...that women, children, maids, young infants and sucking babes, were...murthered, and cast into the river, and that liberty of execution was given to the vilest and basest sort of the popular, without punishment or revenge of such cruelty done afterwards by Law, upon those cruel murtherers of such innocents; this encreased our grief and sorrow in our good brothers behalf.¹

These words convey Queen Elizabeth’s disgust with King Charles IX of France over the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre in which Catholics murdered thousands of Protestants throughout France. On August 24, 1572, two nights after a lone assassin wounded Admiral Gaspard de Coligny, the leader of the French Calvinist Huguenots, a group of French Catholics finished the job by brutally stabbing, decapitating, and burning him.² Other Huguenots shared his terrible fate; an immense mob murdered men, women, and children and tossed them in the Seine until it ran red with the blood of 3,000 dead Protestant Parisians.³ The killings quickly spread throughout the French countryside, and when they finally ceased in October as many as 10,000 Huguenots lay dead. Understandably, Protestant England was shocked by the government-sponsored killings of their Huguenot brethren across the channel, but Queen Elizabeth had a far more nuanced reaction to the bloodshed.

Both Elizabeth’s religious convictions and her astute diplomacy tempered her reaction to the events in France, preventing any straightforward response. David J. B. Trim has argued that
Elizabeth’s religiosity significantly affected her foreign policy.\textsuperscript{4} Elizabeth certainly reached out to Protestant Europe after the massacre, which stemmed partially from her sense of religious duty but more so due to her anxiety over Catholic endeavors to restrain Protestantism. According to Susan Doran, Elizabeth’s expectation that the traditional Hapsburg–Valois rivalry would collapse in favor of a Franco-Spanish Catholic alliance, thus leaving England diplomatically isolated, forced her to alter her foreign policy early in her reign by allying with continental European Protestant realms.\textsuperscript{5}

Indeed, Elizabeth needed all the allies that she could muster in religiously divided late sixteenth-century Europe. The sectarian war between Scottish Catholics and Presbyterians remained unresolved in 1572, while England was in the midst of a five-year trade standoff with Spain. Irish Catholic dissenters continued to foment rebellion in Elizabeth’s second territory, and Mary, Queen of Scots, remained the titular head of Catholic rebels during her incarceration in England. Elizabeth also feared Spanish success in their suppression of Protestants in the Low Countries, though the possibility of French intervention and their control of the entire coastline opposite England posed an equally undesirable settlement to the conflict.

The massacre occurred within this context and only further complicated European international and religious relations, but Elizabeth responded quite sensibly by openly displaying her outrage, yet simultaneously reiterating her goodwill so as not to jeopardize Anglo-French amity. Her caustic words for the French crown showed both her grief for the dead Huguenots, whom she viewed as potential allies, and her willingness to actively prevent further bloodshed. Quite akin to her somewhat \textit{politique} diplomatic policy, Elizabeth tended to speak out against foreign Catholics only if they threatened her realm. The prospect of a French invasion even prompted her to muster troops, and she offered refuge to displaced Huguenots as well. Much like her use of courtships to cement political alliances, Elizabeth halted her marriage negotiations with the king’s younger brother, Hercule François, the Duke of Alençon, later the Duke of Anjou, to convey her anger for the killings. Diplomatic affairs ultimately overrode her religious concerns, however, as she sought to maintain the recently concluded alliance with France and even briefly attempted to restore Anglo-Spanish amity. The necessity of a powerful Catholic ally drew Elizabeth back to France, because if the Anglo-French rapprochement fell apart while England remained at odds with Spain, there was a very real fear that the two Catholic powers could have easily