

How serious a threat did the puritans pose to elizabeth i and her church? essay s...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The rise of Puritan ideology in Elizabeth I's Church and Government was potentially an extremely dangerous threat to her power. However in practice, any attempts to promote Puritan ideas were crushed so quickly and effectively by Elizabeth that the movement never got the chance to develop into anything more serious. There was undoubtedly an increase in extreme Protestant views throughout her reign, an area of particular concern to Elizabeth being the Puritan tendencies of some of her most senior advisors. There were also some individuals from within the Church and within Elizabeth's government whose opposition to the Religious Settlement was influential to an extent, particularly during the 1570s, but all received a zero tolerance punishment and so never gained enough support to be a substantial threat to the Monarchy.

Historians' views on the extent of the Puritan threat have been extremely varied, from J. E. Neale's argument for the rise of a Puritan parliamentary opposition, known as the 'Puritan Choir', to the less extreme views of those such as Michael Graves who agreed that 'the new generation of Presbyterian-Puritans did make concerted efforts to demolish the Religious Settlement', but that there was no evidence of a 'Puritan Choir'. John Guy agrees with Graves in that Neale based his theory on irrelevant evidence, and maintains that 'the wider assumption...that mainstream Puritanism was potentially anarchical...is misguided'. However Christopher Haigh seems to agree more with Neale, claiming that 'there was an obvious potential for conflict between a practical Elizabeth and a Protestant group which grew in influence in the 1560s and dominated her council by 1572' and G. R. Elton argues that 'England was far from puritan, but it was becoming more

definitely protestant, and in this movement the extremists naturally took the lead'.

Arguably if the Puritan threat had been as serious as some of these historians suggest, civil war would have broken out much sooner. However, this didn't happen during Elizabeth I's reign and so clearly she remained in control and handled the situation skilfully in order to maintain stability as much as possible. Guy sums this up saying: ' Irrespective of Elizabeth's private faith, she maintained a vice-like grip on the Church of England and on the pace of change'.

Elizabeth I was mainly concerned about Puritans more from a political than theological point of view because their disobedience was undermining her authority as Supreme Governor of the Church. Anne Somerset argues; ' Elizabeth...was fully alive to the inherent dangers of Puritanism. She had no intention of relinquishing control over her church, or of giving in to pressure for further reform which made no allowance for the views of those whose opinions about religion were less progressive than those of the Puritans' and Robert Lockyer even goes so far to say that ' the Queen herself hated Puritans'.

Although she was raised a Protestant her views were not extreme and, as Guy explains, ' Overall, she sought compromise and reconciliation...she would not examine their consciences or force anyone to take communion provided they took the oath of supremacy and swore allegiance to the crown.' In 1590 Elizabeth described fanatical Puritans in a letter to James VI of Scotland as ' a sect of perilous consequence, such as would have no kings

but a presbytery'. She also told the French Ambassador that Puritans wished to recognise 'neither God nor king', but in 1591 she told Sir Francis Knollys that 'in her opinion the Puritans represented just as grave a threat to her as did the Catholics'. Senior members of the Church were also aware of the potential threat; in 1573, the Dean of York told Burghley that 'The supreme authority was justly taken from the Pope...and given to the Prince...but these reformers take it from the Prince and give it unto themselves.' The Queen clearly was aware of the potential threat and so dealt with all individual Puritans extremely harshly.

There were two main areas from which Puritan threat came from: the establishment of the Church, and Parliament. Arguably the threat from within the Church was greater because it dealt with matters of personal faith which could not be easily compromised. Elton argues that 'There was much wrong with Puritanism- it was narrow, intent on inessentials, incapable of generosity or intolerance- but it gave religion a positive content and stiffened character' and Susan Doran concurs that the Puritans were impossible to negotiate with, saying; "The radical element was particularly obstreperous in its refusal to compromise its principles by conforming its principles" When Elizabeth I made the Religious Settlement in 1559 she had clearly tried to reach a settlement in which aspects of Protestant and Catholic beliefs were combined. Although neither side would be completely satisfied, she managed to avoid civil war in her reign so in this aspect it was a success. However, as Warren explains: 'to the Puritans known as Presbyterians, such compromise was unacceptable. The Church was, in their eyes, fatally flawed because it employed a Catholic-style hierarchy of archbishops and bishops'

and Doran agrees that personal belief was impossible to enforce, claiming that ' Puritanism as a religious experience and mentality continued to thrive outside the court at the end of Elizabeth's reign'

