

BBC Bitesize - GCSE History

Elizabeth I - Episode 3: Religious tensions

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Alice: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE History podcast where we take a closer look at Elizabeth I.

Anouska: I'm Anouska Lewis, podcaster and historian.

Alice: And I'm Alice Loxton, historian and author. In this episode we're exploring the religious tensions between Catholics and Protestants during Elizabeth's reign. Now a little heads up, we know that this is a bit complicated in places, there's quite a lot of terminology but don't worry, stick with us and we'll guide you through it.

Anouska: It might even be worth listening to this a couple of times. In this episode you'll hear actors reading historical sources and imagined conversations between historical figures.

Alice: And you'll hear one of those imagined conversations right now where we think about what Elizabeth might have been feeling after hearing the momentous news, that she was to become Queen of England.

Elizabeth: My Dad, Henry, took over the Church in England and made himself the Head of it. The Pope was not happy and neither were other Catholic nations like France and Spain. My half brother Edward carried this on and led the country towards Protestantism. But then my sister Mary had to be different. She was extremely Catholic and turned the country back towards Catholicism...she is just so annoying...because now it's my turn, and I am left with this mess. Oh what should I do?

Anouska: Mmm... quite a predicament. As Elizabeth said there, at the start of the 16th century almost everyone in Wales and England were Catholic.

Alice: However, scholars abroad were beginning to argue that the Catholic Church was too wealthy, too corrupt and had moved too far away from the Bible.

Anouska: This was the start of the Protestant Reformation which soon spread across Europe.

Alice: Wales and England didn't begin to embrace Protestant ideas until Edward VI was King, remember he was Elizabeth's half brother.

Anouska: But, when he died after only 6 years on the throne, Mary I returned the country to being Catholic. She persecuted and burned over 280 Protestant people over her short reign.

Alice: Mary I had only ruled for five years so when Elizabeth was declared Queen, there was a real desire for stability. Both Protestants and Catholics were eager to see what religion she would follow and whether religious persecution would continue to take place.

Anouska: And it was something Elizabeth needed to address straight away if she wanted to remain Queen, and if she wanted to keep stability in her country.

Elizabeth: Umm hello....I said what should I do?

Anouska: Ooops sorry Elizabeth! Well, we can't tell you what to do. But we are recording this 400 years after you died so we can actually tell you what you did!

Elizabeth: That would be great, thank you.

Alice: Well, Elizabeth's solution was kind of in between Catholicism and Protestantism. Probably good to grab a pen and paper here and make some notes.

Anouska: She tried to find a way of appeasing both groups to ease the tension. So she came up with 'The Religious Settlement', also known as the middle way.

Alice: Which makes sense - it was in the middle! So let's look at three examples of where things changed. Priests, mass and language.

Anouska: OK, example number one. Protestant Priests were not supposed to be special. They couldn't wear clothing that made them look different to ordinary people but they could get married. Catholic priests wore bright robes but they couldn't get married.

Alice: Under the new changes made by Elizabeth, priests were allowed to marry, but there were special clothing, or vestments, that they had to wear. So, sort of a middle way. Sort of a compromise.

Anouska: Example number two - mass. Mass is the main ceremony that happens during a Catholic service. Catholics viewed mass as very important, whereas Protestants didn't have mass at all.

Anouska: Instead of mass, the Middle Way created a holy communion service. That wording was chosen very carefully so it didn't annoy Catholics - another compromise. What about language Alice?

Alice: Well, Catholics believed that services and Prayer Books should be in Latin. Whereas Protestants believed services and Prayer Books should be in the country's native language, so in England they should be in English.

Anouska: The middle way declared that they would be in English. So Catholics would now hear and see those big changes every time they went to church. Now that's quite a lot of information to take on, feel free to rewind to go over it again.

Alice: In 1559 Parliament passed two laws to put all of these changes in place. 'The Act of Supremacy' made Elizabeth the Supreme Governor of the church. This was to stop any confusion about who was in charge.

Anouska: Catholics saw the Pope as the head of the church, so by calling Elizabeth the 'Supreme Governor' they could still accept her as being in charge whilst not being 'the head.'

Alice: All clergymen and government officers had to take an Oath of Supremacy. If they refused to do so three times, they could be executed.

Anouska: 'The Act of Uniformity' made Protestantism England's official religion and set out some rules for practising it. This would stop any variations in faith, everyone would be uniform in what they were doing.

Alice: For example, people who refused to attend Church of England services had to pay a shilling for every absence.

Anouska: These rules did keep some Catholic traditions though, which Elizabeth hoped would be a good compromise and keep people happy. There's a great explanation of the Religious Settlement on the BBC Bitesize website just head to the GCSE History pages.

Alice: But the big question, what did people think of the middle way?

Anouska: Overall this compromise did bring stability to the country. But, as I'm sure you can guess, not everyone was happy. Whilst her sister Mary was queen, Catholics had enjoyed religious freedom. But now, under Elizabeth, they were being forced to change their beliefs.

