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The Unintended Outcomes of Spreading the Gospel: Community Split, False Unanimity, Secular Blaming

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Abstract: Zwingli never considered it likely for the old Confederacy to endure being split between two confessional camps. Therefore, his sermons were a powerful impetus for mobilizing the cantonal governments in favor of a conversion of the entire alliance to the reformed Gospel. However, facing fierce reluctance, he tried to bypass the Diet by rallying local support among parishioners, thus bringing the whole Confederacy on his side. This purpose, allegedly uttered with the intent of securing peace, underpinned the use of symbolic violence and coercion. With the Christian Civic Union between Bern and Zurich, the local parishes found themselves at the core of these efforts, relying on majority votes. Preachers would certainly try to explain how the community would temporarily be divided before achieving a superficial unanimity by voting to abolish the Mass. While Zwingli's death marked an end to these ventures, French-speaking preachers translated these views and beliefs into Western and then French communities and the accusations of sedition and political disruption the protestants faced since years suddenly bloomed again. The transposition of those concepts to less republican contexts than those of Ancient Switzerland created one of the first manifestations of a link between Calvinism and Democracy, although in a controversial way.

Keywords: conversion; majority votes; unanimity; division; defamation; ecclesiology; democracy



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1. Introduction

Despite their major influence on the history of Early Modern Switzerland, specific studies on the meaning and significance of the four peace agreements (Landfriedensbünde with the first and second Peace of Kappel 1529 and 1531; third and fourth Landfrieden after the War of Villmergen 1656 and 1712) are still lacking. Even if they were published along with the printed edition of the ancient Swiss Diet's Acts in the 19th century, no current critical edition of these documents striving to reduce religious tensions is available. This surprising fact is even more striking considering that the first Kappeler Peace (1529) explicitly refers to the need to respect the confessional choice of some of the cantons' subjects, not coercing them for their faith (Strickler 1876, p. 1479; Aberle 2023, p. 360) and that the second treaty (1531) is regarded, albeit this statement should be tempered, as an anticipation of the principle of *cujus regio, eius religio* (Campi 2016, p. 91), a legal rule sanctioned in all other parts of the Empire with the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 (Kaufmann 2006). Nevertheless, especially for the first two treaties, these legal enactments are particularly enlightening in that they bring about far-reaching shifts in internal political relations within the Confederation of the 13 cantons (Church and Head 2013; Würigler 2008; Lau 2008) while, at the same time, addressing two areas that are nowadays dissociated but that were closely bound up in the mindset of the protagonists of the troubled period of early Reformation: the sacred and the secular (Christin 1997).

Spiritually considered, these peace treaties attempted to address the issue of individual respect for each believer's conscience while simultaneously aiming to bolster the political union of sworn alliances grounded in sacred oaths (Blickle and Holenstein 1993; Maissen 2009a; Würigler 2017). Both in cantons that resolutely retained the "old faith" of the papacy

(the 5 Orte of Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug and Lucerne), as well as in those that reformed their liturgy by 1528 (Zurich and Bern), a secular unity would not seem compatible with a lasting denominational split (Gordon 2008; Lécho 2017). Initiatives were, therefore, taken to bring the Confederates back under one common faith, whether Catholic or Reformed. Since the Diet was increasingly the setting for a clash of two intransigent positions, and given that the 1526 disputation in Baden failed to reach any conclusive outcome (Flückiger 2018), Zurich, facing both inertia and the inaction of neutral cantons (Glarus, Appenzell, Fribourg, Solothurn) or those traditionally seen as mediators (Basel and Schaffhausen), opted for an alternative strategy than that of negotiation (Würzler 2001). Spurred on by the views of Ulrich Zwingli regarding the spread of the “pure Word of God” (Opitz 2019), and after convincing Bern to endorse its endeavor with the Christian Civic Union of 1528 (Bender 1970; Engeler 2023, pp. 25–33), it sought to proclaim the Gospel primarily among the subjects of the Confederation, ultimately confronting the other canton’s authorities with popular pressure and a *fait accompli* with all the parishes that would already have abolished the Mass or would demand to do so. Reiterated in the peace clauses of 1529, the strategy was to serve Zwingli’s aspiration for the full and unrestricted convergence of the Swiss population to a “new” faith, freed from its flaws.

Considered from a secular and political standpoint, this situation also boosted Zurich’s and Bern’s influence within the Alliance, stirring up longstanding concerns in the rural and central cantons that the wealthier and militarily powerful cities of the Swiss plateau would take over from them (Blickle 1994). Reflected in Zurich’s strained relations with the Waldstätten, especially Schwyz, this rivalry had previously led to conflicts such as the Old Zurich War in the mid-15th century. This time, however, the missionary aspirations of the city on the Limmat represented a greater threat than ever for the sake of the Confederation of the 13 cantons, precisely since Zwingli appeared to be spreading the seeds of subversion by interfering in the relations of each ally’s councils with their own subjects, a result of his and the Zurich magistrate’s peculiar understanding that the Gospel could not be restricted to temporal boundaries between secular rulers (Kägi 1972).

This study focuses on the ambivalences and ambiguities of the Zwinglian and later Calvinist approach to the proclamation of the Gospel (Arnold 2006), which sometimes resulted in unexpected outcomes. Firstly, it shows that the First Kappeler Peace was, in fact, a practical extension of a precept already outlined in the Christian Civic Union of 1528, which itself derived from the Zwinglian conviction that respect for consciences could not entail a sustained denominational split in the Confederation, nor a prohibition of the reformed faith in certain cantons. To overcome resistance and engage in this activism, Zwingli required the assistance of the civil magistrate to hold majority votes about the faith the subjects wished to follow, thus specifying the modalities of this collaboration in sermons. He was conceding that, although his interpretation of the Gospel would ultimately secure a genuine peace, the process of revealing the “Word of God” would inevitably give rise to divisions. Zwingli was thus engaged in a dialectic that led him to reiterate that his teachings were not subversive (Bost 1993), but the pressure brought on by his confidence that the popular majority would finally prove unanimously in favor of the Reformation led Zurich to take an aggressive stance towards the parishes of the territories conjointly ruled by the cantons. Confident they held the truth and would succeed in bringing the whole territory into line despite this provisional division, the Zurich representatives did not refrain from multiplying local votes to make them a definitive indicator of the move to the “true faith”. However, the turmoil generated by the organization of these votes and the ensuing clashes inevitably provided fertile ground for opponents of the Reformation, whose rhetorical tactics associated it with revolt. Irritated by Zurich’s activist approach to get the parishes to abolish Mass between 1529 and 1531, the five cantons finally brought an end to it through military intervention and Zwingli’s death.

