

The Purpose and Function of the Thirty-nine Articles

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Externally the Church of England, and the majority of Anglican Churches, are marked by a clear doctrinal attitude. Ministers accept allegiance to a distinct statement of faith. They declare this allegiance when they are instituted to office. Indeed, in their ordination they undertake to “minister the doctrine of Christ . . . as this Church hath received the same”. In these circumstances it might be expected that, granted a healthy and legitimate divergence in points of interpretation, both Anglicans and non-Anglicans should know without unreasonable ambiguity what is Anglican teaching and what is not, and that the Articles enshrining and attesting this teaching should hold a place of true honour in the life and thinking of the Church.

Instead, modern Anglicanism presents a picture of sorry confusion to the non-Anglican world. Conflicting statements are made, all claiming to represent the genuine Anglican position. Pulpits are centres of the most diverse propaganda. No one but the historian knows what is Anglican doctrine in the official sense, and the historians themselves are capable of reading back modern conflicts and contentions into the canonical documents. For the most part the Articles which are nominally accepted are ignored, evaded, reinterpreted, or dismissed as irrelevant. Pride is even taken in the fact that Anglicans can believe and teach more or less anything or nothing as seems right in their own opinion. The strange suggestion is even made that the framers of the Articles had something of this confusion in view, and consciously worded their statements with such looseness or flexibility as to make it possible. The decay of genuine dogmatics in the Church is a not unexpected consequence. Such basic theology as there is tends for the most part away from the real Anglican tradition, and debases itself by evading rather than confronting the challenge of the confession and the summons to real doctrinal succession.

In these circumstances, it is obvious that much serious thinking needs to be done by honest and conscientious Anglicans in relation to the Articles which their Church and Churches profess. A mere insistence on the letter is not enough. Confessions are not to be treated as legal documents binding all who accept them to the detailed minutiae of the letter. Attempts to use the Articles for the purpose of heresy trials can hardly succeed, and should not be undertaken. The mere insistence that this is the code and all must abide by it is unlikely to be effective when the code itself derives from so distant a period and the habit of disregarding it is so strongly entrenched. What is required is rather some more basic thinking as to the original purpose of the Articles and their continuing function. For what reason were they really drawn up in the first place? How can they be used in the Church in such a way as to maintain a continuing and distinctive teaching, yet not to bring about a stultification of and even irrelevance to changing issues and emphases? It is by pressing this type of investigation that those who both desire the dogmatic health and unity of their Church, and value the Articles themselves as an attempt in this direction, can best serve in the modern period of neglect and confusion.

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With regard to the purpose of the Articles the matter seems to be plain enough, and there is a striking relevance to the modern situation. When Cranmer first drafted them for his own diocese in 1549 the Church was filled with discordant voices. Standards had already been published in such varying documents as the Ten Articles, the *Bishop's Book*, the Six Articles and the *King's Book*. But the minority of Edward VI had brought a period of greater freedom. The leaders themselves were in a process of reconstruction which made the existing formulae inadequate and impossible. Resistance to change was vocal amongst the supporters of the old order. Others were pressing for reform in different directions. From the councils of the nation to the pulpits of licensed preachers there was the clash of warring opinions which served little to the edification of the flock of Christ. In these circumstances it was imperative that order should be created out of confusion, at least in public statement and utterance; and the diocesan articles adopted nationally in 1553 as the Forty-two Articles, and finally as the Thirty-nine, were to be the instrument for the creation of this order.

Now it is obvious that Cranmer was not attempting a fully developed statement on every point of Christian doctrine. Nor can he have intended, any more than Henry before him, to force all the clergy to hold the same views in every respect, to forbid free discussion, to hamper the continued testing of received doctrine by Holy Scripture, or to arrest the whole movement of theological debate. What was intended was more modest, direct, and practical. For the good of the Church the Church must attain a common mind on its great doctrines, and particularly on disputed issues of the day. Licensed preachers should then assent to this and be prepared to abide by it in their public teaching and utterances until there should be modifications through the properly appointed channels. In this way public theological conflict should be checked. The pulpit would no longer be made an instrument for the propagation of private or party opinions. The people within England, and the Churches without, could know what the general doctrinal position was, and confusion and strife could be avoided. In other words, the kind of situation which has now arisen through neglect or evasion of the Articles, and which is neither necessary for real theological vitality, nor conducive to the good of the Church at home, nor its high esteem abroad, could be checked and corrected.¹

