

What was Elizabeth I's religious inheritance?

When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, she inherited both a problem and its solution. The bulk of this chapter examines the problem and at the end we will look briefly at Elizabeth's solution. In view of how important it is to put Elizabeth I's reign in the wider context of the English **Reformation**, it is necessary to spend some time on what happened before she came to the throne and also to look briefly at what she inherited from continental Europe. Throughout the sixteenth century, English religious life was profoundly influenced by currents of thought coming across the English Channel. Indeed, it often looks as though the English were incapable of developing their own theological ideas and were reliant on influences from abroad. Even when the English did develop their own religious ideas, it was often when they were forced to travel abroad.

The influence of the Reformation in Europe

The religious problem for Elizabeth I was the same as that faced by her two predecessors, Edward VI (1547–53) and Mary I (1553–58) — that the country was divided in religion and it was the job of a ruler to give some leadership on how the religious life of the country was to be conducted. This was a new challenge: when Henry VIII (1509–47) had come to the throne it was almost universally accepted, first, that England was a Catholic country and second, that the king had no authority to make major religious decisions for the people. This all changed in the years following 1517.

The most important event to affect the history of England in the sixteenth century occurred not in England but in Germany, when in October 1517 an obscure Augustinian monk called **Martin Luther** pinned 95 Theses — academic points for debate — on the door of the university church in Wittenberg. From this event developed what has become known as the Protestant Reformation. Luther's reformation was rapid and devastating, sending shock waves all over Europe. Before Luther the Catholic Church had held sway over western Europe

more or less for as long as it had been Christian, in some places for more than 1,000 years. There had been influential heretics who had led movements of opposition to the Church, most notably the Englishman John Wycliffe and the Bohemian (Czech) Jan Huss, but their supporters had all been crushed or driven underground. Luther drew on the ideas of these forerunners while rejecting the more extreme views of other heretics. The difference was that he succeeded where they had failed. The Protestant Reformation attacked the Roman Catholic Church in four interrelated areas: church government, the role of the clergy in society, religious belief or **doctrine** and how to conduct church services.

On the question of who was to run the Church, **Protestants** rejected the leadership of the **pope**. The **bishops** of Rome had established a sometimes precarious leadership over the western European church, and for years their position had been questioned in three ways. First, it was clear that many of the men who became popes were not fit for the job, living irreligious lives of immorality in conspicuous luxury. This was satirised in the writings of the Dutch humanist scholar Desiderius Erasmus, whose work did much to prepare the way for Luther, though he himself remained a **Catholic**. Second, the papacy made financial and political demands on the **laity** and clergy all over Europe, which were increasingly resented, especially by ambitious kings, princes and noblemen. Luther's 95 Theses were inspired by the arrival in Germany of an indulgence seller, sent there by the pope to raise money by selling certificates that claimed to forgive the sins of those who purchased them, the money being destined to finance the building of the Basilica of St Peter's in Rome, to gratify the megalomania of a particularly greedy pope. Third, the Protestant attack on the papacy was broadened into a wider attack on the role of the clergy as a whole in society. After all, if papal leadership was questioned, why should the power of bishops and even priests and monks be immune from attack? Most obviously in the firing line were the rich and corrupt monasteries (corrupt in the sense that they did not practise the rules of poverty laid down by their founders). Luther, as a monk, had direct knowledge of such corruption. He believed that every person had the capacity to be his or her own priest, either by reading the Bible or by accepting the word preached by those who could read. He made a very practical demonstration of these beliefs by renouncing his own monastic vows, marrying a former nun and translating the New Testament from Latin, the language of the clergy, into German, the language of the people.

Luther and his followers had already challenged Catholic beliefs radically by their stance on authority within the Church, but Luther was to challenge beliefs in even more fundamental ways when he developed his teaching on 'justification', or what was needed to get to heaven. Lutherans rejected the Catholic orthodoxy that people were justified (saved) by their 'works': attendance at **Mass**



and other Catholic religious services and charitable or hospitable actions. According to Luther's view, which revived an old Catholic tradition, people were justified by their faith — by what they *believed* rather than by what they *did*. Luther's onslaught on indulgences was accompanied by the wholesale rejection of the concept of purgatory, which underpinned the idea that prayers for the dead provided a route into heaven. Lutherans also challenged beliefs on the nature of religious services. According to the Catholic Church, religious ceremonies, conducted by a special caste of priests, were key events in Christians' progress to salvation. Luther was keen to stress the role of the laity and to reduce that of the clergy. He denied that there were seven **sacraments**, accepting only two: **Communion** and baptism. He rejected the Catholic belief in auricular confession, the one-to-one discussion between priest and penitent. In the Communion service Luther also questioned the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, which taught that the bread and wine actually became the body and blood of Christ when the priest blessed them. Other reformers who followed him completely abandoned any belief in the physical presence of the body and blood in the bread and wine and said that Communion was simply a commemoration of Jesus's Last Supper. Luther was unwilling to go so far and accepted 'consubstantiation', a sort of halfway house between Catholic and radical views that did not completely deny the actual presence of Christ in the bread and wine. Lutherans also fundamentally modified Catholic practice by allowing Communion 'in both kinds' (both bread and wine) for the laity as well as for the clergy. Catholic priests only gave the laity the bread.

