

A Comparative Guide to Religion in Elizabethan England

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From *A Portrait of Elizabeth I*, ed. Robert Pringle

and *Comparative Elizabethan Religion* by Tim Duncan

INTRODUCTION

Everyone who lived in Elizabethan England was, at least publicly, a Christian and (by today's standards) devout. The purpose of this paper is to assist you in portraying this important facet of your character to the audience. This is not an attempt at proselytization. It does not matter whether you really hold to any of these beliefs; it is only important that you understand them.

The sixteenth century was a time of considerable religious change. Over a period of twenty years, the country had gone from Henrician Catholic to Protestant to Catholic to Protestant again. It is therefore important that you understand all of these beliefs and how they differ.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

In the Elizabethan age the Church was an inseparable part of both public and private life. Attendance at its services was obligatory, and whole areas of personal morality and behavior were subject to its authority. Debate about theological matters was not an academic exercise but often became a passionate issue for the man in the street. Religion could be a disruptive force which divided families and communities, and individuals were likely to be imprisoned or hanged for their faith.

When Elizabeth came to the throne, the country had experienced twenty-five years of religious upheaval. Her father, King Henry VIII, had abolished the Pope's power in England and had become Supreme Head of the Church himself. Although the country remained doctrinally Catholic under Henry, he precipitated the Reformation, and when he was succeeded in 1547 by his young son, King Edward VI, the Church became essentially Protestant in doctrine and practice. When Queen Mary I, a devout Catholic, succeeded Edward in 1553, most of the ecclesiastical changes introduced by Henry and Edward were swept away and Catholicism was restored. In her drive to stamp out Protestant heresy, about three hundred people were burned at the stake in less than five years.

Elizabeth did not share her sister's deeply religious temperament, and though she held firm convictions of her own she pursued a tolerant and unfanatical approach to religious questions. The famous Church Settlement established by Acts of Parliament at the start of her reign was a compromise solution calculated to be acceptable to as many Catholics and Protestants as possible, and was designed, above all, to restore strength and unity to a divided kingdom. It re-established the Protestant prayer-book of Edward VI but with alterations that made it more palatable to Catholics, and it revived Royal supremacy over the Church, though in a milder and more parliamentary form than under Henry VIII. The Settlement survived all manner of vicissitudes, and provided the conditions from which the Anglican Church has successfully developed to this day.

The moderate and broadly-based Church Settlement found general acceptance during the first decade of the reign, although like all compromises it did not satisfy the extremists, whether Catholic or Protestant. Events, however, upset the relatively harmonious situation. In the late 1560's, Spain emerged as the leading Catholic power and, with an army in the Netherlands and a strong Navy on the seas, became an increasing danger to England. At the same time, Catholicism was being revitalized on the Continent and missionaries were entering England with the specific purpose of reconverting the country. A further threat was the arrival in England of the deposed Mary, Queen of Scots, who immediately became the focus of Catholic discontent against the Elizabethan regime. Storm clouds began to gather. In 1569 Elizabeth had to put down a serious rebellion led by the Catholic Earls of Westmoreland and Northumberland. The next year Pius V issued a Papal Bull of excommunication and deposition against Elizabeth. Faced with these challenges the Queen was forced to act, and Parliament passed a series of severe anti-Catholic measures. The Papal Bull presented a particularly serious challenge to the regime, and a fearful dilemma to Catholics, since in absolving all subjects of their allegiance to the Queen, it forced them to choose between their religion and their national loyalty, and made them -- in the eyes of the government -- potential traitors.

At the same time as the Catholic threat intensified, a growing body of reforming Protestants voiced their dissatisfaction with the Elizabethan Church. Most of these Puritans, so called because they wished to "purify" the Church of all remaining vestiges of Catholicism, accepted the existing structure of the Church and merely demanded and improved standard of clergy and the removal of "impurities" in doctrine and ritual. Others, however, went much further, 'attacked

the government of the Church by bishops, objected to the Royal Supremacy, and sought a Presbyterian (i.e., elected) style of Church order.

The Queen's distaste for the Puritan attitude of mind, with its solemn disavowal of the ordinary pleasures of life like music and sports, added fuel to her growing aversion to the political implications of Presbyterian doctrines. In her view, Civil and Church government were two aspects of one state, and the Puritans' refusal to accept the latter implied opposition to the former. The more radical Puritans, indeed, openly voiced the claim that the final authority in all matters of government lay with the national synod or assembly of the Presbyterian church and that even monarchs were subject to its jurisdiction.

