

Queen Elizabeth I, born on September 7, 1533, and died on March 24, 1603, was the Queen of England and Ireland who successfully navigated a kingdom in religious turmoil, establishing a unique English Protestant identity and laying the foundation for what is now referred to as the "Elizabethan Era."

We previously explored the progression from Constantine's legalization of Christianity, through Theodosius' Christendom establishment, Justinian's codification, and Charlemagne's mainstreaming in Europe. Then, Louis IX of France set the standard for Christian kings. We also discussed Thomas Cranmer, who became the architect of a new sect through the Church of England. Now, we continue with this sect, focusing on Queen Elizabeth I's lasting legacy.

QUEEN ELIZABETH I: EARLY YEARS AND ASCENSION TO THE THRONE

The Tudor dynasty is notable for its dramatic events. Elizabeth was the daughter of King Henry VIII, the dynasty's renowned second monarch. Wishing for a male heir, Henry initiated the English Reformation, establishing the Church of England, separate from the Roman Catholic Church. This enabled him to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn, who gave birth to Elizabeth. Still lacking a male heir, he married Jane Seymour, who bore his son, Edward.

Upon Henry's death, Edward became King but died at 15. Henry's eldest daughter, Mary, succeeded him. Being the granddaughter of "The Catholic Monarchs," she reversed the religious changes of her predecessors, earning her the nickname "Bloody Mary."

On Mary's death in 1558, the monarchy passed to Elizabeth, who became Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland.

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF ENGLAND

Until Henry VIII's reign, the Roman Catholic Church was the only Christian form in England. The Church of England's birth in 1534 marked the start of the "English Reformation". Initially, this Church retained strong Roman Catholic ideologies. However, under Edward VI, it adopted Protestant beliefs, such as the spiritual presence in communion and the transition from Latin to English for religious practices. This separation aligned with the trend of nations establishing their own churches, following the Protestant Reformation started in 1517.

Previously established protestant churches serving independently of the Papacy included:

- 1. The Church of Sweden (1527)**
 - Established during the reign of King Gustav I of Sweden.
 - Part of the wider Protestant Reformation movement in Europe.
 - Moved away from Roman Catholic practices and adopted Lutheran Protestantism.
- 2. The Church of Denmark (1536)**
 - Formed under King Christian III of Denmark.
 - Influenced by Martin Luther's teachings, it adopted Lutheran doctrines.
 - Officially established by the Danish Reformation, which also dissolved Catholic monasteries and transferred church property to the crown.
- 3. The Church of Norway (1536-1537)**
 - Similar to Denmark, Norway, being under Danish rule, adopted the Lutheran reformation.
 - The Reformation was enforced by King Christian III.
 - The church was reorganized with Lutheran church orders and liturgy.
- 4. The Church of Iceland (1550)**
 - Also influenced by the Lutheran Reformation.
 - Adopted Protestantism under the direction of Christian III of Denmark, as Iceland was a part of the Danish realm.
 - The last Catholic bishop of Iceland was executed in 1550, and the country officially adopted Lutheranism.

Edward VI promoted Protestant reforms, but his half-sister Mary I, a Catholic, reversed many of them. Elizabeth I then inherited a kingdom torn between these two religions. Her successful management of this religious turmoil led to the "Elizabethan Era."

Political instability also existed. Elizabeth, likely influenced by her father's multiple marriages and half-sister's disastrous marriage, chose to remain single. This was not just a personal decision, but a strategic political move. It reinforced her image as a strong, independent monarch and earned her the title of the "Virgin Queen."

ELIZABETH'S RELIGIOUS POLICY

Queen Elizabeth I's 1559 initiative, the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, aimed to stabilize England's religious landscape. The Settlement reinstated the Royal Supremacy over the Church, reversed Mary I's pro-Catholic laws, and introduced a new Book of Common Prayer in English. These actions crafted a unique English Protestant identity, known as the 'Middle Way' or Via Media, balancing Catholic and Protestant elements.

The Via Media retained traditional Catholic liturgies in English and adopted Protestant doctrines, aiming to bridge the divide between the clergy and the common English worshipper. However, it also required "outward conformity", such as attendance at Church of England services. After the 1570 Papal Bull, which excommunicated Elizabeth, Catholics were viewed as potential threats.

Despite its aim to unify, the Middle Way was rejected by extremists on both ends. The Puritans sought to "purify" the Church from its Catholic elements and the Separatists, who rejected the monarch's control over the church, believed the Church could not be purified. Both these groups, resulting from the Settlement, have had lasting impacts on American Christianity.