The Protestant Reformation initiated by Luther developed a fresh momentum when it arrived in Switzerland in the 1520s. **Ulrich Zwingli** in Zurich and, in the next generation, John Calvin in Geneva, emerged as the great leaders of the Reformation. Both were to have a huge influence in England.

Henry VIII

It was these religious reforms that presented the theological problems that faced Catholic England in the years after 1517. Luther's ideas spread quickly in Germany and spilled over into the neighbouring countries of western Europe. By the early 1520s the Lutheran Reformation had produced a profound effect on a small group of English clergy, academics and urban laymen, especially in two influential places, the University of Cambridge and the City of London. These early English Lutherans, called 'evangelicals' by historians, began to preach, write and agitate in favour of an English reformation. Their leading figure was William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English, using Luther's

German translation to help him, and wrote a book calling on Henry VIII to lead his kingdom into a rejection of the pope and into wholesale secularisation of the immense wealth of the Church. However, the king's first response was to persecute Lutherans. In 1521 Henry VIII, with help from Sir Thomas More, wrote a book condemning Luther and was rewarded with the title 'Defender of the Faith' by the pope.

In a period of intense political and religious activity between 1529 and 1536, however, Henry VIII executed a bewildering U-turn, accepting a large part of Luther's agenda and starting the process that we know as the English Reformation. He took three main steps. First and foremost, he rejected the authority of the pope over the Catholic Church in England: this was the famous 'break with Rome'. Using parliament to help him, Henry VIII passed the Act of Supremacy in 1534 by which he, as king, was declared to be the 'Supreme Head, under Christ, of the Church in England'. This ended the jurisdiction of the pope over England, which dated back to the seventh century. All taxes sent to Rome were taken over by the king and the right of appeal from the church courts to Rome was abolished. The king now had the power to appoint all bishops and to control the work of the clergy. England was separated from the rest of the Catholic Church. Second, Henry VIII dissolved the English monasteries, again by Acts of Parliament, passed in 1536 and 1539. There were 600 monasteries and nunneries, occupied by about 9,000 monks and nuns and owning a huge amount of property all over the country. Third, Henry VIII allowed a series of religious changes that made tentative steps towards the evangelical programme of reformation. There was an English translation of the Bible and the adoption of a number of new statements of belief, although these tended to be contradictory. The most significant Catholic doctrines to be rejected were those of purgatory and pilgrimage. The dissolution of the monasteries had been accompanied by the removal of Catholic shrines and by a wave of iconoclasm — the destruction of images, statues and pictures associated with places of pilgrimage. However, Henry VIII did not allow one major change: church services remained in Latin.

Why did Henry VIII do this? The process started with the break with Rome, which was in large part a consequence of his desire for an heir to whom he could pass on the throne of England, thus avoiding a disputed succession. Henry VIII had one child, Mary, by his wife Catherine of Aragon, but there had been no female ruler in England for 400 years, and Catherine seemed to be barren. Henry wished to divorce Catherine and marry Anne Boleyn, by whom he felt sure — erroneously, as it turned out — he would have a son. However, the ultimate decision on whether or not he could divorce Catherine lay with the pope, who was in the political control of Catherine's nephew, the Emperor



Charles V, who opposed the divorce. So there seemed to be no alternative to the break with Rome, simply in order to divorce Catherine. However, there was no need for such a breach in relations with the papacy to be permanent; the fact that it was made so shows that Henry VIII and the political elite in England had accepted a large part of the Lutheran belief that papal and clerical power was not legitimate, whereas that of kings and other lay rulers was. The desire for money and power was also a significant motive both in breaking with Rome and in closing the monasteries, not just from personal avarice, but out of a desire to strengthen the monarchy, preserve civil peace and defend the country from attack. Hovering over all these practical arguments for what Henry VIII did was a great movement in ideas, of which many people in England were only dimly aware but which strongly influenced the educated elite. These were the ideas, both Catholic and Lutheran, of reform — a desire to return to the original bases for Christianity, to the Bible and to a simpler ideal of religion. The nobility and gentry who took over the monasteries' lands were well aware that it had originally belonged to their own ancestors, who had given it away to the monks; they also knew that the founders of the religious orders had believed in poverty and humility.