Throughout the mounting religious controversy of her reign, the Queen remained fundamentally concerned with the safety of the kingdom rather than with the theological claims of Protestants or Catholics. The political and not the spiritual import of religion was her prime interest. Since she believed that the essence of religion was deeply personal and that men might come to God from different paths, it was not her wish to pry into individual consciences but only to enforce a degree of outward religious conformity in the interests of national unity. She had an antipathy to religious dogmatists, and is said to have declared that there was "only one Christ Jesus and one faith; the rest is a dispute about trifles." When she addressed Parliament in 1585, she declared her opposition both to Catholic agitators and to the "new-fangledness" of the Puritan extremists.

That there was considerable continuity of tradition despite the religious changes of the reign is shown by the fact that many foreign visitors who attended English Church services were surprised to find how little they differed in form from the old Catholic rituals. The ceremonies Elizabeth maintained in her own chapels reflected her innate conservatism about religion, as with many other matters.

DOCTRINE AND PRACTICES OF THE THREE MAJOR ELIZABETHAN SECTS

A. Authority/Structure

Roman Catholic

The Church sees itself as an autonomous, transnational (universal) institution that has complete authority over the spiritual affairs of all Christians in western Europe, regardless of nationality. It bases its authority upon Tradition, the teachings of Church Fathers, and Scripture.

The structure is definitely a top-down hierarchy. The pope (Vicar of Christ, Patriarch of the West, Supreme Pontiff, Bishop of Rome) is the supreme and ultimate authority on all matters of faith and morals, and is obeyed by the archbishops, bishops, and abbots, who are in charge of their respective archdioceses and dioceses (specific geographic areas) or monasteries. They are obeyed by the parish priests, who are in turn obeyed by the laity, whom they instruct. All leadership positions are filled by ordained clergy; that is, appointed to or promoted within the hierarchy by members higher up.

Church of England

The reigning English monarch is Supreme Governor of the Church in England and Ireland any claims made by the Church of Rome notwithstanding. This authority is based upon edicts by Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Elizabeth I, and upon various Acts of Parliament; it is this authority which determines proper and correct belief and practice. Clergy are subject to civil laws and civil courts, and the Privy Council assists and advises the Crown on religious as well as political affairs (XXXVII of the 39 Articles). The Archbishop of Canterbury is Primate, or first among his brother bishops, in England, and the diocesan/parish system is as it was under the Roman system.

Puritan

Radical Protestant reformers exist within the framework of the Church of England (C of E), but to varying extents wish to "purify" it, by modifications in structure as well as belief, along the lines of the Calvinist sects on the Continent. These sects believe that God and His Word are the sole authority over the individual believer in matters of faith, and positions of leadership are filled by members of the congregation, of God acting through those members (i.e., by popular vote). A decidedly bottom-up system in contrast to the other two. Most English Protestants considered themselves to be super patriots, and so kept their opinions on this subject pretty much to themselves and their close associates while living publicly within the C of E structure. However, by the 1580's, radical Puritans began to call for a Presbyterian (i.e., elected) system of church government, which Elizabeth saw as a threat to her sovereignty.

B. Scripture

Roman Catholic

The Church alone is authorized to translate and interpret the Bible; and, since it's already in the universal language (i.e. Latin), there is absolutely no reason to translate it further. This version is called the "Vulgate," since St. Jerome translated it into the Latin commonly ("vulgarly") used in his day - not Classical Latin. Can't read Latin? Good - then you're protected from reaching a false interpretation. It is the duty of the clerical hierarchy to explain everything in Scripture that the faithful need to know for their salvation.

As mentioned above, the Church bases its authority on a) Scripture - in this case, particularly Matthew 16:18-19. (Peter ...on this rock I will build my church...); b) tradition, which is to say that if Peter and his apostolic successors were given the authority to establish the Church with all the rites and traditions that have been created over the last 1,500 years, then they must be acceptable to God; and c) the teachings of the Church Fathers, e.g. St. Augustine and others.

And so it is with all questions of doctrine and morals: the Church interprets Scripture in light of its own Tradition. A major update of these interpretations was made as recently as 1564 by the Council of Trent, in reaction to the Protestant Reformation. This update is thought of as the start of the Catholic Counter-Reformation.

Church of England

The bishops and theologians who advised Henry VIII during the start of the English Reformation were heavily influenced by the writings of Martin Luther in Germany. This former Augustinian monk had broken with the Roman program and gained popular support for his ideas of a) secular control of local church organization and b) making translations of the Bible available to everyone in their native language, so that all might receive nourishment and comfort from God's Word -- and make their own dogmatic/ moral/political interpretation of it! Luther believed that, according to Scripture, the Scriptures themselves contained everything a believer needed to live correctly and attain salvation; one had only to read and heed. He cited such passages as II Timothy 3:15-17 as evidence.

