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Revision

How Protestant was England in 1553?

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Consider the following question on the topic of the English Reformation, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How Protestant was England on the death of Edward VI in 1553?

Student answer with commentary

Although England was legally Protestant when Edward died on 6 July 1553, following the 1552 Act of Uniformity, it would be difficult to argue that the people of England had genuinely embraced Protestantism. Protector Somerset and lord president of the council, Northumberland, had introduced a range of Protestant reforms during their tenures, but the majority of the population was still Catholic as is made clear by the reaction to the changes, a study of wills, the popular support for Mary and the ease with which she was able to restore traditional practices.

The opening makes clear the distinction between the legal position and the beliefs of the ordinary people. It raises the issues that will be discussed and offers a clear view in relation to the question.

The religious policies of Somerset and Northumberland had made England officially a Protestant nation. While the First Prayer Book of 1549 introduced a moderate form of Protestantism with communion in both kinds, transubstantiation still remained. However, any hint of Catholic practices was abolished with the Second Prayer Book of 1552, which clearly established a Eucharist ceremony that was in line with Calvin's belief in a spiritual presence. It also destroyed other symbols of Catholicism as altars were replaced by wooden tables, prayers for the dead were abolished and traditional robes were no longer worn by the clergy. However, despite this move to full Protestantism, enforced through the Second Act of Uniformity in April 1552, it had only just over 12 months to take full effect and therefore raises doubts about its impact on the population. Similarly, the 42 Articles, which were based on the doctrine of justification by faith alone and Calvin's belief in predestination, were submitted in November 1552 but never became law, further limiting the impact of the changes.

The legal changes are examined, and the idea raised in the opening paragraph that England was legally Protestant is developed and supported, but the response notes that there were limits to this with the short time that was ultimately available to Edward and his government to establish Protestantism.

Not only did some of the changes have little time to become accepted, but even some of the earlier changes also met resistance. Attempts to remove images, a symbol of Catholicism, were met with

resistance. In July 1547 Injunctions were issued for their removal, then in February 1548 a further order was issued for the removal of all images and this was repeated in December 1549 when a proclamation was issued ordering the destruction of all remaining images. This suggests that previous orders had not been fully implemented. Despite the orders many were not destroyed, but were simply hidden away given the speed with which they were restored under Mary's reign. In Devon, William Body, a royal commissioner, was murdered at Helston when he tried to implement the order for the destruction of images, further evidence of the resistance to the changes.

The argument is further developed through an examination of one particular issue and evidence from both the legislative difficulties and local reaction is used to support the consistent line.

Not only did the government struggle to implement some of the changes, but there was also a problem in providing sufficient Protestant clergy to implement the changes at a parish level. With Protestantism a religion of the word, preaching was central, but there was a considerable shortage of parish priests who were able to preach and the government had to issue a Book of Homilies and Paraphrases, which were a collection of model sermons for those who were unable to preach. It is therefore little wonder that in 1549 one of the demands of Kett's rebels was for an improvement in clerical standards. It is therefore clear that even where there was support for Protestantism there were insufficient educated clergy to implement the changes.

A further difficulty in implementing the changes is examined and this further adds weight to the argument. There is again evidence of action from both the government and local reaction to support the line of argument.

Support at the local level for Protestantism was not strong, even in London, which was the centre of the faith. Only 20% of the population were Protestant by 1547 meaning that there was a great deal of work to be done in the 6 years of Edward's reign. This lack of support for the faith is made even clearer by a study of Kentish wills which suggest that only 8% of the population were Protestant by 1549 and even Suffolk, another supposed hotbed of the reformed faith, had only 27% of its wills with a Protestant preamble. The situation in other parts of the country was even worse, with only two found in York before 1550 and just one in the southwest of England.

The issue of evidence from wills was raised in the introduction and this is developed through a range of examples from across the country to further support the argument.

Resistance to the moves towards Protestantism is perhaps most evident in the religiously motivated rebellions of 1549. This is seen most clearly in the southwest, where Devon and Cornwall rose in resistance to the moderate First Prayer Book of 1549, with all but one of the rebel's demands being religious and demanding a restoration of traditional practices and the abandonment of the new prayer book. Such was their resistance that they murdered William Hellyons just outside the church of Sampford Courtenay, where the unrest began, and had forced the priest to use the old prayer book. Their anger was such that they even engaged royal forces in five battles or skirmishes which saw some 3,000 rebels killed. Although there is evidence that the rising was orchestrated by the clergy, such resistance suggests religion was important and this was also seen in the Seamer rising in Yorkshire and the unrest in Oxfordshire. It would therefore be wrong to suggest that the risings of 1549 were purely brought about by social and economic grievances.

Local resistance adds weight to the argument and again precise details are used to develop it, with a range of examples showing that it was not just the west country that witnessed religious unrest.

However, perhaps the clearest evidence that the religious changes under Edward had little long-term impact is the ease with which Mary was able to restore traditional practices. Not only was Mary able to defeat Lady Jane Grey, even if the struggle was more about legitimacy than religion, but the joy with which she was greeted and the singing of Catholic masses, even in London, before they were law, suggests that Catholicism had lost little of its popularity. Even in East Anglia, which had shown Protestant tendencies during Kett's rebellion, Catholic practices were still maintained according to the work of Eamonn Duffy.

Although the question date ends with the death of Edward the response uses later developments to further develop the argument.

Local evidence and the ease with which Mary was able to restore Catholicism suggest that there was little enthusiasm for Protestantism. Churchwarden's accounts from Edward's reign suggesting there was a gradual destruction of the old faith might tell us that some progress was being made towards the new religion, but rather than seeing this as evidence of people embracing the new faith it is clear that this was simply people conforming, as images and altars were soon restored having been hidden away. Legally England might have been Protestant, but the only thing that stopped England fully re-establishing Catholicism was the death of Mary in 1558 without an heir. In contrast to the success of Mary's traditional policies, the struggle Elizabeth would face to establish her church providing further evidence that England was not Protestant on the death of Edward in 1553.

The conclusion follows the line of argument outlined in the opening paragraph and places the changes under Edward in a wider context of Mary and Elizabeth's reign. The judgement is consistent with the opening and has been developed throughout the response.

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