

Comparative Elizabethan Religion

A Practical Guide for Historical Interpreters

I. CAVEATS. Almost everyone living in Elizabethan England is, at least publicly, Christian. If your character is not, you must **a)** have special permission, and **b)** do additional and specific research. Please keep in mind that the discussions that follow deal with the theory and practice of the subject religions in the latter half of the 16th Century, not (necessarily) as they subsequently developed or as they are today. None of the terms or descriptions used is intended to be prejudicial; every attempt has been made to be clear and objective. Because the levels of interest and/or expertise in this subject area varies so greatly from actor to actor, parts of this material may seem basic to some, new to others, but hopefully of use to all.

II. EXPLICATION OF FORMAT. The basic goal of this handout is to provide you, the user, with a guide to understanding your character's religious beliefs, how they influence your character's actions, opinions, decisions, etc., and aid you in incorporating this facet of your character's internal make-up into your outward portrayal. The following format was chosen with these considerations in mind.

The treatment will be broken down into four major subject areas of doctrine/practice: **1) Authority/Structure, 2) Scripture, 3) Salvation** and **4) Sacraments/Rituals/Prayers**. Each subject area will be broken down into the tenets held by the **Roman Catholic, Church of England** and **Radical Protestant (Puritan)** faiths. Thus the user can compare differing beliefs in one area **OR** extract the material that pertains to his/her character's religion for a basic overview to assist in Character Analysis/Questions.

Following the treatment by subject area, there is a section on **Implementation and Decision Making**. This is intended to provide some practice in using the information and to invite some thought as to how it can be used in our environmental theater.

III. DOCTRINE AND PRACTICES OF THE THREE MAJOR ELIZABETHAN SECTS.

A. Authority/Structure.

1: Roman Catholic: *The Church sees itself as an autonomous, transnational institution that has complete authority over the spiritual affairs of all Christians (i.e. its adherents; everyone else is heretic), regardless of nationality. It bases this authority upon Tradition and its own interpretation of Scripture (see B.1.).*

The structure is definitely a Top-down hierarchy. The pope (Vicar of Christ, Supreme Pontiff, and Bishop of Rome) is the supreme and ultimate authority on all matters of faith and morals, and is obeyed by the archbishops, bishops and abbots, who are in charge of their respective archdioceses and dioceses (specific geographic areas) or monasteries. They are obeyed by the parish priests, who are in turn obeyed by the laity, whom they instruct in their duty to "pray, pay and obey" (hey, this is theory, OK?). All leadership positions are filled by ordained clergy; that is, appointed to or promoted within the hierarchy by members higher up.

There are various groups and offices which advise and assist the pope in the exercise of the Church's authority; here are the most important for us. The College of Cardinals: "Princes of the Church" are clerics (mostly bishops) appointed by the pope for life, to elect the papal successor from amongst themselves upon his death; also serve as members of the Rota and heads

of the various Offices. *The Rota*: The last (and sometimes, only) court of appeal in matters of church law, particularly marriage cases (no such thing as divorce, only annulment). *The Holy Office* (of the Inquisition): Issues pronouncements, conducts investigations and uses whatever means necessary to insure the maintenance of orthodoxy in doctrine and practice.

SPECIAL NOTE. *The Jesuits*: Those characters (or their portrayals) who have a particular interest in the structure, mission and spirituality of the Society of Jesus in the 16th Century, please ask for the special addendum. ***Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam!***

2. Church of England: The reigning English monarch is the Supreme Governor of the Church in England and Ireland; any claims made by the Church of Rome notwithstanding. This authority is based upon Edicts by Henry VIII, Edward VI and Elizabeth I, and upon various Acts of Parliament; it is this authority which determines proper and correct belief and practice. Clergy are subject to civil laws and civil courts, and Privy Council assists and advises the Crown on religious as well as political affairs (Article XXXVII. of Religion). The Archbishop of Canterbury is Primate, or first among bishops, in England; and the diocesan/parish system is as in the Roman system.