Yet his insights on using communal leverages (Blickle 1987) to renew the Church were followed by French-speaking preachers mandated by Bern to spread the Gospel in Western Switzerland, as a second section will show. A third section describes how these locally

focused means of achieving unanimity around a common truth were also translated to the monarchical context of France, where the growing unrest once again gave way to secular blaming by the 1560s. Opponents of the Calvinists who fled the kingdom exploited their location for refuge to propagate negative depictions in line with the derogatory view of the Swiss, suspected of having slaughtered their nobility (Sieber-Lehmann and Wilhelmi 1998). As Zwingli did some thirty years earlier, predictors such as Pierre Viret and Theodore Beza had to clarify their relationship with secular regimes both to absolve themselves of the allegations leveled and to secure the successful outcome of an effort heavily reliant on even patchy support from the local authorities and communal mobilization, in Switzerland as much as in France.

2. Spreading Zwingli's View on the Gospel: The 1528 Christian Civic Union

From the start of his activity as parish priest of Zurich's Grossmünster in 1519, Zwingli had a global vision: regenerating the Confederation through the Gospel (Lutz 2018). He considered his land perverted by foreign service, which consisted of the mercenary duties for princes who paid pensions to the magistrates of each canton (Neugebauer 2017). Bringing all the cantons back to the "true faith" thus seemed a prerequisite for the universal aspiration to restore the primitive Church. In this respect, Zwingli's position differed from that of Luther, more inclined to a renunciation of the duties of this world (Krumenacker 2017). For the former pastor of Glarus (1506–1516), who had accompanied troops in the Italian campaigns as an army chaplain, keeping an eye on secular interests was also part of the churchman's duty. He considered the civil magistracy an essential and unavoidable intermediary for a program of church renovation designed to substitute the hypocritical prosecution of self-interest (Eigennutz) with genuine love for thy neighbor and furtherance of the common good (Gemeiner Nutz). He thus continued the Lutheran two kingdoms view by expressing his opinion regarding the ecclesiastical competencies held by the secular sword (Brady 1985a).

Military defeats suffered by Swiss mercenaries and the influence of foreign princes over cantons, therefore, served as indicators of a lifestyle lacking in observance of divine ordinances, which Zwingli nonetheless considered "imperative and binding" (Zwingli 1905, II 21, p. 194). According to him, the common good could only be attained through the unrestricted revelation of the Holy Scriptures, and given that the clergy had no other vocation than to spread the Word in German (Zwingli 1905, I 12, p. 216), the political authorities had a responsibility for securing access to it in the form of protection for preachers, sending these skilled practitioners to the local communities wishing to be instructed (Schmidt 2001). Consequently, as the shepherd in charge of the congregation (Zwingli 1905, III 30), if a pastor deemed that civil magistrates were not meeting the imperative of facilitating access to the Gospel, he was able to criticize and admonish the secular rulers, as with great power comes great responsibility. So, magistrates, whom Zwingli described as schoolmasters (Zwingli 1905, II 21, p. 488), were both lauded and rebuked if they neglected their obligation to make the divine message accessible to the public. The sermons he addressed to the people of Schwyz or the Confederates between 1522 and 1524 reproved them for only caring about their immediate material goods while neglecting to carry out their spiritual responsibility (Zwingli 1905, I 10; III 34). The latter was not to wield the spiritual sword themselves but to provide the Church all the room it needed to perform its task of revelation.

This interplay of the spiritual and temporal spheres was elaborated in his preaching On Divine and Human Righteousness (Zwingli 1905, II 21). Zwingli owed this statement to the unrest circumstances prevalent in Zurich shortly after the first disputation. Arguing on the grounds of their understanding of the Gospel, some of his most radical supporters rejected the payment of the tithe to secular authorities and planned to abolish the Mass and destroy the images on their own initiative (Ganseuer 1985; Aberle and Christin 2019). The parish priest's aim was thus twofold: first, to show that his preaching strengthened secular authority to avoid accusations of sedition against his fellows; second, to explain how

the rejection of the established clergy's authority enhanced the magistrate's ecclesiastical functions. By overcoming the old clerical dominance and arguing that every individual should benefit from the Word as the sole source of regeneration, magistrates engaged in a fragile dynamic, challenging them to act for the sake of individual and collective salvation. To break the clerical monopoly, Zwingli expected them to disregard bishops' prohibitions and to establish a secure stronghold for the shepherds, preaching on the basis of the Holy Scripture. In terms of human righteousness—understood as the temporal law of the land—the “Richter und Obrer” (Zwingli 1905, II 21, p. 488) had to paternally lead communities to prevent humans from murdering each other. Yet, since mankind was perverted by the original sin, and as they themselves were subject to fallibility, they were to judge according to the divine righteousness outlined in the Gospel, putting God's decrees above all.

