The Age of Elizabeth

The political moves made by King Henry VIII against the Catholic Church during his reign did not ensure England would become a Protestant nation. When Henry died, his son, Edward VI [ruled 1547–1553], came to the throne at the age of 10.

Those who helped the young king rule were sympathetic to the Protestant movement. Parliament gave the Protestants further legitimacy by legalizing clerical marriage and adopting a prayerbook of Protestant teachings in 1549. English printers published dozens of Protestant pamphlets. As in France, Protestant mobs destroyed Catholic churches and burned libraries and Catholic books. English replaced Latin in church services.

When Edward died, his half-sister, Mary Tudor [ruled 1553–1558], came to the throne as queen. She was a committed Catholic and tried to restore the power of the Catholic faith in England. To ensure that result, Mary married Philip II of Spain in 1554.

At that time, Spain was considered by many in England to be her strongest enemy. For that reason, her marriage was not popular with her subjects. Mary ordered the persecution of Protestants across the land. Approximately 300 people were burned at the stake. Despite this religious campaign, which gave Mary the label of Bloody Mary, Protestants in England emerged stronger than ever.

Any question about the religious future of Protestants and Catholics in England was settled with Mary’s death and the rise of her half-sister, Elizabeth, daughter of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth I [ruled 1558–1603] became one of England’s greatest monarchs. She did much to ensure that Protestantism would dominate the Christianity of England.

Elizabeth declared herself the supreme governor of the Church of England. She removed from office all of Mary’s bishops, except one. In 1559, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, eliminating all of Mary’s pro-Catholic legislation. Parliament also passed the Act of Uniformity, accepting a modified version of the Protestant prayerbook created during the reign of Edward VI.

Catholics made periodic attempts to reverse Elizabeth’s reforms. When the Duke of Norfolk staged a Catholic revolt against the queen in 1569, she had him executed.

She did not, however, order the wholesale slaughter of Catholic leaders across her kingdom. In fact, in all the years of Elizabeth’s rule, only four people were executed as heretics, and they were all Anabaptists. Several hundred were jailed for their religious activities, however, and approximately 200 were executed for treason associated with their political and religious activities.

Elizabeth did face serious challenges during her reign. Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots (not to be confused with Bloody Mary), was Elizabeth’s first cousin once removed. She was a great granddaughter of Henry VII, and therefore had valid claims to the throne of England. Mary was a Catholic. (Her first husband had been King Francis II of France.)

When the Scottish lords rebelled against her in 1568, she abdicated her throne and sought refuge in England, which Elizabeth granted her. Once in England (while technically under “house arrest”), Mary cooperated with every plot to remove Elizabeth from the throne. In 1586, Elizabeth ordered Mary’s execution after a letter surfaced in which Mary offered her rights of succession to the English throne to Philip II of Spain.

Following Mary’s beheading in 1587, Pope Sixtus V joined with Philip II in a Catholic crusade to remove Protestant Elizabeth I from her throne and destroy English Protestantism. In 1588, Philip sent a fleet of 130 ships—called the Spanish Armada—sailing toward the English Channel.

Review and Write

How was Protestantism further legitimized in England during the reign of Elizabeth I? What problems did Elizabeth and Parliament make for Catholics in England?
The Age of Elizabeth Questions

1. After Henry VIII died, what religion did Edward VI support?

2. What are two actions that Protestants take against Catholics during Edward VI's reign?

3. How did Mary I execute Protestants during her reign?

4. Explain the significance of these acts of parliament
   a. Act of Supremacy -
   b. Act of Uniformity -

5. What significance did Mary Queen of Scots have in Elizabeth's reign?

6. What happened to England in 1588?

7. Explain how Elizabeth and Mary differed in their treatment of religious opposition.

8. Freewrite: Complete the story...(must fill up the rest of the page, use more space as needed)

One day, Elizabeth woke up to alarming news.