Tudor England

Reformation in England

The English Reformation was rooted in politics, not religion. King Henry VIII a wanted to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, with whom he had a daughter, Mary, but no son. Since he needed a male heir, Henry wanted to marry Anne Boleyn. Impatient with the Pope's unwillingness to annul his marriage to Catherine, Henry turned to England's own Church courts.

Break from Rome

As the Archbishop of Canterbury, head of the highest Church Court in England, Thomas Cranmer ruled in May 1533 that the king's marriage to Catherine was “ null and absolutely void.” At the beginning of June, Anne was crowned queen. Three months later a child was born. Much to the king's disappointment, the baby was a girl. She would later become Queen Elizabeth I.

In 1534, at Henry's request, Parliament move to finalize the break of the Catholic church in England with the Pope in Rome. The Act of Supremacy 1534 declared that the King was “ the head of the Church of England.”  This position gave the king control over religious doctrine, clerical appointments, and discipline. Thomas Moore, a Christian humanist and devout Catholic, opposed the king's action and was beheaded.

Henry used his new powers to dissolve the monasteries and sell their land and possessions to the wealthy landowners and merchants. The king received a great boost to his treasury and a group of supporters who now had a stake in the new order. In matters of doctrine, however, Henry remain close to Catholic teachings. When Henry died in 1547, he was succeeded by Edward VI, his nine-year-old son by his third wife. During Edward's reign, Church officials who favored Protestant doctrines move the Church of England, or the Anglican Church, in a Protestant direction. The new Parliament and created a new service. Before he turned 16, Edward died of tuberculosis.

“Bloody Mary”

The rapid changes during Edward's reign aroused opposition. When Mary, Henry's daughter by Catherine of Aragon, came to the throne of 1553, England was ready for a reaction. Mary was a Catholic who wanted to restore England to Roman Catholicism. However, her efforts had the opposite effect. Among other actions, she had more than 300 Protestant burned as heretics, earning her the nickname, “Bloody Mary.” As a result of her policies, England was even more Protestant by the end of Mary's reign than it had been at the beginning.

Protestantism in England

Elizabeth Tudor ascended to the English throne in 1558. During her reign, the small island kingdom became the leader of the Protestant nations of Europe and lay the foundations for a world empire.

Intelligent, careful, and self-confident, Elizabeth moved quickly to solve the difficult religious problems she inherited from her Catholic half-sister, Mary Tudor.  Elizabeth repealed laws favoring Catholics.  A new Act of Supremacy named Elizabeth as the “ only Supreme governor”  of both church and state. The Church of England under Queen Elizabeth followed a moderate protestantism that kept most people satisfied.

Elizabeth was also moderate and her foreign policy. She tried to keep Spain and France from becoming too powerful by balancing power. If one nation seemed to be gaining power, England would support the weaker nation. The Queen feared that war would be disastrous for England and for her own rule; however, she could not Escape conflict with Spain.

Defeat of the Spanish Armada

In 1588, Philip II made preparations to send an armada - a fleet of warships - to invade England. A successful invasion of England would mean the overthrow protestantism. The fleet that set sail had neither the ships nor the manpower that Phillip had planned to send.

The hope for victory never came. The Armada was battered by the faster English ships and sailed back to Spain by northern route around Scotland and Ireland where it was pounded by storms. By the end of 1598, Spain was not the great power it appeared to be. Spain was the most populous Empire in the world, but it was bankrupt. Philip II had spent too much on war. His successor spent too much on his court. The armed forces were out of date, and the government was inefficient. Spain continued to play a role as a great power, but the real power in Europe had shifted to England and France.