

THINKERS OF THE XVITH & XVIITH CENTURIES

too, was so ordered that it should offend as few of the pious as possible; the ritual remained as nearly Catholic as Protestants could tolerate, the doctrine became as nearly Calvinistic as Catholics could conceivably digest. Even when the Thirty-nine Articles were framed and promulgated, they were not used, like the Six Articles of Henry VIII, as a scourge for the community; they were employed merely as a test for those who voluntarily offered themselves for ecclesiastical ordination, or university degrees, or service under the Government.

Thus Cecil and Elizabeth secured peace in their time. Under pressure of urgent political necessity they abandoned an inquiry into men's beliefs which would inevitably have precipitated a conflict with both Papists and Puritans, and contented themselves with a demand for mere external conformity. By doing so they established a larger measure of religious toleration than was at that time known elsewhere in Christendom. The immense mass of Englishmen, whether inclined to the old ways or to the new, welcomed the relaxation from the oppressive Protestantism of Edward VI's later days on the one hand, and the sanguinary Catholicism of Mary's troublous reign on the other. They willingly went to church and there composed themselves to sleep, thus gaining refreshment and vigour for the secular enterprises on which their hearts were set. Only gradually did the zealous minorities wake up to the fact that the Elizabethan Church was a mere political organisation, having the outward form of a religious communion but being devoid of spiritual life. Not till 1570, and then only under the stimulus of a tremendous papal bull, did a remnant of faithful Catholics decline any longer to bow down in the House of Rimmon; not till the defeat of the Spanish Armada had removed the fear of a Catholic reconquest of England did the growing company of Puritans withdraw from the Erastian Church and begin to set up conventicles of their own. By that time the perils which had beset the early path of Elizabeth had passed away. Firmly established upon her throne, and strong in the devotion of the overwhelming majority of her subjects, she was able to punish with a severity hardly exceeded by her father or her sister those who refused to recognise her authority as asserted in the Act of Supremacy, or to obey the reasonable requirements of the Act of Uniformity.