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‘ACCEPTABLE TRUTHS’ DURING THE FRENCH RELIGIOUS WARS*

By Penny Roberts

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ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to provide some historical perspective on contemporary preoccupations with competing versions of the truth. Truth has always been contested and subject to scrutiny, particularly during troubled times. It can take many forms – judicial truth, religious truth, personal truth – and is bound up with the context of time and place. This paper sets out the multi-disciplinary approaches to truth and examines its role in a specific context, that of early modern Europe and, in particular, the French religious wars of the sixteenth century. Truth was a subject of intense debate among both Renaissance and Reformation scholars, it was upheld as an absolute by judges, theologians and rulers. Yet, it also needed to be concealed by those who maintained a different truth to that of the authorities. In the case of France, in order to advance their cause, the Huguenots used subterfuge of various kinds, including the illicit carrying of messages. In this instance, truth was dependent on the integrity of its carrier, whether the messenger could be trusted and, therefore, their truth accepted. Both sides also sought to defend the truth by countering what they presented as the deceit of their opponents. Then, as now, acceptance of what is true depends on which side we are on and who we are prepared to believe.

‘Truth for us nowadays is not what is, but what others can be brought to accept’¹

Michel de Montaigne’s wry comment on the fickleness of his sixteenth-century French contemporaries, written during and in response to the kingdom’s religious wars, exposes the slippery nature of determining what is true in any period. Writing as he was in troubled times, Montaigne’s observation also speaks to our current anxieties about a widening ideological division in society in which competing truths appear to hold sway. It can prove instructive, therefore, to provide some historical perspective on contemporary preoccupations and on

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¹ M. de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, translated and edited by M.A. Screech (London, 1991), ‘On giving the lie’, 756: ‘Nostre verité de maintenant, ce n'est pas ce qui est, mais ce qui se persuade à autrui’.

what constitutes ‘acceptable truth’. The Protestant Reformation produced powerfully conflicted truths, for asserting one’s own beliefs meant denying those of others. It became a theological schism impossible to bridge, with both sides believing that they were facing ‘the enemies of truth’.² As divisions deepened, in France, the religious wars came to define the battle between what was true and what was false, who could be trusted and who might prove duplicitous. Yet, treachery might come from any quarter, not just openly declared enemies, but those previously thought to be friends and allies. Daily suspicions made neighbours increasingly unsure of who or what they could trust, who might deny them to the authorities or betray the local community.³ In the sovereign courts, royal judges sought to establish the truth of plots and other illicit activities carried out in support of a religious cause and to condemn those responsible for them. However, the definition of justice, too, was changeable during times of peace and war. Thus, actions condemned in one circumstance might be exonerated in another, as successive edicts pardoned rebellious deeds on both sides, and property seized legitimately during conflict had to be returned.⁴ The French religious wars are, therefore, a fruitful testing ground for thinking about how multiple truths can operate and coexist, jostling for attention within a complicated political, judicial and religious landscape. Contested truths were an inevitable outcome of confessional and other divisions, reflecting the fraught context in which they were propagated, for ‘truth had many layers’.⁵ The collision of judicial process and royal authority on the one hand with the various strands of opposition

² A phrase frequently used by John Calvin, for example in a letter to Antoine de Crussol, 31 July 1563’, in *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, 59 vols (Brunswick and Berlin, 1879), xx, 112.

³ J. Foa, ‘Who Goes There? To Live and Survive during the Wars of Religion, 1562–1598’, in FORUM: ‘Communities and Religious Identities in the Early Modern Francophone World, 1550–1700’, *French Historical Studies*, (2017), 425–38.

⁴ P. Roberts, *Peace and Authority during the French Religious Wars c.1560-1600*, (Basingstoke, 2013), 33–7, 94, 140.

⁵ A. Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know about Itself* (New Haven and London, 2014), 252.

which served to undermine them on the other, demonstrate that truth was not just the first but, ultimately, the principal casualty of the wars.

I

The pursuit of truth is central to many academic disciplines; its study is a source of fascination, too, in philosophy, psychology, theology, sociology and law, as well as history. Such studies reveal that, contrary to what we might expect and hope, truth can prove both unstable and destabilising. From an early age, children are encouraged by parents and teachers to tell the truth, although experiments have shown that even the very young practice deceit if they think that it is to their advantage and that they can get away with it.⁶ While people may claim to value and desire the truth from others, they frequently justify concealing aspects of it themselves and tell white lies on a daily basis.⁷ After all, while it is advantageous to be candid in some situations, telling the truth is not always the best policy and facing up to the truth can be inconvenient and uncomfortable for all concerned. To be brutally honest is to alienate and offend when most people rather seek to influence and persuade. Indeed, it is widely recognised that deception is a necessary survival strategy, but, while everyone depends on deception, no one wants to be deceived.⁸ Concealing the truth can also be profoundly damaging and unjust for those harmed or misled thereby.

Above all, the centrality of trust is key to our willingness to believe and accept the truth of, or as told to us by, others.⁹ The sociologist George Simmel claimed that all our relationships are predicated on the fine balance between expecting that our friends, or spouses or relatives will

⁶ A.D. Evans and K. Lee, 'Emergence of lying in very young children', *Developmental Psychology*, 49 (2013), 1958–63; A.D. Evans, F. Xu and K. Lee, 'When all signs point to you: Lies told in the face of evidence', *Developmental Psychology*, 47 (2011), 39–49.

⁷ Discussed in A. Katwala, 'The race to create a perfect lie detector - and the dangers of succeeding', *The Guardian*, 5 Sept.2019.

⁸ S. Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Hassocks, Sussex, 1978), 18–20.

⁹ P. Faulkner and T. Simpson (eds), *The Philosophy of Trust* (Oxford, 2017).

be honest with us, while accepting that this will not always be the case: ‘truthfulness and mendacity ... form a scale that registers the ratios of the intensity of these relationships’.¹⁰ If those with whom we are close prove to be more dishonest than is acceptable, then our trust in them, and often the relationship itself, will break down. Thus, the deceit of loved ones, in whom we place greatest trust, can prove almost impossible to bear. In our personal lives, and as historians, too, we tend to search for the truth in how people speak about themselves, both in the present and the past, but that is often not a reliable barometer. People pronounce reasoned and coherent narratives for why they act as they do which often rely on a degree of self-deception and creative thinking. They look to persuade others and in the process often convince themselves, a position with which they may persist even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Much supposed truth relies, too, on the fallibility of memory, leading to the disputing of facts and the merging or blurring of events that may be only feebly recalled or deliberately manipulated. As a result, it is entirely possible to mislead ourselves as well as others about what is true.