It has often been noted that, whereas the Articles state the main doctrines and take a definite position in relation to such matters as justification and the sacraments, they do not attempt too detailed or narrow a definition. In this respect they are less like Trent and the Westminster Confession, but closer to many contemporary Reformed confessions. Cranmer himself had no desire to repeat the Roman error of making certain strictly defined tenets essential to salvation, or even to good standing in the Church. He realized that there must be freedom from rigidity in order that the Bible itself should be truly sovereign. In the last resort he once stated that he would word his doctrine only in the actual words of Scripture and the fathers, not even in his own most carefully drafted expositions.² He did not wish to fetter the private thinking of men, nor to claim that new things cannot be revealed in response to new situations or in relation to new issues. The Reformation itself was a dynamic movement, and the Articles themselves attained their present form only after rethinking and revision in which there was no sense of disloyalty to the past. To this extent, it may be claimed that there is a degree of caution or even comprehensiveness in what is stated.

Yet we must not exaggerate. Against the background of the time it is obviously a comprehensiveness only within the definite setting not merely of a Reformation understanding but a distinctively Reformed. Of the variant groups of the period, the minister wishing to preach Anabaptism could not possibly retain his licence, though he might just

conceivably hold both licence and Anabaptism if he were willing to keep the latter to himself and his private thinking and discussion. A Lutheran could be tolerated in the earlier period, and especially in the first years of Elizabeth when there was a serious attempt made to commit the Church of England to Ubiquitarianism.³ But with the adoption of Article XXIX there could be no public preaching of Ubiquitarianism in the English Church, and the Lutherans must either be silent or be silenced. The case was less ambiguous with those who clung to traditional teaching either as codified at Trent or in one or other of its pre-Tridentine forms. They could be licensed only if they were prepared publicly to proclaim a teaching very different from their own, and to refrain from any attempt to propagate the views which they really held. In point of fact, so great a contradiction was involved at this point that men who understood the issues, like the Marian bishops, found it quite impossible to retain both their theological integrity and their positions, and, while it is not impossible that some of those who turned, or even turned again, under Elizabeth, may have remained secret traditionalists, even these men realized that the open proclamation of their views did not fall within the envisaged comprehension.

Further light is shed on this matter by the Puritan campaign which led to the declaration under Charles I. Some Puritans, of course, were openly dissatisfied with the Articles. Others, like their successors of different persuasions, tried to read into them their own variant or more distinctive interpretations, for example, in such matters as predestination. But even this reading in of possible interpretations was regarded by the declaration as going beyond the permissible limits of comprehension. With a little ingenuity, almost any view can be foisted upon almost any statement. The Articles, however, were to be taken only in their literal and grammatical sense. To determine this is not always quite so easy today as it was perhaps three or four hundred years ago. But it is not allowable to strain the wording in order that it may bear an interpretation which is possible but hardly the original or natural meaning. Newman's famous handling of the Articles in Tract 90 would have received short shrift at the hands of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and his transition to Rome would have been more swift and clear-cut, and less mischievous, in consequence.

In other words, there is a comprehensiveness about the Articles, but it is confined to a certain area and it also cuts both ways. Some doctrines are plainly ruled out for the purposes of public utterance. No freedom is given to link the wording with a new and perhaps strained interpretation. The official doctrine is laid down in words which are plain even though they do not aim at too constricting an exactitude. Freedom is left for personal reflection and discussion, perhaps even with a view to further revision of the Articles. But in public instruction, and the witness and relationship to other Churches, this is what the Church of England and all loyal Anglican Churches accept, preach, and maintain until further order is constitutionally taken.

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The function of the Articles grows naturally out of their purpose, and it will be seen that they still have a vital and positive function if only there can be found churchmen who are sufficiently informed and conscientious to allow them to exercise it. Indeed, even when churchmen of this kind are lacking, the Articles can still perform something of their work by the retarding influence which they exercise as a standard which has been officially approved and which can be amended or discarded only by great effort. In these circumstances, however, the negative aspects necessarily predominate, and the Articles are primarily an

obstacle. What is more to be desired is that they should play the positive and dynamic rôle for which they are no less adapted.

