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Anti-Catholicism and the Catholic Threat in Early Modern London

England experienced a major reformation beginning in the 1530s as Henry VIII broke from the Catholic Church. From then on, fear of Catholics in London grew as the city converted to Protestantism under Edward VI and Elizabeth I, and started to believe that Catholicism was a true threat to their livelihood. In reality, a Catholic threat was not nearly as extensive as was thought. However, as events such as the Gunpowder Plot transpired in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it seemed as though all Catholics wanted to eliminate Protestantism by eliminating the Protestant monarchs. Altogether, Protestants in London feared Catholics as a group, saw them as a daunting, intimidating threat, and desired greatly to exercise power over them through penal laws and propaganda, despite the difficulty of controlling the religious arena.

After Martin Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517 and sent shock waves throughout Europe, the Protestant Reformation began to manifest itself around the European continent and into England as the English Reformation. After much religious turmoil under Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary, England settled into Protestantism under Queen Elizabeth I in the late 1550s. London, England's largest and most influential city, was the first to adopt wholly the idea of Protestantism replacing the old, papist views. The people of London took part in a continual cultural change, and this change occurred across the entire social spectrum.[1]

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[1] Hickman, David. "Religious Belief and Pious Practice among London's Elizabethan Elite." *The Historical Journal* 42.4 (1999): 947

Initially, Elizabeth I stepped carefully so as to not make enemies too quickly. In 1559, however, she repealed Mary's Catholic legislation with the Act of Supremacy of 1559. This also established Elizabeth as supreme governor of the church, as Henry VIII and Edward VI had been before her. This meant that Catholics were torn between their loyalty to their country and their religion. They were used to being under a hierarchy where the monarch and the Pope were both ranked highly, and Catholics could obey both without too much difficulty.[2] Now they would have to choose, which proved to be difficult. Elizabeth I divided herself and her England from their true faith and, as a result, was excommunicated by Pope Pius V in 1570 with a papal bull, the *Regnans in Excelsis*.[3] She also established penal laws directed towards any opposed to the Protestant religion; these laws were generally harshly enforced. In a shock to Catholics, this was the end of the papal supremacy, their belief in purgatory, monasteries and convents, and lay devotion.[4]

Such a great religious change did not happen without being recorded and evidenced. Some of the best evidence of religious change is seen in wills left by testators during the late sixteenth century. Testators often left detailed wills, specifying their rite of burial, amount to be given to charity, delegations of prayers said or sermons preached in their name, and number of people provided with black mourning attire. Pre-Reformation, testators emphasized large requiem masses with many attendees.[5] Charity was paramount, and the poor who received

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[2] Campbell, Kenneth. *The Intellectual Struggle of the English Papists in the Seventeenth Century: the Catholic Dilemma*. (Lewiston/Queenston: Edwin Mellen, 1986) pp. 3-4
[3] Norman, Edward R. *Roman Catholicism in England from the Elizabethan settlement to the Second Vatican Council*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) p. 12
[4] "London's Elizabethan Elite" p. 947
[5] Hickman, David. "From Catholic to Protestant: the Changing Meaning of Testamentary Religious Provisions in Elizabethan London." *England's Long Reformation: 1500-1800*. (London: University College London, 1998) pp. 122, 129

money were often instructed to pray to the saints or the Virgin Mary in addition to Jesus Christ.[6]

Attendances at mass and regular Ave Maria prayers were required for the poor to get their

money. A mercer by the name of Alexander Plimly made a will in 1532 requiring thirty poor

children of his parish to attend an annual obit for seven years, say the Pater Noster and Ave

Maria five times, and say a creed for Plimly's soul, all to receive a preordained amount of

money. Indeed, Ralph Rowlett, a goldsmith in London, wrote in his will in 1543 that the poor of

his hometown receive twenty pence a week. In return, they were to pray for Rowlett's soul, pray

the Pater Noster and Ave Maria five times, and say the creed while honoring the wounds of Jesus

Christ.[7]

Changes in wills over the span of the Reformation include Protestant and Calvinist ideas

of predestination, limited atonement, and rapidly decreasing mention of the Virgin Mary or any

saints. This can be seen in the 1586 will of Peter Simmonds, London mercer and common

councillor. Simmonds writes about his belief in the almighty God who "chose and elected before

the creation of this mortal world all such as in Christ", that "all things is done [sic] in his

majesty's providence and foreknowledge", and that Jesus Christ has redeemed "all others God's

chosen from sin, death and hell".[8] Also increasingly apparent was less pomp required during

funerals, limits on the alms given to the poor, and limits of the number of mourners in black.

