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Piracy and Religion: Navigating Their Connections during the Golden Age

Sarah Wampler

Oglethorpe University, sarahlynxw@gmail.com

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Even on the high seas among the most vicious of pirates, religion was present. “Previous to sailing, Capt. Kidd buried his bible on the sea-shore, in Plymouth Sound; its divine precepts being so at variance with his wicked course of life, that he did not choose to keep a book which condemned him in his lawless career,” yet by burying it he was recognizing the significance of the book and the religious connotations it carried.¹ Kidd’s actions could be symbolic of leaving God behind in order to move forward free of Christian values, separating himself and his acts of piracy from God. Or he could have been demonstrating that pirates knew that their actions were contradictory to the beliefs of Christianity and by separating himself from his personal bible, he was separating his pirate life from his Christian one. In either case it shows that he recognized at the very least the idea of God, and demonstrated the constant presence of religion in the lives of even the most notorious pirates.

The Golden Age of Piracy saw piracy and institutionalized religion attempt to create order within the vast new sea of challenges presented in the wake of the Reformation and the discovery of the New World. Piracy and religion both served as tools of the state used to assert policy and control over an ever-expanding world. At the same time each existed outside of the state and were yet directly linked to it. Like Kidd and his buried bible, these two concepts often seen as opposites, one moral and ordered the other chaotic and corrupt, became two sides of the same multinational phenomenon of rearranging world politics and control. The leading nations in Europe during this tumultuous and ever-changing era were all fighting for control of land, sea, and faith with little regard for how they accomplished this task, only that it be accomplished. England, Spain, and France as three of the leading nations in Europe were competing fiercely for control over what at the time was the world. The establishment of global trade routes gave new meaning to imperialism and European political disputes expanded to worldwide conflict that led to the capture of over two thousand ships on Atlantic trade routes alone during the Golden Age.² The Reformation then added a religious dimension to these conflicts and offered moral justification for the actions of the nations involved. Piracy and religion offered two options for how to win at this new power politics game without ever *directly* getting involved and starting a war; Piracy did so with great force and violence, and religion by influencing ideals and asserting control over peoples’ moral code. Piracy at times took on religious undertones and became a sort of radical Reformation movement, while religion was able to use piracy as justification for the damnation of other faiths or states.

¹ Charles Ellms, *The Pirates Own Book*, The Adventures of Captain Robert Kidd.

² Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 33.

Scholars did not take the study of piracy as an historical phenomenon very seriously until recently. Instead they tended to look at it in the context of popular almost folkloric history rather than a serious phenomenon that greatly changed world politics and assisted the rise of empires. These earlier works came out following the end of the Golden Age and set a precedent for research on the topic of pirates until midway through the twentieth century. While these earlier texts do not offer much in the way of analysis of the phenomenon aside from illustrating pirates' wickedness, they do offer a great deal of insight into the average person's idea of piracy and demonstrate how the phenomenon was ultimately condemned by the church and state alike as the Golden Age came to a close, the state of world politics began to settle down, and pirates were no longer useful in expansion as they had been. These works also offer a look at the end of the Golden Age and the outcome of piracy once their usefulness had run out.³

Charles Johnson's eighteenth century collection of popular pirate tales and histories is one of the most prevalent versions of this popular look at piracy. Johnson's collection, written for popular consumption, nevertheless provides a lengthy array of narratives, events, and legends that give insight into the ideas surrounding piracy in the decades following its fall.⁴ Charles Ellms' collection does the same, giving a mixture of both true tales and pure fiction. Despite their biases and embellishments, both works remain some of the most popular and arguably useful sources for studying pirate society and are still used by historians today, though should be read with these issues in mind.⁵

More recent historians have looked at piracy only through the lens of these collections and come to a similar conclusion of the pirate as villain.⁶ In the 1950s, Patrick Pringle was one of the first to really look at piracy as something beyond a group of barbaric criminals. He sought to understand the phenomenon as something greater than greed and violence. His work challenged the stigma of the vicious, Godless pirate and their convenient use as a scapegoat throughout the years, and presented a fuller, more humanized study of pirate society.⁷

More modern works have followed Pringle's approach and looked at piracy as a society in and of itself, working both inside of the European system and apart from it. They suggest that pirate society was diverse and ever-changing, and while some pirates were indeed fueled by greed, many took to the seas for a

³ Margarete Lincoln, *British Pirates and Society*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) 286.

⁴ Charles Johnson, *A General History of the Robberies & Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates*, (London: Conway Maritime, 2002) Introduction.

⁵ Charles Ellms, *The Pirates Own Book: Authentic Narratives of the Most Celebrated Sea Robbers*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1993) Introduction.

⁶ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, (London: A. & C. Black, 1938); A.L. Rowse, *The Expansion of Elizabethan England*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1955) 165.

⁷ Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger: The Story of the Great Age of Piracy*, (New York: Norton, 1953).

variety of reasons including political and religious zeal.⁸ Mark Hanna and Peter Linebaugh in particular make a point of exploring the religious side of piracy, illustrating a side of the phenomenon many people had ignored until more recent years.⁹

This study hopes to draw from these historians, both past and present to create a fuller idea of the parallels that existed between what was traditionally accepted as ethical and what was vilified, and through this explain the importance of piracy as a building block of the modern world and how popular views of the phenomenon do not necessarily match the reality of the situation. While religion helped shape piracy to a degree in the forms of such prominent figures as Drake and Raleigh, piracy greatly shaped the religious atmosphere of Europe during this era as well. This paper explores the way in which piracy and religion navigated politics and social relationships in a quickly changing world, and how each used and was used by the other and by society as a whole.

Piracy and religion both allowed nations to continue to feud and vie for control over the global networks being formed following the discovery of the New World while maintaining outwardly peaceful relations. By employing privateers and sending out missionaries, countries could build borders and empires while avoiding outright war.

The sea had become a vast playing field for all this conflict and each side was prepared to fight dirty. By employing pirates, or privateers, the monarch could claim a certain amount of distance and blamelessness from the actions of these crews and therefore did not offer legitimate cause for outright war, something each nation wanted to avoid so they could focus their attention more thoroughly on expanding in the New World.

The ambiguous nature of the terms pirate and privateer serve to illustrate the nature of the conflict and the use of pirating within the political sphere. Monarchs and the pirates themselves were able to use this ambiguity to their advantage and create a space between licit and illicit actions that allowed each to further their respective agendas. Depending on who was labeling and when, a pirate could be hero or villain, oftentimes both. The ambiguous nature of piracy mirrors the religious turmoil that shadowed the globe during this period as well. The church, in its attempts to claim both souls and land worked on the same line between acceptable and unacceptable by both ecclesiastical and secular standards.

⁸ Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004) 33; Stephen Coote, *Drake: The Life and Legend of an Elizabethan Hero*, (London: Simon & Schuster, 2003).

