

## **History 379 – Essay Assignment**

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The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre can serve as a good means of illustrating the dangers of superstitious fanaticism and intolerance, but which one is illustrated depends on whether the subject, whether they are actions or a specific person, being examined and critiqued is Catholic or Protestant.

When examining the Catholic actions, it is not a stretch to draw conclusions which would illustrate the dangers of superstitious fanaticism. We are able to paint this picture using documents from Barbara B. Diefendorf's *The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre*. While Diefendorf paints a picture that the Catholic elite initially believed themselves to be preemptively striking against a Protestant offensive, it becomes clear very quick that religious fervor overcame those taking part in the massacre, one of the reasons the massacre was so violent. Perhaps nowhere is this better evinced than the account given of the massacre in Orleans by a German student living in the city. Although a Protestant himself, the student, Johann-Wilhelm Von Botzheim, vividly captures the zeal with which the attackers went about and contrasts it to the much more measure response of the city provost. He clearly states that the provost "did not want the Huguenots to be treated with such cruelty and barbarity, but the demands and relentlessness of the captains and people forced him to submit to their will," (Diefendorf, 120) a statement which leaves little doubt as to the fanatical nature of the attackers. This fervor was further put on display when the provost is forced into hiding "In order to avoid the people's rage," (Diefendorf, 120) because of his perceived Protestant sympathies. This time spent in hiding by the provost allowed the Catholic aggression to continue unopposed for a full three days, a time described by Johann as one where "the people gave full vent to their rage..." (Diefendorf, 120), a phrasing that seems to further indicate the people were overcome with passion to fulfill what they perceived to be their duty. It is also not unreasonable to believe that people would attempt to go above and beyond this duty, evinced by the brutal nature of the massacre, as they were led by these passions, especially with no voice to quell them. This duty would have arisen out of their devotion to their

religion and the convictions it brought forth allowing one to apply the label of fanatic quite easily when considering the actions they took.

Catholic fanaticism is even seen in reports to other cities after the massacres had finished. One such report was a letter Joachim Opser wrote. In his letter, Joachim come across as jovial while recollecting the details of the massacre, clearly evinced as he declares “I want to transmit to you details on these scenes that will give you true pleasure,” (Diefendorf, 132) and also as he praises “the prudence and magnanimity of the king, who...fattened up, so to speak, the heretics like cattle [and] suddenly had their throats slit by his soldiers.” (Diefendorf, 133) Statements such as these, and the happiness conveyed when put into proper context, are exemplary evidences of fanaticism within the Catholics who took part in the massacre and as such it would be very easy for authors such as Voltaire to use the massacre as a means of criticizing superstitious fanaticism.

Meanwhile, when examining the Protestants, the effects of intolerance, specifically religious intolerance, can be examined in a variety of ways. One such way is the number of Huguenots who were pressured to recant their faith after the events of Saint Bartholomew's Day. Some Protestants did hold fast to their faith in the face of this intolerance, Protestants such as Charlotte D'Arbaleste, who while escaping stayed at the house of a man that married one of her mother's chambermaids. Despite this association she still saw the ruling intolerance of the day manifest itself as she “heard nothing but the Huguenots being vilified...[and was] told in the strongest terms to go to Mass.” (Diefendorf, 111) However, this resiliency shown by Charlotte wasn't necessarily the norm. Nicolas Pithou spoke of volumes of people who left the Protestant church stating there were many who “lost no time in returning to the Mass – some out of fear...” (Deifendorf, 129) In this case, there is little room to doubt the fear Pithou is speaking of is the fear of persecution, a direct result of the Catholic intolerance of the Protestants. Johann also mentions an instance of this, expressing his disappointment at some women who recanted their faith stating “I had hoped they would prefer to risk their lives for their religion.” (Diefendorf, 121) The intolerance and resulting persecution that Protestants faced on a daily basis had

clearly become too much for some to bear, especially given this new way in which the persecution had manifested itself during the massacres.

In his document, Pithou also makes mention of penitential priests who were to receive the Protestants back into Catholicism. The strict process of being received and absolved by this priest, who would give letters to certify a person's recanting of the Protestant faith so they may no longer be harmed, speaks volumes to how intolerant the French Catholics were towards the Protestants. The Catholics would clearly want to rid all traces of Protestantism in the land, a motive with a much broader reach and far more prejudice undertones than the initially stated mission to thwart a coup attempt.

In the end, The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre has many lessons to offer to history regarding religious persecution and forms of blind, superstitious fanaticism. The Protestants and the coercion they faced to convert, as well as the laborious conversion process undertaken when they did recant, mostly serve to illustrate the forms religious persecution can take and warning signs to watch for in society today. This serves well in modern times as humanity seeks to avoid senseless tragedies like the massacre and become more accepting of different cultures and faiths in order to avoid tension that may otherwise result. The Catholics on the other hand, in their fervor and resulting celebrations, highlight the dangerous repercussions, in this case, the violent murder of thousands of innocent citizens, that may arise when a group lets their passions overtake them. Fervor and zeal are not necessarily bad things to instill in a person but as the Catholics illustrated on Saint Bartholomew's Day, when they are blindly followed without properly considering the consequences, the fanaticism Voltaire warns of in his piece arises. The massacre has many valuable lessons for history, the lessons taken just depend on who they are taken from.