Walter Fish, merchant tailor, in his 1578 will refused any use of black mourning attire and pomp

during the ceremony because "such customs did 'rather agree with popery and paganism than

with the rule of the ghospell of God.'"[9] Finally, the Reformation time period saw more testators

granting money to institutions, such as colleges with known Puritan connections. Prominent

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[6] "London's Elizabethan Elite" pp. 948-949
[7] "London's Elizabethan Elite" p. 949
[8] "From Catholic to Protestant" p. 118
[9] "London's Elizabethan Elite" p. 950

Londoners often worried about supplying the city with Protestant preachers. As a result, colleges were founded, two of the most prominent being Emmanuel (1584) and Sidney Sussex (1595). Many people considered these two colleges to be Puritan seminaries, and London Puritans and Protestants favored them in their wills.[10]

Wills, however, show only the apparent in religious beliefs, not the fear and hatred of Catholics that grew as Elizabeth took the throne. During "the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and her successor, James I, hatred of Catholics, once the private obsession of religious extremists, developed into a part of the national ideology."[11] Many Londoners remembered Queen Mary's reign (1553-1558), when she was dubbed "Bloody Mary" for the nearly 300 men and women she ordered executed during her short reign.[12] Also, Protestants constantly feared that the significant number of Catholics still left in London was teaming up with foreign Catholics to instigate plots against their beloved monarchs. In some cases this was true; but every plot uncovered by the English government, Catholic or not, gave the people more reason to hate and fear Catholics— the scapegoats for everything.

An early major plot called the Babington Plot emerged in 1586-7, headed by Anthony Babington. Babington knew of Mary, Queen of Scots, from when he was page to Lord Shrewsbury, a servant of Elizabeth who kept the Queen of Scots captive for some time. Babington befriended many London Catholics upon leaving the Shrewsbury's, finally meeting a priest named Ballard and forming an insane plot to murder Elizabeth and replace her with Mary, Queen of Scots. They recruited young men willing to kill the queen and her top cabinet members. This may have worked, had Ballard not unknowingly explained the plan in front of a

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[10] "From Catholic to Protestant" p. 132
[11] Wiener, Carol Z. "The Beleaguered Isle. A Study of Elizabethan and Early Jacobean Anti-Catholicism." *Past & Present* 51 (1971) p. 27
[12] Dolan, Frances E. "Ashes and 'the Archive': The London Fire of 1666, Partisanship, and Proof." *Journal of Medieval & Early Modern Studies* 31.2 (2001) p. 385

member of the English secret service, Gilbert Gifford. Gifford intercepted all the correspondences related to the plot and fed them to the Secretary of State, Sir Francis Walsingham. Walsingham captured most of the conspirators and tried and executed them. In a demoralizing blow to Catholics, he also had finally collected enough evidence to execute Mary, Queen of Scots, one of the English Catholic population's last hopes for a Catholic monarch.[13]

A second significant plot, and a very well-known one, is the Gunpowder Plot. Though many people associated themselves with the planning, only a small number of men actually participated. The familiar Guy Fawkes and Robert Catesby were two of the plotters. After much careful planning, Thomas Percy (a participant) betrayed the plot in October of 1605. Though the King thought it a joke, he sent his men to Parliament's cellar door on the morning of November 5, 1605. They arrested Guy Fawkes as he walked out of the cellar, and upon searching the cellar found thirty-six barrels of gunpowder, waiting to send Parliament, the King, and the King's family up in flames. Guy Fawkes was taken to the Tower and, upon questioning, gave up the names of his co-conspirators. They were caught, tortured, and publicly executed within the few months following the failed plot.[14] Unfortunately for Catholics, this popularized plot—which very well might have worked, had Percy not betrayed it—convinced London Protestants that all Catholics were the same treasonous bunch as those involved in the Gunpowder Plot, even if the Catholics had declared their loyalty to the Crown.[15] Gunpowder, treason, and plot had just increased the fear of Catholics that gripped London.