The practical implication was a duty to protect those whose task was to educate tirelessly and everywhere, regardless of the prohibitions of the traditional clergy or of cantons not yet enlightened by the “torch of the divine word”, as stated in the Christian Civic Union's (Christliches Burgrecht) eighth article (Strickler 1873, p. 1522). The Union was thus conceived as a way to extend this task of protection and safeguarding to all communities. This Schutz und Schirm was specially designed for the towns and villages of the so-called mandated territories (Head 1997), over which Bern and Zurich shared sovereign rights with other cantons (the Gemeine Herrschaften or bailliages, equivalent to the notion of bailiwick). Unlike the treaty Zurich had already concluded with the city of Konstanz in 1527, the Christian Civic Union Bern entered on the 25 June 1528 explicitly referred to these “counties, lordships and bailiwicks” jointly held with other Confederates, where the “subjects would be eager to hear the Gospel” (Strickler 1873, p. 1524). While Zurich had authority over the Freie Ämter, Thurgau and the county of Sargans, together with six other cantons (Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden, Zug and Glarus) plus the Rheintal with the addition of Appenzell, Bern was included in the government of the county of Baden and of the Italian valleys, not to mention the territories it shared with the canton of Fribourg in Western Switzerland (Schwarzenburg, Morat, Orbe-Echallens and Grandson). It was for these areas that the Union's eighth article was intended, stipulating that its subjects would be allowed to determine matters of faith by majority vote: “Those of our common subjects who shall embrace the Gospel and Word of God with a majority of the votes of their parishioners, expressing their will to comply with us, may not be coerced or punished by anyone unlawfully; on the other hand, those of the parishioners whose majority resolve to retain the current manners and ceremonies, may also not be restrained and forced by any means” (Strickler 1873; Aberle 2023, p. 388).

The clause clearly signals Zurich's intent to rely on the conversion of all the communities in which it even partially had jurisdiction for bypassing the Diet (Würgler 2013). Obviously, although both cantons evoked the potential preference of voters to maintain the old faith, their underlying motive was the confidence that the delegates monitoring these gatherings would ensure a pro-reformation outcome (Christin 2014). Bern and Zurich thereby initiated a process of local troubles whilst, at the same time, assuming an apologetic stance (Maissen 2015, p. 94). The declaration, in fact, charged the bailiffs appointed by the central cantons of forbidding reformed preaching in these areas, thus harming the faith of subjects over whom the two cantons had as many sovereign rights as their counterparts. This tactic served to deflect the accusation of forming an own separated alliance, which was the case (Engeler 2023, p. 30), and to blame it on the Catholic cantons. On 22 April 1529, the latter, concerned by Zurich's activism, indeed sealed a Christian Alliance (Christliche Vereinigung) with Ferdinand of Habsburg, brother of Emperor Charles V and regent of the Further Austrian territories (Strickler 1876, pp. 1467–75). Zurich seized upon the occasion to blow the embers of the conflict, focusing on exposing the five cantons for their betrayal and forming a pact with the hereditary enemy of the Swiss.

This move was politically clever in that it would make the Catholic cantons responsible for the outbreak of a war that was becoming increasingly evident. But, since conscience was a matter of divine righteousness, the move was also a consideration of Zwingli's theology.

A Christian magistrate had no other choice than to face up with those who were slowing down the process of revealing the Gospel and, so doing, needed to stand up for those who had supposedly gained light by abolishing the Mass (Turchetti 1994, p. 627; Maissen 2015, pp. 103–4). In addition, because Zwingli and the Zurich Council were both certain they held the truth, their determination was all the stronger, meaning they could not consider respecting the decision of those they thought remained in the wrong (Maissen 2009b). They would, therefore, constantly keep on appealing to them until they reached the only right decision, not hesitating to have the same parish vote several times in a row. They claimed to do so for friendship (Würgler 2007) and because the duty of the magistrate was to fraternally admonish another secular authority persisting in error to cease neglecting its divine commitments (Maissen 2015, p. 19). The Christian Civic Union's purpose was, therefore, to advocate for divine and human righteousness, with its very name denoting a hybridization that gave rise to an unprecedented number of local clashes caused by the votes, culminating in the First Kappeler War. The 1528 bilateral treaty was a striking sign of Zwingli's influence and a reflection of this scheme with upheavals as the signs of an ongoing revelation inevitably followed by the prompt global decision Zwingli was urging.

Given this, when Jakob Kaiser was caught on his way towards a congregation in a mandated territory owned by Glarus and Schwyz, Zurich had no alternative. The execution of a preacher under its orders by the authorities of Schwyz prompted it to declare war on the five cantons. As the terms of the peace treaty of 1529 not only forced them to renounce their alliance with Ferdinand but also brought the principles of the Christian Civic Union into confederal law, Zurich was free to exploit the loopholes of the agreement to its own benefit and to keep on the process. As it offered the option to vote several times on abolishing Catholic ceremonies without envisaging the possibility of a reintroduction of the Mass, it aggravated rather than reduced hostilities. The First Kappeler Peace was, therefore, a milestone success for Zurich, whose aggressive missionary endeavors were ultimately stopped by the victorious Catholic cantons in a second war they instigated in 1531. While the balance was redressed to their advantage in that Zurich was no longer able to prevent the recatholicization of parts of the Confederation, ministers serving Bern in Western Switzerland shared similar viewpoints to those of the late Zurich theologian.