When Henry VIII died in 1547 he left England in a sort of religious limbo, neither really Catholic nor fully Protestant. Why did the king not go all the way with Luther? First, religious life all over Europe was in a state of flux, with no clearly established template of a reformed ecclesiastical system. Second, we must assume that Henry himself did not wish to take the process too far. The ruling classes in Europe held firmly to what modern historians have labelled 'conservative' views in religion: they feared that if the reformation went too far it would stir the people into a more general revolt, not only against the Church, but also against kings and noblemen. This anxiety had surfaced in Germany where, in 1525, as a result of Luther's ideas, a major peasants' revolt broke out. Worse still, in 1533 the German city of Münster was taken over by a radical religious group, the **Anabaptists**, who not only reformed the church but also deposed the magistrates, instituted communism and denounced the concept of family. Henry VIII wanted to benefit from religious reform, not be deposed as a result of it, so he was responsive to conservative arguments that the reformers should be kept in check. However, there was also danger from the other side of the religious divide. In 1536 there occurred the most serious rebellion in England in the whole Tudor period, the Pilgrimage of Grace. For a few months the whole of the north of England was in open revolt and York, the capital of the north, had been taken over by a rebel army. This was not just a peasants' revolt; it was supported by a large section of the nobility and gentry. Although there were economic and other non-religious reasons for

the rebellion, the pilgrimage was essentially a protest against Henry VIII's religious policy and against the influence at court of reformers like Thomas Cranmer, the **Archbishop** of Canterbury and Thomas Cromwell, the king's secretary. The rebellion fizzled out and there were reprisals, but royal policy for the next 10 years until Henry VIII's death in 1547 was remarkably conservative. Henry did not go back on the major reforms of 1529–36, but he refused to take them any further.

Edward VI (1547–53)

Henry VIII was succeeded by his 9-year-old son, Edward VI. Religious policy during his reign was decided mainly by the adults who ruled in his name, first his uncle, the Duke of Somerset, and later the Duke of Northumberland. Both were Protestants and the boy king gave them his full support in their pursuit of further reformation. It was in Edward's reign that the English Reformation reached its high-water mark. In 1547, the chantries were abolished. These were chapels attached to many churches, where priests were employed to sing masses for the souls of the dead. The earlier attack on purgatory, implicit in the dissolution of the monasteries and places of pilgrimage, had pointed the way to this change. Once again it involved a great increase in revenue to the Crown, since the chantries owned land and property given to them by laity frightened of purgatory. There was also a loss of local amenities, especially schools, as chantry priests were often teachers linked to local confraternities and guilds. This was partially remedied by the creation of King Edward VI Grammar Schools.

Next, by the 1549 Act of Uniformity, parliament introduced the first Edwardian prayer book to replace the Latin Mass, followed in 1552 by a second and more radical prayer book. The doctrine on the Eucharist in the new prayer books was based on reformed theology, with Communion given to the laity in both kinds. The 1552 Prayer Book reflected the Zwinglian belief that the Communion service was performed in remembrance of the Last Supper, and contained no hint of the Catholic idea that Christ was physically present in the Communion bread and wine. Meanwhile, the appearance of the interior of churches changed with a second wave of iconoclasm, the removal or destruction of 'idolatrous' Catholic statues and pictures.

The whole tone of English religious life became more Protestant under Edward VI. A number of important religious leaders from Europe came to England, including Martin Bucer, Bernardino Ochino, and Peter Martyr Vermigli. Under their influence some of the more radical English reformers, such as Miles Coverdale and John Hooper, wanted the reformation to go even further.



Mary I (1553–58)

The hopes of the reformers were dashed, however, when the young king died of tuberculosis in 1553 and his elder sister, Mary, seized control in the face of strong Protestant opposition. Mary was the child of Catherine of Aragon and also a child of the Catholic Church. She threw the reformation into reverse and overturned much of what had been done by Henry VIII and Edward VI. She restored England to the Catholic Church and to obedience to the papacy. The venerable Cardinal Reginald Pole, a minor member of the royal family and opponent of the Henrician Reformation, who had been in exile in Italy since the 1530s, returned to England as Papal Legate to accept the country back into the Catholic Church in the name of the pope. As Archbishop of Canterbury, Pole directed Marian religious policy. Mary and Pole are often portrayed by Protestant historians as wild-eyed fanatics, but they were pragmatic enough to accept that the dissolution of the monasteries and chantries could not be overturned: too much of their property had been bought up by the laity and parliament would never agree. Mary did begin to re-endow monasteries herself, especially the abbey at Westminster, and she also restored a little of the revenue and property that had also been taken from the bishops under Henry VIII and Edward VI, though she was hardly generous.

