

11.5 The Edict of Nantes

At the end of decades of religious strife, Henry IV of France (r. 1589–1610) decreed the Edict of Nantes, granting religious toleration to the French Protestants, known as Huguenots. This is the first time in European history that a Christian ruler permitted civil liberty as well as freedom of worship to a religious minority.

Source: Sidney Z. Ehler and John B. Morrall, eds. and trans., *Church and State Through the Centuries: A Collection of Historic Documents* (London: Burns and Gates, 1954), pp. 185–88.

Firstly, that the memory of everything done on both sides from the beginning of the month of March 1585, until our accession to the Crown and during the other previous troubles, and at the outbreak of them, shall remain extinct and suppressed, as if it were something which had never occurred. And it shall not be lawful or permissible to our Procurators-General or to any other persons, public or private, at any time or on any pretext whatsoever, to institute a case, lawsuit or action in any Court or judicial tribunals whatever [concerning those things].

We forbid all our subjects, of whatever rank and quality they may be, to renew the memory of these matters, to attack, be hostile to, injure or provoke each other in revenge for the past, whatever may be the reason and pretext; or to dispute, argue or quarrel about it, or to do violence, or to give offence in deed or word, but let them restrain themselves and live peaceably together as brothers, friends and fellow-citizens, on pain of being liable to punishment as disturbers of the peace and troublers of public quiet.

We ordain that the Catholic, Apostolic and Roman religion shall be restored and re-established in all places and districts of this our kingdom and the countries under our rule, where its practice has been interrupted, so that it can be peacefully and freely practiced there, without any disturbance or hindrance. We forbid very expressly all persons of whatever rank, quality or condition they may be, under the aforesaid penalties, to disturb, molest or cause annoyance to clerics in the celebration of the Divine worship, the enjoyment and receipt of tithes, fruits and revenues of their benefices, and all other rights and duties which belong to them; and we ordain that all those who during the disorders have come into possession of churches, houses, goods and revenues belonging to the said clerics, and who retain and occupy them, shall give back the entire possession and enjoyment of them, with such rights, liberties and safeguards as they had before they were seized. We also forbid very expressly those of the so-called Reformed religion to hold prayer meetings or any devotions of the aforesaid religion in churches, houses and dwellings of the above-said clerics....

And in order not to leave any cause for discords and disputes between our subjects, we have permitted and we permit those of the so-called Reformed religion to live and dwell in all the towns and districts of this our kingdom and the countries under one rule, without being annoyed, disturbed, molested or constrained to do anything against their conscience, or for this cause to be sought out in their houses and districts where they wish to live, provided that they conduct themselves in other respects according to the provisions of our present Edict....

We also permit those of the aforesaid religion to carry out and continue its practice in the towns and districts under our rule, where it was established and carried out publicly several distinct times in the year 1597, until the end of the month of March, notwithstanding all decrees and judgments to the contrary....

We forbid very expressly all those of the aforesaid religion to practice it in so far as ministration, regulation, discipline or public instruction of children and others is concerned, in this our kingdom and the countries under our rule, in matters concerning religion, outside the places permitted and conceded by the present Edict....

Books dealing with the matters of the aforesaid so-called Reformed religion shall not be printed and sold publicly, except in the towns and districts where the public exercise of the said religion is allowed. And with regard to other books which shall be printed in other towns, they shall be seen and inspected by our officials and theologians as laid down by our ordinances. We forbid very specifically the printing, publication and sale of all defamatory books, tracts and writings, under the penalties contained in our ordinances, instructing all our judges and officials to carry out this ruling strictly.

We ordain that there shall be no difference or distinction, because of the aforesaid religion, in the reception of students to be instructed in Universities, Colleges and schools, or of the sick and poor into hospitals, infirmaries and public charitable institutions....

In order to reunite more effectively the wills of our subjects, as is our intention, and to remove all future complaints, we declare that all those who profess or shall profess the aforesaid so-called Reformed religion are capable of holding and exercising all public positions, honours, offices and duties whatsoever, Royal, seigneurial, or offices in the towns of our kingdom, countries, lands and lordships subject to us, notwithstanding all contrary oaths, and of being admitted and received into them without distinction; it shall be sufficient for our courts of Parliament and other judges to ascertain and inquire concerning the life, morals, religion and honest behaviour of those who are or shall be appointed to offices, whether of one religion or the other, without enacting from them any oath other than that of well and faithfully serving the King

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in the exercise of their functions and keeping the ordinances, as has been perpetually the custom. During vacancies in the aforesaid positions, functions and offices, we shall make—in respect of those which shall be in our disposition—appointments without bias or discrimination of capable persons, as the unity of our subjects requires it. We declare also that members of the aforesaid so-called Reformed religion can be admitted and received into all Councils, conferences, assemblies and gatherings which are connected with the offices in question; they can not be rejected or prevented from enjoying these rights on grounds of the said religion....

And for greater security of the behaviour and conduct which we expect with regard to it [the Edict], we will, command and desire that all the Governors and Lieutenants-General of our provinces, Bailiffs, Seneschals and other ordinary judges in towns in our aforesaid kingdom, immediately after the reception of this Edict, swear to cause it to be kept and observed, each one in his own district; likewise the mayors, sheriffs, captains, consuls and magistrates of the towns, annual and perpetual. We also enjoin our said bailiffs, seneschals or their lieutenants and other judges, to cause the principal inhabitants from both religions in the above-mentioned towns to swear to respect the present Edict immediately after its publication. We place all those of the said towns in our protection and safe keeping, each religion being placed in the safe keeping of the other; and we wish them to be instructed respectively and by public acts to answer by due legal process any contraventions of our present Edict which shall be made in the said towns by their inhabitants, or to make known the said contraventions and put them into the hand of justice.

We command our beloved and loyal people who hold our Courts of Parliament, “Chambres des Comptes” and courts of aids that immediately after the present Edict has been received, they are bound, all business being suspended and under penalty of nullity for any acts which they shall make otherwise, to take an oath similar to the above and to make this our Edict to be published and registered in our above-mentioned Courts according to its proper form and meaning, purely and simply, without using any modifications, rectifications, declarations or secret registering and without waiting for further order or commandment from us; and we order our Procurators-General to demand and ensure immediately and without delay the aforesaid publication....

For such is our pleasure. As witness thereof we have signed the present enactment with our own hand, and in order that it may be sure and stable permanently, we have placed and affixed our Seal to it.

Given at Nantes in the month of April, in the year of grace 1598, the ninth year of our reign.

[Signed,]
Henry

Questions:

1. What specific rights did this edict allow the Huguenots?
2. To what extent were they still treated differently from the Catholic majority?
3. How might they become a threat someday to royal authority?