The vestments controversy in 1564 was the first example of public resistance to the Religious Settlement. It involved two Marian exiles attacking the Religious Settlement as not Protestant enough, and was taken extremely seriously, with both men dismissed. Although it seems now like a trivial complaint it was displaying disobedience to God and the Monarchy as they went hand in hand, which could result in social disorder, so Elizabeth I took it seriously and decided to start cracking down on religious disobedience. Somerset explains that ' By the beginning of 1565...Elizabeth had become disturbed by the discrepancies in religious observance that prevailed in different parts of the country...she feared that if measures were not taken, the Act of Uniformity would be more openly flouted'. She told Archbishop Parker to start treating people with Puritan tendencies more harshly, yet she cleverly refused to put her name to the regulations he drew up in March 1565, so that it seemed as if it was his responsibility and not hers, meaning that ' many puritans laboured under the delusion that if it were not for the episcopate, the Queen would have been anxious for the Church to be further reformed', showing the Queen was dealing with the situation cleverly to try and keep the public on her side.

The next major threat was in 1570 when Thomas Cartwright lectured at Cambridge demanding a Presbyterian system, publicly speaking out against the Religious Settlement. As a Presbyterian his influence was not great; however, the fact that he was criticising the establishment he belonged to <https://assignbuster.com/how-serious-a-threat-did-the-puritans-pose-to-elizabeth-i-and-her-church-essay-sample/>

meant it was taken seriously. Warren argues that ' Thomas Cartwright(' s) lectures at Cambridge University represented the first influential public demand for a Presbyterian system'. and Lockyer agrees that this was a major threat, saying ' Cartwright's definition lifted the Puritan movement out of its obsession with details and threw down a challenge which the established Church could not possibly ignore' and that ' Cartwright's expulsion did not check the puritan revolt, since he had only put into clear terms what many people were already thinking'.

One year later John Field published his Admonitions to Parliament - he was a Puritan clergyman who wanted a Presbyterian church and believed Bishops were enemies to Christianity. It was met with zero tolerance and a year in prison, however, the tract was a runaway success with huge numbers of people reading it, and as the Bishop of Durham described, events escalated so ' not only the habits, but our whole ecclesiastical polity...are now openly attacked by the press'. Guy praises the way Elizabeth dealt with this, saying; ' Elizabeth could always outflank political moves by wielding familiar weapons: expressing her displeasure, or commanding that no more bills for religion be read in Parliament ...' However, Warren downplays the influence of John Field's Admonitions to Parliament, claiming that ' the vehemence of his opinions and the savagery of the attack on the bishops appalled many Puritans. The impact on Parliament was slight'.

In 1575 Edmund Grindal- a Puritan- was made Archbishop of Canterbury. Elizabeth I ordered him to repress prophesying- meetings of clergy to practice preaching, but when Grindal refused on the grounds that they were useful for the Church he was directly disobeying the Queen and so had to be <https://assignbuster.com/how-serious-a-threat-did-the-puritans-pose-to-elizabeth-i-and-her-church-essay-sample/>

dealt with harshly. He was willing to apply 'Adiaphora' and use his position to reform the Church but he was clearly trying to exert too much influence over Elizabeth. Somerset argues that 'if Grindal had pretended he would do as she wished, and had then evaded her orders, the odds are that Elizabeth would shortly have forgotten about the matter, but as it was, he decided on a direct confrontation with the Queen.'. The fact that 'Grindal had in effect repudiated the Royal Supremacy' meant Elizabeth had no choice but to deal with it that way. Neale claims that after the prophesying 'aided by... John Field... the Presbyterian movement grew instead of diminishing in strength...', but Warren contests that it was much less of a threat, arguing that 'the Queen had little real cause to fear prophesying as a factor stimulating disunity'. While it is arguable that the Queen overreacted in removing Archbishop Grindal from his position of responsibility, it did serve to show that she considered it a serious threat to her authority, and therefore was a warning to others inclined to do the same.

