

The Bellicose Dove^[1] -: Claude Brousson Reconsidered, 1647-1698

At Claude Brousson's trial in 1698, *Intendant* Bâville condemned him for directing the Toulouse Project of 1683, participating in armed violence in 1689-90, and inviting the *duc* de Schomberg to invade France in 1691. Yet for three centuries, Brousson's defenders have blamed his colleague François Vivent for this violence and portrayed Brousson as a pacifist.

In 1692 David de Brueys contrasted Vivent, "the trainer of criminals," with Brousson, "head of the visionaries."^[2] John Quick (1700) asserted that Brousson had condemned Vivent's killing dragoons as "immoderate zeal," reminding him that "the weapons of our warfare are spiritual."^[3] In his memoirs, Antoine Court (1712) declared that Brousson "took no part" in Vivent's violent actions; "on the contrary, he tried to stop them."^[4] Charles Bost (1912) contrasted Vivent—militaristic about his faith—with Brousson, who was pious and pacifistic.^[5] Matthieu Lelièvre (1911) described Vivent as pious yet "practicing the law of talon,"^[6] while Nathaniel Weiss (1914) argued that Brousson had "only momentarily been influenced by Vivent," that "man of blood."^[7]

Yet a closer look at Brousson's actions from 1683 to 1692 reveals that he moved from pacifism to civil disobedience to violence to armed insurrection. After obtaining a doctorate in law from the University of Montpellier, Brousson practiced law in Nîmes and Toulouse for 17 years. But the tightening noose of anti-Huguenot legislation in the 1680s destroyed his career. The Edict of 8 march 1683 declared that if any *Nouveaux Catholique* (a Calvinist forcibly converted to Catholicism) attended a Calvinist service, that temple must be demolished. The Declaration of 22 May 1683 required the Reformed to provide front-row seats for Catholic officials to refute treasonable statements made during the sermon.^[8] As a result, at least 14 temples in Brousson's immediate area were threatened.^[9]

After successfully defending before the Parlement of Toulouse the *Religionnaires'* right to worship in March 1683, Brousson was stunned to see the temples torn down months later. Taking up his pen, he wrote *Apology for the Project of the French Reformed* (1683) and *Condition of the Reformed in France* (1684), reviewing Huguenot grievances against Louis XIV's Revocation policies. Comparing the Reformed to the Maccabees resisting Antiochus Epiphanes, he asserted that the Calvinist cause had "justice, goodness, & God's glory" on its side while the Catholic Church represented injustice, evil, and persecution. [\[10\]](#)

Convinced That civil disobedience would force the government to rescind its intolerant laws, Brousson invited 28 deputies from eight provinces of the Midi to meet in his home and form a "Committee of Resistance" in the spring of 1683. They drafted a plan to notify Church and State officials that the RPR ("religion pretended reformed") would publicly worship, temples or no temples. [\[11\]](#) The 18 articles of the Declaration of Toulouse maintained their innocence, protested against recent laws, and defended the "right of resistance" when royal edicts opposed God's commands. [\[12\]](#)

Briefly, the Declaration called on the Reformed to live modestly, to read their Bibles, and to pray regularly. On June 27, believers were to assemble for worship on the ruins of their temples or in private homes, woods or fields, followed on July 4 by a day of fasting and prayer. Relapsed Calvinists and abjuring Catholics could join these meetings of prayer, psalm-singing, and preaching. Secret colloquys would be held and pastors elected by the elders; when harassed in one province, pastors must go to another and continue holding assemblies. Demolished temples should be rebuilt. [\[13\]](#)

Despite Brousson's protest that the Declaration was not devised by "criminals or libertines," [\[14\]](#) five of its 18 articles broke current laws. Articles 3 and 15 calling on pastors and elders to assemble believers on June 27 broke numerous edicts mandating that the demolition of a temple meant the permanent cessation of Calvinist services in that area. Article 10 inviting abjured Protestants and converting Catholics to join in worship disobeyed the Edict of 6 March 1683.