3. A Public and Common Assent: Looking for Unanimity in Western Switzerland

In contrast to Zurich, Bern's attitude was more insidious, which did not prevent it from pursuing the same policy regarding the dissemination of the reformed faith. After its move to the Reformation in 1528 (Sallmann 2016), Bern was consequently more devious but as enterprising as its ally, pushing forward the process of a local adoption of the Reformation between 1529 and 1531. And even after having nullified the Christian Civic Union in the wake of the military defeat and the second Peace of Kappel, it sought to maintain the principle of an acceptance of its Reformation by majority vote wherever the occasion arose, offering this alternative to communities that benefited from a particular alliance treaty with it. This was evident both in its relations with communities that held a Burgrecht or combourgeoisie with the powerful city-republic (Holenstein 2006) and in its attitude towards the Catholic canton of Fribourg, which had shared control with Bern over areas conquered during the Burgundian Wars (1474–1477). Bern thus submitted any renewal of such pacts to a precondition, which was, in fact, the first step in the process leading up to a vote: the sending of its preachers (Krumenacker and Léonard 2012; Simiz 2015). As these regions usually spoke French, the ministers were often refugees who left the kingdom of France following the prosecution of the so-called Lutherans (Bruening 2016). The leading figure among them was Guillaume Farel, backed up by the likes of Antoine Froment, Jean L'Archer, Alexandre Le Bel or Antoine Saunier. If its counterparts refrained from accepting the preaching, Bern would suggest an end of its protection, including its military support, which was crucial for these towns and villages that sought to preserve their liberties and franchises from their traditional lords or even to increase their local autonomy (Holenstein 1991; Maissen 2016). Among numerous other situations, this applied to the southern

villages of the valley around Moutier under the authority of the bishop of Basel, as for the town of La Neuveville; to the four syndics of the city of Geneva regarding their prince-bishop; or to the Quatre-Ministres of Neuchâtel, where the Princess Jeanne de Hochberg sought to maintain Catholicism. To all these allies, Bern also urged for its preachers to benefit from a suitable place to proclaim the Gospel to the inhabitants, for example, by being granted access to the parish church (Foa 2007a).

Bern's attitude was, therefore, ambivalent, as it frequently instigated troubles by insisting that the communities welcome pastors, simultaneously posing as a mediator to resolve the issue of division. As in Lausanne after its 1536 conquest of the Pays de Vaud, holding a disputation was a way to lend a licit aspect to an already predicted outcome. The same was meant by conducting a discussion followed by a communal vote for smaller localities, with the city-republic both striving to appear as a promoter of secular peace and favoring the implementation of its reformation. It was even more compelling for holding to the principle of being allowed to vote repeatedly on whether or not to abandon the catholic liturgy, holding to the guidelines of the peace treaty of 1529 rather than the one of 1531.

For instance, in Morat, the main town of the same-named bailiwick, Bern had sent a pastor as early as June 1529, calling an assembly of the community under the supervision of one of his councilors in August. The official's mission was to remind the community of the terms of the peace agreement and to hold a vote that, by then, was still in favor of Catholic traditions (Strickler 1876, p. 329). Replying to Fribourg, Bern nevertheless insisted on the continuation of its preaching, arguing that the conscience of the town's reformed minority had to be protected. However, while telling Fribourg not to coerce anyone as to their personal faith, if the majority was in favor of Bern, it urged the minority to comply with the rest of the community or to leave. The sermons continued in Morat, leading to another vote in January 1530 (Strickler 1879, p. 420). As the outcome was this time for the Reformation, the town became a launching pad from which Farel and his helpers would spread their message to neighboring parishes. While this principle of *Folgeflicht* was usual in temporal matters (Elsener 1956), it raised questions in terms of conscience, with Bern having no intention of doing anything other than to achieve consensus in its favor (Elsener 1969). Should the outcome prove unsuccessful, retaining preaching as a minimal alternative was proof of its final intentions. As such, in the wake of other parishes in the bailiwick of Morat, La Neuveville adhered to the Reformation of Bern on 15 December 1530, with a majority of 24 votes (Strickler 1879, p. 775). A month earlier, in Neuchâtel, Bern seized on the unrest caused by the destruction of the Collegial Church by Farel's followers, holding a debate where a fragile majority of 18 votes signaled the end of Catholicism (Strickler 1876, p. 832), a move also taken by the villages in the southern part of the prince-bishopric of Basel a few months later, in January 1531 (Aberle 2023, p. 412). A few years later, in May 1536, the citizens of Geneva unanimously manifested their determination to live under the Gospel law and the word of God (Grosse et al. 2018).

The purpose of these votes was less to gauge opinion than to express a communal consensus around a common faith (Stollberg-Rilinger 2012; Christin 2000). Even if the number of voices was occasionally mentioned, it was of little value and was replaced once the result was known by the need to display an even faked unanimity. Since the minority could not remain, the voting ritual, usually conducted with the confidence of its result, showed the incapacity to accommodate differing points of view in an environment where truth could, by definition, only be one (Christin 2001; Benedict 1996). This ceremonial event was thus a symbolic end of the communal division that Zwingli admitted in contemplating the process of revealing the Gospel, in which each person had to enlighten by fighting both himself and those who remained in error.

Even after 1531, this stance marked Bern's actions and attitude towards Fribourg (Christin 2012). For instance, the itinerant preachers led by Farel also waged campaigns in the bailiwicks of Orbe and Grandson. In January 1532, an arbitration allowed a fragile coexistence (Grosse 2018, 2012), with ordinances enabling a so-called *Simultaneum*, i.e., shared use of church buildings, also stating that "the word of God [shall] be preached by

the preacher every day without contradiction [and] that each [shall] have free will to go to the sermon or the mass [and to] confer and speak kindly and fraternally of the faith” (Strickler 1876, p. 1278). This was tantamount to keeping alive the option of abolishing Mass, with Fribourg continuing to face the danger of local votes. In addition, pastors strove to sway the population into claiming for another arbitration and ensuing vote. The village of Concise held one in 1538, and the village of Provence opted for the Reformation in 1552, after a first unsuccessful attempt in 1546, while the village of Oulens declared for Bern’s Reformation in 1553 (Dupraz 1915). While dodging open conflict with Fribourg, Bern regarded denominational coexistence as no more than a poor substitute, unacceptable in the long term (Crousaz 2013).

