Geneva 1973.

30. Elwood, *The Body Broken*, 31.

older and hieratic sense embodied in the institutions of monarch and church.³¹

The placards not only inveighed against the Eucharist but characterized the Mass as a communal ritual of public idolatry. Indeed, the language of the placards was addressed to the deceived and deluded public. Imperiled by the human (and thus carnal) invention of the Mass, readers of the placards were exhorted to public professions of faith in Jesus Christ and the word of Scripture “in confidence of their salvation”.³²

The official written responses to the placards indicated an awareness of the public audience of the sacramentarian arguments and the threat those arguments posed to the French sovereign, state, and church. The Sorbonne chose the theologian Jérôme de Hangest to respond to the placards in print. Hangest published two responses directly after the placards were posted in October, one in Latin for a university audience, and one in French for a popular audience.³³ His Latin treatise, *De Christifera Eucharistia adversus nugiferos symbolistas* (The Christian Eucharist against the cowardly symbolizers; 1534), is an academic response to the theological arguments of the placards and engages with the more technical debates concerning sacramental signs and real presence. His French treatise, *Contre les tenebrions lumiere évangélique* (Evangelical light against the spirits of darkness; 1534), by contrast, is a point-by-point refutation of each claim in the placards – that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was a unique event that cannot be re-enacted in the Mass ritual, that transubstantiation is not found in Scripture, and that the body of Christ can only be in one place in heaven.

Most importantly, in his French treatise, Hangest describes the threat of heretical and false doctrines that deny transubstantiation and real presence as well as the sacrificial nature of the Mass as spreading through the public like an army of darkness or latent poison. This army was led by their

31. Torrance Kirby, “Emerging Publics of Religious Reform in the 1530s: The Affair of the Placards and the Publication of Antoine de Marcourt’s *Livre des Marchans*”, in Bronwen Wilson & Paul Yachnin (eds.), *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*, New York 2009, 38, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203861356>. See also Antónia Szabari, *Less Rightly Said: Scandals and Readers in Sixteenth-Century France*, Redwood City, CA 2009; Georges Farid, “La violence verbale entre catholiques et protestants au XVI^e siècle”, *Voix plurielles* 3:2 (2006), 2–13, <https://doi.org/10.26522/vp.v3i2.507>.

32. Berthoud et al. (eds.), *Aspects de la Propagande Religieuse*, 116.

33. Jérôme de Hangest, *De Christifera Eucharistia adversus nugiferos symbolistas*, Paris 1534; Jérôme de Hangest, *Contre les tenebrions lumiere évangélique*, 2nd ed., Paris 1535. The first edition of the latter text was published in late 1534, and a second and expanded edition in 1535, presumably right after the second posting of the placards in January. All citations are from the second edition published in 1535. See Francis Higman, *Lire et découvrir: La circulation des idées au temps de la Réforme*, Geneva 1998, 515–530.

captain, the devil himself, the cause of sedition and destruction of the Christian kingdom of France.³⁴ The text is composed almost as a mirrored response for an audience presumed to have read the placards: Marcourt's attacks on the "horrible, great, and intolerable abuses of the Papal Mass" are met with Hangest's attacks on the "detestable, harmful, and blasphemous posters" spreading the poison of heresy to a vulnerable readership. Hangest's awkward, Latinized French suggests he wrote the treatise in Latin first and then translated it, leaving in a number of Latin quotations from the Vulgate to defend the Scriptural basis of transubstantiation and real presence.

The text is meant for a French speaker who may know some Latin, or is at least familiar with certain key phrases from the Gospels and the Pauline epistles (though Hangest often, but not always, translates the Vulgate Latin into French). The somewhat cumbersome and prolix style hints at the author's familiarity with longer and more technical genres of academic disputation that he is adapting and attempting to condense for readers more likely to be persuaded by hyperbole, humor, and invective. Yet Hangest spends considerable time emphasizing how any elementary reader of the Gospels and Paul would easily understand the plain meaning of the Eucharistic words of institution to mean the transubstantiation of the consecrated bread and wine into Christ's body and blood; the placards aimed to seduce faithful readers away from the obvious and accepted descriptions of the Last Supper in Scripture.³⁵ The task of drawing out the poison or putting out the fire of heresy thus becomes a communal task for each reader of Hangest's response to the placards: resisting the sacramentarian arguments of the placards becomes at least in part a responsibility of the French reader invested in the national health of France. The "public fire" of heresy, in other words, threatens the holy French nation and is extinguished by the cooperation of the public with the state apparatus to prosecute seditious heresy.

Conclusion

Despite the specific steps taken in the immediate aftermath of the placards, the five years after their first posting did not see as significant and sudden a shift towards repression and the impossibility of reform as has often been claimed. While the next four months saw an increase in prosecutions for heresy, the Edict of Coucy the following July suspended all proceedings against suspected heretics if they made a public renunciation, and, despite the ban on new printing in January 1535 after the second posting, no

34. Hangest, *Contre les tenebrions*.

35. Hangest, *Contre les tenebrions*, Fo.xiiii.

significant action seems to have been taken against specific printers or booksellers. Moreover, sympathizers with humanist reform such as Gérard Roussel (1500–1555) and Jean Du Bellay gained power and prominence in the French church in the aftermath of the placards.³⁶ According to Francis Higman (1935–2015), Christian reform in sixteenth-century France before the outbreak of the Wars of Religion in 1562 saw the development of two Protestantisms – the anti-clerical sacramentarianism expressed in the placards and a moderate Lutheran humanism associated with the circle of Meaux, led by Guillaume Briçonnet (c. 1472–1534) and the theologian Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples (c. 1450–1536), the latter of which enjoyed royal support from the king's sister, Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549). The affair of the placards forced sharper distinctions between the radical and moderate positions, and Higman suggests that one of the placards' aims was to undermine moderate efforts by yoking the Lutheran humanists to a sacramentarian critique of the mass. The specific attack on the mass as the central ritual of the Gallic church, state, and society, however – a national ritual of one faith, one law, and one king – was the precise form of seditious heresy to threaten the early modern French nation-state. ▲

SUMMARY

In October 1534 and January 1535, placards were posted in French cities attacking the Mass, prompting official backlash and altering the course of the Christian Reformations in France. This paper argues that the response to the posting of the placards expressed a specifically Gallic anxiety about the popularization of sacramentarian critiques of the Mass and the Eucharist. France's history of sacral kingship and Gallican independence from the papacy were the key contexts and causes of the official response to the posting of the placards, which affirmed the importance of Eucharistic devotion in the political theology of early modern France and transferred heresy prosecutions to secular courts. Focusing on three key responses – the royal processional in January 1535, the empowering of secular courts to prosecute "seditious" heresy, and the defense of the Mass by the Sorbonne theologian Jérôme de Hangest, I argue that the responses to the posting of the placards reflected an understanding and fear of popular receptions of sacramentarian arguments and the threat they posed to the political, social, and institutional cohesion of the early modern French nation-state. The placards both reflected and mobilized a nationalist identification of a sacred and secular nation with the state headed by the monarch charged with protecting the nation.

36. Higman, *Censorship and the Sorbonne*, 33–34. See also Higman, *Lire et décourvir*.