For some years there were no major plots that seriously threatened the monarchs of England. Then, in 1678, "paranoia about popery played into the hands of one of the most

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[13] Parkinson, C. Northcote. *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976) pp. 16-19
[14] *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot* ch. 5-7
[15] *Intellectual Struggle* p. 43

disreputable and accomplished conmen in English history, Titus Oates."[16] Oates was originally

Baptist, but became Catholic and spent much time in Jesuit colleges on the continent. In 1678 he

returned to London, claiming in front of the Privy Council that he had evidence of a "Popish

Plot" to, once again, assassinate the king and overthrow Protestantism in England through

uprisings in England, Scotland, and Ireland. Unfortunately, though Oates's story was a tangled

web of lies, certain events transpired at just the right time to give credibility to Oates. For a few

years Oates spun more and more lies, consistently increasing England's paranoia, but eventually

Parliament's investigations demolished his credibility.[17] The crisis spurred a whole new wave

of persecutions, namely toward missionary priests,[18] harsher enforcement of penal laws, and

even deeper distrust of Catholics.

Starting with Edward VI and Elizabeth I the government of England passed penal laws

regulating religious toleration and practice, all in the hopes that they could control the Catholics

of England. Some laws put into effect were more general, whereas after significant Catholic

demonstrations such as the Gunpowder Plot, laws became stricter and more specific. Also, the

English government enforced laws differently at different times. When there was relative peace,

laws did not need heavy enforcing. During the time of the Gunpowder Plot and after, on the

other hand, the penal laws were highly emphasized and enforced.

Religious regulation actually began with Henry VIII, with the Act of Supremacy in 1535

establishing Henry VIII as supreme head of the church. Edward VI followed with his Book of

Common Prayer and abolishment of Catholic books in 1549. Mary repealed much of this

legislation, but Elizabeth I quickly reestablished herself as head of the church and brought back

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[16] Coffey, John. *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558-1689*. (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000) p. 185

[17] Greaves, Richard L. *Secrets of the Kingdom: British Radicals from the Popish Plot to the Revolution of 1688-1689*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1992) pp. 7-8, 30-31

[18] *Persecution and Toleration* p. 186

the Edwardian Book of Common Prayer. After the Pope excommunicated Elizabeth I with the papal bull *Regnans in Excelsis* in 1570, she passed more regulatory laws, such as the one banning the Catholic Mass. When Jesuit priests came to London in the 1580s, a law quickly followed that banned Jesuits from England, naming them as traitors. Elizabeth I banned recusancy in 1588 and 1593, not long after conspirators plotted to overthrow her and put Mary, Queen of Scots, on the throne.[19]

Many Catholics believed James I would be more tolerant of Catholics, as he had made statements of tolerance when he came to England. However, he soon saw that the laws were needed, especially since revenue from fines supplied a substantial amount of government income, around £5,000 a year.[20] In addition the Gunpowder Plot did nothing to help the Catholic cause. Over the span of a few years, Catholics were banned from moving without a license, sending their children abroad to schools, and holding public office. Throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the threat of Catholicism never really waned. William and Mary actually banned Catholics in 1689 from living within 10 miles of Westminster and London, purchasing or inheriting land, and even succeeding to the throne of England.[21] Altogether, the people of London felt fear because of the Catholics in their midst. The monarchs attempted to control them through harsh regulations that were rigorously carried out in London, but the Catholic population managed to retain enough substance that the threat never went away.

As a result of Londoners' fear of Catholics, they blamed them for every dire occurrence, no matter what the evidence. Examples of this include the Spanish Armada incident and the Great Fire of London in 1666. Philip II of Spain ordered the Armada to attack England and

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[19] Willington, John R. *Dark Pages of English History: Being a Short Account of the Penal Laws Against Catholics From Henry the Eighth To George the Fourth*. (London: Art and Book Company, 1902)
[20] *Gunpowder, Treason and Plot* p. 33
[21] *Dark Pages of English History*

advance quickly to London. However, this scheme did not go as planned and the smaller, faster

English fleet trounced the Armada. Spaniards had to return home, defeated. As Spain was

predominantly Catholic with a Catholic king, the people of London automatically assumed that

London Catholics had conspired with foreign Catholics to plan this invasion. In reality, London