⁹ Mark Hanna, *Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire, 1570 to 1740*, (UNC Press, 2015); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

The ability of both the church and piracy to adapt to their situation allowed each to navigate this in-between space. Monarchs were able to use this to their advantage as well, as it gave them the option of using pirates and religious differences as scapegoats if they began to see either as an obstacle to their own goals.

By the same token, Catholicism and Protestantism were feuding religions at the time, each perceiving the other as sacrilegious and each preaching the need to eradicate the other. The will of God was a strong factor in many decisions being made at the time. The monarchies all made decisions based on their notion of God's divine will and the idea that their nation was chosen to rule over the others through him. Philip II does this on many occasions, working sometimes directly on the decrees of the Papacy, at other times based solely on his personal religious beliefs. But, much like the fine line between piracy and privateers, these different faiths were perceived in different lights depending on the situation, region, and period. At times, Catholic nations such as France and Spain would turn on each other and ally themselves with a Protestant nation because of the political situation occurring, making one form of Catholicism more heretical than Protestantism, at least for the duration of the conflict.¹⁰ At other times, one Protestant sect would find themselves much more ready to side with Catholics rather than a different Protestant faith. And all of this would again change depending on who was at war with whom, demonstrating how religion was used as a tool much the same way as the pirates were.

Defining "Pirate"

The term "pirate" not only has certain connotations and stigmas attached to it, but is defined differently depending on the period, occupation, and beliefs of the person doing the defining. More modern historians differentiate between these terms using cultural origins to determine what title should be used, while older works tended to use "pirate" more as a blanket term to describe any illicit behavior on the high seas.¹¹ Religion and politics both created and used specific terms to define specific forms of piracy, namely the difference between legal and illegal, such as pirates versus privateers or corsairs. The concept of legality and morality within the world of piracy was a controversial one; each nation had a

¹⁰David Bitton and Ward A. Mortensen, "War or Peace: A French Pamphlet Polemic, 1604-1606," in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen* (Kirksville, MO, U.S.A.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994).

¹¹ Charles Ellms, *The Pirates Own Book*; Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

different definition and set of laws that decided what was and was not illegal on the high seas. Both the legal and illegal actions of pirates aided in the prevention of violence as well as facilitating it by working around the differences in law from nation to nation. By doing so, pirates and privateers were able to stretch the boundaries of law, especially in the New World where laws had yet to be well established and regulated.

The differences between terms like privateer, pirate, and corsair and their specific classifications were defined by nation and circumstance, like the ideas of legality and illegality, and were therefore fluid, changing depending on where a pirate was and the environment he found himself in. He could be a barbaric pirate in one port during a certain year and then be praised as a patriotic privateer the next day at a port halfway across the world. Patrick Pringle discusses this dilemma, pointing out the many crimes that could make one a pirate or not, depending on who is considering whom.¹² His definition, along with many more modern historians, takes the account of the nation of the pirate into consideration before other interpretations when assigning the term. According to the collections of Charles Ellms, “by the universal law of nations, robbery or forcible depredation upon the “high seas,” *animo furandi*, is piracy”.¹³ His definition focuses on a universal ideal of what a pirate should be seen as, not taking into account the individual sentiments of the nations backing these crews. By another account, that of Charles Johnson, a group of English sailors “turn’d Pyrates, robbing not the *Spaniards* only, but their own Countrymen,” meaning in other words that the criteria needed to be considered a pirate was the robbing of one’s own nation, while the robbing of a rival was an acceptable scenario, especially during times of political competition and religious tension.¹⁴ Piracy was an acceptable solution to organizing the chaos of a world trying to navigate a newly discovered continent and religion at the same time, when both of these held heavy political implications for all countries involved. It allowed for conflict while avoiding outright war.

When war did break out though, it created a slew of privateers who had not previously been pirates, and in doing so created a new generation of pirates once war ended. So both war and peace were able to create situations where privateers were used to aid their nation. However, once war ended, privateers could easily be labeled pirates instead. As Johnson claims, “Privateers in Time of War are a Nursery for Pyrates against a Peace”.¹⁵ Once this became the case, the need for them quickly diminished, since they had much less reason to pillage for any specific nation. During times of peace, the state wanted to be as separate from

¹² Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*.

¹³ Charles Ellms, *The Pirates Own Book*, Introduction.

¹⁴ Charles Johnson, *A General History*, Introduction.

¹⁵ Charles Johnson, *A General History*, Introduction.

pirates as they could, in order to prevent being accused of harboring criminals by other countries. They therefore would much more strictly enforce laws against piracy.¹⁶ During the Golden Age, this was much less of an issue since these countries were never really at peace and instead existed in a cold war period until actual wars sporadically broke out. The use of pirates at times of peace were therefore justified.

As for the religious designation of these terms, Catholic states had a harder time of approving piratical action, state sanctioned or otherwise, as it included multiple strong Catholic nations rather than the Protestant nations whose monarch was often also the head of the church, as was the case in England. The Catholic Church had to answer to French and Spanish actions and appear to exist above political differences between Catholic nations even when these nations were feuding.¹⁷ Due to the strong connection between Protestant churches and their state, Protestantism offered a way to color piracy in a religious way - as privateers fighting for the church and nation - that Catholicism was not able to do so easily. Drake is the perfect example of this: he was a hero of both Protestantism and the crown, famous for his capture of Catholic Spain's ships. His actions towards Spain sent a religious message that Protestantism was the true faith and also increased the wealth of England via plunder. Spain, on the other hand, had to deal with the Catholic papacy and its' outlook on piracy. Since the Catholic Church was not directly linked to any one nation alone, pirates and privateers could not have the same double relationship with church and state that protestant countries could.

There is no simple definition for these terms, and on the most basic level they were all committing the same crimes. For the sake of consistency, pirate will be considered those who show no affiliation with any crown or governing state, while those who do align themselves with a governing power will be considered privateers, a simple definition of a highly complex situation. As Pringle states "a great deal of over-simplification" is needed to define these terms so loosely.¹⁸ However, it serves the purposes of illustrating what a pirate connected with, if anything, including any religious orientation associated with their nation. The idea of confessional conflict, or conflict in the pursuit of spreading and enforcing religion, as a driving force behind many privateers, specifically English, seems to factor heavily in much of the violence and pillaging they participated in, whether it was driven by their own ideals or by those of the crown.¹⁹

¹⁶ Charles Johnson, *A General History*.

¹⁷ Bartolomé De Las Casas, and Nigel Griffin, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, (London, England: Penguin Books, 2004).

¹⁸ Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 25.

¹⁹ Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations: Atlantic Pirates in the Golden Age*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004); Stephen Coote, *Drake: The Life and Legend of an Elizabethan Hero*.