While Grindal was in disgrace, the Bishop Aylmer of London was in charge of eradicating non conformity. Under his supervision the ecclesiastical commission in charge of the Act of Uniformity and Oath of Supremacy had become very strong, with increased powers to imprison or fine. 'Puritan sympathisers on the Council...were naturally aghast at Aylmer's activities... The Queen, in contrast, was delighted with the way that the senior Church hierarchy was developing the machinery which would enable it to combat Puritanism without applying to her to strengthen their hand.' Elizabeth I had clearly decided to treat all future Puritan threats extremely harshly in order to stamp it out before it became more dangerous, which is why she

appointed a man well known to hate Puritans to be the next Archbishop of Canterbury- John Whitgift in 1583.

He implemented a total crackdown on Puritans, enforcing the law that Puritanism was an offence and not allowing clergymen their licences to preach unless they gave full and unconditional subscription to the Thirty-nine Articles. He appeared to view Puritanism as a much more serious threat than his predecessors, yet, as Warren suggests about his implementation of these harsh measures, it was 'small wonder that such inflexibility and aggression caused uproar' and even suggests that 'he unwittingly gave stimulus to the case for Presbyterianism'. However, Susan Doran contests that these measures were actually useful in destroying Puritanism, and were a serious setback for Presbyterians: 'Whitgift's muzzling of the Puritan press, which severely limited Presbyterian opportunities for positive publicity.'

Whitgift's actions were met with uproar with many people refusing to subscribe to his articles, and after 1584 the 'Classical Movement' was formed, with 'Classes' taking place which involved the meetings of clergy outside of the diocesan boundaries. The Queen suspected these to be Presbyterian synods, and although this was probably not the case they were nevertheless breaking the rules and had to be dealt with harshly. Neale claims that 'by 1584, with the formation of the classical organisation, we are presented with a case study in revolution' and 'at any time and in any country such an organisation would be formidable. In Elizabethan England it was a menace to the established order of church and state.'



and Warren agrees that ' a system of this type left little or no place for the Supreme Governorship'. However, Doran argues that ' most of the clergy who attended such classes were probably not committed to a Presbyterian system...but simply wanted to meet like minded brethren to discuss the Prayer Book and reach decisions on day-to-day parochial concerns'. This is indeed the more likely explanation because if it really was as serious a threat as Neale suggests then a revolution would surely have taken place as a result, but it didn't. Doran also admits that people such as ' John Field had a different agenda. They recognised that the classes were a Presbyterian system in embryo...and they thought to use the classical organisation as a way of changing the nature of the Elizabethan church from within... they planned to take over eventual control of the official church'.

This shows that in theory the ' classes' represented a serious threat to the entire structure of the Church, but in practice not much came of it and, as Warren attests, ' No doubt John Field hoped that the classes would respond to the resentment caused by Whitgift by stimulating the growth and expansion of Presbyterianism. But noisy propaganda from the likes of Field does not prove that Whitgift's articles caused an influx of recruits to the Presbyterian position'. Somerset agrees that ' although the underground puritan network had sinister implications for the Royal supremacy, very few of its members shared the revolutionary convictions of John Field'.

Between 1584 and 1586 Field attempted to carry out a nationwide survey to establish grievances against Bishops and identify Puritans in England, hoping that Parliament would be influenced by it. Neale argues that this was also a large threat to Elizabeth, and ' the secret, coordinated activity of the classes

<https://assignbuster.com/how-serious-a-threat-did-the-puritans-pose-to-elizabeth-i-and-her-church-essay-sample/>

had gone far enough to create an illusion of spontaneous widespread, discontent' However the 1584 Parliament was not the Puritan triumph that Field had hoped, showing his lack of influence. By 1587 Field had realised he couldn't impose Puritanism from above so started trying to introduce a slower secret reform from below. As Somerset sums up: ' parliament had failed the puritans, and...it seemed that if reform could not be brought about by constitutional means, the obvious alternative was to precipitate a Church revolution from below.'