This opinion was shared by one of the leading figures of the Calvinist Reformation. One of Farel’s earliest partners, Pierre Viret, officiated as an itinerant preacher, especially since he was native to the region of the Pays de Vaud (Crousaz and Solfaroli Camillocci 2014). Born in 1510 in Orbe, the town where the 1532 ordinances granted a Simultaneum, he was well aware of the leverage needed to promote a full adoption of the “pure Gospel” (Blickle et al. 1998; Ulbrich 2010). As pastor of Lausanne from 1536 to 1558, he then tried to lead his hometown to manifest unity under one faith, simultaneously considering the same in the kingdom of France, where he later served as minister from the 1560s until his death in 1571. It is, therefore, significant that many of the opening epistles of his books are dedicated to Swiss and French communities, lordships or municipalities where he served, such as Payerne, Neuchâtel, Orbe, Nîmes, Lyon or Montpellier (Aberle 2023, p. 438). In places where two understandings of faith coexisted, Viret invited them to patiently bear with the division. Most of all, he told them to keep confidence in the public and common consent to a single truth that would finally arise, manifesting itself in communal rituals adapted to local habits and customs. In an epistle to the Neuchâtel community, he stated that the supreme purpose was to collectively express “the doctrine and religion, of which you are all now professing with the same public and common assent” (Viret 1554, fol. B V[a]^{vo}).

From this perspective, the Remonstrances he wrote in 1547, particularly directed to those who concealed their faith in France, took up the Zwinglian theory of human and divine righteousness to underline how public men had a particular vocation, which was to promote the glory of God. The final stance could be, after having authorized preaching, to host an assembly that would show that all inhabitants agreed to one and the same Gospel, so Viret was appealing to the support of local secular representatives, reiterating that “if we wish idolatry to be abolished, and God to be honored as he deserves, according to his word, we do not wish to disturb public order. We have no intention of interfering with the civil and political systems of the state, or with its magistrates” (Viret 1547, p. 243). Nonetheless, since Early Modern jurisdictions were intertwined and allegiances to landlords often manifold, the situation had the potential, on the one hand, to create strains between the clergy and secular authorities. After the heated argument that led him to leave Lausanne, Viret thereby described the Bernese rulers as white devils who prevented the Church from pursuing its task of edification and who forgot to observe the most imperative law of all, that of the Gospel (Aberle 2023, p. 432). On the other hand, it was responsible for a series of clashes in Orbe throughout the 1550s, with Fribourg accusing Viret of stirring up disorder from Lausanne.

In 1551, Viret addressed the epistle of his book *Du devoir et du besoin qu’ont les hommes [de] s’enquérir de la volonté de Dieu par sa parole* to the “nobles and bourgeois of Orbe, his valued brothers and dear friends” (Viret 1551). Several hints of an eventual and expected end to denominational division can be noted, a subtext that gives no doubt as to his aspiration to foster religious reunion based on a consensus regarding the faith. As the customs of most Swiss towns envisaged, and as the ordinances of 1532 regulated such possibility, it was by voting that Viret sought this reunification to happen. He, therefore, exhorted the inhabitants to stay open to preaching, regarded as a “singular grace [that God] does not offer to all peoples” (Viret 1551, fol A V[b]^{vo}). Moreover, the title of the book stressed the necessity to listen to the Word, as otherwise, believers would be in danger of

“eternal death”, with everyone having a responsibility to instruct his or her neighbor. The reformed members of society should keep up their efforts to prevail upon their still ignorant brethren, and unanimous acceptance of God’s divine law would replace coexistence in the “hope that God will once bring about a good and real union of doctrine and religion” (Viret 1551, fol A V^{vo}).

Because this process was still underway in 1551, Pierre Viret reminded that opposing points of view needed to be handled peacefully, “conferring amicably”. “Corporal and mundane” weapons were not to be used, rather opting for “spiritual and celestial” ones to prevent natural friendship from being flouted by “betraying one’s brother and handing him over to death” (Viret 1551, fol A V^{vo}; Foa 2007b, 2016). But the last sentence was loaded with implicit claims, saying that long-term tolerance was repelled by the very conviction that a doctrine of error opposed that of truth, with one that should ultimately prevail. Denying any duality, the Lausanne pastor certainly promised to pray for his fellow countrymen of the other religion but testified, above all, that a sincere manifestation of real obedience to the Gospel would have to follow an assent to that binding law equivalent to an epiphany and to an act of reunion acknowledging the unicity of the faith: “as there is only one God, one Savior and one mediator, one law, one Gospel, and one baptism, we may also be united in one faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ, whose grace I commend to you” (Viret 1551, fol. B V [d]^{ro}).

In many other epistles, Viret referred to a “public and common assent” to the faith (Aberle 2023, pp. 453–61). The fact that they were addressed to local authorities is proof that the preacher knew “how much the consolidation of the Reformation [had] to pass through the control of the organisms of municipal life” (Brunet 2009b, p. 180). The local authorities were defined as the ones in their local church who had the greatest capital of God-given “blessings and graces” (Viret 1564, p. 126) to gather their subjects and subsequently advise them to remove the images and abolish Mass. In Orbe, Viret’s project succeeded. Reprinted in his *Instruction Chrestienne* of 1564, his epistle was reworked accordingly. The theologian praised his fellow citizens for their choice, with the title reshaped to recommend perseverance in the “good and true union of doctrine and religion” he had been hoping for since 1551 (Viret 1564, p. 99). To achieve this, Bern pulled its usual lever, and after several arguments in early 1554, an arbitrator from Basel approved the principle of a vote in Orbe. He even pointed out that if the outcome was favorable to Berne, coexistence would stop. On 30 July 1554, 123 people were listed as supporters of Bern’s Reformation, as 100 were for Fribourg (Deschwanden 1886, p. 979).