More often than not, a pirate and crew were considered in terms of hero and villain depending on the country doing the considering. Most pirates of note during this era were in some way employed or supported by the crown of a nation. Many had sanction to impede the enemy of their employer in any way necessary and were rewarded with the bounty, or at least a cut, from the captured vessel. Because of this it is difficult to determine the difference, at least cleanly, between pirate and privateer. Famous privateers such as Drake and Raleigh, were regarded as heroes of the British crown and champions of the Protestant faith, but were viewed as ruthless pirates by the Spanish and French, both of whom they massacred on many occasions.

The ambiguous nature of the terms pirate and privateer serve to illustrate the nature of the conflict and the use of pirating within the political sphere. Monarchs and the pirates themselves were able to use this ambiguity to their advantage and create a space between licit and illicit actions that allowed each to further their respective agendas. Depending on who was labeling and when, a pirate could be hero or villain, oftentimes both. The ambiguous nature of piracy mirrors the religious turmoil that shadowed the globe during this period as well. The church, in its attempts to claim both souls and land worked on the same line between acceptable and unacceptable by both ecclesiastical and secular standards.²⁰ The ability of both the church and piracy to adapt to their situation allowed each to work within this in-between space. Monarchs were able to use this to their advantage as well, which could in turn harm the pirate if the ruler needed a scapegoat or began to see the pirate as an obstacle to their own goals.

New World Politics

There was a good deal of overlap between the purpose of both piracy and religion in how each were used as a way to navigate and create order within the new political situations that the discovery of a new half of the world had created. They offered two options for how to do so; with great force and violence, or by influencing beliefs and asserting control over peoples' souls.

The discovery of the Americas introduced an entire side of the world yet unclaimed by European powers and offered unknowable fortune and potential power for many nations. Besides riches, it offered the potential control over indigenous people, namely through control over their souls via the church.

The sea had become a vast playing field for this conflict and each side was prepared to fight dirty. By employing pirates, or privateers, a monarch could claim a certain amount of distance and blamelessness from the actions of these crews and therefore not offer legitimate cause for outright war, something each

²⁰ De las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.

nation wanted to avoid so they could focus their attention more fully on expanding in the New World.²¹

The leading nations in Europe during the tumultuous and quickly changing period following the discovery of the New World were all fighting for control of land, sea, and faith with little regard for how they were to accomplish this task, only that it be accomplished. England, Spain, and France as three of the leading nations in Europe were competing fiercely for control over what at the time was the world. Control over the sea meant control over trade, the world economy, and the New World. With so much power at stake, each nation was prepared to use whatever tools they had, including pirates, privateers, and corsairs who could destroy enemy ships, and take whatever spoils were on board. They would give part back to the nation they sailed under, keep the rest for themselves, and strike a heavy blow to the enemy. Ships became the primary pieces with which this world power game was played. Pirates and privateers were in many cases “necessary instruments [...], and agents of main importance in that Hydrarchy wherein they live,” as Richard Braithwaite, a contemporary of the characters of this period, explains, “for the walls of the State could not subsist without them; but least useful they are to themselves, and most needful for others supportance”.²²

Piracy and privateering fared far better before outright war was declared, because this was when monarchs could use them to attack without directly taking the blame, keeping relations somewhat separated still, and giving pirates more autonomy. Once war was declared, pirates had to not only take sides but follow the orders of the crown. Their actions were no longer ignored to the degree they were prior to war; the crown could no longer simply look the other way. Instead, war meant that their actions had direct political connotations and were judged accordingly by both their own country and those abroad. Both the pirates and the nations employing them therefore wanted the competition for the New World to remain relatively civil in order to avoid outright war.

England as an up and coming power was quickly gaining momentum, propelled forward by the defeat of Spain’s armada and their prospects in the New World. The defeat of its armada in 1588 was as sore point for the Spanish Empire, and England’s growing maritime strength and use of privateers only served to reinforce the defeat. This also marked the beginning of Spain’s decline,

²¹ Mia J. Rodríguez-Salgado, *Armada: 1588-1988 Official Catalogue*, (London: Penguin Books, 1988) 100.

²² Richard Braithwaite, “Whimzies” (London, 1631), quoted in Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000) 143.

prompting the empire to fight to retain control even as the new world power of England continued to grow.²³

France, while on the rise for some time, never reached the same heights as Spain or England before beginning to decline, laden with internal religious struggles that affected their ability to fund exploration to the same extent as the other two.²⁴ However, it still fought to maintain the control it had, even as England and Spain gained more and more of a foothold in world affairs, slowly pushing France out of the way. The religious turmoil happening within its own borders at the time and its conflict at home, such as the Italian Wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, coupled and overlapped with its internal Wars of Religion, only increased its rate at which it fell behind in the race for international power. Even so, the New World saw pirates in the form of corsairs wreak havoc on many Spanish and a few English colonial efforts following the discovery.

As Peter Linebaugh points out, this was a time of not only rising imperialism, but great capitalist development as well.²⁵ European nations were competing for land, wealth, and souls as a new world order began to take shape, one where power depended far more heavily on the new rather than on the past traditions and social orders that had governed Europe in previous years. New wealth, New World, new empires were all on the rise during this era, and all of these things were yet unclaimed.

In 1494, Pope Alexander VI declared the Treaty of Tordesillas, which divided the lands in the New World amongst the prominent European colonial powers of the period. The English, Spanish, and French among others were given specific areas with clear borders within the Americas and Caribbean and were not to intervene within the neighboring countries' holdings. Instead, the ships coming and going from port to port offered a way for nations to circumvent this papal decree and raid within the unclaimed waters of the Atlantic. Pirates were used as ways to disrupt trade in rival nations as well as ways to capture wealth for the nation doing the plundering.

Alexandre Exquemelin, a buccaneer who sailed under Sir Henry Morgan, details the many natural riches of the New World, from exotic plants and animals to the strategic coastline, and the extent to which pirates and European nations alike vied for these resources.²⁶ While Exquemelin was writing over a century

²³ Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*.

²⁴ Richard Fiset and Gilles Samson, "Charlesbourg-Royal and France-Roy (1541–43): France's first colonization attempt in the Americas" *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 43, no. 1 (June 2009): 68.

²⁵ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 15.