Although Henry, who was a religious conservative, and his churchmen weren't prepared to go as far as Luther (they maintained a government of the Church by bishops with the King as their head), they used his ideas to justify the formation of the C of E and to establish their stance on Scripture (VI of the 39 Articles). Archbishop Cranmer produced his translation of the Bible in English; thus, the faithful had free access to the Scriptures and could make their own interpretations - as long as they agreed with those of Parliament, the Crown, and its Church.

Puritan

The Radical Protestant reformers not only agreed with Luther, they embraced the more radical positions of fellow reformer John Calvin. Everyone had a personal relationship with God, with no need for any earthly intermediaries, and Scripture was God's method of communicating his requirements and demands to humanity. It also contains (especially in the Old Testament) object lessons of the consequences of conforming to or ignoring God's Commandments; these stories are taken as historical fact in all their detail and are undeniable proof that God is willing and able to render his justice swift and sure, in this life as well as the next.

Scripture is not only a rule of conduct for the individual, but is also the ultimate yardstick against which all societies, institutions, and governments are to be measured. The lessons about the destruction of corrupt societies are not lost on them, no less than the warnings of the Last Judgement, when the sheep will be separated from the goats.

C. Salvation

Before we begin this discussion, we need to cover a few basic premises that all 16th-Century Christians hold in common. All believe in Original Sin (the Fall of Adam): Humanity, by its own choice, is separated from God; the result is the imperfection of human nature, the inability to know or to do what is right on our own, and the inevitability of death - thus making salvation necessary. God chose to give humanity a chance to be reunited with him, so "He sent His only begotten Son" to die as a blood offering for the sins of all humanity, thus making salvation possible. Eternal salvation (and its opposite number, eternal damnation) is of the utmost importance to every Elizabethan. Grace is that property of God by which salvation is obtained, but how it functions and how one goes about receiving it are the subject of our debate:

Roman Catholic

To a Catholic, Grace causes a transformation of our sinful human nature so that we can be reunited with God in this life and more completely in the hereafter. How does one obtain this transforming, or sanctifying, Grace? The old-fashioned way: you earn it! That is, you have to act in cooperation with God to participate in this "free" gift, through the reception of the Seven Sacraments (see Section D), Faith (demonstrated by prayer, both your own and that of others for you), and Good Works (almsgiving, nursing the sick, burying the dead, etc.). Can we lose it? Yes, by choosing to return to our old sinful nature. Can we get it back? Yes.

By this approach, one can possibly understand how a sort of "quantitative theory of Grace" evolved within the Tradition. If you can always recover lost Grace, then you should be able to add to the Grace you already have. But how much Grace does one really need to gain eternal salvation? How one really knows the saints and holy martyrs are held up as models by the Church because it presumes, due to the circumstances of their lives and/or deaths, that they had what it takes to get to heaven and avoid hell, both very real places in most people's minds.

But most people are not saints; what if they die before they gain this unknown required amount of Grace? What if they die in battle, or drunk, or even in anger? Can I get any assurance that God will indulge my human failings when the time comes? Of course, says the Church. Since few of us are ready to meet God face to face when we die, there must be a state in which we are purified in order to begin our heavenly existence; the Church calls that state Purgatory, and while there, we can gain further merit from the prayers and good works done on our behalf by the living. One can see that this system is open to abuse and corruption. It was the practice of the selling of "indulgences" (the forgiveness of a sin in advance) that sparked the Reformation in Germany.

Church of England

Here again we find the influence of Luther on the English Reformers. For Luther, Grace does not change us, but changes the way we appear to God. He calls this Justification: only the action of God through the merits of Jesus Christ can save us, and the only way we get justified in the eyes of God is to believe in the Gospel; that is, Justification by Faith alone. And since everything you need to know about Salvation is contained in Scripture, you can be sure that this theory is based on Luther's interpretation of what we read in his German translation of the Bible (especially in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans).

Here's another way of looking at this Justification idea: Grace acts as a filter through which God views humanity; if you believe that Jesus died to save you from your sins, then God sees you through this filter. No personal faith = no filter (i.e., Grace), so everything you do is a sin and there is no way you can be saved: you're either in or you're out, Justified or Damned. You can't earn Grace, so there's no "quantitative theory" here; no need for Purgatory or human/institutional mediation. You belong to the Church not to gain Grace, but as a result of being Justified and obeying God by your Faith in Christ

All this is laid out for the Anglican in his or her *Book of Common Prayer*, in Articles IXXIX of the 39 Articles of Religion.