Alice: Catholic plots were a real threat to Elizabeth. Catholic leaders wanted her GONE.

Anouska: This was a counter-reformation, and Elizabeth was seen as a target because she was a leading Protestant monarch.

Alice: One of the threats came from the Jesuits. Now the Jesuits were Catholics who were actively trying to convert people back to Catholicism, away from Protestantism.

Anouska: Around this time, Jesuit priests were sent to England and in 1570 the Pope declared Elizabeth a heretic.

Alice: Which sounds pretty serious and indeed it was. He issued a Papal Bull of Excommunication against her and this was hugely significant because if Elizabeth was excommunicated, it meant she was officially an enemy of the Catholic church.

Anouska: It meant that loyal Catholics shouldn't listen to her and they should actively try to bring her down, or in the most extreme cases, kill her – her life was in danger.

Alice: So you can see why this was of great concern to Elizabeth's rule. Throughout the 1570s and the 1580s Elizabeth faced several Catholic plots against her, all of which had the aim of putting Mary Queen of Scots on the throne and returning England to Catholicism. We'll hear much more about Mary and these plots in a later episode.

Anouska: So, that's the Catholic threat. But what about the Protestants?

Alice: So strict Protestants were known as Puritans, and they weren't happy with Elizabeth's compromise either. They wanted to purify the Church and get rid of all traces of the Catholic faith.

Anouska: Oh Puritans, purify...

Alice: That's it – it's a good way to remember the name.

Anouska: Some Puritans started organising campaigns to make the country more Protestant. They didn't plan any plots to overthrow Elizabeth, but there were Puritan MPs and members of the Privy Council who pressured her to be harsher on Catholics, a lot of p's there.

Alice: So, although they were seen as a lesser threat, compared to the Catholics, Elizabeth still didn't appreciate these Puritan challenges to her authority.

Anouska: Let's hear an extract from a letter written by the Spanish Ambassador to King Philip II of Spain in 1583. It's voiced by an actor.

Spanish Ambassador: The sect of Puritans is increasing here and many of the leading people belong to it. Some have considered taking up arms against the Queen to depose her since she will not reform religion here by killing all Catholics. Some members of the Council were in favour of punishing them, but as Leicester and Walsingham are friendly with their leaders, they prevented it.

Anouska: Very interesting. This source suggests that Puritans might have been a bigger threat than Elizabeth thought - they were thinking about removing her from the throne.

Alice: Probably time to grab that pen again and jot down some notes here. Now do you remember that the Act of Uniformity had made it law for priests to wear special clothes, or vestments, which were typically worn by Catholic priests?

Anouska: Yes...

Alice: Well, Puritan priests started refusing to wear them, which became known as the Vestment Controversy.

Anouska: I actually have a really good way of remembering that, so it's vest – clothes, Vestment Controversy.

Alice: I like that – that's neat!

Anouska: The Queen was not happy with this controversy. The Archbishop of Canterbury even held a special exhibition in London to show priests what vestments they should be wearing and when.

Alice: Hmm... sounds quite fun!

Anouska: Yeah, well, fun, but not actually full. Of the 110 priests invited, 37 refused to attend. Those who didn't turn up, were sacked. But this wasn't the end of the Puritan threat.

Alice: No it wasn't. In 1571, Walter Strickland, leader of the Puritan group in Parliament, wanted to reform Elizabeth's new Prayer Book. Elizabeth took action and closed Parliament so that his ideas could not be discussed.

Anouska: Guess that's one way to do it. Elizabeth firmly resisted the Puritan attempts to get him to change the Religious Settlement and the movement lost momentum towards the end of her reign as one by one, the old Puritan leaders died out.

Alice: So by 1590, most people accepted the Church of England as the national Church. So if there's a key message to take away from this episode here it is: Edward VI favoured Protestantism, Mary I favoured Catholicism, whereas Elizabeth compromised with something in the middle. She had a middle way.

Anouska: And if you need to hear any of that again, rewind this episode and make some notes whilst you listen. I think it's quiz time! Question number one. What was Elizabeth's solution to the religious tensions that faced her when she became Queen? We were just

talking about it, the Religious Settlement - the middle way. This was supposed to satisfy both Catholics and Protestants.

Alice: Next. What were the two laws she passed as part of the religious settlement? The answer is The Act of Uniformity and The Act of Supremacy. These were passed in 1559.

Anouska: Last question, what would we call a strict follower of Protestantism? It's another P- word, a Puritan. Puritans wanted to remove all traces of the Catholic faith.

Alice: Lizzie Legends, you've made it to the end of another episode of the Bitesize GCSE History podcast and it was a whopper!

Anouska: Thank you for joining us as we explored religious tensions during Elizabeth I's reign.

Alice: Take a listen to the rest of the episodes on BBC Sounds.

Anouska: In the next episode we'll be taking a look at portraiture and propaganda.

Alice: Sounds exciting, see you then!

Anouska: Bye!