

The Reformation in England 3: The Elizabethan Settlement

Margo Todd has suggested that: 'for every Marian martyr there was a parishioner bringing carefully hidden mass-books and icons back into use; for every exile there was a craftsman busily restoring rood screens and altars. The precise degree of resistance remains unclear, but certainly traditions and beliefs condemned by the reformers survived Edward's reign'.¹ Yet, as we have seen, Mary I misjudged the mood in the land. Her over-zealous attempt to re-establish Catholicism backfired; the spectacle of almost three hundred honest, ordinary and otherwise loyal people burned at the stake had turned the popular mind against the Queen, as had her foreign policy of supporting the Spanish. When she died on 17 November 1558, there was widespread rejoicing. No-one could have expected, at that point, that her successor, her half-sister Elizabeth, would become the most popular and most accomplished of Tudor monarchs.

When she ascended the throne, Elizabeth's primary aims were to establish stability for the realm and to ensure the loyalty of her subjects. Religious attitudes had hardened: Protestants were more resolved in their new faith while Catholics had also become more resolute. Lutheranism had given way to Calvinism which was becoming associated with social transformation and opposition and even the removal of tyrannical rulers (a position adopted by John Knox and developed by his associate Christopher Goodman). Catholicism seemed to be associated with legitimate authority. But Elizabeth chose Protestantism. The scholarly consensus suggests that she pursued policies which reformed the church and maintained the break from Rome partly as the result of how she judged the mood in the country. Elizabeth moved quickly. Immediately, her government presented legislation which replaced stone altars with communion tables and destroyed images, rood lofts and vestments. Under the terms of the 1559 Act of Supremacy, Elizabeth became 'supreme governor' of the Church (rather than supreme head, as her father had been), it rejected papal jurisdiction and repealed Mary's heresy Acts. Only Anthony Kitchin at Llandaff agreed to swear allegiance to the crown, which enabled the wholesale replacement of the bench of bishops, of whom Matthew Parker (1504-75), Elizabeth's Archbishop Canterbury, was the most accomplished. Cranmer's 1552 Book of Common Prayer was restored, largely unchanged, and supported by legislation. A new Act of Uniformity was passed, namely 'An Acte for the Uniformitie of Common Prayoure and Dyvyne Service in the Churche, and the Administration of the Sacramentes' which was passed on 17 December 1559. It went further than previous Acts by trying to enforce attendance at worship in the parish church at least once a week. Those who did not attend were liable to be fined 12d.

In 1571, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion were issued. Based on Cranmer's Forty-two Articles, 'they rejected such Roman Catholic doctrines as purgatory and the validity of indulgences. The veneration of images and relics is rejected. Scripture is the sole basis of faith. There are but two sacraments, baptism and

¹ Margot Todd, 'England after 1558', in Andrew Pettegree (ed.), *The Reformation World* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 365.

Communion. Infant baptism is held to be in accordance with the teaching of Christ. Holy Communion, which is not to be considered a sacrifice, is understood in light of Calvin's teaching. In a word, the Articles were positively Protestant and Calvinistic as to the main points of theology but too moderate in the view of the more radical reformers'.²

Nevertheless, despite pressure from those who sought further reform, Elizabeth maintained that episcopal order in the church would maintain monarchical order and thus she rejected the growing Puritan movement that suggested that the reform of the Church had not, yet, gone far enough. Margot Todd explains the problem in these terms:

What the Reformation finally established in Elizabeth's England was a state church united both negatively in its opposition to popery and positively in its formal identity with Protestant doctrine, but at the same time fundamentally divided by the demands of Calvinist doctrine and piety. For all its theoretical inclusiveness, the Elizabethan church was riven by an unrelenting tension between those most fully committed to continuing the movement that had come so far in Edward's reign and those who were either satisfied that the movement had come far enough or who had merely submitted outwardly to required change in each reign. The first group, the self-professed 'godly', known in modern parlance as Puritans, identified themselves with the biblical remnant of elect saints surrounded in the individual experience of repentance and conversion, reinforced by the personal struggle to achieve assurance of election. To those, the 'hotter sort of Protestants', those mere outward professors of the faith who lacked the inward affront to God and true believers, and the direct cause of providential judgements on all England. The 'mere conformists' simply credal faith, their satisfaction with a 'half-way reformation' and their intermittent harassment of the godly, were constant sources of worry and complaint by their more zealously Protestant brethren.³

In 1562, Bishop John Jewel (1522-71), published his *Apologia*. This work argued that the Church of England was not a new innovation, but a reappropriation of the ancient Church of Christ purged of the perversions introduced by the papacy.

In 1563, the Thirty-nine Articles were adopted in place of the previous Forty-two Articles, which had never been properly enforced because Edward VI had died before they could be implemented.

All seemed to be going well until 1569 when the Catholic nobility revolted and sought to restore Catholic worship and to release Mary Queen of Scots. In 1570, the Pope issued the bull *Regnans in excelsis* which excommunicated the Queen and absolved all citizens from obedience to the monarch. As such it legitimated attempts to depose the Queen in favour of a Catholic monarch.