Nevertheless, it may seem as if the truth has never been as contested as it is today, with the widespread claims of fake news and alternative facts, and we have come to distrust what we are told by politicians and journalists perhaps more than ever.¹¹ Despite big data, instant communication and popular access to the means to livestream and record whatever events or incidents occur across the globe, the truth is not easily verifiable and remains deeply contested. Seeing is not believing; establishing the truth is not a simple process, for it is often in the eye of the beholder. Increasingly, it seems, subjectivity is dominant, objective thinking distrusted. ‘Group think’, but also individual truth, ‘my truth’, is all that counts. In this

¹⁰ G. Simmel, ‘The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 11 (1906), 446.

¹¹ W. Davies, ‘Why can’t we agree on what’s true anymore?’, *The Guardian*, 19 Sept. 2019 (the day before I first gave this talk), which begs the question if we ever did agree; M. Kakutani, *The Death of Truth* (New York, 2018); and ‘The Decade of Distrust’ presented by L. Kuenssberg on BBC Radio 4, 29 Feb. 2020.

circumstance, ‘truth is just a name for opinions’, for what we ‘can be brought to accept’ or the declarations of who we think we can trust.¹² Put another way, the truth is an accumulation of received information, what we perceive to be true and what we wish to be so. For scholars who feel that some form of truth is still worth seeking out, even if it can never be absolute, this kind of relativism may be disconcerting. Yet, is this current ‘crisis of truth’ real, or indeed true, historically-speaking? Hannah Arendt and Sissela Bok, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, provided forensic critiques of the strained relationship between truth and politics and the declining public trust and confidence in what politicians said.¹³ Indeed, truth has always been contested, we might say ‘in crisis’, alongside a wider debate about whether, in certain circumstances, lying, or at least concealment of the truth, is permissible. Thus, on examination, truth is conceptually complex and elusive, and it proves challenging to encapsulate what it is at any time, in any place.

II

What is truth? For Douglas Edwards ‘answering this question is notoriously difficult’.¹⁴ For moral philosophers, like Edwards, truth is metaphysical, dependent on belief as much as reality, and thus ‘elusive’. Its relationship to language and thought is key. Thus, truth is an abstract human construct of thought and speech rather than an objective fact or reflection of reality. Yet, establishing what is true is central, indeed, crucial, to systems of both belief and justice. Unsurprisingly, then, the establishment of the truth was and is the principal pursuit of

¹² F. Fernández-Armesto, *Truth: a History* (London, 1997), 2.

¹³ H. Arendt, ‘Truth and Politics’, *The New Yorker*, 25 Feb. 1967 (making a distinction between ‘factual’ and ‘rational’ truth and presented in a historical context from Plato and Hobbes on); H. Arendt, ‘Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers’, *The New York Review of Books*, 18 Nov. 1971; Bok, *Lying*, xviii.

¹⁴ D. Edwards, *The Metaphysics of Truth* (Oxford, 2018), 1. The philosophical literature on this question is extensive, for example, C.J.F. Williams, *What is Truth?* (Cambridge, 1976); R. Schantz (ed.), *What is Truth?* (Berlin and New York, 2002). A.C. Grayling, *An Introduction to Philosophical Logic* (Brighton and New Jersey, 1982), argues that ‘The *wrong* question to ask about truth is “what is truth?”’, 125, also cited by R.L. Kirkham, *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), who states that ‘there is little agreement about what the philosophical problem of truth is’, 1.

theologians and judges and will be central to this discussion. In particular, it will focus on the views on truth and untruth held in the sixteenth century by thinkers such as Montaigne, but also others who lived through and commented on the French religious wars, as well as those who were tried in its courts and by those who pronounced sentence on them. Particularly contested was the concept of religious truth, or 'Truth', capitalised by both sides to assert that its singularity was not open to challenge. Faced by prosecution, the upholding of religious truth might clash with the need to establish the judicial truth, itself framed in spiritual terms. In this way, both judge and accused sought to defend the truth, as they interpreted it, in the sight of God. Both believed that divine will would prevail to support justice by revealing the truth. Central here is the dichotomy between absolute truth and competing truths, the certainty of both sides that their truth would prevail even though that truth was often strategic and frequently partial.

The Renaissance scholar, Desiderius Erasmus, in his *Adages*, when discussing 'In vino veritas', recalled that a 'proverb is still in common use today, to the effect that you never hear the truth from anyone, save only from three kinds of person: children, drunkards and madmen'.¹⁵ Thus, the wise, experienced and sober are careful to be economical with the truth, to safeguard secrets as well as not to cause offence. Humanists such as Erasmus and Montaigne drew on classical learning for their comments on truth and lies, both subjects of lively discussion in ancient philosophy. At risk of oversimplifying centuries of debate, a quick summary should be at least helpful here. Aristotle and other philosophers had debated whether truth was knowable or was simply a matter of interpretation. By the Middle Ages, these issues were particularly rehearsed in theological debate and, with the advent of the Reformation, became increasingly pertinent. Saints Augustine and Anselm and Thomas

¹⁵ D. Erasmus, *Adages*, I vii 17.

Aquinas focused on truth being essentially divine, but with differing shades of tolerance for its concealment, dependent on the circumstances. For Augustine, it was simple; to lie was to sin against God, thus all lies were equally sinful and to be condemned, whereas Aquinas saw more gradations. He condemned all lying as sinful, but wrote that ‘the greater the good intended, the more is the sin of lying diminished in gravity’.¹⁶ Erasmus conceded, too, that to tell a lie was unchristian, but that withholding or concealing the truth was ‘acceptable and in certain cases even prudent’. Humanists in general asserted that they were ‘strongly committed to the truth’, and rejected allegations that through their rhetorical flourishes they deliberately distorted it.¹⁷

While Alan Nelson claims that a ‘potentially frustrating feature of early modern philosophical theories is that truth is often taken to be comparatively unproblematic’, Stefania Tutino concludes that the ‘fragility of the relationship between truth and language ... originated in the early modern world’, and it was then that thinkers perceived and reflected on the ‘cracks that started to appear in the system linking language, truth, and Truth’.¹⁸ In particular, at the time of the Protestant Reformation, and the greatest and most systematic challenge to the authority of the Catholic Church, the battle for truth was at its most fraught. In order to uphold that truth, however, its champions needed to operate clandestinely. Maintaining this work became more important than bearing witness to it. Secrets sometimes needed to be kept and, therefore, the truth concealed, but a moral judgement had to be made in what circumstances that behaviour was defensible before God. For members of a religious

¹⁶ Quoted in J.P. Sommerville, ‘The “New Art of Lying”’: Equivocation, Mental Reservation, and Casuistry’, in E. Leites (ed.), *Conscience and Casuistry in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2002), 161.

