

Elizabeth I's religious settlement

Fiona McCall

This article argues that the character of English religion was influenced strongly by the circumstances of Elizabeth I's accession and her own personal agenda



Exam links

AQA A2 The triumph of Elizabeth: Britain 1547–1603

Edexcel A2 Revolution and conflict in England

OCR (A) AS Church and state 1529–89; England under Elizabeth I, 1558–1603

OCR (A) A2 Elizabeth I, 1558–1603

OCR (B) AS Tudor finale: the reign of Elizabeth I, 1558–1603

When Elizabeth I became queen in November 1558, religion was her most pressing problem. The mid-sixteenth century saw religious upheaval across Europe, as Protestant ideas challenged the Catholic Church's control over the Christian religion. In England, religious policy had see-sawed back and forth under each of the previous three monarchs. The radical Protestant reforms of Elizabeth's brother Edward VI had been dramatically reversed during the 5-year reign of her Catholic sister Mary. Elizabeth's own reforms would create the foundation for the Church of England, the established religion in England for centuries to come.

Traditional Catholic practice

Most English people had readily returned to Catholicism under Mary. England had previously been a pious Catholic country, with money lavished on building beautiful Gothic churches. Religious ceremonies marked each season of the year and every stage of life. Church worship was a highly sensual experience, with rich church decoration, painted statues of saints, candles, music and incense. A largely illiterate population learned Bible stories via church wall paintings and street theatre.

Catholic doctrine taught that after death most people went to purgatory, from where they earned their passage to heaven by good works performed while alive, such as giving to charity or paying for priests to say masses. It also taught that during the mass (also called the communion service, the sacrament or the eucharist), the bread and wine turned into the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, a belief known as transubstantiation.

Protestants rejected transubstantiation and many other Catholic ideas and practices, including purgatory, the worship of saints, enforced celibacy for the clergy and the idea that good works earned you a place in heaven. Protestantism was a religion of the word, stressing the importance of Bible reading and holding religious services in the vernacular (or local) languages rather than Latin.

A Protestant champion

Although raised as a Protestant, Elizabeth I had attended Catholic masses under Mary. But Catholics did not accept the validity of her father's marriage to her mother, Anne Boleyn. Complex negotiations with the Pope would have been necessary to legitimise her in Catholic eyes. Thus everyone expected Elizabeth to champion the religious beliefs of the Protestant minority.

During Mary's reign, 800 Protestants had gone into exile on the continent. While there, they had come into contact with newer Protestant ideas, most notably those of John Calvin in Geneva. Others had remained in Catholic England, a risky course given that Mary had burned hundreds of Protestants at the stake for heresy. This second group included two important figures in Elizabeth's inner circle: her secretary of state William Cecil and her first archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker. They advised a small privy council dominated by Protestants, who carefully planned out the implementation of Elizabeth's church settlement via three mechanisms:

- two acts of parliament, the Act of Supremacy and the Act of Uniformity, approved in May 1559
- royal injunctions allowing agents of the crown to enforce the settlement across the kingdom
- the doctrine of the new church as stated via the Thirty-Nine Articles of religion, which were prepared in 1563, but only passed by parliament in 1571

Elizabeth I's first parliament

The issue of religion was so sensitive that Elizabeth banned all preaching until it was settled. When parliament opened, Lord Keeper Nicholas Bacon discouraged arguments, emphasising the need to work constructively to implement a practical solution which would unite the realm in a 'uniform order of religion'.

Getting the two acts passed by parliament was not easy. Members of the lower House of Commons belonged to a ruling class which had benefited from the sale of church property under Henry VIII and Edward VI. Most were therefore inclined towards Protestantism, for economic if not necessarily for religious reasons.

The House of Lords was the problem. Its small cohort included staunchly Catholic bishops appointed by Mary who did their utmost to impede the passage of the legislation. Steering the legislation through a hostile upper house required all the political dexterity for which the Elizabethan regime became famous. When a joint bill of supremacy and uniformity failed, the two bills were separated, so that the less contentious issue of royal supremacy could be more easily passed.

The Act of Supremacy required all holders of religious or political office to take an oath of allegiance to Elizabeth as 'supreme governor' of the Church of

England. Elizabeth's father had been 'supreme head of the church'; Elizabeth's title was more palatable to those who questioned whether a woman could lead the church. The timely imprisonment of two bishops then helped to get the Act of Uniformity passed by the House of Lords by a majority of 21 to 18.

