In the late 1550s intense Protestant fervor gripped the southern French provincial town of Nîmes. Its inhabitants thronged to hear Calvinist preaching, occupied Catholic churches, and engaged in iconoclasm against traditional sacred imagery and devotional objects. Many Nîmois participated readily in the protracted religious warfare that rocked the French kingdom starting in 1562. After two horrific massacres of the town’s few abiding Catholics in 1567 and 1569, Nîmes became one of the most thoroughly Protestant towns in all of France.

Allan Tulchin’s *That Men Would Praise the Lord* is one of the latest contributions to a growing body of historical scholarship examining religious change and confessional conflict in early modern Europe. His foremost concern is to account for the “startling success of the Reformation” in Nîmes during the late 1550s and early 1560s, a period of immense social and religious upheaval in France (26). Throughout the 1540s a Protestant movement had slowly coalesced in Nîmes, but it had attracted only a small minority of the populace. The town’s earliest Protestants appear to have been drawn to the Eucharistic theology of Geneva-based reformer Jean Calvin, whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was published in Latin in 1536 and reissued in French five years later. Tulchin contends that by about 1560, however, Protestant converts in Nîmes—lawyers and municipal elites especially—were mainly unsettled by “years of economic and political stress,” even if they were “excited by the vision of political and religious reform” that Calvinism seemed to offer (69, 103).

Tulchin employs sociological and anthropological methodologies, as well as quantitative approaches, to examine the growth of Protestantism in Nîmes. He utilizes a rich body of manuscript sources including consistory registers, cathedral chapter accounts, judicial records, and notarial contracts conserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and local archives in Nîmes and Toulouse. Yet Tulchin’s key source—the crux on which his argument hangs—is a *cahier de doléances*, or list of grievances, which Nîmes’s leading Protestants dispatched in March 1561 to a session of the Estates General, France’s deliberative assembly. In his
assessment, the Nîmes cahier is central to the history of Protestant reform in Nîmes because it proved to be a “superlatively successful organizing tool at the local level” (102). It asserted, among other things, that the severe political and economic strains that France was experiencing were attributable to moral corruption and could be alleviated only through religious reform and constraints on monarchical power.

Social science theory features prominently in Tulchin’s intriguing interpretation of the Nîmes cahier. He argues that the cahier’s authors used ambiguous language and skirted thorny religious questions to appeal to the widest possible audience within the town. They thus created what social scientists have termed an “emergent norm,” the effect of which “is like a cascade of peer pressure” that eventually carries along reluctant or skeptical parties (107). Tulchin presumes, though, that most signatories to the cahier learned about Protestantism from preaching and mass gatherings that occurred in the city, but that “preaching at such events was also likely to focus on moral uplift and attacks on the corruption of the Church, rather than on the careful exposition of precise theological differences” (108). Given the likelihood that Protestant preachers in Nîmes had been trained under Calvin and Théodore de Bèze in Geneva, however, their sermons may have exhibited the theological and doctrinal precision for which Geneva’s Compagnie des pasteurs is well known.

Central to Tulchin’s analysis is another model drawn from social science, namely cognitive dissonance, which posits that individuals prefer not to hold conflicting ideas simultaneously. He maintains that Nîmes’s elites were doubtless steeped in humanist values, and that the diluted Calvinism of the cahier “reinforced the moral viewpoint to which they already adhered, thus easing any cognitive dissonance they may have felt” (112-113). Likewise, Tulchin asserts that many of the Nîmois who attacked Catholic churches and images did so because they felt “considerable guilt” at having participated in Catholic rituals and needed to resolve their “cognitive dissonance … [by] wip[ing] out the object that brought back the memory of the experience” (141). Unfortunately, this heavily psychologized approach to iconoclasm downplays
the juridical, demonstrative, and spatially purificatory aspects of such violence elaborated by scholars such as Natalie Zemon Davis, Eamon Duffy, and Lee Palmer Wandel.¹

Tulchin’s conceptualization of conversion is somewhat ambiguous at times. He finds that the “precise religious views” of the cahier’s signatories “probably varied considerably,” yet contends that by signing they both “accepted a community” and received a “new religious identity” (118). What should the reader make of reform-minded Catholics who signed the cahier? They cannot be seen as “converts” to Protestantism in any sense of the word, regardless of having signed a document promulgated by Nîmes’s leading Protestants. The cahier was perhaps “the closest Nîmes came to a referendum on the Reformation,” but many of its signatories either had not abandoned their traditional faith or could not grasp the consequences of signing the document (113).

The latter portion of the book focuses on the consolidation of the Protestant movement in Nîmes between 1561 and 1570. The town’s first consistory of elders met in March 1561 but was re-staffed twice over the course of the next year, and Tulchin points out that the members of the consistory were not drawn from the elite but included “four merchants, a greffier [court clerk], a bookseller, an apothecary, and a farmer” (128). The movement quickly succeeded in mobilizing prominent Nîmois families, but Protestants had been formally excluded from city government by the outbreak of religious war in spring 1562. The new royal governor, Henri duc de Montmorency-Damville, reinstated Catholic worship in Nîmes between 1563 and 1565, though Protestants continued to worship in some locations. Renewed warfare, however, created the conditions for the breakdown of Catholic control in the town. Protestants decisively recaptured power in late 1567 and perpetrated the notorious massacre known as the Michelade, during which dozens of Nîmes’s Catholics were killed, imprisoned, or exiled for good.

Tulchin’s lengthy conclusion asserts that the book’s argument “may be extended to create a general model of religious conversion in sixteenth-century France and, in a more limited way, to … other European countries” (181). Here Tulchin reiterates his point that Nîmes’s Protestant movement succeeded because it attracted adherents from powerful social groups such as officeholders and lawyers, essentially confirming the findings of local studies by historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Philip Benedict.  

*That Men Would Praise the Lord* represents a new work of significant interest to scholars of the Protestant Reformation, the French Wars of Religion, early modern religious identity, and processes of conversion. It is bound to generate substantial debate, particularly among historians investigating the extensive religious conversions to various forms of Protestantism that occurred across sixteenth-century Europe. Tulchin succeeds in underscoring the complicated and multifaceted process of religious change in this admittedly distinctive southern French town, while suggesting conclusions germane to similar studies of urban change and religious reform throughout the early modern period.

Greg Bereiter
Northern Illinois University
gbereiter@niu.edu

---