Introduction

The Reformation was one of the most violent and divisive episodes in European history, and France witnessed more than its fair share of bloodshed and division as a result of religious schism. Confessional discord rocked the political establishment, tested the effectiveness of royal governance and challenged the social bonds of community and nation during nearly 40 years of civil strife. Traditionally, this period is presented as a time of monarchical weakness resulting in the collapse of royal authority.\(^1\) The most infamous incidents of the wars are the massacres of the Huguenot minority, in particular, that of St Bartholomew’s Day 1572 in Paris. Not far behind in their notoriety are the high-level political assassinations: of nobles on both sides of the confessional divide, and of kings Henry III and IV. Such violent episodes appear to underline the lack of royal control of events. Less often acknowledged, however, is that this volatile period also produced an extensive and unprecedented experiment in religious toleration initiated by the crown through its edicts of pacification. Although this policy, too, has been generally dismissed as an indication of royal impotence and domination by faction, on closer examination the picture is far more complex and, thus, more interesting. Just as religion has been profitably restored to a central role in studies of the conflict, therefore, scrutiny of the pursuit of peace can provide greater depth to our understanding of the experience of war.\(^2\)

In recent years, historians of the wars have reconsidered royal attempts at peacemaking and the establishment of coexistence in the French provinces. This in turn has led them to question the traditional characterisation of the conflict. Olivier Christin’s work has highlighted both the importance of the role of the law in the politicisation of the process, in France and the Empire, as well as the contribution of acts of reconciliation.
in local communities. A number of insightful essay collections have also explored peacemaking from a variety of perspectives, ideological and practical, from the point of view of individual writers or officials as well as in a regional and urban context. Furthermore, Jérémie Foa has undertaken an extensive study of the work of the royal commissioners sent out to enforce the peace during the reign of Charles IX (1560–74), Mark Greengrass of the push for an ambitious reform programme under Henry III (1574–89), and Michel De Waele of the process of reconciliation during the first decade of the reign of Henry IV (1589–1610). In addition, Grégory Champeaud’s study of the role of the parlement of Bordeaux, covering the whole period, illuminates developments from a provincial perspective, while Keith Luria takes our view beyond the wars to consider the coexistence of the faiths in France in the seventeenth century, combining both national and regional insights. While drawing on these valuable studies, the intention here is to provide an overview of the last four decades of the sixteenth century across the entire French kingdom in order to better understand the vicissitudes of royal policy, as well as how the communities of France responded to the crown’s rhetoric and the implementation of the edicts which embodied it. Above all, this approach has proved instructive about the fragility of the peace throughout the wars, yet also the extent to which crown and people were engaged with the process.

The late Valois monarchs have undoubtedly suffered from comparison with their Bourbon successors. Their reigns are usually associated with the crisis of civil war and consequent hardship for the French people. In contrast, Henry IV is characteristically presented as presiding over peace at home and abroad, and providing a period of security and stability for his subjects. In studying the crown’s efforts at peace and reform, however, it is possible to arrive at a more balanced assessment. Historians have recently turned their attention to the underlying philosophy and characteristics of late Valois kingship and the court. Such an approach illuminates not only the crown’s determined pursuit of peace in the face of often strident opposition, but even royal justification of the St Bartholomew’s Day massacre. Royal attitudes to the formation of policy to resolve the troubles destroying the realm lie at the heart of this analysis arising from, as Greengrass argues, ‘a perception of politics as a branch of moral philosophy’. Thus, the king presented himself as arbiter in the disputes of his people and concerned for the welfare of all his loyal subjects, both as a means to end the conflict and to bolster royal power. The ideals of peace and unity held out the promise of sustaining the well-being and prosperity of the realm,