Religious tension was one of the causes of the war which broke out between England and Spain in 1585. There were also other causes for the war, such as commercial rivalry and English action in the Netherlands. I will argue that, although religion played an important part, the main cause of the war was English involvement in the Netherlands.

With Elizabeth’s religious settlement of 1559, England became a Protestant country again. This did not please Philip II of Spain, who was a devout Catholic. He wanted to stamp out the Protestant heresy from Europe and restore Catholicism. However, it would be another 26 years before war began between England and Spain, which suggests that religion was not the main cause. In 1570, the Pope excommunicated Elizabeth and instructed all Catholics not to obey her any longer. This made relations with Spain more difficult but still there was no war.

During the 1570s, commercial rivalry developed between England and Spain. Many English merchants were trading in the New World illegally, without a licence from Spain. Some of them attacked Spanish ports and ships. The most famous of these merchants was Francis Drake. From 1577 to 1580, Drake circumnavigated the globe and returned with £400,000 of Spanish treasure. He was welcomed back in England as a hero and knighted by Elizabeth. This angered Philip II but he did not declare war on England at this point. This suggests that commercial rivalry on its own was not enough of a reason for starting the war.
Another source of tension with Spain was England’s involvement in the Netherlands. In 1566, the Dutch had rebelled against the Spanish. This was because many of them had become Protestants, and were being persecuted by Catholic Spain. In response, Spain sent a large army to the Netherlands to fight the rebellion. This was a threat to England, as it was dangerous to have a large Spanish army within close range of England’s shores. At first, Elizabeth assisted the Dutch indirectly. For example, she allowed the Sea Beggars, Dutch pirates that attacked Spanish ships, to shelter in English harbours. The turning point came at the end of 1584, when Spain made an alliance with the French Catholic League in the Treaty of Joinville. A French/Spanish alliance was too much of a threat for Elizabeth to ignore. In response, Elizabeth signed the Treaty of Nonsuch in August 1585 in which she promised to send an army to the Netherlands under the leadership of the earl of Leicester. This was in effect a declaration of war against Spain. Shortly afterwards, Philip began the preparations for an Armada to invade England.

England’s decision to openly support the Dutch rebellion was, in my view, the main cause of the war. However, religion played an important part in this decision too because the Dutch and the English formed a Protestant alliance against Catholic Spain and France. Therefore, religious tension contributed to the war but was not the main cause.