Consequently, Viret even inserted a new paragraph in his text, emphasizing the idea of swearing an oath to God to sanctify the temporal community while demonstrating its submission to political authority. This section evidently echoed the necessity to counter the seditious reputation that his opponents were building up against his doctrine. Viret thus entrusted the community to God so that He might fill each person with the true faith, and he wished for those in charge of the people to lead them wisely so that, with the divine will as their guiding force, the common assent to God’s honor should remain unbroken (Viret 1564, p. 109). Yet, as he noted in an epistle to the town of Payerne, no one should be astounded that “from the beginning, all men do not agree to receive this light together, with a common and public assent” (Viret 1560, fol. *iii^{ro}). Viret understood that the spread of the Gospel in France, where he tried to erect churches with John Calvin and Theodore Beza, would lead to the Catholic clergy taking action to preserve his privileges, thereby inciting the lords of the kingdom against the Reformation. And while there was no intention of simply transposing the customs of the Swiss who voted on religion to France, the principle that public and common assent was to be expressed in every terrestrial manifestation of the Church was also to be found there. Ironically, it provided fertile ground for the secular blaming expressed by the Calvinists’ opponents, accusing them of being rebels plotting for France to “turn Swiss” (Brady 1985b).

4. Secular Blaming as a Reaction to a Sense of Spiritual Shift

What brings the inhabitants of France to agree to the “real Gospel” and avoid their gatherings appearing as uprisings? Why did the French-speaking predicants working with Bern design their actions in Western Switzerland to be bound up with the implementation of the Reformation in the neighboring kingdom? Evidently, the origins of the protagonists engaged in the establishment of a Calvinist network favored this agenda (Higman 1992). Farel may have settled in Neuchâtel and John Calvin and Theodore Beza in Geneva, but they were still subjects of the kingdom of France, while Viret studied in Paris from 1528 to 1530. Like him, theologians and preachers like Lambert Daneau often moved back and forth between these two areas. In fact, this was also the result of their distinctive understanding of the Church.

Even if the Church was universally spread across the world and exclusively submissive to the single authority of Jesus Christ (Bost 2019), so they wrote, it was manifested through scattered communities, which first needed to be erected and then provided with ministers. It was, therefore, no coincidence that Theodore Beza, Calvin’s close associate and adviser to some of the leading French nobles sympathetic to Reformed ideas, referred to the Church as a “communion of saints” (Beza 1559, pp. 149–50). The fifth chapter of the Confession of Faith he published in 1559 thus described it as a single, universal body that nevertheless, in its empirical manifestations, consisted of “believers spread all over the earth as the Lord chose them, according to no particular place, time or nation” (Beza 1559, p. 149). Even if the faithful were distributed in various places, they remained “united and conjoined like the townspeople of a community, all sharing in the same privileges”, namely the blessings of Jesus Christ sanctifying the members of His congregation (Beza 1559, p. 149). In his *Instruction chrestienne*, Pierre Viret pushed further the analogy between the Church and civic community. Addressing the question of disciplinary sanctions issued by a local consistory (Grosse 2005), he argued that these would apply regardless of the nation or country’s customs since “the Church, regarding the polity and discipline that Jesus Christ instituted in it and its government he gave to mankind, is not like a monarchy or some other temporal lordship, in which particular princes have all authority, but is rather a sanctified and free community, for which it is called the communion of saints” (Viret 1564, p. 86).

Nevertheless, the proponents of these apparently bold statements were quick to mitigate their scope (Berman 1999; Walzer 1985). Worried by the risk of overinterpretation, they emphasized the dissociation between divine and human righteousness, echoing Zwingli’s position. This meant that drawing an analogy between democracy and the Church was not equivalent to seeking to introduce a popular state into the secular realm (Bost 2012). This was all the more true since the two theologians, in suggesting more or less explicitly a democratic system, were referring to Aristotle’s straight form of the *politeia*, in which the people are supervised by councilors (Poddighe 2022). Theodore Beza’s *Confession de la foy* thus underlined that “Jesus Christ indeed leads his Church by his Spirit” but that he “uses men as His instruments to sow and water” the faith (Beza 1559, p. 151). Some may be more qualified to undertake it since the Lord “distributes his blessings and graces in differing measure, whenever and to whomsoever He pleases, in order to foster the entire Church organism, whereby He wants all things to be done in proper order and polity” (Beza 1559, p. 152; Blickle 2003; Iseli 2003). He thus foresaw the vilifications to which his movement was exposed, recalling that he did not claim “to consider all members of the Church as equal in their duties and offices, and by that means inducing confusion in the house of God” (Beza 1559, p. 152). The notion of confusion indirectly referred to a form of anarchy, a major apprehension of the Calvinists, who were trying to regroup their influence and overcome one of their opponents’ main concerns. Beza subsequently addressed them squarely, stating that one of the principal causes of contention between the two denominations was that the Reformed wanted only to re-establish the “ecclesiastical polity” set out by Scripture and that it was because they witnessed “the dereliction of many, and the little hope of providing for it in a general spirit by common consent” that certain “princes and lords, sensing the disorders” in the Church, were impelled to “provide

for it in their own particular way” (Beza 1559, pp. 152–53). As no universal authority had resolved the problem, Calvinists turned to other powers, especially as these were prominent members of the communion of saints, more potent than the papacy.

The scenario thus resembled that of Zwingli overriding the Diet and obtaining a general resolution, all the while reminding the people that the initiated process was not seditious (Durot 2009). Beza consequently directly confronted what he regarded as spurious statements “filling the princes’ ears, that we are seditious and heretical”. He swept them aside as “manifest calumnies and falsities plain and easy to see as day”, demanding his followers be “granted audience” as of now so that they might judge the righteousness of the “cause” (Beza 1559, p. 153). For his part, Viret took the same risk, even mentioning democracy by name (Linder 1964). But he was quick to specify that churches were to remain controlled by local elites. A dialogue from the 1564 Instruction featured two persons talking about the principle that all the faithful must comply with the same discipline. Yet one of them was concerned about possible confusion, which the other immediately tempered: “although power and authority is given to the whole community of the believers, just as it is in the people’s hands in the popular state, commonly known as democracy, this does not prevent the Church from by common consent electing some individuals within the entire body of that holy congregation, to assume special responsibility to carry out and to manage the public duties that God has ordained in this community, just as is the case in a free town, where elections for public duties are carried out by the burghers and citizens of the town, who all belong to the same community” (Viret 1564, p. 86). The most able were, therefore, immediately appointed to lead the Church, with local hierarchies permeating the congregation and presenting an example of order to those who insisted that Calvinists were overthrowing the Church because they were out to destroy the nobility, or conversely (Krumenacker 2010).

