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DISCOURSE
and the
CONSTRUCTION
of SOCIETY

Comparative Studies of
Myth, Ritual, and Classification

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*Festivals and Massacres:
Reflections on St. Bartholomew's Day*

Ritual and the Deconstruction of Social Forms

As has been long recognized, any society, even the smallest, is a complex amalgam of multiple subunits—clans, lineages, socioeconomic classes, political factions, age groups, genders, and so on that are only imperfectly bonded together to form the total social unit. Such integration, which is necessary for the smooth and harmonious functioning of society, is regularly sought and accomplished through numerous overlapping systems and mechanisms—among them law, pedagogy, etiquette, aesthetics, and ideology, particularly religious ideology. It is, in fact, the particular competence of religion for achieving broad social integration that led Durkheim to consecrate his masterpiece, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, to the study of religion, and the Durkheimian tradition—which has been so influential in sociological, anthropological, and historical scholarship—has enriched our understanding of the means whereby religion powerfully promotes social cohesion and sentiments of common belonging.¹

Among the many aspects of religion that promote social integration perhaps none is more powerful and important than ritual, although it must be noted that not all ritual is necessarily religious.² It should immediately be stressed, however, that for all its power and efficacy, ritual is never able either to eradicate cleavages or to resolve tensions between groups in competition for scarce resources of a material and nonmaterial nature. Rather, what ritual is competent to do—as Max Gluckman rightly observed—is to “cloak the fundamental conflicts,”³ thereby permitting groups and individuals to forget them for a time (or at least to take them less seriously) so that some temporary measure of good will, common spirit, and stability may emerge.

There now exists a splendid tradition of studies demonstrating how rituals of one sort and another “cloak” the issues that might otherwise force cleavages between subunits to erupt. But what has been given considerably less thorough attention are ritualistic responses to situations of crisis when the normal techniques of integration and social maintenance are inadequate

to their weighty task: What happens when the tensions between competing groups cannot be controlled by ritual means?

One work in which this important topic was addressed is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's justly celebrated *Carnival in Romans*, in which he describes how growing friction and resentment between the lower social orders (chiefly artisans and peasants) and their traditional superiors (*notables* and *bourgeoisie*) in a small city of Dauphiné came to a head during carnival week of 1580.⁴ The setting was an appropriate one, for carnival is normally a time of "ritual rebellion" (in Gluckman's sense), where norms and hierarchies temporarily dissolve in symbolic inversions, moral license, and generalized antistructure, only to be reestablished when carnival is over.⁵ But in this year, the disorder threatened to spill beyond its accustomed limits, as the lower classes staged ever-more aggressive shows of force, all within the ritual discourse of masquerades, processions, and dances, through which they voiced and enacted their determination to force a permanent reordering of power and privilege within the city. Acutely sensitive to this threat, the upper orders responded with a premeditated and brutal massacre of the popular party on Mardi Gras Day. That is, when the ritual appeared capable of reconstructing society along lines different from its traditional hierarchic order, extreme measures were employed by those who were determined that this should not transpire. In place of the normal ritual celebration, we find agitation followed by massacre.

Within the Carnival of Romans is revealed the simple fact, more apparent to Marxists than to Durkheimians, that social integration benefits some segments of society considerably more than others and is always won at the expense of the lower orders. Ladurie's data further make plain that where ritual and other forms of discourse fail to effect integration, coercion may quickly follow. But let us move to another example, separated from Ladurie's by only eight years: the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, the single most dramatic event of the French Wars of Religion.⁶

Background to a Massacre

As with any such incident, one must begin by considering the nature of the total social aggregate and the chief cleavages within it. Here, as is often the case, what appears simple at first, proves more complex on closer study. Although the struggle that rent France during the latter half of the sixteenth century is conventionally called the Wars of Religion, more was at issue than a straightforward confrontation of Catholics and Huguenots. To be sure, religious differences were of tremendous importance to both parties, but other factors also figured prominently.⁷