²⁶ A.O. Exquemelin, Basil Ringrose, Montauban, Thomas Newborough, John Nicholson, Benjamin Tooke, and Raveneau De Lussan, "The History of the Bucaniers of America; from Their First Original down to This Time ; Written in Several Languages ; and Now Collected into One Volume: Containing I. The Exploits and Adventures of Le Grand, Lolonois, Roche Brasiliano, Bat

after the initial discovery of the New World, his emphasis on the riches to be found there speak to the continued importance the Americas held for European nations throughout the Golden Age. The possibilities for trade were great and by controlling these rich areas, a nation effectively created a monopoly over certain goods. The outcome of trade was one of the primary benefits and consequences of piracy. Pirates ensured the trade of some nations by devastating the trade, and therefore economy, of others. French Huguenot corsairs were heavily attacking Spanish ships for control of New World trading early on, even before England began to do so. Later, Elizabeth's seadogs, Drake and Raleigh among others, diminished the Spanish monopoly over the ocean trade routes due to the brute force and frequency of their attacks on rival merchant ships. Drake worked tirelessly trying to break Spain's hold over Atlantic trade and as England continued to gain power and Spain began to lose it as the period wore on, he was able to help do so.²⁷ All in all, the Golden Age saw the captured of around 2,400 merchant vessels across the board while following common trade routes through the Atlantic.²⁸

At the same time, Spain was expanding in search of gold, god, and glory, with conversion as a primary factor in their expansion efforts. The forced conversion of many natives posed a problem to the British and French in two ways. First off, it created an indigenous population loyal to the church and Spain, even if only due to fear. And secondly, it threatened the conversion efforts of the Protestant explorers. The Reformation had acted as a catalyst for exploration.²⁹ Dispersal of church land and wealth allowed funding for voyages and gave the nation new purpose in expanding and increasing their power. It also gave religiously persecuted people a place to go which in turn gave the state willing volunteers to settle the New World and give them ownership of the land there.

Exquemelin details the exploits of the French Buccaneers and the violence they directed at Spanish merchant vessels. He describes French pirate Captain Pierre Le Grand massacred a Spanish merchant vessel in the New World, threw off the surviving Spaniards, and proceeded to sail back to his own country with spoils on board.³⁰ He also looks at the notorious Lolonois and the incredible

the Portuguese, Sir Henry Morgan, &c." (London: Printed for Tho. Newborough at the Golden Ball in St. Paul's Church-Yard, John Nicholson at the King's Arms in Little Britain, and Benj. Tooke at the Middle Temple Gate, Fleetstreet, 1699) 1-47.

²⁷ A.L. Rowse, *The Expansion of Elizabethan England*, 165.

²⁸ Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, 33.

²⁹ A.L. Rowse, *The Expansion of Elizabethan England*, 160.

³⁰ A.O. Exquemelin, Basil Ringrose, Montauban, Thomas Newborough, John Nicholson, Benjamin Tooke, and Raveneau De Lussan, "The History of the Bucaniers of America; from Their First Original down to This Time ; Written in Several Languages ; and Now Collected into One

violent acts he committed against the Spanish during this time. Exquemelin's accounts demonstrate the way in which France used, or at least permitted their pirates to massacre well-established Spanish ports in order to take them over and retain a portion of the New World riches for themselves.

Elizabeth I's sea dogs did the same, raiding forts and attacking enemy ships in the name of the queen without risking punishment from the crown. Drake and Raleigh both plundered many enemy ships and directly attacked colonies in the New World.

The monarchs of sixteenth century Europe had turned the sea into an immense battleground. The colonization of the New World and all its riches gave England, France, and Spain even more reason for conflict. The race for God, gold, and glory created new political competition between the powers of Europe even as the Reformation rocked the proverbial boat to an even greater degree by bringing rival nations' faith into question.

Challenges in the Wake of Reformation

The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 and created a permanent rift in Christendom that began religious conflicts that would last decades, sometimes centuries, within and between European nations and generated a new way of fighting for international domination. These nations had to compete not only in the New World for control, but at home where the Reformation was stirring the pot by refuting the authority of the Papacy, and therefore delegitimizing the power of strongly Catholic nations like Spain and France. Just after the discovery of the New World and the new conflicts it offered, the Reformation deepened the divisions between European nations and reinforced the tension that the Americas had already created. However, it also offered a new way of confronting the conflict in much the same way piracy did. Religious conflict provided nations a moral and spiritual reason to feud. The century following the Reformation saw the conflicts began with the New World take on an ideological edge that allowed for the use of violent reformation – piracy being one example - while retaining the image of Godliness in the eyes of the world. By doing so, it made the condemnation of the feuding nations' action much more difficult.

European nations used both religion and piracy as extra political entities throughout the period to assert authority, or attempt to, over other countries in a way that made it difficult to directly attach blame. Piracy offered impunity from rival nations, religion offered justification against the accusations of both other countries as well as a nation's own citizens. Catholic France and Spain and Protestant England were three of the most powerful nations in Europe at the time,

Volume: Containing I. The Exploits and Adventures of Le Grand, Lolonois, Roche Brasiliano, Bat the Portuguese, Sir Henry Morgan, &c.,” 50.

and each had multiple grievances against the others, perhaps the biggest being that each simply wanted control over the others and found the use of piracy an efficient way to do so while avoiding outright war. The justification was often a religious one, with pirates then being presented, especially in the quickly growing British Empire, as national and religious heroes doing both the nation's and God's work across the sea.

In the years leading up to the Reformation, a Catholic Europe was already feuding in the series of conflicts that made up the Italian Wars, which lasted from the mid fifteenth century until the mid sixteenth century. France's king Francis I was at odds with Philip II's predecessor, Charles V, concerning ownership of Italian territory and the Pope's choice of Charles as Holy Roman Emperor. With Spanish control therefore stretching over the Holy Roman Empire along with Spain itself, France was virtually surrounded by Spanish territory, which greatly inhibited France's ability to expand its own territory. With already existing intervals of war and shaky peace having lasted decades, France and Spain had a precarious relationship at best. And with the Hundred Years' War still fresh in their minds, ending between France and Britain in the late fifteenth century, relations were still very much on edge between France and England as well, with both nations also competing for control abroad and at home.

The Reformation was not only a religious phenomenon, but also a political one. The Reformation took on a very political edge when it acted as a means to alter, solidify, or completely overthrow one political body in favor of another, acting both as cause and solution to politically fragmented areas of Europe.³¹ It gave rulers a reason to condemn the Papacy and take back power and wealth from the church, strengthening their own position. It also gave those nations still faithful to the Catholic Church a sense of moral superiority and a cause to conquer those nations that had left the church. The rise of Protestantism had ushered in a serious Catholic backlash, or counter-Reformation, against the new religion and persecution was common in Catholic nations such as Spain³² and France³³ who sought to reestablish church control over the population. Protestantism diminished the reach of the Catholic Church's control by taking away entire countries of adherents in some places, like England. With protestant nations no longer recognizing the authority of the Pope, Catholic sovereigns' power was delegitimized on some level. With persecution violence already widespread for

³¹ Mia J. Rodríguez-Salgado, *Armada: 1588-1988 Official Catalogue*, 49.

³² Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II*.

³³ Nancy Lyman Roelker, "The Two Faces of Rome: The Fate of Protestantism in France" in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen* (Kirksville, MO, U.S.A.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994).

this reason, it was a relatively simple move to use violence to establish control in other areas of society, such as the use of violent conversion practices in the New World in order to create and maintain a foothold and exercise control over the native populations.³⁴

The Protestants no longer recognized the authority of the Papacy, and the agreements that had given the Old World and New World alike some sense of order and political tolerance were overturned. The Reformation disrupted shaky agreements like the Treaty of Tordesillas that had until this point existed between Catholic nations. Even powerful Papal decrees like the Treaty of Tordesillas no longer held the sway they had prior to the Reformation and Protestant nations began to overrun Catholic lands in earnest, especially in the New World, usually through the use of privateers. Wars broke out, clearly with political ends, but claiming to be done “in the name of God”. Many monarchs during the Golden Age saw it as their God given duty to defend and spread their faith and to stomp out heretical would-be usurpers.