¹⁷ T. van Houdt ‘Word Histories and Beyond: Towards a Conceptualization of Fraud and Deceit in Early Modern Times’, in T. van Houdt, J. L. de Jong, Z. Kwak, M. Spies, M. van Vaeck (eds), *On the Edge of Truth and Honesty: Principles and Strategies of Fraud and Deceit in the Early Modern Period* (Leiden, 2002), 11, 19; see also the essay by J. Trapman, ‘Erasmus on Lying and Simulation’, in the same volume, 33-46.

¹⁸ A.H. Nelson, ‘Early Modern Theories of Truth’, in M. Glanzberg (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Truth* (Oxford, 2018); S. Tutino, *Shadows of Doubt: Language and Truth in Post-Reformation Catholic Culture* (Oxford, 2014), 190.

minority, upholding the 'Truth' of their faith could clash with the imperative to be truthful.

As Tutino has argued, '[u]nderstanding the early modern origin of this tension can give us a better perspective as we try to reflect on the relationship between true, false, and feigned.'¹⁹

With its vast historiography, many scholars have written extensively and expertly on the notion of mental reservation or equivocation, effectively the concealment of truth, a phenomenon that became a crucial safeguard for many during the Reformation period. The discussion to date has mainly focused on those brought before the inquisition in Italy and Spain, on the one hand, and the Jesuits' moral justification for how lying could be reconciled with its prohibition on the other. This was also the case for the Recusants in England, attending Protestant services while continuing Catholic worship at home. Scholars have provided their own and contemporary definitions of what this meant in practice: 'inner qualification was believed to preserve an apparently untrue spoken expression from being a lie'.²⁰ For instance, by making a distinction between mental and spoken language, 'it is not lying to make a spoken assertion which you believe to be false ... provided that you add in thought some words which make the whole truthful'.²¹ In particular, it allowed someone to 'reconcile the prohibition on lying with the obligation of keeping a secret', and as such it was a 'more or less ethically acceptable, way to allow a certain course of action ... in the name of a different, and higher, moral principle'.²² This was the case for the confessor torn between 'the moral imperative of keeping the confessional seal intact ... [and] the other moral imperative of not lying'.²³ It was essential, too, for those brought before the courts on accusations of heresy or dissent, for 'equivocation was a necessary resource against

¹⁹ S. Tutino, 'Nothing But the Truth? Hermeneutics and Morality in the Doctrines of Equivocation and Mental Reservation in Early Modern Europe', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 64 (2011), 152.

²⁰ Van Houdt 'Word Histories and Beyond', 11.

²¹ Sommerville, 'The "New Art of Lying"', 160.

²² Van Houdt 'Word Histories and Beyond', 11; Tutino, 'Nothing But the Truth?', 115–16.

²³ Tutino, 'Nothing But the Truth?', 121.

interrogation in a world of strong convictions, when deponents were not in any serious doubt about the truth or falsehood of what they said'.²⁴ Such certainty cemented the belief in where truth lay and how best it could be protected by being concealed from its detractors.

The Augustinian dilemma that lying could never be justified remained, however. Largely associated with the Jesuits, so-called casuistry later came to be seen as amoral, or morally reprehensible, especially for a committed Jansenist like Blaise Pascal. Yet, recent scholars have sought to defend it. Braun and Vallance define it as, 'a theory of practical reasoning developed for dealing with cases in which particular courses of action provoked moral doubt', that the conscience acted as intermediary between God and man, and that the resulting strictures were stringent and rigorous not lax.²⁵ To some extent, what we are looking at here is a distinction between the position of ecclesiastical and secular courts, or perhaps, more precisely, between ecclesiastical and secular judges, or, rather, which side of the judicial process the accused was on. From the inquisitors' perspective, 'truth was one' and the Church saw itself as the only channel through which it was revealed, thus heresy undermined the 'unity of the truth' and heretics were 'lacking in both truth and in virtue' and were, above all, 'untrustworthy'.²⁶ By contrast, in the late sixteenth century, the Jesuit Gregory of Valencia, sought to question the legitimacy of the court system itself that challenged God's truth, 'such as the case of a man *unjustly* interrogated'. In those specific circumstances, he argued, a man could use both ambiguous speech and forms of mental reservation, 'for the judge in this case is *illegitimate*'.²⁷ Truth was central to the judicial

²⁴ Fernández-Armesto, *Truth*, 163–4.

²⁵ H.E. Braun and E. Vallance (eds), *Contexts of Conscience in early modern Europe, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke, 2004), x.

²⁶ N.S. Davidson, "'Fuggir la libertà della coscienza": Conscience and the Inquisition in Sixteenth-Century Italy', in Braun and Vallance (eds), *Contexts of Conscience*, 52–3, 55.

²⁷ Tutino, 'Nothing But the Truth?', 136.

process that framed these encounters, but its interpretation and understanding remained deliberately elusive.

III

The phenomenon of mental reservation has been less extensively explored in the case of France. Its inquisitorial system of examination by the judges of the secular *parlements*, and the emphasis on sedition rather than heresy in the courts, has clear parallels, however. Furthermore, it was not just the Huguenots, but their coreligionists from foreign states, who had to face this challenge when they operated in the French kingdom. Traditionally, though, scholars of the French Reformation have tended to focus rather on the Calvinist condemnation of both deceit and dissent, more specifically, the practice of so-called Nicodemism, with believers urged to openly confess their faith, not keep it secret in their hearts.²⁸ There was much soul-searching, too, among Calvinist authors about the internal torments of acting against one's conscience. Yet, as with their covert support for political rebellion, it is demonstrable that Geneva was central to the clandestine organisation of the French Reformed churches and their networks. While asserting that 'God is truth', and quick to condemn Nicodemites for concealing their faith, John Calvin and Theodore Beza made extensive use of deceptive practices to further their cause while repeatedly denying that they were doing so. As Jon Balsarak puts it, 'Geneva's systematic employment of falsehood and dissembling in their ministry to France must be recognized and acknowledged ... to uncover the true character of the French Reformation'.²⁹ Thus, at the highest levels of the Reformed

²⁸ On more positive views of Nicodemites, C. Kolofsky, *Evening's Empire: A History of the Night in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2011), 49.