To begin, the Huguenot/Catholic cleavage had an important socioeconomic dimension to it, Protestants in general being more urban and more prosperous than Catholics, although such data that are available do not permit any precise measurement of these differences. Of particular note is

the concentration of Huguenots in certain sectors of the legal and financial professions, at the master level within the artisanry, and in such prestigious trades as goldsmithing, jewelry, and printing.⁸ Moreover, the Huguenot party met with considerable success in converting a large section of the upper class (the *notables*) and other *notables* still were quite sympathetic to their cause without actively committing themselves to it.⁹

Geographic distributions were also significant. Protestants enjoyed numerical superiority only in the center-west of France and in the south—Languedoc, Dauphiné, Provence, Béarn, and the Garonne valley—Catholics predominated elsewhere. Significant Protestant communities existed in Paris, Rouen, Orléans, Lyon, and Meaux where, however, they were surrounded by a hostile Catholic majority. A difference in political ideology also became apparent in the years after St. Bartholomew's, for as Michael Walzer has shown, such prominent Huguenot authors as Francis Hotman, Theodore Beza, and Philip de Mornay at that time and partly in consequence of the St. Bartholomew's events, sought to establish a set of justifications for resistance to royal authority.¹⁰

Finally, the cleavage found expression in contrasting cultural styles: *différences des mœurs*. The sobriety, zeal, and fervor of the Protestants effectively constituted a direct challenge to the traditional values and behaviors of the more relaxed, self-indulgent Catholics, and the Protestants' general demeanor, as well as many of their distinctive practices were taken as an affront by their adversaries in this conflict of cultural styles. Janine Estèbe describes this situation vividly:

The daily habits of the Huguenot were not those of a Catholic: the Huguenot did not fast, neither on Friday nor during Lent, and on these days the aroma of roasts which issued from Calvinist kitchens was as the stench of a funeral pyre. In their clothing and their external demeanor, the Protestants affected a great austerity: somber and decent clothes, and neither vertiginous décolletage nor flowing dresses for the women. Again the Calvinists voluntarily cut themselves off from the popular milieu by not participating in the usual pastimes: they did not frequent the cabarets, play cards or dice, and above all they did not dance. And dance in the 16th century was the diversion *par excellence*.¹¹

Religious differences were thus compounded by differences in income level, social standing, geographic distribution, political orientation as well as in patterns of dress, demeanor, and recreation. These last considerations, far from being the least important aspects of the cleavage, were extremely weighty, for through such *différences des mœurs*, the Huguenots estranged themselves from the rest of French society. To quote Estèbe again, "The Protestants had put themselves, by their religious choice on the margin of the urban or village community whose rites, feasts, and games they no longer accepted. . . . [They] were already outside traditional society, even though they continued to share its language and its conditions of life."¹² As with the Swaziland Protectorate, at issue is the question of whether there

was one (somewhat fragile) society having two segments or two societies co-existing uneasily under the cover of a superficial integration. But it is senseless to consider this in purely synchronic fashion: Over the course of several decades, the first state of affairs degenerated into the second, and St. Bartholomew's is an important turning point in this process.¹³

In the years leading up to St. Bartholomew's, violence mounted throughout France.¹⁴ Between 1562 and 1570, three wars of religion were fought in which many Catholics understood themselves to be defending not only their religion, but their traditional way of life against the threat posed by the Huguenots (April 1562–March 1563, September 1567–March 1568, and August 1568–August 1570). Each war was inconclusive, with neither side being able to force the other into submission. In the last of these conflicts, despite significant victories won by the Catholics under the duc d'Anjou at Jarnac (13 March 1569) and Moncontour (3 October 1569), the Protestants successfully regrouped, and the Edict of Saint-Germain (signed 8 August 1570) brought the war to an end on terms considered by Catholics to be extremely generous.

What the young king Charles IX sought in this treaty—his policy here, as elsewhere, being guided by his mother (and former regent) Catherine de Medici—was a reconciliation of Catholic and Protestant France under the auspices and to the ultimate benefit of the royal family, whose power had been considerably eroded by the recurrent civil wars. This treaty was only part of a much broader set of compromises, in which the Catholics agreed to greater tolerance toward the Huguenots and accepted the elevation of their chief leader, Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, to a position as senior advisor at court. Foreign policy as envisioned by Coligny—and inconsistently implemented by the king—had as its chief features alliance with (Protestant) England, support for the (Calvinist) rebels in the Netherlands, and ultimately war with (Catholic) Spain: the goal being to unite all France in a war against an encircling power and traditional rival. Protestants, for their part, agreed to a royal wedding, in which the cleavage within the nation would find symbolic redress in the union to be consummated between the foremost Huguenot prince, Henri de Navarre (later Henri IV), and the king's own sister, Marguerite de Valois.