Article 12 stating that colloquies would continue was a bold declaration of resistance since national and provincial synods had already been forbidden. Thus, 150 years before Henry David Thoreau and 250 years before Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., applied the tactics of passive resistance to unjust governments, a small-town French lawyer conceived a plan of civil disobedience based, not on the 16th-century *Monarchomachs* (Hotman, Beza, and Mornay), but on the Bible. To Brousson, the Reformed resembled the early Christians before Nero. “One does no wrong to Caesar by being faithful to God,” he declared. [\[15\]](#)

But there is no place for passive resistance in an absolute monarchy. Government retaliation against the heretics and rebels was swift and brutal. Military reprisals in Dauphiné, Languedoc and the Cévennes in the fall of 1683 pushed one group of Zealots—including Brousson—over the edge. Meeting in Toulouse, these militants voted to support armed resistance to assist their comrades in the Cévennes. But a “false brother” (or traitor within) betrayed them to the *presidial* of Nîmes and they barely escaped with their lives as 300 dragoons closed in.

Brousson fled to the safety of Lausanne, Switzerland. [\[16\]](#) But at least 20 *Religionnaires*—pastors, elders, laity—died in 1683 supporting Brousson’s Project of Toulouse; most were broken on the wheel or hanged after short trials. [\[17\]](#)

After laying low in Lausanne for six years, Brousson reentered France in 1689 to encourage the persecuted Huguenots and distribute his books. Yet he and his companion, François Vivent, shared a more subversive goal: “to foment a legitimate revolt against a felonious King who had revoked the irrevocable [1598 Edict of Nantes].” [\[18\]](#) Disguised as the merchant “Paul Bonsacle,” Brousson traveled with a sword strapped to his side. [\[19\]](#) Vivent also traveled heavily armed. It appears, moreover, that some of Vivent’s militancy rubbed off on Brousson, for Antoine Court, referring to both men, stated that “they deliberated piously how to assassinate all those who...opposed their gatherings.” Vivent murdered the *curés* of at least six towns, and, according to Court, “several others were also assassinated by these *dévots* [devout followers] of Brousson or by the satellites of Vivent.” [\[20\]](#)

While Brousson, unlike other preachers, did not travel with an armed guard, he associated with those who displayed weapons at his meetings. Perhaps their presence made him feel overconfident and inspired a certain fanaticism in his rhetoric, for Brousson's rashness alarmed even his heavily armed companion Dubruc. In August 1689 Brousson wrote to Monsieur de Mirmand requesting "a good captain to disperse the royal troops" that harassed his assemblies. This letter shows how alike Vivent and Brousson's views of armed resistance were in 1689-90. [\[21\]](#)

Brousson also put his militant beliefs into action. Learning that troops had captured 40 Calvinists, Vivent decided to counterattack. Brousson agreed to go, but advised taking more muskets and swords. At the head of fifteen armed men, they surrounded the prisoner detail. When the officer asked, "By whose orders do you march?" Brousson shouted, "By God's orders." They disarmed the soldiers and freed the prisoners. [\[22\]](#) After an assembly in September 1689, Brousson and Vivent mustered 100 men armed with guns and halberds to disarm the troops at Florac; they also scattered the militia along their route. One of Brousson's men stabbed a militiaman in the back and captured him. [\[23\]](#) As they approached Florac, they took other prisoners and dispersed the militia who guarded the bridge. [\[24\]](#)

In each of these incidents, Brousson accompanied Vivent as an accomplice in his armed exploits. But following Vivent's violent death at the hands of government troops in February 1692, Brousson allegedly reverted to pacifism once more. In his *Summary Relation*, he admitted that early in his ministry, "as he was surrounded by a prodigious number of enemies who sought unceasingly to kill him," he had taken "several precautions to defend his life." But henceforth he vowed to "fight only with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God." He would be the mystical dove described in the Song of Solomon, trusting in God for protection. [\[25\]](#)

To a greater extent than his biographers have admitted, Brousson deserves the credit for this public relations makeover depicting him as the pacifist dove and Vivent as the warlike hawk. A month after Vivent's death, Brousson's *Summary Relation* attempted to put as much distance as possible between them. Writing of himself in the third person, he declared that "Brousson had

never approved the use of such zealous actions as those used by Brother Vivens, which seemed immoderate to him.” Instead, traveling unarmed, he “had often told him [Vivent] that he must be content with fighting with the sword of the Spirit.” Brousson’s pious example allegedly “edified everyone by the innocence of his conduct.”^[26] It was a clever PR trick—and it worked for 300 years. A century and a half after Brousson’s death, Napoleon Peyrat (1842) described him as a model for all early Calvinist leaders espousing pacifism. While Vivent pushed the movement toward revolt, Brousson advocated non-militaristic methods. In fact, he said, had Brousson lived longer, there would have been no Camisard War in 1705-10.^[27]

