

Elizabeth I: The Religious Settlement of 1559

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There is much debate amongst historians concerning the religious priorities of Elizabeth in formulating the momentous Church Settlement of 1559, which was to shape the Church of England for years to come. Many factors can lay claim to shaping the Settlement, but in order to judge which one influenced it most strongly, one must look at the Settlement itself, which contains a strong base of Protestantism but with conservative concessions. Taking into account Elizabeth's own personal beliefs, which were conveniently politically shrewd, Elizabeth seemed to have adopted the pragmatic policy of trying to please everyone and to keep internal peace, with a Settlement containing enough Catholic superficiality to keep her conservative subjects, if not bishops, contented.

The traditional view of the Settlement, taken by historians such as J.E Neale, is that it was influenced by Protestant pressure applied by Puritans returning from abroad and that Elizabeth herself favoured the conservative methods. This view relied mainly on evidence about the 'Puritan Choir', a group of committed Puritan MPs led by Sir Francis Knollys and Sir Anthony Cooke, making up a quarter of the 404 members of Parliament. After the Protestant burnings of the reign of 'bloody Mary', many radical Protestants returned to England from their refuges of Geneva and Strasbourg, both hot-beds of Protestant ideas. Under Elizabeth they perceived a chance to return England to its rightful religion and with no compromise with the Catholics. However, the historians following Neale's theory paint Elizabeth as preferring the Henrician form of religion of her father, with more conservative practices such as keeping a crucifix in the Chapel Royal, even when they had been removed from most of the churches in England. There is a danger when trying to ascertain Elizabeth's own personal beliefs, as much were dictated by political considerations and so cannot be considered her own personal preferences. Indeed, revisionist historians have rejected Neale's view as the existence of the 'Puritan Choir' has been disproved, in fact Norman Jones showed that only 25 MPs could be seen as Calvinist and only 4 of these arrived in time for Parliament. Elizabeth made sure that she did not give way to ardent Calvinists, so although her Settlement was mainly Protestant, with an English Bible and denunciation of transubstantiation, it was Catholic enough to irritate hard-core Calvinists, such as Anthony Cooke.

With this 'via media' of policies, it is difficult to analyse Elizabeth's own beliefs behind the Settlement. While she may have made concessions to the Catholics in her Settlement, the Settlement itself is overall leaning towards Protestantism, and this is shown by the fact that it met with such fierce Catholic opposition. A Protestant Elizabeth was behind the Protestant Settlement and there is strong evidence for her own Protestantism. Christopher Haigh writes that 'There can be little doubt about Elizabeth's personal Protestantism', as she had been brought up in the Protestant household of Catherine Parr and had been taught by John Cheke, who had strong reformist tendencies. During her reign, her advisors were Protestant, e.g. Cecil, Bacon, Knollys and she was publicly identified with Protestantism, a factor that led her to be crowned by the junior Bishop of Carlisle as the other Catholic bishops did not want to get involved. At the Christmas Mass of 1558, Elizabeth dramatically swept out of the royal chapel after the host was raised and in early 1559 at the State Opening of Parliament, she eschewed the monks carrying tapers, saying 'Away with these torches, we can see very well!' Elizabeth may not (in the words of Haigh) have been a 'card-carrying Calvinist' but she certainly wasn't a Catholic. Indeed the Catholic Church saw her as illegitimate and would not recognise her as a rightful claimant to the throne. Elizabeth also did not desire to be associated with the unpopularity of the Marian regime, especially as they were so easy to compare, considering they were both women. However, taking into account the level of Catholic opposition and the danger of upsetting the major

Catholic powers, especially after the treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis in April 1559, Elizabeth was forced to make compromises from her beliefs and to take the option that was the most politically shrewd and beneficial for her subjects, to have a 'via media' between Catholicism and Protestantism.

Catholic pressure was certainly a key component to the formation of the Settlement of 1559. David Starkey takes this view as he says that 'All the evidence of Elizabeth's behaviour in the first months of her reign shows that she feared the power of Catholicism'. Indeed she had good reason to, as the Bills of Supremacy and Uniformity making up the Settlement were torn to pieces by the Marian bishops and Catholic peers, although having already passed the Commons. In retaliation to Elizabeth's Bill of Supremacy which gave Elizabeth the title of 'Supreme Head' of the English Church, Archbishop Heath challenged the authority of Elizabeth over the Church, when women were forbidden by Saint Paul from even speaking in a church. Eventually the Bills were passed, although Elizabeth had been forced to make several important concessions. Her title was changed to 'Supreme Governor', the wording of the 1549 communion service added to that of 1552 - leaving it deliberately ambiguous enabled people to interpret in the way they wanted, and the clergy wore traditional vestments that had been worn in the 2nd year of Edward VI's reign. Even with these Catholic concessions, it only just passed the House of Lords, an embarrassment considering that several Catholic bishops including White of Winchester and the Abbot of Westminster were conveniently absent after misbehaviour in a staged Protestantism versus Catholicism debate. Elizabeth had achieved the Protestant settlement but it had been changed significantly to appease the Catholics. However these appeasements were enough to satisfy the average lay person but the adiaphora hid the Protestant based doctrine behind the church, which any intellectual Catholic could discover.

In conclusion, there appear to be three main influences on the Settlement, Puritan pressure, Elizabeth's own beliefs and Catholic pressure. Neale's verdict of Puritan pressure has been proved by historians to be wrong and while Elizabeth did have Puritan influence, she was never going to let the Calvinists take over her Settlement. Catholic pressure was certainly more influential as so many concessions were made to Catholicism, however it always remained rooted in Protestantism. Elizabeth's personal beliefs were certainly important but she did not let them cloud her judgement when forming the Settlement, as her main priority was to ensure that everyone in England could attend their parish church, conforming to a religion that suited them. In order to do this she leant more towards Protestantism, her religion of preference, with Catholic concessions to ensure that the Settlement got past Parliament and would not alienate her Catholic subjects, many of whom were used to the return to Catholicism of Mary's reign. Unlike Mary, she had no strong religious zeal to convert her subjects to her own religion but recognised that care and caution were necessary and so adjusted her Settlement accordingly, especially after the unexpectedly strong opposition of the Catholic Lords shocked her in February 1559. Therefore the verdict must be that Elizabeth's main priority when forming the settlement of 1559 was her subjects and the well-being of her country, perfectly summed up by Count Von Helffstein writing in 1559, 'A very prudent action, for the less she ruffles them at the beginning of her reign, the more easily she will enthral them at the end.'