Mary's best-known policy, however, was much less enlightened and less effective: she began to persecute Protestants as heretics. The Catholic Church had developed a way to deal with heretics: there was a trial and if the heretics refused to recant they were handed over to the lay authorities, who would burn them at the stake. A steady trickle of Lollards, followers of John Wycliffe, had been treated in this cruel fashion and both Henry VIII and Edward VI had burnt religious extremists as heretics. Mary's persecution of Protestant heretics was remarkable because it involved, by English standards, a relatively large number of deaths: 280, mainly in the second half of her brief reign. The executions were concentrated in areas where heresy was strongest, especially London and the southeast, so the scale of the bloodshed seemed worse to contemporaries there. In addition, leading figures from Henry VIII's and Edward VI's reigns were executed, including Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Nicholas Ridley and Hugh Latimer. There is little question that Mary's persecution was unproductive as well as cruel: it did not stamp out heresy (although a supporter of Mary might maintain that it was not given enough time) and it helped create a myth of Catholic barbarity and Protestant courage, best shown in John Foxe's extremely popular — and highly biased — 1563 account of the persecution in his *Acts and Monuments of the English Martyrs*.

Mary also drove about 1,000 leading English Protestants into exile. These people travelled to southern Germany and Switzerland, where they were hospitably received by the followers of Zwingli and Calvin and had their beliefs confirmed and strengthened. When they came back to England after Mary's death they did so with the experience of having lived as part of thoroughly reformed congregations fresh in their minds. Once again, continental ideas were influencing the development of English religion.

Mary's reign, like Edward's, was cut short by her death. Also like Edward, Mary failed to leave an heir to carry on her work: her unpopular marriage to Philip II of Spain had produced nothing more than a phantom pregnancy. Both reigns can be judged to have been failures, largely because neither monarch lived long enough to build on what they were trying to achieve, or to put right the mistakes they had made. The 1540s and 1550s were a difficult time in economic, social, medical and diplomatic terms, and it is against this background that the two rulers had struggled. Mary died in November 1558 and left the throne to her half-sister, Elizabeth.

Religious change and the English people

This brief survey of Elizabeth I's religious inheritance has focused on the activities of monarchs and parliaments rather than on the English people. How were they affected by these religious changes? There is no clear answer to this. Clearly some people were confirmed as Catholics by the Marian restoration: historians have detected signs of a Catholic revival during her reign. Another section of the population favoured a more moderate Henrician religious solution, with some aspects of Catholic ceremonies but no interference from Rome. A third group wanted a thoroughgoing Protestant reformation; and there were also a large number of people who were essentially apathetic, either because they were not strongly religious (and there were certainly people of that sort in Tudor England) or because they had taken the philosophical view that it did not really matter which version of Christianity was followed. It is impossible to say how many people fell into each of these categories: the consensus among historians is that the large urban centres, especially London, tended to be more Protestant while more remote rural areas, especially in the north, were more Catholic. The younger generation was more likely to be Protestant, though for 5 years immediately before Elizabeth I's accession England had seen a revival of Catholicism. Social class is crucial in this



discussion, since the mass of the people had little opportunity to influence events one way or the other. The aristocracy had a conservative streak, though this could make them Henricians rather than Marians. Protestantism was popular among people of the middling sort, the gentry, yeomanry and merchants, and possibly also among the literate and intellectual classes. The main point to emphasise, however, is that the country was divided and these divisions had the potential to lead to rebellion, even to civil war. Elizabeth I inherited a religious mess: a stalled Protestant reformation and an unsettling period of Catholic revival.

Elizabeth I's solution

There was little doubt about what sort of a solution Elizabeth would attempt to these problems. Elizabeth was a Protestant. It is a defensible position that by 1558 it did not really matter which course a ruler followed as long as the ruler stuck firmly to that course and did not die too soon. The English Reformation had unsettled the religious and political life of the country, and a period of certainty and clarity was needed. A Catholic historian might suggest that continuity with Mary's reign might have been useful, and that the foreign situation favoured a Catholic settlement; a Protestant historian would reply that the more advanced parts of the country, London and the south, were reformed and that the march of ideas was going in a Protestant direction. However, such pragmatic considerations did not weigh with Elizabeth: as the daughter of Anne Boleyn, she was not going to continue the religious policy of the daughter of Catherine of Aragon. Elizabeth's own inheritance, even her genes, provided her with the outlines of a solution to the religious divisions which faced her at the beginning of her reign.