²⁹ J. Balsarak, 'Geneva' Use of Lies, Deceit, and Simulation in their Efforts to Reform France, 1536–1563', *Harvard Theological Review*, 112, 1 (2019), 76-100: <https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/publications/genevas-use-of-lies-deceit-and-simulation-in-their-efforts-to-ref> (consulted 19 Feb. 2019).

Church these practices were commonplace, if not openly condoned in the cause of a higher principle, upholding ‘the truth of Scripture’.

A tendency to dissimulation was, thus, a result of the religious controversies arising from the Reformation, when concealing your faith and illicit activities was particularly necessary to avoid prosecution. As Alexandra Walsham argues, ‘[a]gainst a back drop of coercion and violence, dissimulation might be a legitimate short-term solution, a prudent strategy’.³⁰ As a member of a minority religion, it was dangerous to admit and speak openly about one’s faith or beliefs, as was true for those brought before the inquisition in the Middle Ages. The vexed relationship between inner conviction and outward conduct, private belief and public behaviour and the separation between physical and spiritual self, had a profound effect on individual perceptions of truth. Indeed, whatever the religious drivers for concealment and deception, contemporary and modern authors, such as Perez Zagorin and Jon Snyder, have emphasised the extent to which the early modern period should be viewed, in its entirety, as an age of dissimulation.³¹ Summed up most succinctly, once again, by Montaigne, ‘dissimulation is one of the most striking characteristics of our age’. He also declared, ‘what man are we to trust when he speaks of himself, seeing there are few, perhaps none, whom we can trust when they speak of others, where they have less to gain from lying’ which ‘is an accursed vice’.³² The implication of such a position was that almost no one was trustworthy and everyone had a reason to conceal the truth.

Furthermore, many observers claimed that it had become the fashion of the time to dissemble, to conceal your true feelings, to play a part or to present a manufactured self, as advocated by

³⁰ A. Walsham, ‘Ordeals of Conscience: Casuistry, Conformity and Confessional Identity in Post-Reformation England’, in Braun and Vallance (eds), *Contexts of Conscience*, 47.

³¹ P. Zagorin, *Ways of Lying: Dissimulation, Persecution and Conformity in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 1990) and ‘The Historical Significance of Lying and Dissimulation’, *Social Research* 63.3 (1996), 863–912; J.R. Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy in Early Modern Europe* (Berkeley and London, 2009).

³² Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, ‘On giving the lie’, 756; ‘On liars’, 35.

Renaissance authors such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Baldassare Castiglione. According to Snyder, the discourse on dissimulation prevailed among dominant social groups especially in Italy, creating a ‘culture of secrecy’, as well as the opportunity for ‘self-expression and self-representation’, and revealing the tension between ‘the concern to publish the truth and that of protecting it’.³³ Erasmus commented that, ‘[t]ruth however is not always opposed to falsehood; sometimes its opposite is pretence. A man can speak sincerely and what he says may be false; and what he says can be true though he does not speak the truth.’³⁴

Appearances could be deceiving. In particular, to appear what you were not, or to have your reactions be so inscrutable that no one could be sure what you were thinking, became *à la mode* at the French court, including wearing masks both actual and metaphorical. Henri III of France developed a particular reputation for being adept at concealing his true feelings, a trait which his opponents exploited, and which reinforced a sense of distrust that was one of the contributory factors in the failed promise of his reign.³⁵ Montaigne even claimed that such deception was a peculiarly French vice and that lying ‘at the present time is for them a virtue’ and ‘more commonplace among us than any of the others’.³⁶ The religious wars brought with them a particular dilemma, as Frenchman was pitted against Frenchman, not just on the battlefield and in the streets, but also in the courtroom. Avoiding capture and prosecution to safeguard one’s faith might involve physical disguise as well as mental dissimulation, in order to carry out illicit and potentially seditious acts. But there was a necessity in doing so, for the enemies of truth needed to be defeated and, as such, a degree of deception could serve God’s cause.

³³ Snyder, *Dissimulation and the Culture of Secrecy*, xvi–xvii.

³⁴ Erasmus, *Adages*, I vii 17.

³⁵ X. Le Person, “*Pratiques*” et “*practiqueurs*”. *La vie politique à la fin du règne de Henri III (1584–1589)* (Geneva, 2002).

³⁶ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, ‘On giving the lie’, 756; note his switch between ‘them’ and ‘us’.

IV

As is evident, much of the scholarship on truth and falsehood looks at the various debates from the philosophical or theological point of view. Interesting as it is to know what humanist scholars and other elites of the period thought about these issues, it does not tell us much about the lived experience, the real risks and practical dangers, as well as moral dilemmas, which individuals faced in negotiating this world. One place to look for these encounters, as we have seen, is in the courtroom, but this lens, too, is problematic. Thomas Weigend pronounces, rather starkly, that '[f]inding the Truth is a difficult task under any set of circumstances, but finding the truth in the context of crime and punishment is almost impossible.'³⁷ He argues further that the criminal process provides 'a strong incentive for ... concealing relevant facts' and 'a vested interest in concealing the truth'. Tension between the judge's quest for truth and the accused's motivation to prevent its discovery, results in the need to seek a credible judgement based on substantive truth and resulting in 'natural justice', for 'truth and justice are intimately intertwined'.³⁸ Torture, too, in Weigend's judgement, 'turns out to be less than effective in producing the truth'.³⁹ Montaigne, himself a judge in the *parlement* at Bordeaux, echoes this:

Torture is a dangerous innovation; it would appear that it is an assay not of the truth but of a man's endurance. The man who can endure it hides the truth: so does he who cannot. For why should pain make me confess what is true rather than force me to say what is not true?⁴⁰

³⁷ T. Weigend, 'Is the Criminal Process about Truth?: A German Perspective', *Harvard Journal of Law & Public Policy*, 26 (2003) [special issue on 'Law & Truth'], 157.

³⁸ Weigend, 'Is the Criminal Process about Truth?', 157, 160, 172.

³⁹ Weigend, 'Is the Criminal Process about Truth?', 160–61.

⁴⁰ Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 'On conscience', 414.

Yet studies of the use of early modern torture show that it was often carefully calibrated and judges were '[a]ware that torture did not always yield the truth but anxious to ensure that it did so'.⁴¹ The role of God in the early modern court and the torture chamber was significant, for both the judges and the accused. In the heightened atmosphere of French witchcraft trials, the confession was key to a conviction, but its refusal could also be damning for the accused, since the truth needed to be heard.⁴² This imperative was crucial, too, in the case of other so-called moral crimes. In Geneva, according to Sara Beam, 'truth, conscience and sin were concepts constantly evoked by the interrogators during torture sessions' aiming for 'unadulterated truth produced by a purified soul'.⁴³ The spiritual intent might be less explicitly evoked in Catholic France than it was in Calvinist Geneva, but that does not mean that God was not believed to be present in the chamber, through his judicial representatives, as we will see.

Truth is difficult to pin down, therefore, particularly when we look at it historically, and religious confrontation exacerbates its fragility. Furthermore, our interest should not be so much in determining what was true from what was not, but how contemporaries talked about, and conceived, the role of truth. This concerns both the judges and the accused. The role of truth in judicial procedures was freighted by expectations on both sides. The judges' openly declared pursuit of truth, articulated in interrogations and court procedures is a good example. In the inquisitorial system of Roman law that prevailed in France and elsewhere, dominated by the assessment by judges, truth needed to be measured and not directed too much by what the judicial perception was of what that truth might be. Equally, those before the courts were

⁴¹ S. Beam, 'Rites of Torture in Reformation Geneva', in G. Murdock, P. Roberts and A. Spicer (eds), *Ritual and Violence: Natalie Zemon Davis and Early Modern France* (Oxford, Past and Present Supplement, 2012), 201.

⁴² V. Krause, *Witchcraft, Demonology, and Confession in Early Modern France* (Cambridge, 2015): 'The truth must be spoken – or rather, to take the standpoint of the inquisitor and then demonologist, it can only be *heard*.' Krause also asserts that, during this period, hearing rather than vision was held to be the most spiritual sense.

⁴³ Beam, 'Rites of Torture', 201, 210.

often guided by what they thought the judges wanted to hear, or rather what version of the truth might be most likely to secure their release.⁴⁴ Judicial truth had to be palatable as well as procedural. It was valorised, but judges actually needed to show restraint in its exercise as with the use of torture. So we have to be careful with our reliance on the veracity of court papers, compounded by the fact that we have relatively few of the sort of documents surviving which would tell us about these procedures in the French courts in any detail.

Truth be told, the survival of interrogation documents for the sixteenth century is sparse, particularly from the early decades of the wars, the 1560s and 1570s, and often involves high profile cases.⁴⁵ Much of it is dependent on chance or circumstance and the diligent copying out after the event can be crucial to interpret the original scrawl. Those that do survive are often related to the importance of the case, or how unusual it was, so again we have to be careful about what we can extrapolate from these ‘exceptional norms’. On the other hand, they can still tell us a great deal about the operation of truth in the ‘courtroom’ in sixteenth-century France. The truth was used in two ways during interrogations and stock phrases and judicial formulae recur in many documents. Under oath, the accused was admonished, sometimes repeatedly, ‘to tell the truth’ (*dire la vérité*), at other times they were put under pressure to respond in a particular way by a confrontational assertion regarding what was ‘the truth’. So that they could not deny that what was written down was other than the truth they had given, they were asked to sign (if they could do so) at the end, or even sometimes on every page, of the account, which was most likely read to them. In response to the appeals of those subject to it, the use of torture was also defended in these terms, as a way of

⁴⁴ For a German example, see J.F. Harrington, ‘Tortured Truths: The Self-Expositions of a Juvenile Career Criminal in Early Modern Nuremberg’, *German History* 23 (2005), 143–71, and on ‘the early modern axiom that pain always produced truth, and thus revealed the true voice of the interrogated’ (147).

⁴⁵ The vital work of A. Soman, who has done so much to open our eyes to the riches of the archives of the parlement, including, ‘The Parlement of Paris and the Great Witch Hunt (1565–1640)’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 9, (1978), 30–44, is focused mainly on the period from the 1580s when the sources are more abundant.

determining or ‘knowing the truth’ and ‘to find out and extract the truth from [the accused’s] mouth’.⁴⁶ Similarly, ‘false testimony’ was to be severely punished, that is what was ‘falsely and contrary to the truth, deposed against’ someone.⁴⁷ In many cases, the judges chose to believe or dismiss what they heard, determining the truth as they saw fit. The necessity of determining what was ‘véritable’ also led to confrontations between prisoners and/or witnesses with conflicting testimonies. As they stood face-to-face with one another, and before the judges, they were under pressure to defend and uphold their statements in order to see whose version of the truth would prevail. This process will be explored here with reference to a few specific, but very different, case studies from 1570s, and what they can tell us about the uses of truth. In particular, it is important to consider how the judges and the accused responded in the court and if this suggests that they were aware or not of the wider debate of the role of truth and the status of lying for the fate of the soul.

V

The first case is an unusually detailed treason trial from 1574 and a contemporary *cause célèbre*.⁴⁸ It involved accusations against close associates of the king’s youngest brother, the duke of Alençon. They were accused of plotting with Protestant nobles and their international allies, and even an Italian astrologer, to place Alençon on the throne. Although there was a confessional element, the principal charges were political rather than religious; nevertheless, spiritual concerns played a central role for both the accused and their prosecutors. We are fortunate to have the complete transcript of all the depositions and interrogations because they were published a few years afterwards by the Calvinist pastor, Simon Goulart, in his

⁴⁶ Some examples: Archives nationales, Paris [hereafter AN), X/2a/129, 492v, 17 Mar.1562, ‘savoir la verité’; X/2b/80, 31 July 1574, ‘pour scavoit et tirer par sa bouche la verité’.

⁴⁷ AN, X/2b/85, 30 June 1575, ‘faulx tesmoignaige ... faulcement et contre verité desposé alencontre de’.

⁴⁸ I have recently discussed this trial in more detail, and from a different perspective, in ‘Violence by Royal Command: A Judicial ‘Moment’ 1574–1575’, *French History*, 33 (2019), 199–217.

Mémoires de l'estat de France.⁴⁹ Those tried were asked to tell the truth repeatedly, particularly in the latter stages of the trial when torture was introduced. The account of their interrogations demonstrates the vivid escalation in the pressure put upon them and, thereby, to incriminate themselves and their accomplices. Meanwhile, rumours swirled around the case, with Sigismondo di Cavalli, the Venetian ambassador, declaring that 'no one knows the truth of all this'.⁵⁰ The principal suspects, Joseph de Boniface, sieur de La Molle, and Annibal de Coconat took very different approaches to their predicament. La Molle chose outright denial. He repeatedly 'said that he knew nothing' in response to the twenty-one questions he was asked, and of which he had sight the evening before, extrapolating only occasionally to declare a statement as 'false' or an event as never having happened.⁵¹ He was probably trusting in his master's protection to come to his rescue, while his alleged accomplice, Coconat, went for full and frank disclosure, probably in the hope that he might be granted a royal pardon. Neither strategy served them well. After three weeks of questioning, both men were condemned and swiftly executed.

La Molle and Coconat defended themselves as having been loyal and obedient to the young prince to counter accusations of their disloyalty and disobedience to the crown. Alençon and his brother-in-law, Henri de Navarre, were also forced to testify, with the former declaring 'in the word of a prince that the above is the truth', while Navarre complained that the crown chose not to trust him, but only the lies of his enemies 'and the malice of those who have lied about me'.⁵² Aristocratic privilege protected the princes of the blood, but did not prevent them from being held under suspicion through effective house arrest. For the nobility, in

⁴⁹ S. Goulart, *Mémoires de l'estat de France sous Charles Neufiesme*, iii (1577), 208–81.

⁵⁰ Quoted in M.P. Holt, *The Duke of Anjou and the Politique Struggle during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge, 1986), 41.

⁵¹ Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 208–10: 'dit qu'il n'en sait rien'. Declarations of knowing nothing were contrary to the guidance on mental reservation.

⁵² Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 219, 220, 224: 'en parole de prince que ce que dessus est la vérité'; 'la meschanceté de ceux qui peuvent avoir menty de moy'.

particular, truth and trustworthiness were tightly bound up with a sense of honour. To be dishonest was to be dishonourable. Truth was a matter of honour, and to give someone the lie was to dishonour them, as we know from several high profile instances.⁵³ When the accused were confronted with those who had testified against them, it was to test the resolve as well as the conscience of both parties that they had told the truth, as well as providing the opportunity for them to impugn each other's reputation or honour. Often these confrontations concluded with the accuser persisting with the truth of what they had asserted and the accused declaring it to be untrue.⁵⁴ When confronted by the testimonies of others which challenged his claims to know nothing, La Molle declared that he was only answerable to the truth and then only in the duke, his master's, presence. Coconat also sought to bring in the duke of Guise as a 'truthful (or trustworthy) prince' to argue his case.⁵⁵

The judges in the trial, which was expedited swiftly outside the timetable of normal or ordinary justice, explicitly tied the declaration of the truth to service to the king, that there was 'no service more agreeable to the king than to tell the truth'.⁵⁶ Once torture began, the condemned were repeatedly asked to confess the truth, but they were more concerned with the fate of their souls, making it clear that to persist in a denial or untruth made no sense. François de Tourtay, as his torture continued, asked in desperation, 'what do you want me to tell you? I promise you that I know only what I have said', and 'what use would it be for me to deny it, since you have condemned me to death?'⁵⁷ Furthermore, he declared that God should damn him if he knew any more and, despite the urging of his judges, stayed firm in

⁵³ For instance, Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris) [hereafter BNF], MS Dupuy 755, 'Mélange des divers titres et mémoires', 143, dispute between lieutenant-governor Blaise de Monluc and marshal Montmorency-Damville, Feb.1570.

⁵⁴ For examples, see Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 235–6, 240–1, 260–1.

⁵⁵ Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 248: 'prince véritable'.

⁵⁶ Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 256: 'il ne sauroit faire service plus agréable au Roy que de dire vérité'.

⁵⁷ Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 256–7: 'Que voulez-vous que je vous die? Je vous promets que je n'en say que ce que j'en ay dit'; 'Que me serviroit-il de le nier, puisque vous m'avez condamnez à la mort?'.

this assertion right up to his execution.⁵⁸ La Molle also continued to resist through several rounds of torture. While the judges told him that he would ‘never enter paradise unless he discharged his conscience’, he asserted that he sought nothing more than ‘to pray to God for the rest of my life’. La Molle eventually broke down, admitting that he had not told the truth before because his master the duke had ‘obliged him a hundred thousand times, on my life and all that I hold dear in this world to say nothing’.⁵⁹ Thus, his fidelity to his master, to keep his secret, had trumped La Molle’s obligation to tell the truth. As the judges put it, he had thus committed ‘his heart to the world and to the service of great lords, and had forgotten God’, and the Jesuits would probably have agreed. Like Tourtay, once he had confessed, La Molle declared that God should ‘damn his soul if he knew anymore’, and ‘I know no more on the damnation of my soul’ and by the ‘True eternal God’.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, right up until the moment that he was beheaded, the judges continued their demands that he tell the truth, not only so as to determine who was culpable for the plot against the king, but in the interests of La Molle’s salvation.

In this, as in other trials, it was not at all unusual for a suspect to declare as ‘true’ or ‘véritable’ certain aspects of the accusations made, while denying others, perhaps so as to deflect suspicion that they were concealing something. The language of truthfulness and lying permeated both the judges’ rhetoric and the defendants’ discourse. The accused were urged not to lie and they, in turn, pleaded their innocence. During the La Molle/Coconat trial, Catherine de Medici and others enquired directly from the procureur-general of the Paris *parlement* what the truth was in regard to the supposed threat to Charles IX’s life, ‘the truth

⁵⁸ Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 259, 262.

⁵⁹ Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 267–9: ‘n’entrera jamais en paradis s’il ne descharge sa conscience’; ‘ne demande autre chose que d’estre enfermé en un couvent, pour prier Dieu le reste de ma vie’; ‘m’ayant obligé cent mille fois, me commanda sur ma vie et sur ce que j’avois le plus cher en ce monde que je ne disse rien’.

⁶⁰ Goulart, *Mémoires*, iii, 270, 272–3, 279: ‘son cœur au monde et aux service des grands seigneurs, et a oublié Dieu’; ‘damne son ame s’il en sait aucunes’; ‘je ne say autre chose sur la damnation de mon ame’, ‘Vray Dieu éternel’.

of the king's illness' and the enchantment of Alençon by La Molle.⁶¹ Directly afterwards, the king himself asked the judges to tell him what lessons could be learned. Royal justice and, by extension, divine justice had to be upheld, especially when the life of the monarch was under threat. The judicial pursuit of the truth aimed to stabilise the French polity threatened by the deception of those of the king's subjects who sought to destroy him and, thus, his kingdom.