RELATIONSHIP WITH ROMAN CATHOLIC EUROPE

ELIZABETH'S EXCOMMUNICATION BY POPE PIUS V:

Elizabeth's ascension and religious reforms strained her relationship with the Catholic Church. Her Protestant establishment in England, especially via the Elizabethan Religious Settlement, was viewed as a threat to the Church. In 1570, Pope Pius V excommunicated her with the Papal Bull "Regnans in Excelsis," labeling her a heretic and encouraging rebellion. This deepened the conflict between Protestant England and Catholic Europe, and potentially incited internal rebellion, further widening the divide between Catholics and Protestants.

The Bull begins by stating;

He that reigneth on high, to whom is given all power in heaven and earth, has committed one holy Catholic and apostolic Church, outside of which there is no salvation, to one alone upon earth, namely to Peter, the first of the apostles, and to Peter's successor, the pope of Rome, to be by him governed in fullness of power. Him alone He has made ruler over all peoples and kingdoms, to pull up, destroy, scatter, disperse, plant and build, so that he may preserve His faithful people (knit together with the girdle of charity) in the unity of the Spirit and present them safe and spotless to their Saviour.

It continues:

...the number of the ungodly has so much grown in power that there is no place left in the world which they have not tried to corrupt with their most wicked doctrines; and among others, Elizabeth, the pretended queen of England and the servant of crime, has assisted in this, with whom as in a sanctuary the most pernicious of all have found refuge. This very woman, having seized the crown and monstrously usurped the place of supreme head of the Church in all England to gather with the chief authority and jurisdiction belonging to it, has once again reduced this same kingdom- which had already been restored to the Catholic faith and to good fruits- to a miserable ruin.

Eventually it boldly states:

And moreover (we declare) her to be deprived of her pretended title to the aforesaid crown...We charge and command all and singular the nobles, subjects, peoples and others afore said that they do not dare obey her orders, mandates and laws. Those who shall act to the contrary we include in the like sentence of excommunication.

[Regnans in Excelsis. <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/pius05/p5regnans.htm>. Accessed December 30, 2023

THE SPANISH ARMADA AND ITS RELATION TO RELIGIOUS CONFLICT:

In 1588, Spain's King Philip II dispatched the massive Spanish Armada to invade England, depose Protestant Elizabeth, and reinstate Catholicism. This mission was fueled by religious disputes, with Philip viewing Elizabeth as an illegitimate ruler. The ensuing naval battle was a landmark event. The smaller but more agile English fleet, aided by unfavorable weather for the Spanish, defeated the Armada, marking a key moment in Protestant England's maritime supremacy. The Armada's defeat solidified Protestantism in England, deterred further Catholic interventions, symbolized Spain's naval decline, and marked England's rise as a naval power.

LEGACY AND IMPACT ON CHRISTIANITY

The Church of England's establishment under English rule shaped British Christianity, creating a distinct identity. Its unique blend of Protestant and Catholic elements, crafted using Elizabeth I's Via Media, led to a more unified nation.

The English Reformation also influenced American Christianity. The Puritans and Separatists, both products of the Elizabethan Settlement, shaped American Christianity, evident in institutions like Harvard University and the congregational church governance style.

The Settlement's requirement for "outward conformity" to the Church of England, allowing private Catholic worship, set a tolerance precedent later seen in America.

The "middle way" Elizabeth I established continues to resonate today, offering a balanced approach appealing to those alienated by extreme Christian positions. Its enduring popularity among young evangelical adults shows Elizabeth I's lasting impact on Christianity.

As a "radical reformer," I reject both the governance and the theology of the Church of England, as well as its American counterpart, the Episcopal denomination. However, it would be misguided to believe that its influence isn't felt today.

QUEEN ELIZABETH I'S PLACE IN CHRISTENDOM

Elizabeth I's reign established the monarch as the UK's Church head, a unique and enduring role. Her middle-way approach consolidated power by aligning religious authority with the monarchy, surviving centuries of upheavals.

The Elizabethan Era was also a golden age for England in drama, exploration, and arts. It birthed seminal works by Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Kyd while encouraging global exploration by Drake and Raleigh. The era also saw the arts flourish, with music from Tallis, Byrd, and Dowland and iconic portraits by Hilliard.

The subsequent chapter explores James I's reign. The first Stuart monarch, he faced the challenge of uniting England and Scotland. His reign was significant, commissioning the King James Bible, impacting the Church of England, and shaping Christianity's future in Britain.