The precise nature of Elizabeth I's religious opinions has been much debated by historians. This debate is important because it helps us understand the political forces that came together to form her religious policy. One straightforward approach would be to look at her policy throughout her reign and then conclude that it was based on her ideas: we would then be able to picture Elizabeth as a moderate Protestant. However, with a little digging we can make the picture of her religious views, and hence of the religious policy of Elizabethan England, more complex. Elizabeth's birth had placed her in the Protestant camp as surely as Mary's ancestry put her among the Catholics. In order to marry Elizabeth's mother, Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII had made himself head of the Church; it was highly likely that their daughter would continue that policy. Anne herself had been a strong supporter of more advanced religious

ideas and had she lived longer it is likely that she would have encouraged Henry to take his reformation further. One of Anne Boleyn's chaplains was Matthew Parker, Elizabeth's first Archbishop of Canterbury. Elizabeth's cousins on her mother's side featured prominently in her government. After Anne's execution, Elizabeth was brought up with her brother Edward in an increasingly Protestant atmosphere in which Edward seems to have developed quite radical religious views. Prominent among the formative influences on the young Elizabeth was Catherine Parr, Henry's last queen and a woman of strong reforming views. With this background and education, Elizabeth certainly ought to have been a Protestant.

However, there are two problems with this straightforward analysis. The first is that Elizabeth seems at times to have lacked any strong religious sentiment at all, which suggests that she had some sympathy with the religious outlook of her father as much as with that of her mother. She might even have sympathised with that section of the population which regarded religion with indifference; she certainly had little time for the Puritanism of those who wanted to turn their households into godly paradises. Elizabeth's language was coarse and peppered with medieval curses; she liked a good party, especially if there was dancing, and she spent a great deal on clothes and jewels. She possessed beautifully written manuscript collections of prayers, some in her own hand and possibly composed by her personally, though historians disagree on how to interpret this. To some it is evidence of a deep piety; others see such books merely as fashion accessories for a rich young lady. Elizabeth is probably best seen as conventionally religious, attending her chapel every day because this was her Christian duty, rather than because she was devout like Philip II or Mary. She had little time for religious leaders; she developed her religious policies with lay advisers, except at the end of her reign when she found in John Whitgift an Archbishop of Canterbury with whom she saw eye to eye. Her lack of religious enthusiasm appears to its best advantage in her desire to avoid religious persecution: this policy, which she struggled to maintain in the face of strong opposition, shows her to be a pragmatist, one who valued political peace more highly than religious correctness. Elizabeth was not made of the stuff of martyrs: in Mary's reign, when her position was dangerous, she conformed and attended Catholic Mass. Like any successful monarch, Elizabeth was first and foremost a politician.

The second caveat to the idea that Elizabeth was simply a Protestant is that she had a strong conservative streak. In a careful dissection of her recorded religious statements in letters and speeches, Susan Doran has shown Elizabeth to have been closer to Luther's ideas than to Calvin's — in other words she reflected the prevalent atmosphere in which she grew up. This placed her at odds



with more advanced Protestants, or **Puritans**. However, she disagreed with Luther on the subject of the marriage of the clergy: she refused to be introduced to the wives of bishops on her royal progresses. She had to accept that the reformed clergy could be allowed to marry, though it is fair to add that marriage was a painful subject for her and she tended to be jealous of anyone marrying at all. On the subject of church ornaments she disagreed even with conservative Protestants. She insisted on having a **crucifix** and candles in her own chapel, which caused much controversy: there were frequent attempts to get her to remove these popish symbols and the crucifix was occasionally stolen by enraged Protestants, even, in 1570, by her own court jester, Patch. Elizabeth always had the crucifix replaced. In 1565, when the Dean of St Paul's, Alexander Nowell, gave a sermon in her presence attacking her use of such popish ornaments she silenced him, saying: 'Do not talk about that. Leave that, it has nothing to do with your subject, and the matter is now threadbare.' Her cross and candles were, however, just about acceptable to a Lutheran. Patrick Collinson has described her as 'an odd sort of Protestant' and Susan Doran has punned that she was 'an old sort of Protestant'. Odd or old, Protestant she certainly was.

Questions

- 1 Who stood to gain and who stood to lose from the religious changes of Henry VIII's and Edward VI's reigns?
- 2 Who did more to advance the cause of Protestantism in England, Edward VI or Mary I ?
- 3 How important were Tudor family relationships in determining Elizabeth I's attitude towards religion?