Puritan

Again, John Calvin is the one whose idea forms the basis of this Radical Protestant doctrine. There is nothing you can do about your own salvation! Because of Original Sin, everyone deserves to go to Hell; in fact, many do in order for God to demonstrate His Divine Justice. But many are saved in order for God to demonstrate Divine Grace; these folks are the Elect, those chosen by God from the beginning of time to be given Salvation by the action of Christ's death. This doctrine is known as *Predestination*; your salvation or damnation is predetermined before your creation and not subject to debate or alteration. This and other of Calvin's concepts about the way Christianity was meant to be practiced are contained in his *The Institutes of Christian Religion*.

How can you tell if someone is one of the Elect and have been saved already? There are several ways: One, he lives an upright life (not in order to achieve Grace, but because he already has it), and two, he regularly attends church services to hear preaching and to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The Church, therefore, is the earthly company of the Elect; if the Church authorities find any reason to expel you from the church, it's obvious you weren't a member of the Elect in the first place. The Saved aren't going to waste any effort associating with the Damned, because nothing is going to change that which God has predestined. And, again, there's no need for Purgatory or earthly mediators here, either.

English Radical Protestants vary to a greater or lesser degree in their belief in Predestination. Article XVII of the 39 Articles allows for belief in it within the C of E, but cautions about not sticking other people's damnation constantly in front of their noses, lest they should lose heart and enter into a deal with the Devil. But notice how this attitude will determine whom you will associate with, as friends, business partners, and political allies; and how it will affect the ways in which you evaluate the motives and actions of others whom you consider to be members of the Elect (and those who aren't!) and so affect the ways you deal with them.

D. Sacraments / Rituals / Prayers

Roman Catholic

The Council of Trent defined a Sacrament as a ritual action instituted by Christ to confer Grace, and recognized seven (listed here in the order in which they were usually conferred): *Baptism*, *Penance* (Confession), *Eucharist* (Holy Communion), *Confirmation*, *Holy Orders* (creation/ promotion of clergy), *Marriage*, and *Extreme Unction* (anointing the dying). Infants are baptized as soon as possible to confer Sanctifying Grace on them immediately; and children are confessed as soon as they can distinguish right from wrong, so that they can receive Communion as soon as possible. Confirmation is usually administered around the age of puberty, signifying an adult commitment to the baptismal promises made for you by your godparents. You have to get married in front of a priest; you can't marry a Protestant; and divorce is almost impossible (though actually easier than in the C of E, where you need an act of Parliament!). The Church believes that the Eucharist is, in fact, physically as well as spiritually the Body and Blood of Christ under the mere appearance of bread and wine, a concept referred to as Transubstantiation (the laity was allowed bread only). Attendance every Sunday to hear and watch the priest participate fully in the Mass is mandatory.

All the rituals of the Church, as well as much of the private prayer of the educated laity, is conducted in the universal language, Latin. Veneration of the saints (as well as their images and relics), especially the Blessed Virgin Mary, is encouraged. It is important to note that, according to the Catholic Church, all of the sacraments have a scriptural basis (e.g. Holy Orders - John 15:16 & 20:21-22; Confession -John 20:23; Communion - John 26:26-28).

Church of England

Here the differences in sacrament and ritual from the Roman Church are subtle yet important; Henry VIII wished to alter the Church only insofar as authority was concerned, yet his theological advisors introduced some of Luther/ Calvin in this area as well. All public ritual, as well as private prayer, is to be conducted in the daily language of the people; this is reflective of the attitude that the whole congregation present should fully participate in the ceremonies taking place, not just observe (as in "hearing Mass"). An example of this is full participation in Communion; all those present at services receive, and do so under both bread and wine.

In Protestant belief, there are only two Sacraments of the Gospel, as shown through the actions of Jesus - a visible sign ordained by God: Baptism and the Lord's Supper (although, according to the C of E, transubstantiation does not take place). Penance, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction are commonly called sacraments but are not of the same rank or nature as those of the Gospel; they are considered to be without a visible sign ordained by God. Nothing in God's Word forbids the clergy to marry, so they may decide for themselves -- although the Queen was uncomfortable with the idea of married clergy. Some Protestants were fond of the old ways (e.g. crucifixes and saints' images); these things died hard. (References for this section are in Articles XXIV-XXXVI).