Indeed, if the slanders that Beza directly targeted dated back to the early stages of the Reformation, they were especially acute considering the very particular way in which the Calvinist doctrine was introduced in France (Beintker 2011; Kingdon 2007). Since it was carried out in states whose political regime was then deemed republican (Holenstein 1999)—the most unpopular of the three forms of government outlined by Aristotle and rediscovered by Humanism—and even more so considering that the development of denominational cultures was in line with studies of the different nations of Europe, comparisons between religious and political forms could be made (Loetz 2008). Furthermore, the preachers certainly drew on the dissociation between divine and human righteousness, but this did not mean that these spheres should not interfere. On the contrary, whenever local consuls and échevins disregarded their governor’s injunctions (Brunet 2013; Chevalier 1982), or when some minor reformed noblemen envisaged marching in arms to the King’s court to be granted an audience and to have him read a Confession of Faith, simultaneously pretending to release him from the pernicious control of the Guise brothers—his political advisors from the duchy of Lorraine—both spheres were blurred and offered fertile ground for discrediting the Calvinist doctrine as politically subversive (Daussy 2004). Hence, the Amboise conspiracy in March 1560 was an outstanding occasion to apply reinforced and effective secular blaming to the Reformed (Debbagi Baranova 2012, 2022), leveraging the mingling of the revolt of the Swiss (Maissen 1994; Weishaupt 1992) with that of the Calvinists (Daussy 2016).

In the context of uncertainty mingled with hopes of an end to persecution in the wake of the accidental death of Henri II in July 1559 and the coronation of his young son François II, some protestant noblemen tried a bold action (Benedict 2020). Their plan was to sideline François, Duke of Guise, and his brother Charles, Cardinal of Lorraine, from the court. Both were taking advantage of being the uncles in the marriage of the King who wed to their niece Mary Stuart. Building up their position in the court, they could maintain a policy of firmness towards the Reformed. Other high-nobility bloodlines were resentful of their loss of power around the crown, in particular the Montmorency and Bourbon (Jouanna 1989, 2006; Le Roux 2004). As princes of the blood, the Bourbons were qualified to inherit the

crown in case of the extinction of the royal family or to assume general lieutenancy of the kingdom in the event of a crisis ([Benedict 2014](#)). Given that Antoine de Bourbon, King of Navarre, was married to a Calvinist queen and that his brother, Louis de Bourbon-Condé, was looking to lead a pro-Reformation faction in the making, the leader of the plot looked for their support ([Daussy 2011](#)). Nevertheless, the involvement of Louis de Condé as a secret backer of the conspiracy led by Jean du Barry, seigneur de la Renaudie, as the complicity of John Calvin and Theodore Beza are disputed. Du Barry had indeed outlined his plans to Calvin during a stay in Geneva, and the theologian likely remained equivocal since the seigneur de la Renaudie kept up his plotting. However, the coup was discovered, and the Guise moved the court to Amboise, where Jean du Barry's allies arrived in disarray. Captured one after the other, they were severely punished for the crime of conjuration, with leaders executed and their bodies exposed.

In this regard, the Guise communicators depicted the venture as a secular rebellion driven by a religious project. The discourse was, therefore, extremely effective, as it made good use of the weak points identified by both Beza and Viret: the interference between spiritual and secular realms and the requirement for local structures to erect Reformed churches ([Chareyre 2009](#)), which could well lead to confusion and division. Historiographers reporting on the event stressed how the Guises were determined to emphasize that the King's life had been endangered and that those who rebelled were "people of unsound faith, who conspired to kill the King, the Queen, and his brothers, to set their religion forward with weapons, to destroy the Monarchy of France, and to transform it into a republic and popular state, as is the country of Switzerland" ([Place 1565](#), fol. 51^{vo}; [Beza 1580](#), p. 264).

From the time of this conspiracy, the charge became a commonplace of polemics. Gabriel de Saconay wrote that when Lyon was taken by the Reformed during the First War of Religion ([Krumenacker 2009](#); [Christin 1995](#)), the échevins deemed their "sovereign king (...) rather a companion than a superior" ([de Saconay 1569](#), p. 115). Secretly converted, they allegedly plotted to seize the city in one night and then to join forces with the Swiss. The writer emblemized that they were part of an overall project to dismantle France politically with his use of the word "Huguenot". This label instantly pointed to the reputation their opponents sought to brand the Calvinists with, as it was derived "from this word of Swiss Eydgnossen, which means, allied for freedom, or confederate, which confederacy they call Ligue" ([de Saconay 1572](#), fol. 9^{ro}). The creation of a Huguenot party was thus disparaged, putting it on an identical level with the bad reputation of the Swiss, who had allegedly slaughtered their nobility to enjoy freedom, or that of Geneva, supposedly emancipated from the authority of its prince-bishop and of the Duke of Savoy. The author of a libel stated that the "Aignos" feigned to "follow the truth of the Gospel" but that, in reality, "their religion strives to be free from the subjection of men, to live in the freedom of the Swiss, and become cantons" ([Response 1562](#), fol. 11^{ro}; [Aberle 2019](#)). He went on to explain that their plotting started undercover by winning over "a large part of the justice and nobility, without whom there was no hope of putting the people in arms for freedom". Religion became a pretext for manipulating the most skilled, using them to overtake towns. In this case, the author was trying to explain how Orléans, like Lyon, could have so easily fallen into the hands of the Huguenots. For him, there was no question of conceding that it could have been anything other than a plot following the same pattern as that of the Geneva Eidguenot party. The "name of Aignos that the deformed Church had usurped" was proof that "those of Geneva from which the seditious of Amboise originated" were infiltrating cities to when the time would come, openly come out and force the populations to join, as they did in 1536: "finding they were stronger than the faithful, [they] ordered those who wished to live in the Aignossen to raise their hands, and finding themselves exceeding the number of the faithful, [they] drove them out, and occupied their property and homes" ([Response 1562](#), fol. 11^{vo}–12^{ro}). The recollection of the vote manifesting the will to live under the Gospel became a conspiracy to rebel against the lords and live lawlessly.