In the late sixteenth century, Philip II of Spain and Elizabeth I of England, followed later by James I, were some of the more prominent monarch who associated themselves with religion, which in turn granted them religious authority in the eyes of their subjects. They sanctioned many of the religiously charged conflicts following the Reformation in an attempt to assert their faith and bring an end to the others. Philip, a champion of the Counter-Reformation, worked endlessly during his reign to bring Catholicism to all of Europe, and Elizabeth, on the defense, worked to prevent him from succeeding in spreading Catholicism any further. England, since it did not recognize the authority of the Pope, disputed his decrees, and by extension, the actions of Spain in their expansion efforts in the New World.³⁵

Once Philip II took the throne, his military intervened in France on the grounds of acting as the true Catholic monarch of Europe furthered the tension between the two Catholic nations, both of who saw themselves as the true Catholic power in Europe. The papacy's appointment of Philip as Holy Roman Emperor was a slap in the face to the French nation. Pierre Droit de Gaillard defended his nation's religious piety and worth in the chapter of his text entitled “Of the Piety and Religion of the Kings of France, from Which Stems Their Title ‘Most Christian’,” arguing how France and her kings were the “Most Christian” and listing their accomplishments in defending and spreading the faith.³⁶ France

³⁴ De Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.

³⁵ Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*.

³⁶ Pierre Droit De. Gaillard, Frédéric Morel, and Marc-Antoine Muret, *Methode Qu'on Doit Tenir En La Lecture De L'histoire, Vray Miroir & Exemple De Nostre Vie: Où Les Principaux Pointes Des Sciences Morales & Politiques Rapportez À La Loy De Dieu, & Accommodez Aux*

and her people, like Spain and England, saw themselves as "a peculiar petiole chosen by the Lord to carry out the orders of heaven" and "distinguished by marks of special honor and grace".³⁷

Francis I wanted the backing Spain had; France wanted the recognition of the papacy to extend the borders and rule to give French expansionism religious legitimization such as Spain, and England in their own way, had. France saw itself as the epitome of the Catholic faith and the French believed themselves to have been slighted by the appointment of the Spanish king as Holy Roman Emperor when Spain was engaged in such atrocities across the Atlantic.³⁸ Envious and bitter, French pirates began attacking and looting Spanish ships, especially in the New World.³⁹

While Spain saw France as a nation caught in heresy in need of intervention to bring it back to God, France saw Spain as a nation led by "the devil's agent in Europe".⁴⁰ France viewed Spain's actions as expansionist, not religious. They saw a nation that had "looked on England with the eyes of a butcher in order to have complete control of the seas and by this means manipulate trade in Europe".⁴¹

France was also in religious conflict with England concerning Scotland's religious turmoil. Scotland was still caught in between Catholic and Protestant in the wake of the Reformation, with Francis II's wife Mary Stuart supporting Catholicism, and Elizabeth supporting the Protestants. All three were up in arms about what religion the world should be and who should be presiding over it. Proof like the accounts of De Las Casas could be used to condemn an opposing nation's faith, resulting in instances where Catholics would accuse other Catholics and Protestants would denounce Protestants if doing so aided their own religious and political aims.

In England the Black Legend, or rather the extreme prejudice against Spain during this period, was heightened by the competition between England and

Mœurs De Temps, Sont Contenus, & Illustrez Des plus Beaux Exemples Tirez Des Histoires, Tant Sacrees Que Prophanes (A Paris: Chez Regnaud Chaudiere ..., 1604).

³⁷ Joseph Reese Strayer, "France: the Holy Land, the Chosen People, and the Most Christian King" in *Action and Conviction in Early Modern Europe; Essays in Honor of E.H. Harbison*, quoted in *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen* (Kirksville, MO, U.S.A.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994) 102.

³⁸ De Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.

³⁹ *Jaques de Sorres Sacks Havana*, Unknown artist.

⁴⁰ David Bitton and Ward A. Mortensen, "War or Peace: A French Pamphlet Polemic, 1604-1606," in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen*, 129.

⁴¹ Pierre L'ostal De Roquebonne, "Le Soldat François," (S.l., 1604).

Spain in the New World, and was fueled further by Spain's actions overseas.⁴² Specifically, the Spanish conquests in the Americas and how the Spanish dealt with the situation was viewed by other European nations as barbaric, violent, and cruel. Bartolomé de las Casas, a friar and historian present in the Americas at the time of the Spanish conquest, wrote extensively in his work *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias* about the crimes and cruelties being practiced by Spanish men towards the indigenous populations.⁴³ He had gone to the New World to spread the word of God, and saw the atrocities the Spanish conquistadors were committing not only as anti-religious, but as a disgrace to the nation of Spain.

Spaniards back home were shocked by the reports and many other European nations were outraged. These same nations were of course practicing similar methods of cruelty towards the native populations in other colonized areas, such as England in North America, however not in such large amounts nor were their religious officials condemning their actions. These reports greatly added to the already substantial prejudice of the Black Legend and gave other nations cause for deeper resentment and action. England in particular would use this as justification to plunder and destroy Spanish ships, giving privateers and pirates a moral, religious excuse for their actions. Not only were they reprimanding the Spanish for their atrocities, but were liberating them of the gold and treasures they had themselves taken from the indigenous peoples of the Americas.

In the eyes of many, the pillaging of Spanish vessels was a crime fully justified by the Spanish crimes committed in the New World. For England, it was vital to slow Spanish expansionism in order to spread the Protestant faith to the colonial world. Drake himself converted many Africans during his campaigns in that region of the world, amongst others.⁴⁴ Elizabeth saw herself as “born by God to consider and, above all things, do those which appertain unto His glory”.⁴⁵ She viewed the fight against Spain as a “just defense from wrongs, hate, and bloody desire of conquest” that had been ordained by God.⁴⁶ England's anti-Catholic sentiments were only furthered by such radical figures as the royal advisor to the

⁴² William S. Maltby, *The Black Legend in England: The Development of Anti-Spanish Sentiment, 1558-1660*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1971).

⁴³ De Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*.

⁴⁴ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 134.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth, Leah S. Marcus, Janel M. Mueller, and Mary Beth. Rose, *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 59.

