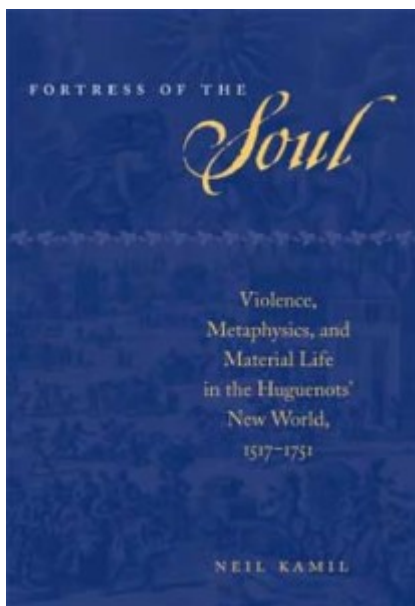
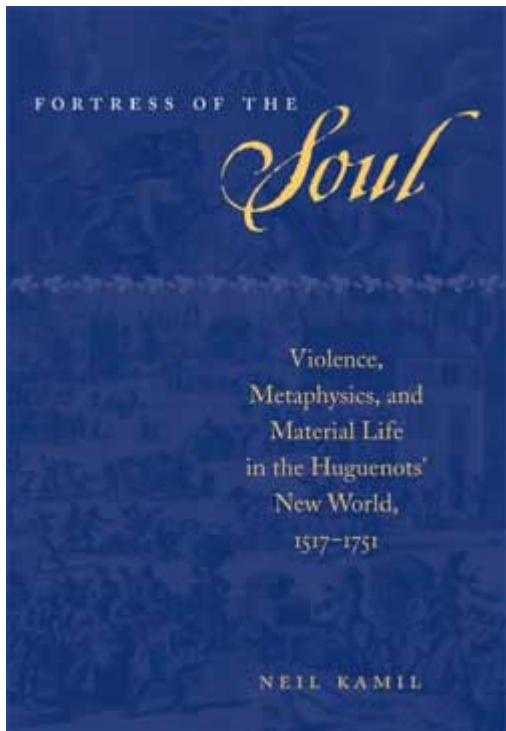


# Sometimes a Chair is Only a Chair



Fortress of the Soul: Violence, Metaphysics, and Material Life in the Huguenots' New World, 1517-1751

*Fortress of the Soul* is an immensely ambitious, learned, and imaginative but fundamentally flawed book. The chronological sweep is impressive, as indicated by the anagrammatic time frame of 1517 (the year of Luther's ninety-five theses) to 1751 (which witnessed the publication of Franklin's *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, among other events). Even more notable, however, is the thematic range. As Kamil notes in his preface, the book "is intended to engage historians of science as well as historians of religion, technology,

art, and artisanry, sexuality (and the body), agriculture, human geography, textual criticism, the book, ecology, and I hope most of all, the colonization of pluralistic New World societies" (xix-xx). With such an agenda, it is no wonder that Kamil is unable to deliver fully on his promise.

The first part of the book revolves around the teachings of Huguenot potter, alchemist, and Paracelsian natural philosopher Bernard Palissy (1510?-1590?). Stunned by the martyr's death in 1557 of his religious mentor Calvinist preacher Philibert Hamelin, Palissy grew increasingly skeptical of the ability of the walled fortress of La Rochelle to protect the region's Protestants, particularly in the rural hinterland. By 1563, aided by his ruminations on natural history, he had devised an alternate model for the safety of his fellow Huguenots: "security had either to be internalized as skill and industriousness or carried by fleeing refugees 'on their backs' the way an artisan carried his tools, or the *limace* [snail] its portable, inside-out shell" (97). What Calvin called "Nicodemism," or the concealment of inner belief for purposes of self-protection, was justified rather than condemned, enabling industrious, camouflaged Huguenots to survive and prosper in hostile environments.

Palissy's program was not only practical but metaphysical. As a Paracelsian adept, he subscribed to the Neoplatonic notion of cosmological harmony between man-microcosm and universe-macrocosm, since the divine soul of the creator animated all creation. This animate materialism, by positing the monistic unity of all souls in God, provided a philosophical basis for Nicodemism, indeed for reconciliation across the Protestant-Catholic divide. While the ultimate recombination of matter and spirit, what Kamil calls the material-holiness synthesis, would be the task of the rapidly approaching Millennium, the adept could anticipate the process of redemption through alchemy, the separation of pure from impure by fire.

Palissy's ceramic experiments, culminating in rustic lead-glazed basins encrusted with naturalistic figures such as snails and amphibians, embodied both his belief in camouflage and his industrious search for the alchemical Millennium. His obsession was to make the perfect translucent glaze: "For Palissy, the white glaze signified the flash of astral spirit materialized and then merged with the macrocosm in enamel . . ." (325).

According to Kamil, Palissy's ideas became widely diffused among artisans in his corner of central western France, where they persisted for over a century. Acquiring further urgency after the siege and fall of La Rochelle in 1628, they then traveled with the Huguenot Diaspora of the seventeenth century, eventually reaching across the Atlantic to the American colonies. In particular, Kamil finds traces of Palissy's esoteric worldview in the material culture of Huguenot furniture makers in New York, for instance, viewing a high chest of drawers made by Huguenot descendent Samuel Clement in 1726 as an emblem of "the force of cosmological unity" (847).