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One by one, the elements of this policy encountered difficulties. First, Catholics were not reconciled to Protestants, but they resented the favorable treatment accorded to the latter under the Edict of Saint-Germain, feeling that what the heretics could not win in war had been granted in an incomprehensible peace. Second, diplomatic and military reverses, particularly Spanish victories against the Turks at Lepanto (7 October 1571) and against the rebels in the Netherlands at Mons (17 July 1572), rendered Coligny's foreign policy much less feasible, but rather than reformulate it he clung to his plans more tenaciously than ever, threatening that if there were not war with Spain there would be war at home. Such a stance brought him ever more into conflict with Catherine de Medici, with whom he wrestled for the king's favor. Although it is easy to personalize this last struggle (as historians have often done), it is

something of a fallacy to do so: the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, for this was not so much a personal struggle as it was a personal expression (one among many) of a broader social struggle. The attitudes and actions of the admiral and the queen mother, like those of all individuals, resulted from and represented forces that were inscribed on their individual consciousness and personal predispositions by society at large. Catherine and Coligny could not be reconciled primarily because they were the representatives and products of broad social groupings, Catholic and Huguenot, respectively. And so long as the sentiments of estrangement that divided these groups were too strong and their sentiments of affinity too weak to permit any lasting peace, so also would their representatives experience jealousies, rivalries, misunderstandings, mistrusts, arguments, and other manifestations of personal estrangement in their dealings with one another. The tensions inherent in the broader social situation thus generated and found expression in conflict between individuals, not only within the royal court, but at all levels of society, and no simple personalistic solution could reunite the separate segments of French society: neither the attempt to bring Coligny and Catherine together in council, nor that to join in marriage the royal houses of Catholic Valois and Huguenot Navarre.

A Royal Wedding: The Failed Ritual of Social Integration

After the enormous success of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, anthropologists regularly treat marriage as that means whereby men forge bonds of affinity (in the technical, as well as the more general sense) between their respective social groups through the carefully regulated exchange of women.¹⁵ Although this view may be subject to debate and modification in many instances, there is perhaps no body of evidence for which it is so adequate and accurate a description than the system of royal marriages within the great European monarchies. And among all those adept in the use of marriage as an instrument of foreign policy, few surpassed Catherine de Medici, who arranged for her only daughter the first official marriage between a Catholic and a Huguenot, celebrated Monday, 18 August 1572 at Notre Dame de Paris between Henri de Navarre and Marguerite de Valois, six days before the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (Fig. 6.1).

That this marriage was no union of two happy individuals is abundantly clear. The bride stated plainly that she did not love the groom (she was reputed to favor the duc de Guise, the most militant champion of the Catholic cause) and agreed to the union only under duress, her mother having insisted that it was necessary for the welfare of France. On the groom's side, there was also hesitation, as Henri's mother, Jeanne d'Albret signed the marriage contract with profound misgivings. Her letters show her as bitter and recriminating, deeply disturbed by the frivolity of the royal court, Marguerite's coldness toward Henri, and above all the refusal of the

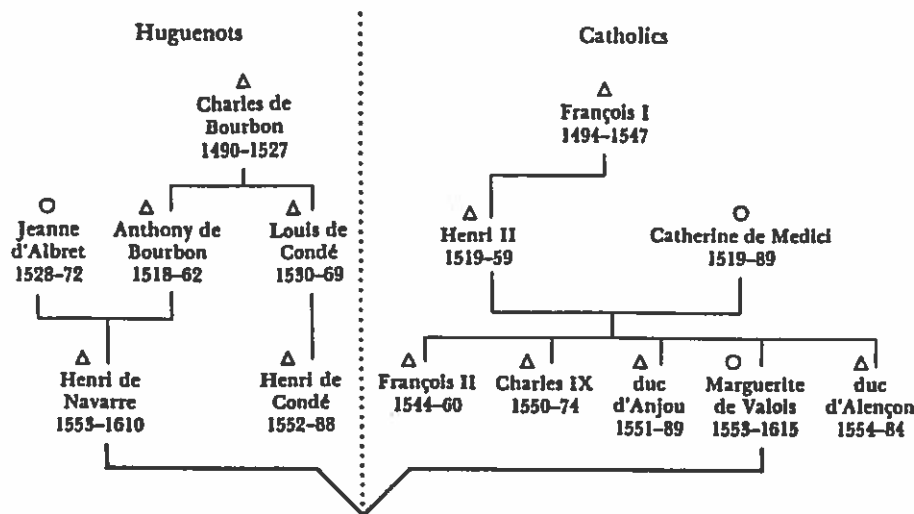


Figure 6.1. Royal marriage as an instrument of social integration: Religious and familial connections of the chief actors in the wedding of Henri de Navarre and Marguerite de Valois, 18 August 1572.

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bride to accept the religion of her husband-to-be, something that would ordinarily have been expected of her.¹⁶ The wedding itself dramatized the same misgivings and latent hostilities evident in the prenuptial negotiations. Far from being a celebration of unity and harmonious integration, the ceremony was in large measure a ritual dramatization of the gulf that separated the two major segments of the French nation. Several ominous shadows lay over the wedding, chiefly resulting from, and giving voice to, Catholic resistance. Among these was the fact that the expected papal dispensation failed to arrive, which could invalidate the wedding. Further, two influential Parisian preachers—Sorbin and Vigor—delivered violent sermons in the days before the ceremony, inveighing against it, promising divine anger, torrents of blood, and comparing the king to Esau, who would lose his birthright to Jacob (an obvious reference to the duc d'Anjou [later Henri III], hero of Jarnac and Moncontour) if he permitted the union, and stating pointblank, "God will not tolerate this execrable mating (*Dieu ne souffrira pas cet exécrationnel accouplement*)."¹⁷

If dress and demeanor normally served as indexes of Catholic-Protestant estrangement, they did so emphatically on the day of the wedding. Whereas the Huguenots chose to wear their normal black attire for the most part, the royal family seized the opportunity to parade their most brilliant fineries. Charles came "en soleil," Anjou in pale yellow satin covered with silver and pearls, Marguerite in a *robe d'or* and a cloak of blue velvet. Even Catherine abandoned her habitual mourning and appeared bedecked in diamonds. A

competition was thus encoded in the contrasting styles of dress, and each group strove not only to express something of their values and position through the medium of clothing, but also to cast shame upon their rivals: the Huguenots for their lack of elegance; the Catholics for their frivolity. Predictably, each side considered itself victorious in this competition. Yet the pride displayed by the Huguenots on this occasion was taken as an affront by the predominantly Catholic Parisian crowds, who resented their hauteur and "hypocrisy." A contemporary source speaks of the animus felt toward the strutting of the Protestants, "thinking themselves to be fortified by the marriage of the King of Navarre to *Madame*."¹⁸

Madame herself—that is, Marguerite de Valois—was not without her misgivings, as we have seen. Once again, it would be a mistake to overly personalize her reluctance to marry the Huguenot prince. And for all that it may be that she "simply didn't love him," the ultimate sources of her actions and sentiments must be sought not in romantic chemistry or personalistic psychology, but within the social, political, and historic context in which she was formed and in which she found herself a significant actor. For if the forces seeking the integration of French society drove her toward the historic marriage, sentiments of estrangement prevailed over those of affinity at this crucial juncture—in her as in the nation at large. At the crucial moment, when Marguerite was called on for the final "oui" that would join her lawfully to Henri de Navarre, she hesitated, unwilling to speak, and it is told that King Charles himself placed his hand on her head and physically forced her nod of assent.

What followed the wedding was equally revealing: There ensued a series of nocturnal *fêtes*, including dramatic spectacles that were arranged by the duc d'Anjou with the deliberate intention of humiliating the Protestant party. Thus, on the evening of Wednesday 20 August at the Hôtel de Bourbon was staged the *Mystère des trois mondes*, in which a troop of *chevaliers* led by the Huguenot princes Navarre and Henri de Condé sought entrance to a Paradise filled with nymphs. Their way into this heavenly grove being blocked by a set of angelic *chevaliers*—played by the king, Anjou, and their younger brother, the duc d'Alençon—a struggle ensued in which the would-be assailants of Paradise were defeated and cast into Hell, where they were engaged by a group of devils. Although a song in honor of love and a nymphic ballet were followed by the Huguenots' release, never were the latter united with the nymphs of their desire.

It takes no particular sensitivity or expertise to interpret such crude and deliberate symbolic discourse. The same struggle that had rent France for more than a decade and that was apparent in the contrasting apparel at Monday's wedding again found graphic expression in Wednesday's masque. The dénouement—a resounding victory of the Catholic party—must be seen as part wish and part (accurate) prophecy. The only mystery in the *Mystère* is the question of what was signified by the nymphs in Paradise: nymphs sought by the Huguenots, but ultimately denied them. At the most obvious level of signification, they clearly represent Marguerite and, beyond that,

Catholic women in general. In this light the masque forms a counterpoint to the wedding of two days prior, for here intermarriage—all intermarriage—is firmly and conclusively rejected as an impious affront that leads to death and damnation for those male Huguenots who would seek it. At a deeper level, however, the celestial nymphs signify the same thing as did Marguerite herself, for there is no indication she was an object of any personal desire. Rather, she—like the nymphs in paradise—signified that which is sought in any marriage: peaceful union, harmony, and social integration. It is this that the Protestant *chevaliers* hoped to win and that the Catholic *chevaliers*, who cast themselves as defenders of heaven (i.e., of the true faith), violently denied them.

On the next night, the same points were reiterated when Anjou staged a *course de bague* in which Navarre and his companions were defeated in mimed joust by the king and his brothers, the former party dressed as Turks and the latter as Amazons. What was here staged, in effect, was an elaborate inversion of the royal wedding: a denial and an undoing of its effects. For in place of a union effected between the sexes was battle between them and in place of the joining of two social groups was the conclusive victory of one over the other. One must also pay close attention to the sexual and religious codes employed, for the groom's party were presented as heathens and effeminate males (complete with great floppy turbans), whereas the bride's party appeared as martial females and defenders of civilization. With this ominous display, the wedding festivities celebrating the union of Catholic Valois and Protestant Navarre officially came to an end.¹⁹

On the following day, Friday, 22 August, an attempt was made on the life of Gaspard de Coligny, admiral of France, chief adviser to the king, and leader of the Huguenot party.

A Ritual Massacre:

The Feast of St. Bartholomew, 1572

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From the moment of this unsuccessful attempt on the admiral's life, all Paris was galvanized. Among the Protestants debate raged as to the most appropriate response. Some urged flight, fearing they had been lured to a hostile city for slaughter, the royal wedding having been bait in the trap. Others urged an attack on their enemies, particularly the forces of the duc de Guise. Still others—and their counsel prevailed—demanded justice from the king, issuing dire (but foolhardy) threats should such justice not be forthcoming.

On the Catholic side, too, there was confusion and maneuvering. Contemporary sources are both lacunary and at points contradictory, particularly in their attempts to assign responsibility for the attempted assassination: Most incriminate the duc de Guise, who owned the house from which the shots were fired; others implicate Catherine, Anjou, and prominent members of the king's council.²⁰ What is clear is that the king began an

investigation and himself called on the wounded Coligny on Saturday, 23 August, with members of the court and royal family in attendance. Coligny, however, insisted on speaking to the king in private, at which time he urged him to pursue the war in Flanders against Spain, and (according to some) to repudiate the influence of Catherine and Anjou.