⁴⁶ Elizabeth, Leah S. Marcus, Janel M. Mueller, and Mary Beth. Rose, *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, 426.

queen, William Cecil.⁴⁷ It was “‘under God’ [that] Elizabeth and William Cecil took the helm” during this period of change and the unknown, and it was this sentiment and successful “seamanship [that] carried the ship of State through that preliminary foul weather” at the beginning of expansion and ever-shifting political relations.⁴⁸

Spain likewise saw English Protestantism as a heretical sect that needed to be quelled before it was allowed to spread any further, especially to the New World. Priests like De Las Casas were working hard at missions in the Americas to bring Catholicism to the indigenous peoples before English Protestants could intervene. Spain arrested English merchants during Inquisition years, keeping them from spreading English goods and ideals to the New World.⁴⁹ Philip II was adamant about the need to reestablish Papal control in England, and was backed by the Catholic Church as they too sought to bring Britain back under the church’s influence.

The effects of the Reformation on the religious scene of Europe lasted centuries and left England, France, and Spain in ideological conflict that was backed by pirate activity well into the seventeenth century. England and Spain were at odds with the Anglo-Spanish War ranging from the late sixteenth century to early seventeenth century, Spain bringing their “Catholic crusade” into Scotland and Ireland and inciting Catholic rebellion in the hopes of slowing the growing Protestant threat coming out of England, and England greatly inhibiting Spanish expansion in the New World.⁵⁰ The defeat of the Spanish armada, a previously unbeatable force, by England’s new and barely tested navy only reinforced the tension.⁵¹ Philip began immediately to rebuild and attempt to secure a Spanish victory over England the next time they met on the sea. France and Spain were at war for decades in the Franco-Spanish War; and despite them both being devoutly Catholic nations, the fighting was not separated from religious tension created during the years following the Reformation.

⁴⁷ Malcolm R. Thorp, “William Cecil and the Antichrist: A Study in Anti-Catholic Ideology,” in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen*, 289.

⁴⁸ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 11.

⁴⁹ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 6.

⁵⁰ Malcolm R. Thorp, “William Cecil and the Antichrist: A Study in Anti-Catholic Ideology,” in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen* (Kirksville, MO, U.S.A.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994) 292.

⁵¹ Kristin Richardson, “After the Armada: The Cuatro Villas de la Costa and Philip’s Brittany Campaign,” in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen* (Kirksville, MO, U.S.A.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994) 161.

Religious differences gave nations the spiritual edge necessary to employ pirates in a virtuous manner during the conflicts following 1517. Rather than just claiming that they were blameless and not connected to what their pirates were doing, nations could claim them as heroes doing God's work. In other words, religious divides gave nations the option of using immoral practices to preach morality. Catholicism and Protestantism were feuding religions, each perceiving the other as heretical. The monarchies made decisions with their notion of God's divine will in mind and the idea that their nation was chosen to rule over the others through him. Philip II does this on many occasions, working sometimes directly on the decrees of the Papacy, at other times based solely on his personal religious beliefs.

Much like the fine line between piracy and privateers, these different faiths were perceived in different lights depending on the situation, region, and period. At times, Catholic nations such as France and Spain, would turn on each other and ally themselves with a Protestant nation because of the political situation, making one form of Catholicism more heretical than Protestantism, at least for the duration of the conflict.⁵² At other times, one Protestant sect would be much more ready to side with Catholics rather than a different Protestant faith. And all of this would again change depending on who was at war with whom, demonstrating how religion was, much the same way as piracy, a flexible tool in the struggle for international control. While religion helped shape piracy during the Golden Age of piracy, in the forms of such prominent figures as Drake and Raleigh, piracy greatly shaped the religious atmosphere of Europe during this era as well by giving it a weapon to forcibly stamp out competing faiths.

Specific accounts of individual pirates

Piracy and religion fed off of each other all through the Golden Age. Religion was used as a way to justify practical acts, and piracy was used both as a tool to further a faith as well as proof of a religion's corrupt nature in order that one nation or faith could accuse and attack another. The idea of lived religion versus doctrine further shows the ambiguity of terminology during the period and the way it could be manipulated to the benefit of one party or the other. In other words, the way the common person practiced their religion on a day-to-day basis could differ greatly from the actual creed of their church, and this gave people some room to bend the official rules. Pirates clearly did just that, especially

⁵²David Bitton and Ward A. Mortensen, "War or Peace: A French Pamphlet Polemic, 1604-1606," in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen* (Kirksville, MO, U.S.A.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994).

privateers who were breaking several very obvious rules mentioned in Christian doctrine and doing so in the name of God.

Religion was an ever-present force that permeated all aspects of European life during this period, including piracy. The attitude of pirates towards religion often differed from those on the shore. Many saw it as a reason to adopt piracy, whether that was in order to condemn it outright by acting in the most non-Christian way possible, or as a way to practice religious zeal and further the faith through force, as was the case with Drake and Raleigh. Pirates recognized the power religion had and used it in their own way. The church did the same, using pirates as both a type of violent preachers and as condemnable examples of sinners demonstrating why religion was necessary to save the soul; both once again navigating the spaces between the legal and illegal, existing outside of the lawful norm as well as relying on it to function successfully.

Pirates were not necessarily good Christians; in fact in most cases they were very far from it, however that did not mean they couldn't be. And it certainly did not mean they were not Christian at all, albeit rather horrible Christians. While some were clearly acting against Christian values, the majority still fully believed in the faith and chose to act against it either because they saw God as having turned his back on them and therefore did the same to God, or they claimed to be working with the devil as a way to inspire fear and awe.

Many pirates and privateers, however, were common sailors out of work and looking for a way to make an income. Colonization of the New World was an answer to hard economic times and mass unemployment.⁵³ Johnson details this dilemma in one passage of his work, stating "I need not bring any Proofs of what I advance, viz. that there are Multitudes of Seamen at this Day unemploy'd; it is but too evident by their straggling, and begging all over the Kingdom. Nor is it so much their Inclination to Idleness, as their own hard Fate, in being cast off after their Work is done, to starve or steal."⁵⁴ Marcus Rediker details the appeal of piracy to many sailors and showed that "a ship did not have to be run in the brutal and oppressive ways of the merchant service and the Royal Navy" to be effective.⁵⁵ In fact, the brutality was often much worse on naval and merchant ships than it was aboard pirate ships, with punishments like the loss of a hand, flogging with shell-tipped ropes, and spikes forced in the mouth all perfectly legal on naval ships.⁵⁶ That being said, this means that a vast number of pirates were average people just as much caught up in the political and religious atmosphere as anyone else during this era. Piracy, while for many was an escape from all this, for others it was an answer to it. For the pirates and privateers, patriotism and

⁵³ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 4.

⁵⁴ Charles Johnson, *A General History*.

⁵⁵ Marcus Rediker, *Villains of All Nations*, 17.

⁵⁶ Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 19.

religious beliefs drove many men to pursue a life of piracy for the protection of their nation's ideals. English pirates, before privateers, were sanctioned unofficially by the state and funded by lords and other wealthy patrons to combat Spanish Catholic imperialism. Likewise, France had many privateers, or corsairs as they were dubbed in France, bent on contesting not only English Protestantism, but Spanish Imperialism as well.⁵⁷ Religion was a controversial topic at the forefront of everyone's mind following the Reformation, not just within the elite or governing powers, but for the common people who were most affected, via persecution and war, by these religious tensions.