In positive terms, their first function is to preserve the dogmatic order of the Anglican Church and communion. This has its negative implications. It means that mere individualism or schismatic preaching and action are kept in check. But the underlying purpose is the positive promotion of order and edification through the instrumentality of good and accepted doctrine. The ordinary members of a Church can only be confused and hampered when subjected to discordant and often erroneous voices. They can be truly instructed and strengthened when what is preached and taught is informed by the confessional standard, and arbitrary deviations are kept to a minimum.

The second function of the Articles is to exercise a purifying influence on liturgical and canonical action. Here, too, the function is critical, that is, to expose and expel that which is contrary to accepted teaching. But the purpose of the Articles is not merely to sanctify the traditional. New modes of worship and action are demanded in response to new situations. These can be tested by the Articles, but they can also be informed and suggested by the Articles, so as best to bring out that for which Anglicanism stands in dogmatic interpretation. In this connection, it is to be emphasized that liturgy and canons are not instruments for the surreptitious introduction of new or conflicting articles of faith. They necessarily stand under the dogmatic norm, and no good can come from theoretical or practical evasions of this truth.

The third function of the Articles is to pose the question of seriousness to those individuals or groups who in legitimate discussion wish to bring in new teachings or to amend the old. Before they can glibly speak of the new Anglican position, they must face the challenge of the Articles. Have they carried the whole Church with them to the point that revision or addition is now demanded? Or are they only a noisy sect claiming to speak for the whole Church but evading the real work of convincing and carrying with them the Church? Do they represent genuine and lasting insights, or merely a temporary and ephemeral theological fad? No movement can claim truly to represent the Church until it has honestly faced and satisfactorily measured up to this challenge.

More positively, the fourth function of the Articles is to provide a framework within which discussion can go forward, new issues can be taken up, and new teachings perhaps formulated, without sacrificing the formulations of the past or disrupting the continuity of the Church's witness. In relation to official utterance, the Articles are in some degree restrictive. But this does not preclude theological debate and discussion. On the contrary it is a spur to it. Only that which is true should be demanded in public utterance. There is no place for irresponsibility in the work of the ministry. Hence it is vitally necessary that the beliefs stated in the Articles, or others which may suggest themselves, should be weighed with the utmost seriousness before they can be advanced and taught as the accepted teaching of the Church. Properly understood, this is not a restriction of theological freedom. What is excluded is the bondage of irresponsible and frivolous individualism. The freedom of serious discussion is safeguarded and fostered.

Fifth, and finally, the Articles pose an ultimate challenge by their own acceptance of the biblical and therefore the apostolic norm which is the test of the only true catholicity. This is closely linked with the freedom of serious discussion to which reference has already been made. The Articles are a genuine attempt to state scriptural doctrine on leading issues. But they do not usurp the place of Scripture. By their own confession, they are themselves subject

to the lordship of God's Word. This means that they call for constant scrutiny in accordance with Scripture. Perhaps some things are wrongly stated. Perhaps others ought not to be there at all. Perhaps important biblical truths are left out, possibly because their relevance was not seen at the time of compilation. Perhaps the emphases are distorted. On the other hand, suggested revisions, additions, or subtractions must be brought under the same scrutiny in order that the teaching of the Church of England should not be that of individual theologians, nor ecclesiastics, nor parties, nor even this whole Church, but the teaching which is apostolic and therefore catholic, and which as such will truly promote saving faith and growth in grace. Here again, the function is from one standpoint critical and negative. Yet it must be conceived positively as well. The Articles summon us to the constant task of seeking and stating genuine evangelical truth and of making this the accepted standard of our preaching and teaching.

The current neglect or evasion or even defiance of the Articles is one of the greatest tragedies in modern Anglicanism. As they were conceived in the first instance, they gave hope of promoting both the unity in truth and the freedom under authority which are so necessary to the well-being of the Church. In spite of every obstacle, they have not wholly failed of their purpose. But quite obviously they cannot today exercise their functions in the fruitful way which could mean so much not only for doctrinal but for spiritual and disciplinary health. No matter is more urgent than that glib misconceptions should be removed, the true historical purpose of the Articles appreciated, and the place restored to them in which positively and constructively, as well as negatively and critically, they can discharge their living and salutary function.

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Endnotes:

- 1) On this point cf. Cranmer, *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. II, pp. 440f.
- 2) *Works*, Vol. II, p. 227.
- 3) Cf. Jewel, *Works* (Parker Society), Vol. IV, pp. 1261, 1264.