² R. Tudur Jones, *The Great Reformation*, p. 168.

³ Margot Todd, 'England after 1558', p. 367.

From 1580, Jesuit missionaries arrived in England. Of around six hundred identifiable missionaries, approximately three hundred were imprisoned and 130 of them executed along with around sixty lay Catholics. Unlike under Mary, these were executed as traitors rather than heretics. The 1588 Armada made Catholicism synonymous with military threat and treason.

The Elizabethan settlement of 1559 has been the subject of much debate among historians.

1. It has been seen as an inspired piece of compromise which ensured religious stability in England and enabled its established church to develop its own very distinctive doctrines and liturgy. This view has been challenged by those who argue that the Elizabethan church was, with some minor modifications, a thoroughly Calvinistic institution;
2. It has been seen as a thoroughly inadequate compromise which satisfied neither Catholics nor Protestants and led to the religious instability and conflict in England which dominated the whole of the seventeenth century and contributed to the English Civil Wars of the 1640s;
3. It has been seen as a cynical piece of power politics which ignored the overwhelming desire of the English clergy and people to remain part of the Western Catholic Church and led to the gradual decline of religious observance in England. This view has been challenged by those who point out the high levels of support for the Book of Common Prayer in English parishes by the late sixteenth century, and the widespread hostility to Puritanism and recusancy.

There were two significant groups in England that did not greet the Elizabethan religious settlement with enthusiasm.

1. Those who wanted to remain part of the Western Catholic Church and were not prepared to do what they could to retain traditional doctrines and practices within the framework of the new prayer book services. The position of these people, known as recusants, was made exceptionally difficult by the formal excommunication and deprivation of Elizabeth I by the pope in 1570. Thereafter they were regarded as potential traitors to the Crown, and though the anti-recusant legislation was only sporadically enforced from the early seventeenth century, English Roman Catholics remained severely restricted in their freedom to worship until the late eighteenth century, and were not allowed to hold political office until after the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829.
2. Those who felt that the English Reformation had not proceeded far enough and wanted a more 'scriptural' church purged of its bishops and the few vestiges of ceremonial permitted by the Book of Common Prayer. These people were known as puritans, on account of their desire for a 'purity' of Protestant doctrine and practice in the English church. The puritan lobby remained vociferous during the reigns of Elizabeth I, James I and Charles I and eventually succeeded in abolishing both episcopacy and the Book of Common Prayer in the 1640s. When these were restored

in 1660 many puritans refused to accept the new religious settlement under Charles II and set up their own Protestant Nonconformist churches which were granted limited toleration in 1689. These Protestant Nonconformists were also, unless they communicated in the Church of England, excluded from political office until the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828.

Margot Todd has explained this issue in these terms:

For some Protestants, however, the Settlement was a halfway reformation and the pace of further reform was too slow. Christened by their enemies in the 1560s 'Puritans' or 'Precisions', these Protestants preferred with remarkable hubris, to identify themselves as the 'godly'. They opposed the remaining 'dregs of popery' in the service and in clerical dress as undermining the Protestant campaign against idolatry and superstition. Particularly targeted in the 1560s were clerical vestments, though to retain a popish distinction between clergy and people at the expense of the priesthood of all believers. In the 1570s Puritans called on communion, the sign of the cross in baptism and the use of communion wafers instead of bread, Puritan M.P.s attempted to secure freedom for ministers of tender conscience to depart from the Prayer Book liturgy. In the 1570s and 1580s, a minority of Puritans led by Thomas Cartwright and John Field advocated replacement of episcopal church government with a classical or Presbyterian form of polity that would effect a more comprehensive discipline of parishioners' behavior, on the model of Geneva or Scotland. Their 1572 *Admonition to Parliament* comprised the Presbyterian platform. Elements of which were put forward in 1580s parliaments. At the same time, presbyterians did manage in a few locations to establish an embryonic system of *classes* exercising the discipline and holding clerical conferences.⁴

While much had been achieved, Elizabeth's settlement had been a compromise. Although we cannot be sure, it seems that even the queen herself had compromised and would have liked to include more aspects of Catholic practice. Yet the mood in the church was quite different. There are those who think that, had Elizabeth not died in 1603, she would have ultimately been defeated as a result of the fact that a significant majority in the church sought further reform. Their zeal would meet further regal opposition after her death and ultimately lead to the tragedy of the civil wars of the 1640s. Nevertheless, by the time of Elizabeth's death on 24 March 1603, the Reformation had been consolidated to such an extent that it could not be reversed, despite the intrigue of the Stuart monarchs. England was now Protestant, even if that was to be interpreted and understood in terms that were quite different from that which was common on the European continent. England was forging its own path, but there were those who sought to go further. And this would bring conflagration in the seventeenth century.

⁴ Margot Todd, 'England after 1558', p. 374