3. Puritan: Radical Protestant reformers exist within the framework of the C of E, but to varying extents wish to "purify" it, by modifications in structure as well as belief, along the lines of the Calvinist sects on the Continent. These sects believe that God and His Word (see **B.3.**) are the sole authority over the individual believer in matters of faith, and positions of leadership are filled by members of the led congregation by God acting through those members (i.e. popular vote); a decidedly Bottom-up system in contrast to those discussed above. Most English Protestants considered themselves to be superpatriots, and so kept their opinions on this subject pretty much to themselves and their close associates, and publicly lived within the C of E structure.

B. Scripture.

1. Roman Catholic: *The Church alone is authorized to translate and interpret the Bible; and since it's already in the transnational language, Latin, there's absolutely no reason to translate it further. This version is called the "Vulgate", since St. Jerome translated it into the Latin commonly used in his day, not Classical Latin. Besides, it is the duty of the clerical hierarchy to explain everything that the faithful need to know for their salvation that is contained in Scripture. Can't read Latin? All the better; you are protected from reaching a false (read non-Catholic) interpretation!*

As mentioned above, the Church bases its authority on: a) Scripture- in this case, particularly Matthew 16:18-19 ("Peter...on this Rock...keys of the Kingdom"); and b) Tradition- that the apostle Peter was the first bishop of Rome; so all you have to do is trace the succession of popes back to Peter to prove the indisputable authority of the Holy See.

And so it is with all questions of doctrine and morals, including the next two subject areas: the Church interprets Scripture (its own translation) in light of its own Tradition; and read "Church" as the theologians and bishops, overseen by the Holy Office, in union with the pope. A major update of these interpretations was made as recently as 1564, by the Council of Trent, in reaction to the Protestant Reformation (and is thought of as the start of the Catholic Counter-Reformation). And a word about theologians: they take into account the writings of the classical philosophers (e.g. Plato, Aristotle) about the Nature of the Universe and Man when advising the Church about the proper interpretation of Scripture.

2. Church of England: The bishops and theologians who advised Henry VIII during the start of the English Reformation were heavily influenced by the writings and

exploits of Martin Luther in the Germanys. This former Augustinian monk had broken with the Roman program and gained popular (read Nobility) support for his ideas of **a)** secular control of local church organization and **b)** making translations of the Bible available to everyone in their native language, so that all might receive nourishment and comfort from God's Word (and make their own dogmatic/moral/political interpretation of it!). Luther believed that, according to Scripture, the Scriptures themselves contained everything a believer needed to live correctly and attain salvation; one had only to read and heed. He cited passages like 2 Timothy 3:15-17 as evidence.

Although Henry and his churchmen weren't prepared to go as far as Luther (why intentionally scrap your own power base?), they used his ideas to justify the formation of the C of E and establish their stance on Scripture (VI. of the "39 Articles"). Archbishop Cranmer produced his (ponderous and barely readable) translation of the Bible in English. Thus, the faithful had free access to the Scriptures and could make their own interpretations, as long as they coincided with those of Parliament the Crown and its Church.

3. Puritan: The Radical Protestant reformers not only agreed with Luther, but embraced the more radical positions of fellow reformer John Calvin. Everyone had a personal relationship with God, with no need for any earthly intermediaries, and Scripture is God's method of communicating his requirements and demands on humanity. (**Note:** John Calvin's God is generally not a happy camper.) It also contains (especially in the Old Testament) object lessons of the consequences of conforming to or ignoring God's Commandments; these stories are taken as historical fact in all their detail and are undeniable proof that God is willing and able to render his justice swift and sure, in this life as well as the next.

Scripture is not only a rule of conduct for the individual, but is also the ultimate yardstick against which all societies, institutions and governments are to be measured. So, when Jesus is heard telling his disciples, "call no one Father but your Father in heaven" (Matthew 23:9), how is the Radical Protestant to regard the romish practice of addressing the parish clergy (not to mention the "Holy Father" in Rome)? The lessons about corrupt societies are not lost on them, no less than the warnings of the Last Judgment, when the sheep will be separated from the goats (but more of that in the next area).