There followed a critical series of meetings and discussions within the court, culminating in a royal council held on the evening of August 23, in which Charles was brought to support the elimination of the Huguenot leaders. A purge list was rapidly prepared, although not within certain disagreements,²¹ and the assault on Coligny's quarters (where most of the Protestant leaders were to be found) was entrusted to the duc de Guise. During that night the latter gathered his forces, instructing them, "Now is the hour in which, by the grace of the king, we must avenge ourselves on the race of the enemies of God" (*Voici l'heure que par le volonté du roi, il se faut vanger de la race ennemie de Dieu*).²² Meanwhile, in the streets, rumors circulated wildly as workers—freed from their labors for the vigil of the feast day—milled about. Catholic preachers also used the approaching feast to stir up popular emotion against the Huguenots, and the Huguenots made matters worse by publicly hurling threats at the family of Guise, who were particularly loved by the Parisian crowd.

An hour before dawn on Sunday, 24 August, the holy Feast of St. Bartholomew, the tocsin was rung at Catherine's order as a signal for the massacre to begin. Coligny's guard was overpowered, numerous Huguenot leaders were killed, and the admiral himself, announcing "I am ready for death," was murdered, defenestrated, and his body abused. By dawn, the official proscription was complete, with approximately two hundred victims.

At this point the Parisian people took over. Assembling first at the Hôtel de Ville toward daybreak, a mob, which included not only the rootless poor, but also a high percentage of artisans, moved on Huguenots throughout the city. Three days of riot, murder, and pillage followed, despite sporadic attempts to restore order. Not until Saturday, 30 August, was the city calm, by which time a bare minimum of two thousand Huguenots lay dead. Throughout August, September, and into early October rioting and massacre spread into the provinces, as far north as Rouen, south to Toulouse, east to Lyon, and west to Angers. Total casualties are estimated in the neighborhood of ten thousand.

Numbers alone cannot possibly convey the horrors of St. Bartholomew's, for in addition to death the victims were subjected to fearful degradation. Repeatedly, corpses were stripped naked, dragged through the streets, pelted with dung, and flung into rivers. The most extreme case was the treatment of Coligny's body: Having been defenestrated, kicked, and cursed by Guise, it fell to the mob, who decapitated and castrated it, dragged it through Paris, and consigned it to the Seine. Thereafter, the cadaver was fished out, paraded through the streets, and hung by its heels over a fire which, being ineptly constructed, failed to consume it. Such actions as these recurred throughout all cities in which there was rioting.

Also noteworthy is the Miracle of the Hawthorn, reported on the afternoon of 25 August, when the killing had continued for nearly a day and a half. At that moment, when it appeared there might be a lull in the carnage, a withered hawthorn tree, dead many years, is said to have turned green and burst into flower before an image of the Virgin. This occurred, fittingly enough, at the *Cimetière des Innocents*, located at a center of considerable slaughter. Church authorities took this as a sign of God's favor and interpreted the miracle as conveying divine authorization for the massacre to continue, the restoration of the tree representing the renewal of France through sacrifice.

On Tuesday, 26 August, yet another form of legitimation was added. Holding a *lit de justice*, Charles declared that he had ordered the massacre in order to thwart a Huguenot plot against the royal family. As the killing continued, a solemn Jubilee was staged, complete with a procession in which clergy and royal family marched in a show of unity, strength, and remorse-free celebration. This Parisian Jubilee was mirrored in another: On receiving reports of the massacre, Pope Gregory XIII announced a Jubilee to be held in Rome on 11 September 1572 and every year thereafter in commemoration of the event. Medallions struck for the occasion show Gregory on one side and the Exterminating Angel on the other, the latter wielding a sword against the Protestants. The legend reads, "Slaughter of the Huguenots" (Latin, *Ugnotorum strages*).

Analysis of a Socioritual Drama

In the events of St. Bartholomew's Day, French society was effectively deconstructed: A previously established level of integration came apart, bloodily and dramatically. Basic to the history of the latter half of the sixteenth century is the fact that two segments of society became gradually ever-more estranged from one another, given their religious, political, economic, geographic, moral, aesthetic, and cultural differences. Unity was sought through military, political, diplomatic, legal, and ritual means. None succeeded.