VI

The worst of these wars is that the cards are so mixed up, with your enemy indistinguishable from you by any clear indication of language or deportment, being brought up under the same laws, manners and climate, that it is not easy to avoid confusion and disorder.⁶²

As the conflict progressed, this sense of confusion that Montaigne describes was intensified. In such circumstances, the Protestant minority in particular had no choice but to rely on the trustworthiness of their coreligionists, forming new associations through faith as well as reinforcing some already established bonds. This spiritual solidarity clearly strengthened the sense of common endeavour and shared risk, at a time when lives were endangered for holding a particular view or belief and everyday activities reinterpreted as suspect and threatening.⁶³ The establishment of religious 'Truth', whatever one's faith, was incontestable and brought certainty. Religious dissent encouraged the promotion of this truth through subterfuge. One striking example is the illicit carrying of messages and correspondence by the Huguenots. This practice involved deceit in the service of 'Truth', 'the truth of God's word', as the Huguenots saw it, with the carriage of letters to facilitate communication between the leadership, including nobles and ministers, the end therefore justifying the

⁶¹ BNF, MS Dupuy 590, 'Recueil des pièces', 24 and 26, letters from Catherine and the sieur de Lanssac to Jean de La Guesle, 26 and 29 April 1574, re the need to 'sçavoir la verité' and to check 'la verité du mal du roi'.

⁶² Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, 'On conscience', 410.

⁶³ Foa, 'Who Goes There?'

means. The concealment of activities was defensible because it allowed the true religion to be perpetuated, to flourish, to triumph, in the face of temporal power. This, of course, brought those carrying out such actions before the courts, which were defending truth of another sort.

Discerning the true from the false was even more vital at a time of contested belief. It was important to know who you could trust, that some sources of news were more reliable than others, as were some messengers if they were to give a truthful account since, for the sake of secrecy, many messages were transmitted orally. The frustration of getting reliable news is reflected in contemporary correspondence. Thus the Huguenot sieur de Montjay wrote from England in January 1569, requesting an update on how his coreligionists were faring, as he suspected that the French ambassador ‘often silenced the most truthful (reports) and (those) at which we would most rejoice’.⁶⁴ This transport across borders caused problems for ambassadorial messengers too. Edmund Mather, who worked as a courier for the English ambassador to France, commented from Boulogne that, ‘(a)s troubled waters be ... furthest from the frontier, so are news bruited in remote places oft times furthest from the truth’.⁶⁵ Mather knew more about the hazards of circulating news than most as the English authorities arrested, interrogated and executed him for treason, in 1572, for acting as a double agent in collusion with Spain. Furthermore, from prison, after his condemnation, he wrote that because of his ‘error’, and with nothing to lose, he might be expected ‘more plainly to discourse the truth’.⁶⁶ Thus, Mather asserted that he was a more reliable source precisely because he had previously proved untrustworthy!

⁶⁴ BNF, MS Cinq Cents Colbert 24, fo. 363: ‘bien souvent luy taizent les plus véritables et dequoy nous serions les plus resjouiz’. More broadly on this issue, see Pettegree, *The Invention of News*.

⁶⁵ C[alendar of]S[tate]P[apers]F[oreign], 70/107, 52–3, May 1569.

⁶⁶ British Museum, Harleian Manuscripts 0/6991, fo.11 (undated), Mather to the Earl of Leicester and Lord Burghley.

Someone who almost certainly crossed paths with Mather at the English ambassador's house was the merchant, Jehan Thivignat. The account of his arrest and interrogation at Dieppe in May 1570, for smuggling concealed correspondence to England, survives because officials subsequently sent it to Paris for scrutiny by the crown.⁶⁷ Thivignat was three times asked to 'dire la vérité' and twice challenged on the truth of his testimony. Despite the danger he was in, he did not appear to dissemble at all. It would seem that he was open and honest about his activities, his acquaintances and even his faith. We can compare his experience with that of Henri Fléel, arrested between Saint-Omer and Calais in the same year for carrying correspondence between the Netherlands and England.⁶⁸ Here, the focus was on the religious beliefs of the accused which probably resulted in a death sentence before the Council of Troubles. By contrast, Thivignat mentioned attending Protestant services in the French church in London as well as his frequent carriage of correspondence to and from Protestant exiles in England. In another surviving case, including a detailed interrogation and prepared questions, the royal sergent, Claude Boursier, was sentenced to death for having evaded his majesty's justice by escaping from the prison of the *Conciergerie* in Paris.⁶⁹ He had originally been condemned for blasphemy, rather than heresy, against which he had appealed. However, his interrogators showed no interest in his religious views, focusing rather on the veracity of the account he gave of his escape and the contacts he had with others outside the prison. While at pains to point out the 'véritable' details of the accounts made by witnesses, Boursier's story was not believed by the judges and he was subsequently executed.

⁶⁷ BNF, MS français 15551, fos. 272–7 (10 May 1570); I am currently writing a full-length study centred on this incident.

⁶⁸ A.L.E. Verheyden, 'Une correspondance inédite adressée par des familles protestantes des Pays-Bas à leurs coreligionnaires d'Angleterre (11 novembre 1569–25 février 1570)', Extrait du *Bulletin de la Commission Royale d'Histoire*, cxx (1955), 95–257.

⁶⁹ AN, X/2b/1174, 'Chambre criminelle ou de la Tournelle'; Archives historiques de la Préfecture de Police (Paris) [hereafter AHPP], Conciergerie, AB 3, 102v (31 Oct. 1569), judgement (18 Feb. 1570).

Significantly, although his interrogation does not survive, and we know that he was tortured and said to have confessed to having plotted to kill the king, Jehan Abraham was arrested for much the same offence as Thivignat in July 1575.⁷⁰ Partly this was due to his closeness to a high-ranking rebel, as Abraham was secretary to Henri, prince of Condé, then in exile in the Empire. Timing was equally important though. When Thivignat was arrested, the crown was negotiating peace. When Abraham was seized, the crown was still fearful of Protestant reprisals for the St Bartholomew's Day massacres of 1572 and other plots.⁷¹ Thus, the type of truth extracted by the royal judges in these circumstances was also shaped by the prevailing political climate. Abraham's account (which does not survive), extracted under torture, was incriminating, whereas Thivignat's was much more about information-gathering. Plus Thivignat was a small cog in a much wider network and he was forthright about his role, that he did this as a favour and was not paid to do so. It seemed to be a matter of honour for him that this 'truth' was understood, although he certainly knew that what he was doing was illicit in view of the deliberate measures he took to conceal the letters he was carrying.