C. Salvation: Before we begin this discussion, there are a few basic premises that all 16th Century Christians hold in common that we need to cover first. All believe in Original Sin (the Fall of Adam): Humanity, through its own choice, is separated from God; the result of which is the imperfection of human nature, the inability to know or to do what is right on our own and the inevitability of death; and thus making salvation necessary. God chose to give humanity a chance to be reunited with him, and so "He sent His only begotten Son" to die as a blood offering (**very** Old Testament) for the sins of all humanity, thus making salvation possible. And believe this: eternal salvation (and its alternative, eternal damnation) is of the utmost importance to every Elizabethan. **Grace** is that property of God by which salvation is obtained, but how it functions and how one goes about receiving it are matters for debate, and the reason wars are fought, and both the great and the lowly are imprisoned, tortured and killed. And so it is that Grace is the major focus of our discussions in the next two subject areas.

*1. Roman Catholic: If the Church maintains that in itself alone possesses the ultimate authority on all matters spiritual, then it certainly stands to reason that it considers itself to have a lock on the Grace market. To a Catholic, how does Grace function? **It causes a transformation of our sinful human nature** so that we can be united to God in this life and more completely in the hereafter.*

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*So how do you obtain this transforming, or sanctifying, Grace? The old-fashioned way: **You earn it!** That is, you have to act in cooperation with God to participate in this "free" gift. Again, how? Through the reception of the **SEVEN SACRAMENTS** (see **D.1**), **FAITH** (demonstrated by prayer, both your own and that of others for you), and **GOOD WORKS** (almsgiving, nursing the sick, burying the dead, etc.). Can we lose it? Yes, by choosing to return to our old sinful nature. Can we get it back? Yes; how?*

PASS GO AND RETURN TO THE STATE OF GRACE

By this approach, one can possibly understand how a sort of "quantitative theory of Grace" evolved within the Tradition: if you can always recover lost Grace, then you should be able to add to the Grace you already have. But, how much Grace does one really need to gain eternal salvation? Now there's a pretty problem, because no one really knows. (After all, God didn't develop this theory, so there's no answer in Scripture.) The saints and holy martyrs are held up as models by the Church because it presumes, due to the circumstances of their lives and/or deaths, that they had what it takes to get to heaven and to avoid hell (very real places in most people's minds).

*But most people are not saints; what happens if they die before they gain this unknown required amount of Grace? What if they die in battle, or drunk, or even in anger? What about Mom and Dad: did they make it, and will I be with them forever? And can I get any assurance that God will indulge my human failings when the time comes? Of Course, says the Church. Since few of us are ready to meet God face to face when we die, there must be a state in which we are purified in order to begin our heavenly existence; the Church calls that state Purgatory, and while there, we can gain further merit from the prayers and good works done on our behalf by the living (not to mention the prayers of the saints, who know just exactly what it takes!). Don't think anyone will pray for you after you're gone, not even St. Jude (Lost Causes Dept.)? Don't think that even your Creator will indulge your human weaknesses? Well, the Church will **indulge** you- now; for **X** number of prayers, or **Y** number of good works, **OR.....for Z** shillings you can assist yourself, in advance to a speedier reception of that final happy reward.*

Please note: None of the above is possible outside Holy Mother Church.

2. Church of England: Here again, we find the influence of Luther on the English Reformers. And Luther was very much influenced by the writings of St. Augustine in the 4th Century; because of Original Sin, humanity is not only separated from God, but is likened to a huge, cosmic dung heap. We chose to be that way, and even God himself can't change that. But Grace is like snow, falling on that dung heap, and changing our shitty appearance to something acceptable for God to look upon throughout eternity. So, for Luther, **Grace does not change us, but changes the way we appear to God.** He calls this **JUSTIFICATION**: only the action of God through the merits of Jesus Christ can save us, and the only way we can get justified in the eyes of God is to **believe in the Gospel; that is JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE.** And since everything you need to know about salvation is contained in Scripture, you can be sure that this theory is based on Luther's interpretation of what he read in his German translation of the Bible (especially in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans).