When the normal instruments for achieving or maintaining social integration fail, the likelihood of an open breach becomes great. One form that such breaches may take is schism: the formal separation of two (or more) irreconcilable parties that had earlier been contending segments within one encompassing society.²³ St. Bartholomew's Day and the Carnival in Romans as well as such similar incidents as the Sicilian Vespers and the Nazi *Kristallnacht* present another possible means to deal with an irresolvable cleavage: massacre or even genocide.²⁴

Analytically, schism and massacre have much in common. Both are instances of social deconstruction, involving the radical redrawing of social borders along lines more restrictive than those that had previously obtained. Where schism and massacre differ, however, is in the rather fundamental question of whether the members of all segments of the original aggregate

will be left alive when the process is completed. Horrific though it may seem, these important social processes may be represented in quasialgebraic equations, in which *A* and *B* represent segments of society and parentheses represent social borders within which sufficiently powerful sentiments of affinity prevail to maintain some reasonable degree of unity, harmony, and integration (Fig. 6.2):

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{Integrated Society} = (A + B) \\ \text{Schism} = (A + B) \rightarrow (A) + (B) \\ \text{Massacre} = (A + B) - B \rightarrow (A) \end{array}$$

Figure 6.2. Processes of social deconstruction (I).

Similar processes may also be observed within relatively small-scale groups and events. Thus, for instance, when an individual has been branded as a dangerous deviant for one reason or another, society excludes him or her from its midst. This exclusion can take such forms as ostracism, imprisonment, enslavement, ghettoization, or banishment—to name a few. But in certain cases, stronger measures are sought, and the offender is executed. Again, that minimal social unit composed of two persons and ordinarily known as marriage may be dissolved either through divorce (including under this rubric such variants as annulment, desertion, and separation); alternatively, one partner may murder the other. An analogy between these various forms might be posited as in Figure 6.3.

In each instance, the first alternative is a relatively bloodless means for dealing with situations in which integration cannot be maintained. The latter is the most sanguinary of options.

Given the relation between schism and massacre, it is worth asking what factors lead toward the exercise of massacre as an option. Among such factors may be noted first, the transformation of sentiments of simple estrangement into those of pronounced animosity along the line of cleavage where division will occur, and second, a pattern whereby in the minds and rhetoric of one or both of the rival segments, the other is characterized as less than human. Third, when the larger society in which the segments are encompassed takes the form of a nation-state effectively controlled by one of the segments, this increases the probability of violence insofar as the dominant party, striving to preserve its territory and authority intact, may tend to

	Pacific	Violent
Individual level	Exclusion	Execution
Marital level	Divorce	Uxoricide
Social level	Schism	Massacre

Figure 6.3. Processes of social deconstruction (II).

characterize schism as secession and dissidents as traitors. Finally, there is the question of legitimation. If actors can be persuaded that mass killings are a rightful—or even a religious—act, such killings become more likely.

All of these points have relevance for the case at hand. Thus, with regard to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, it is clear that Catholic clergy and crown alike exercised their full authority to legitimate it through their sermons, proclamations, and exploitation of the Miracle of the Hawthorn. Further, it must be acknowledged that the massacre itself, in important ways, was nothing less than a ritual performance: a celebration of the holy feast of St. Bartholomew, a day that was doubly sacred for falling on a Sunday in 1572. Such a provocative and profoundly disquieting line of interpretation does not, it should be stressed, originate with scholars who sit at a comfortable distance from the events. Rather, contemporary witnesses themselves regularly described the degradations perpetrated on victims of sectarian violence throughout the latter half of the sixteenth century as acts of ritual purification. Regarding St. Bartholomew's specifically, they emphasized the way in which Huguenot corpses were ritually, if abusively, treated with the four classic elements: earth (pelted with dung), air (stripped naked to the winds), fire (burnt), and water (flung into rivers). The attempt was thus not merely to kill enemies, but to eradicate a pollution and to cleanse society of an infesting evil.