The network around Thivignat included not only those who supplied him, but others charged with carrying correspondence for the English ambassador to France. The 'distinction between spies and official couriers', as seen with Mather, was a fine one; many ambassadorial messengers were regularly detained and, therefore, their communications disrupted.⁷² In September 1568, an Englishman charged with carrying letters from Paris to England was arrested by the authorities at Rouen.⁷³ Their suspicions had been aroused, they told the king, by his 'disguises, variations and lies, while trembling', and the fact that he had tried to

⁷⁰ AHPP, Conciergerie, AB 5, fo. 10r (19 July 1575), judgement (13 Aug.).

⁷¹ Roberts, 'Violence by Royal Command', esp. 210.

⁷² V. Groebner, *Who Are You? Identification, Deception, and Surveillance in Early Modern Europe*, trans. M. Kyburz and J. Peck (New York, 2007), 166.

⁷³ BnF, MS fr 15548, fo. 10r (3 Sept. 1568), president of the *parlement* at Rouen to the king: 'les desguisemens, variations et menteries avec un tremblement'.

dispose of several packets of the letters in question. As a result, they had opened one and were concerned enough about their contents, and the ill-will expressed therein to the crown, to send them on and to imprison the courier. We know from other correspondence that this was one of the English ambassador's men and Queen Elizabeth was outraged by both the detention and confiscation.⁷⁴ The French ambassador to England faced similar problems with getting his dispatches through, including deliberate obstruction and interception. In addition, ambassadorial disputes regarding the truth or otherwise of each other's reports was commonplace.

The suspicion with which ambassadors were viewed by the courts in which they were resident intensified at a time of confessional conflict. They were suspected of subterfuge and the conscious distortion of events. Catherine de Medici commented on the 'fine opinions ... customarily' expressed by the English ambassador, Henry Norris, as 'so false, malicious and contrary' and 'entirely false'.⁷⁵ In the fraught circumstances of the religious wars, the need to establish the truth and counter the false claims of adversaries could prove vital. Thus, in January 1569, the young prince Henri of Navarre wrote to Elizabeth's chief minister, William Cecil, regarding the Huguenots' military position, so that 'you have truly understood the state of our arms ... without disguising anything as readily as do our enemies who, in all sorts of ways, hunt down the truth'.⁷⁶ Following defeat at the Battle of Jarnac a couple of months later, Henri once again sought to downplay to their allies the seriousness of the Huguenot losses and the rumours spread by the other side, for 'our enemies publish as they please', whereas this messenger 'will not disguise nor conceal any of it'.⁷⁷ His mother, the Queen of

⁷⁴ CSPF, 70/101, 30 (6 Sept. 1568), English ambassador in Paris, Henry Norris, to Cecil.

⁷⁵ *Lettres de Catherine de Médicis*, ed. H de La Ferrière, iii (Paris, 1887), 261 (9 July 1569), Catherine to the French ambassador to England, Bertrand de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénélon, 'beaux advis ... selon sa coutume ... sy faulx, malicieux et controuvez ... entierement faulx'.

⁷⁶ CSPF, 70/105, fo. 48 (10 Jan. 1569), Navarre to Cecil, 'vous ayez véritablement entendu l'estat de noz armes ... sans vous desguiser aucune chose comme voluntiers font noz ennemys qui chassent la vérité en toutes sortes'.

⁷⁷ CSPF, 70/106, fo. 43 (18 Mar. 1569), Navarre to Cecil, 'noz ennemys publient ainsi que bon leur semble ... n'en desguisera ne dissimulera chose quelconque'.

Navarre, wrote in similar vein ‘au vray’ (‘in truth/truthfully’) regarding these events, also endorsing the credibility of the messenger as ‘worthy of trust’.⁷⁸ In this, as in other situations, good news was more readily accepted than bad; reports of defeats and deaths were received with scepticism until more fully verified, whereas victories and survivals were celebrated. The death of the Huguenot commander, Louis de Bourbon, prince of Condé, at Jarnac, for example, was not fully accepted by the English court until a month after it was first reported.⁷⁹ Some circumspection was justified, however, as the deaths of leaders on both sides were often falsely relayed during the wars.⁸⁰

VII

The upholding of truth in sixteenth-century France was more complex in practice than it appeared in theory. Returning to Montaigne’s observation that truth is what others can be brought to accept, we can see that this is a fair assessment of what occurred when those accused of secretive practices came before their judges. What judges were prepared to accept was dependent on context as the events of the wars played out and the crown was more or less concerned about what those around it were able to conceal. So the truth was caught somewhere between the judges’ determination to seek it out and the accused’s willingness to reveal it. Some were prepared to take considerable risks to uphold a higher or absolute ‘Truth’ and, thus, to be answerable to divine rather than royal justice. The myriad responses that individuals might have to the circumstances in which the wars placed them shaped their attitudes to the reconciliation of their consciences with deception and concealment, conviction and condemnation, and were as complex as truth itself. By anchoring cases in

⁷⁸ CSPF, 70/106, fo. 50 (21 Mar. 1569), Jeanne d’Albret to Cecil, and fo. 110 (13 Apr. 1569), to Queen Elizabeth; ‘digne de foy’.

⁷⁹ *Correspondance Diplomatique de Bertrand de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénélon, ambassadeur de France en Angleterre de 1568 à 1575*, i, (Paris and London, 1838), 302–5, 308–9 (12 & 17 Apr. 1569).

⁸⁰ In the case of Jarnac, both the sieurs de Téligny and Montgomery were falsely reported dead. Téligny was killed during the Massacre of St Bartholomew in 1572, but Montgomery survived until his execution in 1574.

royal justice, seeking consensus while refuting the assertions of others, the crown and its judges looked to establish an acceptable truth that they could present to a wider audience. Likewise, leaders on both sides sought to counter the falsehoods disseminated by their opponents, and their coreligionists were more inclined to believe what they were told by trusted intermediaries. In some cases, however, the truth was unavoidable, as with the death of Condé, but the context was open to interpretation and distortion, and a version of events which was acceptable and, therefore, in some sense 'true'. The evident contemporary parallels with the way that truth is constructed and manipulated today reinforce the need for us to continue to challenge and interrogate which truths we, too, are prepared to accept.