Here's another way of looking at this Justification idea: Grace acts as a filter through which God views humanity; if you believe that Jesus died to save you from your sins, then God sees you through the filter. No personal faith, then no filter (Grace) and nothing you do can be good (you are not Justified in the sight of God), so everything you do is a sin and there is no way you can be saved: you're either in or you're out, Justified or Damned. You can't earn Grace, so there's no "quantitative theory" here; no need for Purgatory or human/institutional mediation. You belong to the Church not to gain Grace, but as a result of being Justified and obeying God by your Faith in Christ.

All this is laid out for the Anglican in his or her **BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER**, in Articles IX.-XIX. of the "39 Articles of Religion".

3. Puritan: Again, John Calvin is the one whose ideas form the basis of this Radical Protestant doctrine. **There is absolutely nothing you can do about your own salvation!** Because of Original Sin, **everybody** deserves to go to hell; in fact, many do in order for God to demonstrate His Divine Justice. But many are saved in order for God to demonstrate Divine Grace; these folks are the **Elect**, those chosen by God from the beginning of time to be given salvation by the action of Christ's death. This cheerful little doctrine is known as **PREDESTINATION**; your salvation or damnation is a done deal, predetermined before your creation and not subject to debate or alteration. This and other of Calvin's delightful concepts about the way Christianity was meant to be practiced are contained in his **The Institutes of the Christian Religion**.

But how can you tell if you're one of them that's got Grace, and so has been saved already? There are several ways to tell if someone is a member of the Elect: First, he is a Radical Protestant (naturally!), and as such he lives an upright life (not in order to achieve Grace, but because he already has it); and he regularly attends church services to hear preaching and to receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The Church, therefore, is the earthly company of the Elect; if the Church authorities find any reason to expel you from the Church, it's obvious that you weren't a member of the Elect in the first place. The Saved aren't going to waste any effort associating with the Damned, because nothing is going to change that which God has predestined. And again, no need for Purgatory or earthly mediators here, either.

English Radical Protestants vary to a greater or lesser degree in their belief in Predestination. Article XVII. (of the "39 Articles") allows for belief in it, but cautions about not sticking other people's damnation constantly in front of their noses, lest they should lose heart and enter into a deal with the Devil. But notice how this attitude will determine who you associate with, as friends, business partners and political allies; how it will affect the ways in which you evaluate the motives and actions of others whom you consider to be members of the Elect (and those you don't), and so also affect the ways in which you deal with them.

D. Sacraments/Rituals/Prayers

*1. Roman Catholic: The Council of Trent defined a **Sacrament** as a ritual action instituted by Christ to confer Grace, and recognized seven as having a basis in Scripture and an enduring continuity in Tradition (listed here in the order in which they were usually conferred): Baptism, Penance, Eucharist, Confirmation, Holy Orders (creation/promotion of clergy), Marriage (these last two being mutually exclusive) and Extreme Unction (anointing the dying). Infants are baptized as soon as possible to confer Sanctifying Grace on them immediately (just in case God should forget that they're still innocent if they should die) and children are confessed as soon as they can distinguish right from wrong (in case God really does consider it a sin not to eat your peas), so that they can receive Communion as soon as possible (and so really be plugged into the Grace circuits). Confirmation is usually administered around the age of puberty, signifying an adult commitment to the baptismal promises made for you by your godparents. You have to get married in front of a priest, you can't marry a Protestant and divorce is out of the question (except for the rich and powerful; see **A.I.**, re: annulment).*

The Church believes that the Eucharist is, in fact, (meta)physically, as well as spiritually symbolic of, the Body and Blood of Christ under the mere appearance of bread and wine (only the clergy partake of the latter "specie"), and so is the best channel of Grace available. But you might only receive Communion once or twice a year, depending on how devout you are, and how often you want to fast from midnight till you can get to the Communion rail at Mass. But attendance every Sunday to hear and watch the priest participate fully in the Mass is mandatory;

besides, you don't want to miss out on any residual Grace that you just might be able to pick up, do you?

All the rituals of the Church, as well as much of the private prayer of the clergy and the educated laity, are conducted in that transnational language, Latin. Veneration of the saints (as well as their images and relics), especially the Blessed Virgin Mary, is encouraged; doesn't hurt to have those on your side who know all about this salvation game, and might be inclined (or induced) to put in a good word with the Judge of All Men.