The characteristic term used by militant Catholics for the Huguenots in the sixteenth century—others have since become more fashionable—was *vermin*, by which Protestants were discursively reduced to the level of a subhuman annoyance, a source of disease fit only for extermination.²⁶ Consider, for example, an anonymous poem published in the wake of the massacre:

O joyous victory! To you alone, Lord—
Not to us—is the signal honor
Of having with a single blow torn them out root and
branch:

The ground is strewn with heretic vermin.
Vermin who that night were caught in the snares.²⁶

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For all that we may find it shocking in a moral or aesthetic sense, there are strong reasons to take the contemporary testimonies most seriously and to consider the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre as a ritual while remaining aware of the fact that it was other things as well.²⁷ Many of the chief hallmarks of ritual are patently evident: Thus, within moments set dramatically apart from those of normal, profane time, there transpired a discourse of highly stylized and symbolic (as well as materially effective) gestures and actions that were understood by their perpetrators to be divinely ordained and religiously legitimated. It is instructive, moreover, to juxtapose this ritual with another: the royal wedding of 18 August, which preceded it by less than a week. In that wedding, as we have seen, an attempt was made to effect ritual integration of the total French social body: to call forth senti-

ments of affinity and diminish those of estrangement through celebration of an unprecedented union between two individuals who acted as the focal representatives of the contending segments encompassed within France. That attempt failed, and six days later the consequences of its failure became all too apparent.

I do not think it goes too far to insist on the close relation that exists between the royal wedding—a failed ritual of social integration—and the massacre that followed, an all-too-successful ritual purge. Yet it would be wholly inaccurate to describe the relation between these two events as one of simple cause and effect. For it is hardly the case that *because* the wedding miscarried, *therefore* the massacre occurred. Rather, the same forces that made it impossible for the wedding to succeed *also* rendered further blood-letting all but inevitable. Moreover, those same forces gave shape to, and found expression in, the full range of individual actions and attitudes that culminated in the massacre: the strategic manipulations of Catherine de Medici, the reluctance of Marguerite de Valois, the militance of the ducs d'Anjou and de Guise, the inflexibility of Coligny, the willingness of the Parisian populace to kill and that of the Huguenots to die.²⁸ In the simplest terms, those forces may be understood as the sentiments of estrangement—radical otherness—that came to prevail over sentiments of affinity between Catholics and Protestants during the latter half of the sixteenth century, producing that state of affairs that, following sociological parlance, we tend to call cleavage.

When normal rituals fail, other rituals of an extraordinary nature may be improvised in order to achieve the desired results, as is seen, for instance, in ceremonies for rain or success in the hunt.²⁹ Thus, for example, in San Salvador during the entire year of 1894 no rain fell, and the town council responded to this crisis with a resolution stipulating that if rain did not come within eight days, no one would go to mass or say their prayers. After another eight days, all churches would be burned, all missals and rosaries destroyed; were there still no rain after a third eight days, all priests and nuns would be beheaded. Further, it was stated, "For the present permission is given for the commission of all sorts of sin, in order that the Supreme Creator may understand with whom He has to deal."³⁰ Here, we see a solemn moment, in which the normative moral and ritual order were symbolically deconstructed as a means of redressing the cosmic disorder evidenced in the failure of rain. And for all that the specifics may seem untoward or outlandish, the underlying logic is straightforward, even elegant. Thus, normal ritual being intended to maintain the cosmos in its familiar, established order, when such rituals prove counterproductive (i.e., yielding the opposite of their desired effects), the solution lies in the performance of extraordinary rituals that symbolically and materially undo the discredited normal rituals: rosaries are broken, priests beheaded, and so forth.

A similar line of analysis may be advanced with regard to the normal rituals through which social integration is maintained or—to put it more actively—continually reconstructed in its familiar established order. When

weddings, gift exchanges, banquets, and the like, are no longer sufficient to bind a given social aggregate together in relative harmony and goodwill,³¹ rituals of an extraordinary type may be improvised, rituals in which the preexisting socioritual order is effectively deconstructed and sentiments of estrangement are celebrated rather than those of affinity. Banishment, divorce, and formally proclaimed schism (e.g., the celebrations staged by colonized nations on regaining independence) are all such rituals of social disintegration. So, too, may the execution of a criminal or a wayward spouse take ritual form. Such also may be true of massacre, which can all too readily assume the form of a purificatory sacrifice through which a troubled society is bloodily deconstructed and a novel (if truncated) society constructed in its place.