Puritan

Baptism and the Lord's supper are the only sacraments; and, since reception of them is only a reflection of predestined election, the sacraments are only symbolic representations of God's presence in the world. Yes, Christ is present in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, but only symbolically and to those who have Faith (i.e., the Elect). You receive the sacraments not to receive Grace, but to demonstrate to the world God's mercy in electing you to be Saved.

In keeping with the bottom-up character of the Radical Protestant structure model, the clergy are not ordained, but rather selected by the congregation which that particular minister serves; in the most radical models, this means by popular vote. Clergy should marry, because everybody should marry. Puritanism permitted no saints and no images (except a bare cross on the altar at services), so no veneration, and vestments worn by the minister are kept simple. Sin and salvation are personal matters between you and God, so no public Confession is necessary. The existence of the other sacraments, in one form or another, was one of many things of which the Radical Puritans wished to "purify" the Church.

IMPLEMENTATION/DECISION MAKING

The following is an attempt to assist you in transforming all of the above information into visible, believable facets of your Elizabethan character. Most of this help is general in nature; the ideas are not meant to be a complete guide and the suggestions are simply that: suggestions. You (with the help of the Guildmaster) are ultimately the best judge of what to incorporate into your portrayal.

Roman Catholic

Crucifixes with a Corpus (depiction of Christ's body), especially when attached to a rosary, are perhaps the clearest visual signal. Also, the rosary in its current form is period, but care should be taken (as with any prop/accessory), to get a period look. Bibles are generally out, unless your character is well-educated, has an unusually strong interest in religion (e.g., an amateur theologian), and it is in Latin. Missals and prayerbooks are good; all but those containing the simplest private devotions (i.e., for children) would be in Latin; it is heresy to translate the Mass, period.

Good works, notably almsgiving, is motivated by a desire to continue to build up that Grace stockpile by following God's Commandments. Doing penance, doing good things as well as praying to make up for bad things, is very necessary for peace of mind and self-esteem. You were named after a particular saint; you probably took another as a personal patron at your Confirmation, and have a personal devotion to one or more other saints: you would know what area of human endeavor each is interested in, details of their lives, and especially why they are important to you personally.

Church of England

There is a very broad latitude of belief here, and that results in a corresponding broadness in practice. Since almost everyone over age 30 was born into a Catholic world, the practices of youth are hard to forsake, representing as they do our very earliest memories of hearth/ home and order in the universe. Many have a sentimental, as well as religious, attachment to the crucifix and other religious imagery. Many still swear by this or that saint, out of habit if not devotion. All who could afford it would own a Bible in English, and the *Book of Common Prayer*, containing all the prayers and rituals necessary to conduct public and private devotions in common with the rest of the Church. Other prayerbooks -- in English -for private use were also available.

Since whether or not any deed you do is good depends upon your being Justified, the motivation to do charitable works is to continue to manifest Faith in Christ's saving power by obeying His teachings. Remember, you don't do good works to gain Grace; having Grace is what allows what you do to be good.

Don't forget: there is no separation of Church and State; authority is authority. And if you are a fervent English patriot, membership in this Church is more than a natural extension of that attitude; it is part of your identity as English and a way of judging the "Englishness" (i.e., loyalty to the Crown) of others.

Puritan

Only the most radical of Protestant reformers are using total severity of dress as a public signature: being members of the Elect, we are more than willing to wait to enjoy heavenly rewards that will outlast our earthly goods. Old customs often take on new rationales; wearing your wealth is considered by some to be a privilege granted by God, as the wealth itself is an earthly manifestation of Election (the "Protestant Work Ethic"). Those who are of the Elect naturally do not overindulge in pleasures of the flesh, as they have the Grace to refrain. But having a true understanding of salvation and wishing to bring the Church more into conformity with God's Word does not mean having to completely withdraw from the social pursuits of your class, which might jeopardize any position of power or influence you might hold.

The emphasis here as far as services go is on public prayer, reading of Scripture, and preaching. Carrying a Bible, as opposed to just owning one, will be important to some, as there is nothing that happens in life that is not addressed specifically to God's Word. Crucifixes, religious images, saints as mediators, relics, and the idea of the clergy as separate are right out. You are motivated to do good works because you are a member of the Elect, not the other way around.

Patriotism can be a real factor for the Radical Protestant as well, since you want to insure that the English Church is the Protector of God's True Gospel on Earth, and the English Crown has the political and temporal wherewithal to do just that. Wouldn't it be great, when we get to heaven, to find out that all true and loyal Englishmen are members of the Elect? God Himself is, after all, an Englishman.

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