2. Church of England: Here the differences in sacrament and ritual from the Roman Church are subtle, yet important; Henry VIII wished to alter the Church only insofar as authority was concerned, yet his theological advisors introduced some of Luther/Calvin in this area as well. All public ritual, as well as private prayer, is to be conducted in the daily language of the people; this is reflective of the attitude that the whole congregation present should fully participate in the ceremonies taking place, not just observe (as in "hearing Mass"). An example of this is full participation in Communion; all those present at services receive, and do so under both kinds (bread and wine).

There are only two Sacraments of the Gospel, which have a visible sign ordained by God, as shown in the actions of Jesus: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Penance, Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony and Extreme Unction are commonly called sacraments, but are not of the same rank or nature as those of the Gospel, as they are without a visible sign ordained by God (please note what this begins to say about sex, even in marriage). Nothing in God's Word forbids the clergy to marry, so they may decide for themselves. Some (for instance, the Queen) are fond of some of the old ways, such as crucifixes and saints' images, and so these things die hard. (References for this section are in Articles XXIV.-XXXVI., "39 Articles".)

3. Puritan: Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the ONLY sacraments, and since reception of them is only a reflection of predestined election, the sacraments themselves are only symbolic representations of God's presence in the world. Yes, Christ is present in the Lord's Supper, but only symbolically and to those who have Faith (i.e. the Elect). So you receive the sacraments, not to receive Grace, but to demonstrate to the world God's mercy (not to mention his good judgment) in electing you to be Saved, and not just a little to confirm that fact in your own mind.

In keeping with the Bottom-up nature of the Radical Protestant structure model, the clergy are not ordained, but rather selected by the congregation which that particular minister serves; in the most radical models, this means by popular vote. Clergy should marry, because **everybody should marry**, lest they be tempted into greater sin (notice what this is **DEFINITELY** saying about sex, even in marriage). No saints, no images (excepting a bare cross on the altar during services), so no veneration. Sin and salvation are personal matters between you and God, so no public Confessions are necessary (though sometimes required by a local congregation to prove your qualification to re-enter after a particularly public scandal).

IV. IMPLEMENTATION / DECISION MAKING

The following is an attempt to assist the user in transforming all of the above information into visible, believable facets of your Elizabethan character. Most of these helps are general in nature; the ideas are not meant, by any means, to be a complete guide and the suggestions here are just that: suggestions. You (with the help of the Guildmaster/Directors) are ultimately the

best judge of what to incorporate into your portrayal, since you've done more research on the character and more serious thought about your portrayal than anyone else around...right?

A. Roman Catholic: *Crucifixes with a Corpus (depiction of Christ's body), especially when attached to a rosary, are perhaps the clearest visual signal here. Also, the rosary in its current form is period, but care should be taken, as with any prop/costume piece, to get a period look. Bibles are generally out, unless your character is well educated, has an unusually strong interest in religion (e.g. amateur theologian) and it is in Latin; an exception to this last is the Douay New Testament. Missals and prayerbooks are good; all but those containing the simplest private devotions (i.e. for children) would be in Latin; it is heresy to translate the Mass, period. All this makes relatively little difference visually, of course, unless you want to read out of it for character reasons. Please note: The importation of the above items became illegal after 1571; their possession was unevenly prosecuted throughout Elizabeth's reign, usually corresponding to current political climate.*

It is very important, on a personal level, to make it to Mass on time, remember your daily prayers and take advantage of every opportunity to do a good work. The clergy are VERY special people: without them, no Sacraments; without Sacraments, no Grace, and you know what that means! It is REALLY important to die with your soul as prepared as possible, and for most that means having a priest nearby to do whatever is necessary to get the job done (a situation further complicated by the fact that, in England, harboring a priest and receiving the Sacraments from him constitute high treason).

Good works, notably almsgiving, is motivated by a desire to continue to build up that Grace stockpile by following God's Commandments. Doing penance, that is, doing good things as well as praying to make up for bad things, is very necessary for peace of mind and self-esteem. You were named after a particular saint, you probably took another as your personal patron at your Confirmation, and have a personal devotion to one or more other saints: you would know what area of human endeavor each is concerned with, details of their lives, and especially why they are important to you personally.