But by plotting to invite the League of Augsburg powers to invade France in 1691, Brousson demonstrated that while he had repudiated the use of violence in his personal life, he was still willing to enlist the armed might of outsiders in the cause of religious liberty. He would learn too late that doves and hawks cannot cooperate effectively toward the same ends.

The kingpin in this invasion plan, the Duke of Schomberg, was Europe’s foremost mercenary leader. Born a Protestant in the Palatine, Schomberg had fought for the Dutch, the Germans, and the French in the Thirty Years’ War before helping England defeat the Dutch in 1678. He had commanded the Prince of Orange’s troops during the invasion of England in 1688 and led an army against the Stuart uprising in Ireland in 1689. Created a French *maréchal*, a Portuguese Grandee, and an English duke, this “Rambo of the Rhine” would fight for any remunerative cause.^[28]

Early in 1690, Huguenot leaders approached the Duke requesting assistance in an invasion plan to reverse the Revocation. Schomberg’s envoy assured them that William III would send troops into France if they would organize local forces to assist him. Vivent and Brousson agreed to raise troops in Languedoc. The plan called for an invasion force of 10,000 men to join local militias totaling 15-20,000 men. Schomberg’s troops would sail from Savoy, disembark between Aigues-Mortes and Montpellier, penetrate the Cévennes and organize an insurrection.^[29] Throughout February and March 1690, Brousson, Vivent, and others traversed the Cévennes laying the groundwork for this plan and consulting with agents and spies from Italy and

Switzerland. [\[30\]](#)

Brousson's biographers have denied his active role in this plot, but his 8 March 1691 letter to "Monsieur de Schomberg" proves that he was not a passive bystander in the unfolding events. Although the Duke of Schomberg had died in Ireland the previous July, Brousson kept in contact with his army (led by Charles, *maréchal* de Schomberg) throughout 1691, hoping an invasion could still be implemented. While at his trial Brousson claimed that Vivent had written the letter, internal evidence shows that the writing style belonged more to Brousson the lawyer than to Vivent the peasant. [\[31\]](#)

Its content demonstrates a careful military mind and a keen sense of strategy. Brousson gives advice on the number of cavalry, infantry, and militiamen needed; the importance of having English and Savoyard officers; and the amount of muskets, bayonets, and cannons desired "to make a grand affair." He also provides a detailed description of the route to take and which areas should be seized first. The letter concludes with typical Broussonian flair stating that "this coup, with God's help, appears to be a sure bet." [\[32\]](#)

It turned into a sure fiasco instead. Brousson entrusted the letter to his friend Henri Pourtal who took it to Nîmes. In a cabaret, he slipped it to the guide Gabriel Picq, who secured it in his belt. But French border guards searched Picq, found the letter, and sent it to *Intendant* Bâville, who identified Brousson as its author from samples of handwriting already on file. Picq was tried, tortured, and broken on the wheel. [\[33\]](#)

This letter demonstrates the dual nature of Brousson's role: he was both a pious pastor-revivalist and an astute lawyer-negotiator. In his eyes, preparing for Schomberg's army to invade France was also serving God's righteous cause. To force Louis XIV to negotiate with the League of Augsburg, a "serious internal threat" had to be devised. Participating in such a plot was not treason, but attempting to restore their religious rights guaranteed by the Edict of Nantes. He did God's will just as much by helping Schomberg's army as by distributing Communion bread and wine in his assemblies. [\[34\]](#)

There is, in fact, no evidence in the 4000 pages of his oeuvre or by the time of his death on the scaffold in 1698 that Brousson had changed his mind on the rightfulness of resistance in defense of Truth. In a petition he sent to Bâville and possibly to all the League powers in 1692, he justified “the enterprise” of invasion by declaring: “One dares to say, Monseigneur...that either the State will perish or liberty of conscience must be reestablished.” Reflecting on his experience with civil disobedience, he concluded:

It is always strange...that subjects should take up arms against their prince. But they do not take them up except to defend their own lives....The patience of the most moderate changes to fury when it is pushed to the limit. The most pacific tire eventually of being devoured without reason, treated as slaves and butchered like beasts....What course then can this miserable people take? They have tried numerous times the method of supplications and remonstrances....Should one find it strange then that they take some precautions to avoid being slaughtered? Does one wish that they wait until foreign powers have made an overture in the kingdom before throwing themselves into their arms and putting an end...to all their miseries and to all the calamities? [\[35\]](#)

No statement from Brousson’s pen better clarifies the issue than this bold declaration. France must either restore liberty of conscience or face God’s judgment in the form of foreign invasion and civil war. This conflict, to Brousson’s mind, would be a “just war” for a righteous cause—the restoration of God’s Truth (“Mystical Jerusalem” he called it) in a corrupt Catholic realm (“Mystical Babylon”). In his writings and personal experience, Claude Brousson, “the bellicose dove,” illustrates the point that for many Huguenots, a righteous end did sometimes justify the use of violent means.

Brian E. Strayer
Andrews University

Endnotes

[1] I am grateful to the late Walter C. Utt, Professor of History at Pacific Union College in Angwin, CA, for this apt metaphor. During 2000-01 I updated and revised the book manuscript, “The Bellicose Dove: Claude Brousson and Protestant Resistance to Louis XIV, 1647-1698,” he left unfinished at his death.

[2] David Augustin de Brueys, *Histoire du Fanatisme de nostre temps, et le dessein que l’on avoit de soulever en France les*

mécontents des calvinistes (Paris: F. Muguet, 1692), cited by Frédy Teulon, "François Vivent, Prédicant cévenol" (Paris: Thèse à la Faculté libre de théologie Protestante de Paris, 1946), 136.

[3] John Quick, "The Life of Monsieur Brousson, Minister of the Gospel and Martyr" (unpublished manuscript, 1700), quoted in Alan Clifford, *Sons of Calvin: Three Huguenot Pastors* (Norwich, England: Charenton Reformed Publishing, 1999), 39-41.

[4] Antoine Court, *Mémoires* (1712), Bibliothèque de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français (Paris), ms. 628, ff. 565-66.

[5] Charles Bost, *Les prédicants protestants des Cévennes et du Bas-Languedoc, 1684-1700* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1912), 1:321.

[6] Matthieu Lelièvre, *De la Révocation à la Révolution* (1911), cited by Teulon, 130.

[7] Nathaniel Weiss, "Au temple de la rue Maguelonne les 8 et 9 novembre 1913," *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français* 63 (1914): 18 [hereafter cited as *BSHPF*].

[8] Pierre Bernard and M. Soulier, *L'Explication de l'Edit de Nantes* (Paris: Antoine Dezallier, 1683), 490-91; "Mémoire de ce qui s'est passé à Rouen," *BSHPF* 3 (1854): 60; Abraham Borrell, *Biographie de Claude Brousson Pasteur de Nîmes à l'Époque des Assemblées du Désert de 1683 à 1698* (Nîmes: B. R. Garve, 1852), 6.

[9] Brian E. Strayer, *Huguenots and Camisards as Aliens in France, 1589-1789* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2001), 135-36; Louvois to Intendant Le Bret, 30 September 1683, *Papiers Court*, Bibliothèque de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français (Paris), ms. 8871 (XIII)[hereafter cited as *BHP*].

[10] Claude Brousson, *Apologie du Projet des Réformés de France Fait pour la conservation de la liberté de conscience & de l'Exercice public de Religion que les Edits & Traités de Pacification leur accordent* (La Haye: Barent Beck, 1685), 1-10, 13-20, 73-83, 101-103, 109, 113, 125-31, 171-75, 198; idem, *Estat des réformés en France, où l'on voit que les Edits de pacification sont irrévocables, que néanmoins on les renverse entièrement, & que la on ôte aux Reformés tous les moyens de vivre & de subsister* (Cologne: Pierre du Marteau, 1684), 3:112-16.

[11] Borrel, *Brousson*, 6; Nathaniel Weiss, "Bâville et la Guerre des Camisards," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 19 (1972):425-26; Orentin Douen, "La Réforme en Picardie depuis les premiers temps jusqu'à nos jours, particulièrement dans le Vermandois, la Thiérache, le Laonnais, le Noyonnais, et le Soissonais, formant aujourd'hui le Département de L'Aisne," *BSHPF* 8 (1859):527; Bost, *Prédicants*, 1:12; Claude Brousson, *Lettres et opuscules de feu Monsieur Brousson, ministre & martyr du saint Evangile* (Utrecht: Guillaume VandeWater, 1701), 5.

[12] Brousson, *Apologie*, 56-67; Lucie Rauzier-Fontayne and S. Mours, *Claude Brousson* (Geneva: Editions Labor et Fides, 1948), 45; Léopold Nègre, *Vie et ministère de Claude Brousson, 1647-1698* (Paris: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1878), 21, 24; Napoleon Peyrat, *Histoire des pasteurs du Désert, 1685-1789* (Paris: M. Aurel, 1842), 125-27.

[13] Brousson, *Apologie*, 57-60; idem, *Estat des Réformés*, 3:104-10; Antoine Court, "Claude Brousson et les 'Directeurs' (1683-1684) en Dauphiné et Vivarais," *BHF* ms. 871 (XIII), ff. 1-7.

[14] Brousson, *Apologie*, 60-61.

[15] *Ibid.*, 16-18, 76-80.

[16] *Ibid.*, 158-70; idem, "Relation sommaire des Merveilles que Dieu fait en France, dans les Cévennes & dans le Bas-Languedoc, pour l'instruction & la consolation de son Eglise désolée" (Amsterdam: n.p., 1694), 20; Borrel, *Brousson*, 7-11; Rauzier-Fontayne, 53-57; Bost, *Prédicants*, 1:26-29.

[17] Bost, *ibid.*, 29; Solange Deyon, "La résistance protestante et la symbolique du désert," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 18 (1971):247; Ferdinand Teissier, "Portraits des ministres et predicants (1687)," *BSHPF* 49 (1900):639-42.

[18] André Fabre, "Marie Durand et sa famille," *BSHPF* 122 (1976):169.

[19] Deborah Alcock, *Six Heroic Men: John Firth, T. Foxwell Buxton, David Livingston, Richard Baxter, John Lawrence, Claude Brousson* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1906), 177; Henry Baynes, *The Evangelist of the Desert: Life of Claude Brousson, sometime advocate of Parliament at Toulouse in the Reign of Louis XIV; afterward a Protestant Minister and Martyr* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1853), 123.

[20] Court, *Mémoires*, 55-57.

[21] Bost, *Prédicants*, 1:103-106, 318-20; Teulon, 66, 69.

- [22] Teulon, 70-71.
- [23] Ibid., 73, 81; Bost, *Prédicants*, 1:331-34.
- [24] Bost, *Prédicants*, 1:344-45.
- [25] Brousson, *Relation sommaire*, 26; Laurent Theis, "Claude Brousson en 1692," *BSHPF* 139 (1993):133, 136.
- [26] Brousson, *ibid.*, 26-27, 31-32.
- [27] Peyrat, 484.
- [28] *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1971 ed., s.v. "Schomberg, Friedrich Hermann, Duke of."
- [29] Nègre, 59-60; Abraham Borrel, *Histoire de l'église réformée de Nîmes depuis son origine en 1533 jusqu'à la loi organique du 18 germinal an X* (Toulouse: Société des livres religieux, 1856), 332-33.
- [30] Bost, *Prédicants*, 1:406-408.
- [31] Ibid.; Teulon, 93; Theis, 136.
- [32] Bost, *Prédicants*, 1:406-12; Nègre, 161-63; Charles Almeras, *La révolte des Camisards* (Paris: Arthaud, 1960), 52.
- [33] Bost, *ibid.*, 409-13.
- [34] Ibid., 408-409, 415; Theis, 135-36.
- [35] Claude Brousson, Remonstrance to the League powers (1692), quoted in Bost, *ibid.*, 415.