*Fortress of the Soul* contains a number of interesting arguments, among them a

new critique of Max Weber's much-debated classic, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Like Weber, Kamil views innovation and commercial profit as intrinsic to the Protestant project, but he takes issue with Weber's interpretation of that project as an example of modern man's "disenchantment of the world." On the contrary, he argues, Palissian metaphysics reenchanting the world, as its practitioners recognized its spiritual and economic potential for their respective crafts. Kamil thus provides a useful corrective to the teleological narrative of modern history as disenchantment, an approach that fails to account for the continuing strength of faith-based belief systems in contemporary times.

Kamil also goes against the grain in arguing that metaphysics, not skepticism, laid the basis for early modern "multiculturalism," defined as Christian inclusiveness rooted in Neoplatonism. Such pluralism was embodied in a multilingual sundial engraved in New York by a son of Huguenot refugees in 1751, which juxtaposed rhyming texts about industry and God's protection in Greek, Latin, Dutch, French, and English. This pluralism was also responsible for a Huguenot-Quaker convergence in New York, as spiritual affinity between the two groups bore fruit in the merging of familial craft networks.

Kamil traces the resulting process of Anglo-French creolization in furniture making, a colonial industry characterized by multitalented artisanship and abundant slave labor. Of the upholstered leather chair, "the single most influential moveable" produced in colonial America (712), he writes, "Thus the New York leather chair . . . was not purely French, English, Dutch, Bostonian, or American. Instead the New York leather chair is a material manifestation of the interactive and competitive discourse of cultural convergence, quotation, and creolization whereby different regional cultures communicated their perception of difference to themselves and others" (749). Successful artisans, moreover, were able to transcend ethnic identity with social status, becoming part of the local elite.

Despite such perceptive observations, *Fortress of the Soul* is not a successful book. The fundamental weakness is Kamil's inability to show conclusively that Palissy had a committed following among Huguenot artisans in Anis and Saintonge and that the descendents of these artisans went on to spread his ideas throughout the Atlantic world in the seventeenth century. His claim that Charentais artisans shared a religious outlook rooted in animate materialism and Paracelsian alchemy rests on the assumption that Palissy, in his role as lay preacher, had evangelized them. Yet Kamil is forced to admit that "we can only guess how many other 'simple artisans' shared Palissy's association with this international tradition . . ." (191).

Of course, if Kamil is correct in his claim that Huguenot artisans concealed their innermost beliefs in order to survive, then proving their allegiance to those beliefs is no simple task. The only method, in fact, consists of deciphering the cryptic messages encoded within their artifacts. Kamil writes, "By the mid-sixteenth century, southwestern Huguenots had developed a mobile,

mutable, largely artisanal culture that expressed its values, attitudes, and beliefs obliquely, usually in material form, by converging invisibly, yet within plain sight, with the most powerful symbols of the dominant host culture. A marginalized people, they chose to display their personal symbols on the margins of their work" (757).

While I am sympathetic to Kamil's argument, his esoteric readings of the French and American artifacts left me unconvinced. Frankly, the examples of seventeenth-century pottery from La Chapelle-des-Pots (the village where Palissy first learned his potter's trade) do not much resemble the Palissy basins to which they are compared, though Kamil makes much of the common moldings and lead glazes. His attempt to interpret these ceramics as mystical allegories based on a comparison with texts by Rosicrucian alchemist Jakob Böhme and various occult prints likewise falls flat in the absence of concrete evidence for intertextuality (339-386). The fact that an image was (or may have been) available to an artisan or artist does not constitute proof of influence.

Similarly, Kamil's interpretation of American furniture and woodworking styles is more successful when he focuses on creolization than on Palissian metaphysics. American craftsmanship had much in common with that of central western France, specifically the Île de Ré near La Rochelle. Although many of the island's artisans were Protestant in the early seventeenth century, all the examples of insular woodworking discussed by Kamil are associated with the Catholic Church: a baptismal screen, a confessional, a pew door, a choir screen. Even if one accepts Kamil's argument about Huguenots hiding in plain sight—accepting patronage from the enemy while pursuing cosmic nullification of religious difference—it is difficult to imagine them willingly carving confessionals. Since the chairs made by Huguenots in New York also resemble those—presumably the work of Catholic Frenchmen—of the St. Lawrence and Mississippi valleys (739-740), it seems that Kamil is documenting the transplantation of a regional rather than a specifically Protestant or esoteric tradition.

Kamil indulges in numerous digressions in the course of the book, retracing the ramifications of esoteric thinking far beyond the Huguenot community. Featuring such colorful figures as John Winthrop Jr., Sir Kenelm Digby, and William Hogarth (the subject of a 150-page chapter), these diversions are sometimes more erudite than convincing. In interpreting Hogarth's 1736 painting portraying a Huguenot church, *Noon, L'Église des Grecs, Hog Lane, Soho*, Kamil purports to get inside the artist's mind: "How, he asked himself, does one represent an absence?" (566). Yet here as elsewhere Kamil's hermeneutics relies more on imagination than evidence.

As a work of 923 pages (1031 with the notes), *Fortress of the Soul* will not be widely read, at least not in its entirety. Parts 1 and 2 (the first seven hundred pages) will appeal primarily to specialists in the intersection of religion, philosophy, and science in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Part 3, with its careful reconstruction of the craft networks of colonial New

York, will be of considerable value to historians of colonization. Although the book could have benefited from editorial intervention—to eliminate redundant quotes, for example—there are surprisingly few errors in the lengthy and complicated text. It is beautifully produced with abundant and helpful illustrations. In the end, readers must make up their own minds as to the validity of Kamil's original and provocative thesis.

This article originally appeared in issue 6.2 (January, 2006).

---

Leslie Choquette, L'Institut français Professor of Francophone Cultures and director of the French Institute at Assumption College, is the author of *Frenchmen into Peasants: Modernity and Tradition in the Peopling of French Canada* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).