B. Church of England: There is a VERY broad latitude of belief here, and that results in a corresponding broadness in practice. Since almost everyone over age 30 was born into a Catholic world, the practices of youth are hard to forsake, representing as they do our very earliest memories of hearth/home and order in the universe. Many have a sentimental, as well as religious, attachment to the crucifix and other religious imagery. Many still swear by this or that saint, out of habit if not devotion. All who could afford it would own a Bible in English, and the Book of Common Prayer, containing all the prayers and rituals necessary to conduct private and public devotions in common with the rest of the Church. Other prayerbooks, in English, for private use were available.

Since whether or not any deed you do is good depends upon your being Justified, the motivation to do charitable works is to continue to manifest Faith in Christ's saving power by obeying his teachings. Remember, you don't perform good works to gain Grace; Grace is what allows what you do to be good.

Don't forget: No separation of Church and State; authority is authority. And if you are a fervent English patriot, membership in this Church is more than a natural extension of that attitude; it is part of your identity as English and a way of judging the "Englishness" (read loyalty to the Crown) of others.

C. Puritan: Only the most radical of Protestant reformers are using total severity of dress as a public signature: being members of the Elect, we are more than willing to wait to enjoy heavenly rewards that will outlast earthly goods. Old customs often take on new

rationales; wearing your wealth is considered by some to be a privilege granted by God, as the wealth itself is an earthly manifestation of Election. Those who are of the Elect naturally do not overindulge in the pleasures of the flesh, as they have the Grace to refrain. But having a true understanding of salvation and wishing to bring the Church more into conformity with God's Word does not mean having to completely withdraw from the social pursuits of your class, which might jeopardize any position of power and influence you might hold; after all, that would be contrary to God's will: that his mercy and righteousness be made manifest through the lives of the Elect.

The emphasis here as far as church services is on public prayer, reading of Scripture and preaching, more than on the two sacraments. Carrying a Bible, as opposed to just simply owning one, will be important to some, as there is nothing that happens in life that is not addressed specifically in God's Word, and who wouldn't want to have the Answer Key directly at hand if God suddenly decided to give a Test (read here, every decision you make; how fanatical you are determines the extent to which you carry this scrupulosity). Crucifixes, religious images, saints as mediators, relics and the idea of clergy as different from other believers are anathema to the godly. You are motivated to do good works because you are a member of the Elect; non-members can't control what they do, and it doesn't matter anyway- they're hosed no matter what.

Patriotism can be a real factor for the Radical Protestant as well, since you want to ensure that the English Church is the Protector of God's True Gospel on Earth, and the English Crown has the political and temporal wherewithal to do just that. **Wouldn't it be great, when we get to heaven, to find out that all true and loyal Englishmen are members of the Elect?**

D. Sample Situations: Here are some ideas to use as character questions, both to think about and possibly discuss with members of your character's family, household, faction, etc

1. Baron Buckhurst, a Catholic although not a recusant, is one of the wealthiest peers in the Realm.
2. What is your response to the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre?
3. Before the defeat of the Armada, His Most Catholic Majesty the King of Spain entirely controls the massive wealth and resources of the Indies and the New World.
4. In the 3rd quarter of the 16th Century, the northern (mainly Protestant) banking houses neared complete collapse; for a time, the Italian (Catholic) banks controlled the Northern European economies to a great degree.
5. Bishops outrank **ALL** peers secular (i.e., highest nobles), and are considered "pillars" of the monarchy; the removal of their power would threaten the stability and existence of the monarchy. How do you feel about all this?
6. The Queen absolutely refuses to release any funds to help the Low Countries fight the Spanish.

V. CONCLUSION

As in any treatment this brief, of a subject this complex, there are **A LOT** of things omitted or glossed over; and like as not, those areas will be of burning concern to some and even vital to the portrayal of certain characters. My apologies, in advance, for these inconveniences; please let me know how I can make this document (now in its fourth edition) more useful to you. Your comments are most welcome, as are your requests for any specific assistance that I can provide in this area.

Wishing All a GRACEful Faire Season!

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Timothy E. Duncan.
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