The royal injunctions

The Elizabethan settlement has often been described as a 'middle way' between Catholicism and Protestantism. However, it inclined strongly to the latter. Church services were now held in English using a liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer. Many of the changes in church decoration and ritual which had the greatest impact on parishes were enforced via visitations by royal officers to implement the royal injunctions in the summer of 1559.

Minor concessions to Catholic sensibilities were made via certain deliberate ambiguities in the settlement. Two different texts of the communion service were included, one of which was compatible with a belief in transubstantiation. The injunctions encouraged the replacement of stone altars by free-standing communion tables but did not enforce it.

Reading the Bible in public in Elizabethan London. Protestantism was a religion of the word



Although parishioners now received communion in 'both kinds' (i.e. bread and wine), traditional communion wafers were still used. Some holy days of the church calendar were still celebrated, although processions were banned. Although, as under Edward VI, Elizabethan Protestants destroyed images, the injunctions now specified the need to preserve the walls and windows of churches. Window glass was an expensive status symbol in Elizabethan England; allowing its preservation avoided the necessity for parishes to spend large sums replacing it. William Harrison, writing in 1586, described how 'stories in glasse windowes' still remained in most areas.

Most significantly, the Catholic hierarchical structure of clergy, higher clergy and bishops was retained. Bishops, directly appointed by the monarch, were seen by Elizabeth and her successors as useful

instruments of direct state control. The medieval cathedrals remained, and developed thereafter a rich choral musical tradition. Canon (church) law still operated via a system of church courts, which regulated many aspects of everyday life and law until the nineteenth century.

How was the settlement received?

All the Catholic bishops, bar one, rejected the church settlement. They were replaced and imprisoned. The rest of the clergy were not represented at the time by parliament but via a separate meeting known as convocation, which rejected the settlement. Yet most clergy continued to serve in the new church.

Surviving sixteenth-century church accounts show that churches made the requisite changes. The settlement required compulsory attendance at church on Sundays. Catholics who refused to attend were fined a shilling. Homilies (published sermons read out in churches) were a useful propaganda tool to stress the importance of obedience and conformity.

The settlement had attractive features: it still followed the rhythms of the year; its liturgy used the familiar forms of the Catholic mass, but in English that people could understand. Now permitted to marry, the vast majority of clergy chose to do so, and more educated people were attracted into the church. Over time, English people became habituated to the rituals of the new religion and associated it with national identity, as an English state isolated in its Protestantism fought off threats from the mighty empire of Catholic Spain.

Nevertheless the settlement remained fragile. While London contained violent Protestant mobs, elsewhere change was effected quite reluctantly and slowly. Parishes hid Catholic service books and artefacts, hoping times would change again. Church papists attended church but held Catholic services in private.

Everything depended on the attitudes of the local power brokers. In the north, for example, it was only in 1571 that Edmund Grindal, appointed archbishop of York, forced recalcitrant parishes to toe the line.

Chronology

- 1533 Birth of Elizabeth
- 1558 Accession of Elizabeth (Nov)
- 1559 The Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy (May); royal injunctions and visitations
- 1563 Convocation draws up the Thirty-Nine Articles
- 1570 Papal bull excommunicating Elizabeth
- 1571 Thirty-Nine Articles passed by parliament; other reforms blocked
- 1581 Draconian penalties against Catholics
- 1603 Death of Elizabeth

Medieval stained glass. Elizabeth's injunctions specified the need to preserve church windows, which would have been costly to replace



In the north and west it sometimes took two or more decades for the settlement to be implemented fully. Closet Catholics remained numerous until the end of Elizabeth's reign. Remaining Catholics stiffened their resistance when Elizabeth was excommunicated by the Pope in 1570. Financial penalties against Catholics vastly increased after 1581. Catholic priests, if discovered, were hung, drawn and quartered for treason.

Some Protestants were also unhappy. At the beginning of Elizabeth's reign one government adviser had compared implementing religious change to pouring water into a jug: it was best done little by little. Reforming bishops and other exiles returned to England with perhaps unreasonable expectations that the settlement would be just the first step towards more fundamental reforms.

