The King, the Queen, the Virgin, and the Cross:

Catholicism versus Protestantism in *Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*

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The way that historical films depict conflict often says much more about the contemporary religious and political climate than it does about the period depicted on the screen. Both of Shekhar Kapur's films about Queen Elizabeth I of England – *Elizabeth* (1998) and *Elizabeth: the Golden Age* (2007) – clearly reflect and repurpose contemporary religious tensions. While a film about Elizabethan England cannot avoid engaging with religious politics, with this paper I will argue that Kapur took contemporary religious debates, and repurposed them for his films. This repurposing is visible in the depictions of Catholics and Protestants: Catholics are depicted as evil and scheming – a metaphor for modern religious fundamentalism; whereas the Protestants, embodied by Elizabeth, are depicted as being moderate, rational, and secular—people who wish to rise above religious divides, and rule for the common good. Due to time constraints, my paper will only look at one particular scene in detail—the passing of the Act of Uniformity—but will devote more time to looking at the criticisms that were levelled at the films for their depiction of Catholics, and suggest that repurposing the past to comment on the present is often rather fraught.

Elizabeth premiered at the Venice Film Festival on the 8th of September 1998. It received its cinematic premier in London the 2nd of October. Much of the writing and principal photography of the film took place against the backdrop of the Troubles—a very modern and contemporary parallel of Kapur's subject matter. Indeed, the Good Friday Agreement was signed on the 10th of April 1998, and both Ireland and Northern Ireland held referenda on May 22nd 1998 to approve the agreements—in both countries, the referenda passed with overwhelming majorities. Likewise, I don't think that it is a coincidence that film was directed by an Indian man who is known for his staunch, anti-colonialist campaigns—which has led to accusations of being "anti-British" in English tabloids; that the film was edited by the Australian Jill Bilcock—whose most famous works are arguably Baz Lurhmann's *Romeo and Juliet* and *Moulin Rouge*; and that the film starred two Australians—Geoffrey Rush as Sir Francis Walsingham, and Cate Blanchett as Elizabeth—the first

time an English film featured a non-English actor portraying Elizabeth. These two points—that the film was produced against the background of The Troubles, and that the film's technical team and cast were drawn from outside "normal" English talent—highlight the importance of reading *Elizabeth* not as a standard historical film, focused on elaborate costuming and imagined historical scheming, but as a commentary on Britain's religious sectarianism, and indeed the increasing intolerance of, and discrimination towards, other religions around the world, and the impact of colonialism around the world—colonialism that had much of its roots in, and took its legitimisation from, religion.

The writers of the film were very obvious in what picture of the two queens they wanted to portray, and the way that religion was used as reason for their conflict. Kapur made it clear that he wished to convey to his audience that the queens, while being half-sisters, were polar opposites. The religious conflict they both inflicted upon England is the epitome of this opposition. The scenes that include Queen Mary are very dark and sinister. Even the people around her wear black. And, to ensure that this point cannot be missed, all the scenes are filmed in Gothic-style rooms—architecture that predates Mary reign by several centuries. This all serves to leave the audience in no doubt that Mary has brought a darkness over England, and that her reign will only bring about death.

These scenes are in stark contrast to those of Elizabeth. They are all light and bright. In fact, the film employs three distinct white washout transitions for Elizabeth, but nothing similar for Mary. Even the people around Elizabeth wear colourful clothing. The contrast between the two queens could not be greater. Elizabeth is light and life. Mary is darkness and despair. The historical accuracy of these polarising depictions is of course questionable at best, but it is indicative of the stereotypes that exist in films of Elizabeth. Religion, and the conflict it causes, features prominently in all aspects of the film: even something as specific as the lighting and sets.

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Kapur's response to his critics sums up the point I am making here rather well. While seemingly about depicting the past, historical films are intrinsically about commenting on the present. Between the release of *Elizabeth* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, the world was rocked by the September 11 attacks, the 2002 Bali Bombings, and the 2005 London Bombings—among other

terrorist attacks. Using the past to comment on the events of the present is, on the one hand, a rather safe option. There's no need to specifically point out what it is you are commenting on. Film tropes are relatively ubiquitous enough that audiences can draw connections between the content and what is being commented on. But, on the other hand, using the past in this way can have a dangerous impact on the continued (usually negative) stereotyping of different groups, cultures, religions, and customs. Reinforcing the difference between Catholics and Protestants, as these films do, will not help to heal past wounds, nor encourage toleration. And this is where the role of humanities scholars comes to the fore: to point out when the past is being used to perpetuate current antagonism—in whatever form it takes, and to argue that we can learn from past mistakes to promote unity and tolerance.