Therefore, it seems presumptuous to assume that pirate was an antonym for religious as some historians, both then and now, seem to think. A majority of sailors caught up in piracy and privateering were common sailors looking for a way to support themselves and their families. Or else they were defending their country and faith from enemy forces during a time when the fight could be easily brought to the shores of European nations via the naval forces these nations commanded during this time.

It is difficult to say whether or not the codes adhered to aboard pirate ships were directly connected to religious doctrine, but they tend to share many similar points. Pirates rarely killed prisoners, partially because it meant more recruits, but also because many saw themselves as plunderers, not necessarily murderers. And the "barbaric" punishments they administered to traitors and enemies were the same as those being practiced lawfully on shore.⁵⁸ Privateers often took great offence to being labeled as vicious and unlawful pirates, and many, such as Drake, vehemently protested any time they were called pirate due to the criminal connotation associated with it. Pringle discusses this vilification as being a result of "judging men of a past age by the moral fashions of the present".⁵⁹ Others recognized the crimes they committed as sinful and, especially before being executed, repented and called for forgiveness.⁶⁰ This may have been one common way pirates reconciled their actions with their faith, by waiting until the last minute to do so. Others saw themselves as completely innocent at the time of their execution, having acted only on the orders of God and country. Ellms describes the trials of several Spanish pirates who proclaimed before being executed "I die innocent, but I die like a noble Spaniard".⁶¹

⁵⁷ David Bitton and Ward A. Mortensen, "War or Peace: A French Pamphlet Polemic, 1604-1606," in Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur Joseph. Slavin, *Politics, Religion & Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of DeLamar Jensen*, 129.

⁵⁸ Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 35.

⁵⁹ Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 15.

⁶⁰ Charles Ellms, *The Pirates Own Book*.

⁶¹ Charles Ellms, *The Pirates Own Book*, History of the Adventures, Capture and Execution of the Spanish Pirates.

For many pirates and privateers, there was not a need for reconciliation between their actions and their religious faith because they did not see them as being separate. The faith of famous privateers shows the overlap in ideals between piracy and religion perhaps more than anything else. Especially for those who considered themselves privateers, they saw the acts they were committing as not only religiously acceptable, but necessary and heroic for the pursuit of religious truth. Drake saw the need for conflict against the Catholic faith as obligatory in order to follow God's command.⁶²

Francis Drake is perhaps the best example, and certainly most famous example, of a religious privateer. Drake, Queen Elizabeth's most famous (or infamous) seadog, was regarded as a hero amongst the English, adored and idolized by the common man and royal alike. At the same time, he was seen as a notorious "demon" to the Spanish, a murdering pirate devoid of mercy or reason.⁶³ He demonstrates how someone could be both hero and villain at the same time. Despite the Spanish accusations that called him demon and pirate, Drake "grew up an ardent Protestant" and "his religion was strong in him" all his life.⁶⁴ He fought, in his mind, for God and country, and notably became furious anytime anyone referred to him as a pirate. Not only did he believe what he was doing was legal and justified, but morally upright. His actions and convictions demonstrate the confessional conflict that appeared in many of the disputes between countries during the Golden Age. His religious zeal bordered on radical and he worked tirelessly to break Spain's hold over the New World and over control of the Atlantic. He saw his attacks upon the Spanish as a God given duty to stamp out the corrupt institution that was the Catholic Church. He believed that England was not necessarily doing enough to bring about the end of the Catholic problem and took it upon himself to fight it. Despite the claims other nations, and even some of his own countrymen, leveled against him, Drake viewed himself as a herald of the Protestant faith and despite the violence he used as "morally not a pirate".⁶⁵ After his famous mandatory Morning Prayer aboard his ship, the crew would get busy ransacking and killing Spanish, providing a clear example of the dichotomy that existed within his moral code.⁶⁶ Elizabeth used Drake to deal many serious blows to the Spanish, under the pretense of religious duty and patriotism and he fought for those very things because of his own personal ideals. According to accounts of the time, he was determined to "sing[...] the King of Spain's beard" with his actions on the high seas.⁶⁷

⁶² Stephen Coote, *Drake*.

⁶³ Mia J. Rodríguez-Salgado, *Armada: 1588-1988 Official Catalogue*.

⁶⁴ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 72.

⁶⁵ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 121.

⁶⁶ Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 62.

⁶⁷ Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 43.

Drake was not only seeking to further puritanism via privateering, but also personal revenge against the Spanish following the deaths of some of his family after clashing with Spanish forces in Panama, which only strengthened the idea of the Black Plague amongst Drake and others in England.⁶⁸

Drake claimed that his actions not only furthered the good of the crown and God, but also supplied work for many individuals unable to find it elsewhere. He claimed it also gave jobs to vagabonds and others who caused trouble on the mainland, clearing prisons and removing them from the streets.⁶⁹ This was an idea shared by several famous privateers of the time, including William Hawkins and John Hawkins, who most likely saw this both as a true statement but also as a good excuse to find marauding crews.

French corsair Jean-François Roberval was notable for his Huguenot faith, yet “even though he was a Protestant,” he was famously good friends with Francis I, the French king responsible for one of the largest Protestant persecutions during this period and the ruler who really drove the French Wars of Religion.⁷⁰ He was entrusted with “full authority over a colony which was largely Catholic” by the French king in order to spread the Catholic faith and to wrestle from Portugal and Spain the monopoly they had over New World colonization.⁷¹ He was later assassinated and died a Huguenot martyr despite the crimes he committed, being revered for his commitment to his faith even in the face of persecution. Both He and Drake illustrate how piratical actions did not necessarily negate a strong Christian belief, but could in fact reinforce it.

While many of the most famous pirates and privateers used religion and politics as legitimizing factors in the raiding and plundering of merchant vessels, they were likewise used for the navigation of both religious and political disputes of the period. This use often led to their arrest and even execution in order to appease a rival nation, or to legitimize the power of a ruler or religion within their own country, especially as the Golden Age drew to a close.

Henry Morgan fought and raided Spanish and French vessels and settlements for England in the mid seventeenth century and was praised for his efforts in aiding English colonization efforts through his actions. However, as soon as peace was declared between Spain and England he was villainized and returned to England to rumors about his “cheating” the French buccaneers of their loot and of terrorizing Spanish colonies in the New World.⁷² In order to appease the Spanish following Morgan’s raid on Panama and attempt to preserve the

⁶⁸ Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 43.

⁶⁹ Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 43.

⁷⁰ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 121.

⁷¹ James A. Williamson, *The Age of Drake*, 121.