Catholics were just like the rest of Londoners: they were very much opposed to foreigners. Not

only did Catholics in London fail to help out the Armada, English Catholics at a Jesuit college in

Rome purportedly cheered when they heard of the Spanish defeat.[22]

When it came to accusing someone for the devastation of the Great Fire, a fire that "laid

waste to about 436 acres, 400 streets, 89 parish churches, and 13,200 houses"[23], Londoners

automatically looked to Catholics, and were especially fond of the idea of London Catholics

working with foreign Catholics. In fact, the fire began in a neighborhood filled with French and

Dutch people, many of which were known to be Catholic.[24] The people of London had good

reason to suspect Catholics by now. Their fears of fire went back to the days of Queen Mary's

persecutions and the Gunpowder Plot. Even though King Charles II and the Privy Council could

not find evidence against Catholics, all written accounts of the fire were extremely anti-Catholic.

In addition, all the Protestant accounts of the fire were immediately considered true, while

"papist" accounts were deemed false.[25] Hatred and fear of Catholicism went so far that the

House of Commons declared in 1681 that the City of London was burnt by papists, and the Court

of Aldermen had this verdict carved, in English so all the population could read it, into the

Monument built to commemorate the Great Fire. It read,

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[22] *Intellectual Struggle* p. 8-9
[23] "Ashes and 'the Archive'" p. 382
[24] "Ashes and 'the Archive'" p. 383
[25] "Ashes and 'the Archive'" pp. 391-394

> This Pillar was set up in perpetual remembrance of the most dreadful
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> burning of this Protestant City, begun and carried on by the treachery and
>
> malice of the Popish faction in the beginning of September, in the year of
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> our Lord 1666, in order to the carrying on their horrid plot for extirpating
>
> the Protestant religion and old English Liberty, and introducing Popery
>
> and Slavery.[26]

The other writing on the Monument is in Latin and is simply a description of the fire. An

English inscription opened the text to the whole of London, not just those proficient in Latin, so

the idea of evil papists could easily spread among the poor as well as the rich.[27]

The Monument's inscription was not the only way of spreading news in sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century London. Pamphlets, books, proclamations, and other prints were incredibly

useful for propaganda in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially with the

popularization of the printing press. The emergence of the printing press allowed Protestants and

Catholics alike to mass-produce their religious works. Also popularized were the visual and oral

accounts of such proceedings as the last dying speech at the gallows. Catholics and Protestants

both printed visuals to hang in public areas for all to see. Last dying speeches were put into print

or passed on by word of mouth. Protestants often portrayed events much differently than

Catholics.

Catholics were the victims of state power and objects of hostile attention from the

English state and its people. They were also agents who tried to contradict the Catholic identity

of "traitor" in England, for Catholics were not executed for heresy; they were executed for

treason. Whenever a Catholic was executed, though, and odd thing happened: the boundary

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[26] "Ashes and 'the Archive'" p. 396
[27] "Ashes and 'the Archive'" pp. 395-396

where state power stopped and persecution began was questioned and put up for argument. The

state was forced to face an issue, one of state religion, which no one could hope to dominate.[28]

As long as Catholics respected the monarch while speaking from the gallows, they could say

anything they wanted before their death. A few priests went so far as to tell the crowd that if

they "remained in the Church of England they should undoubtedly perish everlastingly"[29] in an

attempt to destabilize the scene set by the Protestant executioners around the gallows. Others,

while being marched through the City of London on public parade before their executions, paid

homage to their religion and their fellow doomed Catholics. Edmund Campion, taken through

London to the Tower, bowed to the cross in Cheapside. Others wore crosses to their trials, sang

hymns, and showed respect for the remains of other executed Catholics on their way to the

gallows.[30] While Protestants did their best to undermine Catholics, what they were really doing

was giving them a chance to speak out.