In 1571 the Puritan MP William Strickland tried to bring his own prayer book into the law and to get rid of certain Catholic practices such as the surplice and kneeling at communion. The total crackdown- probably driven by the Queen's recent excommunication by the Pope was somewhat of an overreaction, resulting in the Thirty-Nine Articles. Lockyer explains how ' this was a clear invasion of the Queen's prerogative...but they were up against men who would let nothing stand in the way of religious truth' and argues that it showed ' how the puritans were shifting their attack from matters of detail - adiaphora- to the central question of who should govern the church' Neale claimed that there was a ' Puritan Choir' within the House of Commons influencing Elizabeth's policies and decisions, but this theory is not supported by a re-examination of the evidence and, as Graves argues, leaves ' only the proceedings of 1571 as possible proof of the moderate Puritans' parliamentary religious campaigns'. However, Keith Randell admits that ' Neale was undoubtedly correct in claiming that, in the 1570s and 1580s at least, a number of MPs worked very hard in an attempt to persuade their colleagues that the Church of England should be made more

Protestant.’ Randell goes on to point out that ‘ where Neale got it wrong was in according the agitators greater numerical strength, organisation and significance that they actually possessed’.

In 1576 Peter Wentworth launched a Puritan attack in parliament against clerical abuses, but the other MPs didn’t tolerate this disobedience and sent him straight to the Tower. Neale claims that Peter Wentworth’s demand for freedom of speech made him the heroic figurehead of Parliaments struggle, however due to the fact that nobody took him seriously and no change resulted from his demands, it seems as if Michael Graves’ interpretation is more accurate.

He explains that Wentworth was ‘ foolhardy, impetuous and politically inept’ and ‘ did little to enhance the efficiency of the Commons and was little more than a parliamentary nuisance’. Elton agrees with this saying ‘ He had been presumptuously rude by the standards of the time, but no more so than Puritans thought it right to be...Sir Francis Walsingham, frequently lectured the queen....’ Peter Turner headed the ‘ Bill and Book’ campaign in the 1584-1585 parliament, to replace the Book of Common Prayer with the Genevan Prayer Book and the Anglican system of Church government with a Calvinist model. Although Neale thought that this proved the Puritans were becoming more organised and succeeding in making difficulties for the government, Graves maintains that Neale’s claims were nothing more than supposition and the Puritan campaigns in the Commons were mounted by ‘ a handful of members, lacked general parliamentary sympathy or support, and were easily smothered by official action’.

In conclusion, the Puritans from within both the Church itself and from within Parliament posed a potentially extremely dangerous threat to Elizabeth I and her Church. However, due to the fact that the Queen did not tolerate any non-conformists, the movement was never allowed to gain any momentum. Guy and Doran praise Elizabeth's reaction to it, Guy arguing that ' Elizabeth succeeded to a remarkable extent in preserving a firm separation of church and state....' and ' within 10 years the Elizabethan puritan ' movement' was dead...the collapse in 1586-7 of a final Presbyterian attempt to abolish bishops... epitomizing the defeat' and Doran agrees to an extent that while ' nonconformity could not be eradicated...'in general ' religion ceased to be a major divisive issue at both the national and the local level during the last decade of the reign'. However Warren and Elton argue that it was not Elizabeth's skill in dealing with the situation but the unskilfulness of the Puritans, Warren saying, ' the Presbyterian threat was no real threat at all' and ' Puritans failed to change the organisation and hierarchy of the church'. and Elton saying that ' Elizabethan Puritanism was past its peak...(it) had entered upon a decline which made it... a permanent minority opposition outside the church'