⁷² Graham Thomas, *The Buccaneer King: The Story of Captain Henry Morgan*, (Pen and Sword, 2014) 145-157.

newly established peace between the two nations, Morgan was arrested and brought to London to be tried.⁷³ When peace deteriorated, once again between England, Spain, France, and the Dutch, Morgan was released immediately and praised once again. Even at his arrest members of the English nobility were writing each other about how he would “be very advantageous to this island if war should again break forth with the Spaniard,” showing the political cycle occurring in Europe and how Privateers were used both to fight the enemy and then used as scapegoats to appease them if it helped politically.⁷⁴ At the same time, religious differences and preferences were being used as reasons for alliance and war between all these same nations. In fact, Morgan was released due to religious conflict breaking out once again between Protestant and Catholic nations.⁷⁵

Martin Frobisher likewise fought French and Spanish ships for the English crown and was praised for his actions. Even when arrested for piracy, he was able to produce the necessary paperwork to be released.⁷⁶ He was even employed in catching pirates not seen as useful to the crown of England. As time went on, however, he like Morgan was arrested for piracy by the English crown, and though released, his arrest again demonstrated the crown’s practice of recycling pirates as they went in and out of usefulness.⁷⁷

Sir Walter Raleigh was not so lucky, and while Elizabeth I praised him for his efforts in the New World colonies and his search for riches there, he was later arrested and executed. With Elizabeth’s death, James I took the throne and used Raleigh’s execution as a way to appease the Spanish crown who were angry at the attack of one of their forts by some of Raleigh’s men. While Raleigh and others had attacked rival forts in the past and been pardoned, the circumstances of the agreement between Spain and England in 1618, the year of his execution, and the personal feelings of dislike harbored by James against Raleigh meant his execution was more valuable to the crown than the privateer himself.

Figures like Raleigh and Morgan are examples of the nature of world politics at this time and the way in which extra-political forces like piracy and religion could be just as useful as scapegoats for a nation as they could be as the nations most useful tools in imperial expansion. As the Golden Age came to a close, pirates’ use as expansionary tool dwindled until they were much more useful as a way for nations to avoid further conflict by taking blame. What was once one of their greatest strengths, their illicit connection to the state and the

⁷³ Graham Thomas, *The Buccaneer King: The Story of Captain Henry Morgan*, 155.

⁷⁴ Graham Thomas, *The Buccaneer King: The Story of Captain Henry Morgan*, 157.

⁷⁵ Graham Thomas, *The Buccaneer King: The Story of Captain Henry Morgan*, 159.

⁷⁶ Hanna, *Pirate Nests*, 48.

⁷⁷ Richard Fiset and Gilles Samson, "Charlesbourg-Royal and France-Roy (1541–43): France's first colonization attempt in the Americas" *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 43, no. 1 (June 2009): 49 and 65.

flexibility this offered, became their biggest downfall. Where this unofficial connection once offered them a way to avoid the law, it later gave the state the chance to sever all ties, intangible as these ties were, when it too needed to avoid the consequences of international law.

Piracy and Religion as Nation Builders

While religion had been used as a way to navigate politics and changing societies for centuries, its relationship with piracy was an innovation unique to this period. The period saw religion and piracy engage in a sort of give and take, with each borrowing ideas from the other, which in turn created an atmosphere of both strict religious adherents, pirates and governing powers alike, as well as powerful nations that used piracy and religion to further their own power.

Piracy is often looked at as being apart from the political tension and competition happening during this time; a factor of the turmoil but still separate from the heart of things; its own phenomenon. However, it often went hand in hand with the events of following the discovery of the New World and the Reformation. This was a liminal period that took European powers to the international level and piracy and religion were key elements of this transition. Piracy was very much at the heart of these two events, greatly influencing the political, social, and perhaps most notably the religious landscape of a Europe on the edge of the modern era. Piracy was an excuse for the church to act violently in furthering its own power, and religion gave legitimacy to the actions of many of the most notorious pirates and privateers history has seen. Religion and piracy, though at first seemingly opposite, in fact shared many similarities in influencing such a transitional time. Each worked outside of society and was yet at the very heart of the global discourse of the period. While both religion and piracy acted outside of the secular legal system, the great strides made by those making and following the law would have been unachievable without their contributions.

While difficult and at times impossible to understand the complex, mysterious culture and beliefs that governed pirates and how religion was affected directly by the phenomenon of pirate culture during this period, each of these institutions played a vital role in shaping the landscape of a modern Europe and doing so in much the same way. Each relied on the other, and the opposition that existed between the two allowed both to gain the influence they wielded over the world. While the nations playing the power game used them both as tools, they became an entity in and of themselves, existing apart from international politics and laws, instead being fluid and ever-changing entities.

Once the political atmosphere began to level out and the order of power became more concrete, the need for pirates and religion on such a scale was no longer necessary. The states once again began to clash with the church and vie for power, and pirates were once again condemned for their crimes. Privateers

became pirates, such as the case of Morgan and Raleigh, and the pirates who remained at large were hunted down now that they were no longer useful to the state, but instead seen as a threat to the power structure Europe had built in the centuries following the discovery of the Americas. Europe began implementing laws and “Act[s] for the More Effectual Suppression of Piracy”⁷⁸ in the hopes of convincing “colonial administrators and citizens of the necessity of the death penalty for a crime that had long been tolerated and sometimes even encouraged”.⁷⁹ Even the limited legal privateering that continued was outlawed in 1856 under the Declaration of Paris.⁸⁰

Both piracy and religion began as forces existing above or outside of the political sphere of society, were sucked into the world of politics and power, and were then discarded when they became unnecessary. This happened to piracy long before religion began to decline as a legitimizing force within politics. However, as the modern era progressed and church and state began to separate, religion was no longer useful to the world of politics as it was during the Golden Age. Both piracy and religion pushed each other into a position of power, shaped the other, and then began to lose this power as the modern period continued. The shaping of the New World saw piracy and religion serve as frontiersmen in a quickly expanding world.

History may never reveal the faiths of individual pirates or the extent to which religion permeated life aboard a pirate ship at sea, but it does show the effect piracy had on Christianity and the rise of international empires. The idea of pirate as villain is a concept that continues to dominate popular opinions, and the phenomenon therefore loses significance as a prominent part of creating the political and diplomatic system of the modern world.

Piracy was a major building block of the larger European world, and not only affected, created, and even solved conflicts that arose during this era, but shaped how Christianity function within this ever changing European world and how it handled expansion and violence. Piracy, especially during the Golden Age, reflected the larger political and religious landscape of Europe, significant in such a religiously and politically charged environment, showcasing the dichotomies that defined this era. Piracy became a cultural building block of Spanish, French and English identity in much the same way as Christianity and helped shape the international relationships that grew out of the Golden Age into the modern world.

⁷⁸ Ernest Fayle, “A Short History of the World’s Shipping Industry” (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1933), quoted in Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 149.

⁷⁹ Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, 149.

⁸⁰ Patrick Pringle, *Jolly Roger*, 24.

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