“Catholicism was only a threat to Elizabeth when it had foreign support”

- Discuss

The question is correct in saying Catholicism was only a threat when it had foreign support as the domestic challenges to Elizabeth were overshadowed by the possibility of foreign invasion or intervention. Events such as the 1570 Papal Bull and the Spanish War were largest causes for concern for Elizabeth.

Although revisionist historians believe that there may have actually been a slight catholic majority in England according to evidence collected at the time, the attitude of many Catholics was to out-live Protestantism until Mary Queen of Scots became the monarch. Indeed, the Catholic movement possessed no organised opposition groups outside of the House of Lords which meant they could not be considered a threat to Elizabeth as they lacked the organisation to overthrow her – and at this time they had no desire to do so either. However, Elizabeth and her council were forced to make compromises in the religious settlement to please the apparent Catholic majority in England. Most of the JPs employed to enforce the act of uniformity were Catholic themselves and the fine for not attending church was only 12d. Catholicism in the 1560s was a potential threat for Elizabeth, however they lacked the organisation and desire to directly challenge Elizabeth herself rather than her settlement and they cannot be considered a threat. Further, the Elizabeth’s plan to let Catholicism wither along with their failed plots giving them a poor public image, it is thought that the Catholic population may have fell to around 2% by the late 1590s.

The underpinning threat to Elizabeth came from Pope Pius the fifth in 1570, when he excommunicated Elizabeth, following the execution of Mary Queen of Scots, by issuing the Papal Bull. This was “an unmistakeable declaration of war” (G.R Elton) and killed the “via media” idea Elizabeth had tried to govern by. It also led to the Spanish war breaking out in 1585 until 1604. The Spanish war was the greatest Catholic threat Elizabeth had ever faced, foreign invasion seemed certain and every Catholic was a potential traitor. Although the Armada was defeated in 1588 (more by luck than the actions of Elizabeth of the Navy), Spain still launched three other attacks, with the 1601 attack successfully landing troops in Ireland. Overseas support for Catholicism also energised plots against Elizabeth that may not have taken place on their own. Without this foreign intervention and overseas support for Catholicism, the Catholic movement would never have evolved from opposing the religious settlement to threatening to remove Elizabeth from the throne.

The Northern Rising is perhaps the largest and best-known exception to the statement in the question as it was the first serious Catholic challenge to Elizabeth that was not solely about the defence of the Catholic faith. Though the leaders of the rebellion were Catholic, factional rivalries and local issues were the largest motives in the rising. There were also external threats such as a Douai Priests (1568) and the Jesuits (1580) who didn’t provide a substantial threat to Elizabeth herself. Though the Douai priests travelled England arguing for religious reform, they pledged loyalty to Elizabeth which in itself means they could not have been a threat to her. However, the Jesuits rejected any compromise with the Queen and actively encouraged rebellion and foreign invasion. Ninety-eight of the four hundred and thirty-eight Jesuits that travelled to England were executed for treason rather than heresy meaning they couldn’t be martyred by the Catholic movement. However, it is believed that there was a “disproportionate use of resources” (J Guy) as priests were often only available to the higher classes and concentrated efforts on the Protestant South and East. Similarly, the differences between the two groups weakened which impacted their message and effectiveness.

Without foreign support for a Catholic uprising there simply wouldn’t have been the motivation for opposing Elizabeth. Although some domestic threats such as the Northern Rising could be considered a potential threat if they had been allowed to develop further, many plots were energised by the Papal Bull and the declaration of war by Spain. The threat of foreign invasion vastly overshadowed any threat domestic Catholics may have posed – lacking the organisation to act on their own. Elizabeth’s tactics (similar to the idea of “survivalism”) of waiting for Catholicism to wither and die largely worked as by the late 1590s the number of Catholics in England was around 2% of the population.