The argumentation could thus alarm the most ignorant, but was it merely a matter of what Beza called manifest falsehoods and calumnies? Did it not reflect the practical difficulties the Company of Pastors in Geneva faced? Asking the question is a way of answering it. If such secular blaming seemed effective, it was precisely because it occurred in troubled circumstances, fueled by the growth of Protestantism in France and an increasing number of armed clashes (Brunet 2009a). The process of spiritual strife evoked by Viret was thus at the root of outbursts that alerted the local nobility. It was, therefore, no accident that Beza modified the passage of his Confession dealing with the authorities endorsed to reform their church. Compared to the 1559 version, the one of 1561 specified that by the magistrate, he meant, in the Empire, “the seven electors and, in virtually all monarchies, the Estates of the Kingdom” (Beza 1561, p. 218). As a close advisor to Louis de Condé, Beza had to show signs of reliability, and he did so by indicating that “private individuals, from whom the lower magistrates differ little or nothing, must understand that there is a difference between suffering violence or doing it ourselves” (Beza 1561, pp. 218–19). The case of Anne du Bourg, a Councilor of the Parliament of Paris executed in 1559 for having tried to put an end to the persecutions, was valid, unlike that of Amboise (Bonney and Trim 2006; El Kenz 1997). Calvin and Beza thus focused on a settlement through a decision of the Royal Council, but their strategy was coupled with the continued implementation of local churches, whose concrete outcomes were often unexpected.

In 1563, the governor of Lyon and the consistory, chaired by Pierre Viret, thereby censured the pamphlet *La Défense civile et militaire des innocents de l’Église de Christ*, which justified active defense against a tyrant persecuting the true faith (El Kenz and Gantet 2008). The destruction of its copies prevents its contents from being disclosed, but its radicality is implied by a reply recalling the only way to convince the Royal Council was to provide it with “justificatory documents” through the “assembly of the States”, the only “remedy” to the crisis (Du Moulin 1563, p. 18; Bercé 2000). Against the alternative proposed in the pamphlet, the author highlighted the “too notorious difference” of time and place, criticizing the libel’s violence, which seemed to aim to “overthrow this Kingdom into a popular State like Switzerland” (Du Moulin 1563, p. 20). The condemnation was, therefore, a direct result of the concern to provide a pretext for opponents by overly radical interpretations of the demand for a change in the ecclesiastical regime.

In this respect, around the same period, the censure of the *Traicté de la discipline et police chrétienne* was just as relevant (Denis and Rott 1993). Like Viret, his author Jean Morély defined the communion of saints as a democracy. However, according to him, those with the divine blessings and graces, meeting in the consistory, were not entitled to act on behalf of the congregation (Grosse and Fornerod 2017). The latter was to wield all executive power. His book was officially sentenced by the consistory and the Council of Geneva, along with a book-length reply by pastor Antoine de Chandieu (de Chandieu 1566). The stakes were considerable, as Morély, who had connections with the French high nobility, threatened to both split the movement led by Calvin and Beza into dissident churches (Bruening 2021) and to stir up the Catholic polemic so eager to draw on the thread of rebellion. Morély’s condemnation was thus a gesture presented to the Royal Council and to the counterparts at a time when the Company of Pastors was risking losing control of a project that inevitably entailed a degree of subversion (Chareyre 2016; Fornerod and Benedict 2009). Hence, the preachers were on a thin line (Kingdon 1958, 2009). They were seeking to leverage all the resources in their favor, maintaining the uncertainty over the identity of those who could decide on the question of religion while having to restrain their more radical side, which might bolster the opposing side’s rhetoric.

These calumnies were, therefore, not merely spurious rationales to be dismissed with the flick of a wrist. Already palpable among Catholics during the rise of the Zwinglian Reformation, they arose from a genuine sense of a shift into the unknown. This sensation was underpinned by a very tangible reality: introduced as they were into the key structures of municipal life, the Calvinists were able to rapidly control towns and cities (Daussy 2010). During the First Wars of Religion, many were astonished by this swiftness. Such

amazement may well have given credence to accusations that had been heard for decades. The imaginative dimension associated with the conspiracies waged by the Huguenots suddenly became tangible because of the exceptional circumstances (Bourdieu 1980). Hence, for both Catholics and Protestants, these events led to unexpected outcomes. While the Reformed hardly anticipated having so often to deny being revolutionaries avant la lettre and to disavow their own radicality (Krumenacker 2006), Catholics were not expecting such a wave, prompting some of them to sincerely believe in allegations they would not have otherwise endorsed.

Following a three-step progression stretching from Zurich to the Kingdom of France, crossing Western Switzerland via Bern, Geneva and the pays de Vaud, this study has highlighted how the introduction of the Reformation relied heavily on the approval of both local magistrates and the common people, leaving the predicants in an ambiguous position, trapped between their radical interpretation of the Bible and their concern not to undermine the social fabric. The majority votes carried out on the initiative of Zurich and Bern were thus meant to fulfill the global ambitions of Zwingli's followers while, at the same time, lending the process the appearance of being in line with political practice and the need to recreate unity after an inevitable division. Even if this strategy stumbled over the entrenched position of the Catholic cantons, it left its mark on the subsequent Reformed movement, with a discernible tension in the actions of the preachers operating between Ancient Switzerland and France. On the one hand, it provided fertile ground for polemicists who were concerned about the changes taking place, while on the other, it required Protestants themselves to define clearly their attitude towards secular political regimes.

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