Catholics actually dominated the printing business in the post-Reformation and pre-Civil

War years. While Protestants feared the changes in technology involved with a printing press,

Catholics embraced the new technology as a "divine art" and made excellent use of it to spread

the word about their faith.[31] When the English government banned Catholic works from

England, printers put out material in secret, both in London and the countryside. In the 1620s a

community of Catholic printers and vendors existed in Holborn and Clerkenwell.[32] Also, books

were smuggled across the channel from the European continent. Generally, women were

peddlers of smuggled books in the streets of London. Mainstream booksellers sold Catholic

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[28] Lake, Peter and Michael Questier. "Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric under the Gallows: Puritans, Romanists and the State in Early Modern England." *Past & Present* 153 (1996) p. 73
[29] "Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric" p. 82
[30] "Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric" p. 77
[31] Walsham, Alexandra. "'Domme Preachers'? Post-Reformation English Catholicism and the Culture of Print." *Past & Present* 168 (2000) pp. 76-78
[32] "'Domme Preachers'" pp. 81-82

works on the black market. A prisoner by the name of William Hartley did business from

Marshalsea prison. Even some of the pious Catholic elite in London, such as one Lady Tresham,

assisted in the smuggling of Catholic books.[33] Books containing prayers, descriptions of last

dying speeches, and eyewitness accounts of martyrs, for example, were the lifeblood and morale-

boosters of the scattered and persecuted Catholic community in London, and throughout

England. It was vital that the secret Catholic book trade continue, and many Londoners did their

part to make that happen.

As the Reformation wore on, Protestants saw the positive aspects of printing presses and

finally began to use them to their advantage. Thus Protestant works began to replace the once-

popular Catholic works in London. They were especially proficient with pamphlets expressing

the evils of Catholicism and the Catholics that roamed the streets and died at the gallows. While

Catholic pamphleteers attempted to show all the executions in the light of martyrdom,

Protestants focused on the weaknesses of Catholics at the gallows. For example, they often

portrayed those priests and Catholic martyrs about to die as fearful, unable to complete prayers,

and distracted by the offer of conversion with the promise of life.[34] Pamphleteers painted

Catholics out to be sly, wily seducers of people. Edmund Campion, while being paraded through

London, wore a sign stating "This is Campion, the seducer of the People." One London writer

said that Catholics, or "papists", are cunning, subtle and crafty; while they may appear as lambs,

inwardly they are ravening wolves.[35] Jesuits were said to have the voices of Mandrakes, and

possess venomous poison which they used to infect all those around them.[36] It is obvious that

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[33] "'Domme Preachers'" p. 86
[34] "Agency, Appropriation and Rhetoric"
[35] "The Beleaguered Isle" p. 42
[36] "The Beleaguered Isle" p. 43

Protestants felt the extreme need to put down Catholics in any way possible to undermine their credibility.

Was the threat of Catholicism felt by Londoners really as perilous as they thought? Of course, Catholicism was a well-established religion with a fairly well-established following, especially in London. As Protestantism took over England and the continent, though, Catholicism was constantly under its own threat—the threat of the Protestants, those who wanted to wipe out Catholics in London. Protestants very much overestimated the power of Catholics in England. King James I sent out a large army in 1605 to apprehend less than ten Gunpowder Plot conspirators.[37] The penal laws enacted against Catholics went so far as to banish Catholics from the city of London, where there were certainly Catholics left but they were scattered and unorganized. No one expected the Protestants and Catholics in London to easily co-exist, and this applied to Europe as well. The English expected something larger and much worse than the previous plots to come along and show the true champion, and this struck fear into the hearts of Englishmen.[38]

The Reformation in England effected many religious and political changes throughout the country, with wills being excellent testaments to these changes. As the fear of Catholics developed, various plots to assassinate the king or queen confirmed Londoners' fears and the Catholic threat. Such a threat inspired penal laws that were, in themselves, not harsh but were enforced harshly. Fear pushed the people of London to set Catholics as the scapegoats for events such as the Spanish Armada's attempted invasion and the Great Fire of 1666. Treasonous plots gave rise to heightened propaganda, both for Catholics and Protestants. Overall, as Wiener writes, "The English had over-estimated the monolithic character of the Church precisely

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[37] "The Beleaguered Isle" p. 40
[38] "The Beleaguered Isle" p. 53

because order was so important to them. In the same way, they exaggerated the ability of the

Catholics to undermine their beliefs because they had severe doubts about their own self-

control."[39] Londoners had such a distorted view of the strength of Catholicism that they let their

fear overwhelm them. They let Catholics know they were fearful, which lent strength to the

hopes and beliefs of the Catholic population in early modern London, that they might stand a

chance against the powerful Protestant government.

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[39] "The Beleaguered Isle" p. 49

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