The royal prerogative

Elizabeth was a pragmatist. She overlooked people's beliefs, as long as they remained loyal. She siphoned off money from church estates. More significantly, her life experiences had made her instinctively cautious — her personal motto *semper eadem* means 'always the same'. At every opportunity she intervened to prevent

The Catholic martyr Edmund Campion. Convicted of treason, he was hung, drawn and quartered at Tyburn in 1581



Questions

- To what extent should the church settlement be seen as a personal success for Elizabeth?
- Was Elizabeth I's church settlement a compromise between Protestants and Catholics?
- What popular resistance was there to the implementation of Elizabeth's religious settlement?

parliamentary discussion of further religious change, even when proposed by her bishops. 'Our excellent Queen...holds the helm and directs it according to her pleasure,' wrote Bishop Horne of Winchester.

Even though her religious settlement had been implemented through the mechanism of parliament (Queen-in-Parliament), she saw religion as her

Rushton Triangular Lodge, Northamptonshire, built in 1597 by Sir Thomas Tresham as a symbol of his Catholic faith, for which he spent 15 years in prison. The whole design is based around the number three, to represent the Holy Trinity



Suggested reading

Doran, S. (1994) *Elizabeth I and Religion*, Routledge.

Haigh, C. (2001) *Elizabeth I*, Longman.

Mervyn, B. (2001) *The Reign of Elizabeth: England 1558–1603*, John Murray.

Sheils, W. (1989) *The English Reformation, 1530–70*, Longman.

John Guy's website Tudors.org has a section geared to AS and A2: www.tudors.org/as-a2-level/.

Useful articles by J. P. Sommerville on Elizabethan parliaments, Elizabethan puritanism and Catholicism: www.tinyurl.com/qfny44h.

The text of the royal injunctions of 1559 and the Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy may be found at www.tinyurl.com/obgfaa8.

The text of the Thirty-Nine Articles may be found at www.tinyurl.com/pqf57wc.

royal prerogative. Some Protestants considered her a 'do-nothing-queen' who had left the church only 'halfly-reformed'. Tensions persisted throughout her reign.

Conclusion

Most people had not wanted any 'alteration of religion' at Elizabeth's accession, nor did they expect it to survive. That it did so is primarily due to Elizabeth's good health and fortune in reigning for 44 years, and the force of her resistance to further reform. Her

settlement survived for 80 years, until the English Civil Wars attempted to settle by armed conflict many of the religious controversies which had been broiling ever since: whether it was acceptable to use set forms of prayer, what type of church structure was sanctioned by scripture, attitudes to religious imagery, parliament's role in shaping religious policy, and so on.

It can be argued that had Elizabeth resolved these issues during her lifetime, her legacy would have been less bitter. Others believe that by inhibiting the pace of reform Elizabeth ensured its success, keeping England Protestant against a backdrop of religious war and Catholic resurgence elsewhere in Europe. Although her church settlement was overthrown and puritan ideas gained prominence from 1645 to 1660, they failed — the fundamentals of the Elizabethan settlement were restored in 1660. Given the intense religious divisions of the age, it is doubtful whether any other uniform national settlement could have been more successful.

Dr Fiona McCall is a lecturer in early modern history at the University of Portsmouth with a research interest in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious history.

Using this article in your exam



How could the religious settlement of Elizabeth I come up in your course?

AQA

This topic is an important part of AQA A2 Unit 3, The triumph of Elizabeth: Britain 1547–1603. This paper is 1 hour and 30 minutes long and you must answer two out of a possible three essay questions. Essay structure, focus and an ability to consider historical debates are all important skills for this paper.

For a discussion of a question on this topic go to: www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras

Edexcel

The religious settlement of Elizabeth I features in the Edexcel A2 Unit 3 topic Protest, conflict and rebellion in England, 1536–88, part of Option A: Revolution and conflict in England.

This article would be useful in answering the following question:

How far do the beliefs of the Tudor monarchs explain the religious changes they made from 1547 to 1570?

Robin Bunce discusses this in a sample paragraph and examiner commentary at: www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras

OCR (A)

The Elizabethan settlement features in AS module F961 study topic 4: Church and state, 1529–89 and study topic 5: England under Elizabeth I, 1558–1603. You may be focusing on Elizabeth I for the Interpretations element of your A2 coursework (module F965). This is an essay of maximum 2,000 words in which you must evaluate historians' arguments in passages provided for you.

You can find a sample answer for AS F961 Church and state as well as an assessor's commentary at: www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras