

The Status and Function of the Thirty-nine Articles in the
Anglican Communion today.

In a whimsical passage of the novel The Towers of Trebizond, Rose Macaulay has her principal character engage in a little light apologetics for Anglicanism. The strength of the Anglican Church, she claims somewhat half-heartedly, is its adaptability. Its prime asset is the calm and casual way it discards things it no longer needs. To her annoyance she has to admit though that it has not been able to mislay any of its Articles of Religion - presumably because they have all been so carefully numbered!

Stronger characterizations of Anglicanism can be mustered of course, but even then the position of the Thirty-nine Articles stands in need of some explanation. Plainly the Articles have not been mislaid but neither do they hold any clear place in the consciousness of Anglicans today. Indeed, in the ~~twenty~~ years since Rose Macaulay wrote, they seem even to have lost their power to annoy. So what exactly is the status of the Thirty-nine Articles in the life of the Anglican Communion? and how do the Articles function - if at all - in the articulation of contemporary Anglican self-awareness? This paper seeks to respond to these questions, first by an examination of some constitutional material of the Anglican Provinces, and then by a brief reflection on the most recent debate on the place of the Articles in the Anglican Communion.

I. The status of the Articles in the Provincial Constitutions.

For virtually three centuries after the Church of England's breach with Rome there was no doubt in anyone's mind about the importance of Articles of Religion. They provided a domestic creed for ecclesia Anglicana. While there were recurring disputes about their correct interpretation, the fact that they set the authorised standard of doctrine for the English Church was unquestioned. The Articles set the terms of communion for the laity who were forbidden to speak against them, and offered a confession of faith for the clergy who were obliged to subscribe to them. Consequently, when Anglicanism found its borders expanding during the middle years of the nineteenth century, the Articles were generally perceived as an integral part of the identity of the emerging Churches.

In due time these bodies were forced to gather their credentials in the form of synodal compacts and the importance of the Articles at that time can still be found reflected in the Constitutions of the older Anglican Provinces which were formed, at least in part, as a result of colonial expansion.

When defining their sources of doctrine these constitutions invariably give the prior claim to the Catholic norms of Scripture, Creeds and the tradition of the early Church, but they also acknowledge their more particular inheritance. It is the apostolic faith that resides at the heart of the Churches' identity, but those early constitutions make it clear that it is a faith which was received from the Church of England and expressed in that Church's Book of Common Prayer, Ordinal and Articles of Religion.

Thus, the Church in North America retained an amended form of the Thirty-nine Articles when it achieved its independence, and a canon links the Articles with a standard Book of Common Prayer as the measure for doctrinal and liturgical revision. The Articles are included among 'Historical Documents of the Church' in the current American Prayer Book. The New Zealand Church - which possesses a model of nineteenth century constitutional propriety - includes the Articles in the first of its fundamental

provisions defining doctrine. The decision of that Province to ordain women priests was, incidentally, tested by appeal to that Provision. In Australia, the Provincial Constitution was not finalised until 1958, but a similar preservation is found there. It is stated as a ruling principle that the Book of Common Prayer, together with the Thirty-nine Articles, is the "authorised standard of worship and doctrine". The Articles are appended to the new Australian Prayer Book and feature prominently in the 1973 form of clerical assent - partly as a result of a whole-hearted adherence to the Articles in the regional Province of New South Wales, where they are used catechetically. Probably as a result of Australian missionary activity in East Africa, Uganda specifies the Articles among its standards of doctrine. Tanzania and Kenya do not refer to them in their Provincial constitutions, apart from indicating that they may be used where appropriate in the life of member dioceses. Nigeria is the other of the newer Provinces which refers explicitly to the Articles in its declaration of faith. Canada reflects the more traditional formulation. The Thirty-nine Articles are appended to the Prayer Book and a Solemn Declaration committing the Church to uphold the doctrine, sacraments and discipline of Christ the Lord as the Church of England received and set forth the same in the Book of Common Prayer, the Ordinal and Articles.

In principle then, it seems that where the Thirty-nine Articles feature specifically in the foundation documents of an Anglican Province, it suggests a direct or indirect dependence upon the historical precepts and theological example of the Church of England.

This assertion is borne out by a comparison of the Provinces which lie in closest geographical proximity to the English Church. The Provinces of Wales and Ireland which had independence thrust upon them by disestablishment, found it necessary to stress the continuity they held with the Anglican tradition in their constitutions. The Irish Church's historical declaration of 1870 'receives and approves' the Articles, while the Welsh constitution 'accepts' the formularies of the Church of England as "set forth in and appended to the Book of Common Prayer". On the other hand, Episcopalianism in Scotland, which was effectively born independent, has not seen the Articles as an integral part of its tradition. They were imposed on the Scottish clergy in 1792 as a result of the non-jurors schism and only reluctantly adopted thereafter. In 1980 references to the Articles were removed from the Scottish Canons, and the Articles themselves annotated as "an important statement of Doctrine in the development of the Church of England at the time of the Reformation."

For most Provinces however, independence was not something either to be inherited or discovered but ^{was} achieved by virtue of hard work and serious theological effort. The newer Provinces invariably give the primary position to Scripture, Creeds and Councils as their doctrinal standards, as do the Articles themselves of course. For them questions of the domestic relationship of a Province to the Church of England or the Anglican Communion remain important, but secondary.

The Lambeth Conference of 1888 reflected on this state of affairs and declared that new Provinces need not "be bound to accept in their entirety the Thirty-nine Articles", although it did anticipate that they would be able to give "satisfactory evidence that they hold substantially the same doctrine as our own, and that their clergy subscribe Articles in accordance with the express statements of our own standards of doctrine and worship".

In that statement the Bishops were in effect legitimising what had already seemed to be ~~the~~ appropriate action of the Church in America and South Africa. The South African constitution was the first to add just the Prayer Book and Ordinal to the traditional norms of doctrine, and explicitly to omit reference to the Articles. By this time the historical and

cultural limitations of the Articles as a test of Anglican orthodoxy had become apparent, and this was what the Lambeth decision recognised. Furthermore, the Church of England's revision of the form of clerical subscription, along with the problems of internal discipline that it faced throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, increasingly marginalised the Articles as a statement of Anglican beliefs. The polarization of opinion by ecclesiastical parties accentuated this tendency. Where there was a ~~predominant~~^{prevailing} Tractarian influence, the Articles were discounted: if the spirit of the evangelical revivals predominated, a more forthright commitment to their teaching resulted. Either way, the Articles could not provide a basis for Anglican identity it seemed.

So then, the newer provinces of the Anglican Communion generally define their doctrinal stance without reference to the Articles of Religion. In every case they appeal to the Catholic norms of belief, but indicate their particular and historical background in different ways. Tanzania, Sudan, Uganda and Nigeria (which include the Thirty-nine Articles in their formulation, as has been noted), Kenya, Central Africa, and the West Indies, all employ a statement to the effect that their understanding of the Catholic faith is the same as that "received and taught by the Church of England in the Book of Common Prayer and Ordinal". Central Africa, Indian Ocean, Jerusalem and M.E., and Kenya focus upon the 'principles', or 'spirit and teaching', or 'doctrine, sacraments and discipline' of the Book of Common Prayer, while a number of Provinces - Urundi, Indian Ocean, Melanesia, P.I.G., and CASA - lay emphasis on the way they share common norms, standards of faith or terms of fellowship within the Anglican Communion. In two instances more immediate historical connections are acknowledged. The Church of Surma locates its credentials by reference to the Prayer Book it originally inherited from the Indian Church, while Japan which formally puts forward the Chicago-Lambeth quadrilateral as its standard of faith, historically identifies itself with LCUSA.

This brief survey of the constitutional material possessed by members of the Anglican Communion reveals that the Thirty-nine Articles, although not completely mislaid, are treated quite differently by different provinces of that Communion. Some of the older Churches, give the Articles a formal authority in the interpretation of their doctrine, although it is not at all clear how that authority would or should be exercised. Several others give the Articles some prominence as an indicator of their historical origin and development; but more than half the provinces identify their Anglican heritage without reference to the Articles at all.

II. The function of the Articles in Anglican Theological Definition.

The varied not to say confusing picture presented so far gives rise to a number of questions. What sort of attention, if any, should ecumenical observers give to the Thirty-nine Articles in their evaluation of contemporary Anglicanism? Indeed, what attention should Anglicans give to them? Do the Articles have any function in the life of the Anglican Communion, or are they simply the vestigial remains, like an appendix, of an earlier stage of its historic evolution?

Such questions were focussed upon by an English Commission under the Chairmanship of I.T. Ramsey which published its findings, Subscription and Assent to the Thirty-nine Articles just before the 1968 Lambeth Conference. This report, after dealing with legal and historical

situation, concentrated on the essential question: how should a Church seek to define its faith, and how should such definitions be utilised as a basis for ministerial discipline? The Commission was unable to commend the Articles for such purposes. Even if it were possible to revise them, they could never command ex animo assent. Quite apart from any historical or legal considerations they could never be regarded as a definitive expression of Anglican belief; "As long as the relation between the Bible and the Word of God is treated as problematical, it is logically possible to question the normative status of any biblical categories". The Articles ~~simply~~ bore testimony to part of the path along which the Church of England had travelled. Assent to the Articles indicated simply a willingness to continue that journey. The Articles provided one of the historical filters through which the Anglican tradition had to be understood.

The commission then was not so much concerned with the content of the Articles as it was with the question of what should - and equally, what should not - be done with them. Bishop Ramsey summed up this concern when he remarked on the publication of the report, "We do not want to sweep the Thirty-nine Articles under the carpet but to send them to a stately home in England where we can visit them from time to time."

The stately homes of England are not just monuments to the past but tangible reminders of a history, and markers on the course of cultural development. On such an analogy the Articles still have a positive function, and certainly the commission's report did not seek simply to abolish all norms of doctrine. A significant purpose of the Articles ^{had} been originally to give a sense of cohesiveness to the Anglican clergy. The Articles could not now fulfil that purpose and it was not a revised set of Articles that were required, but a new and clearer form of clerical assent. Such a formula should not attempt to tie down every detail of belief or practice, and it should not threaten the comprehensiveness of present-day Anglicanism. It should be related to the historic formularies, emphasise both what was distinctive in the Anglican tradition and what it held in common with other Churches, and it should leave open the possibility of entering in to fresh understandings of the faith. To further this end, the commission suggested a simple statement of belief, prefaced by a declaration outlining the different sources of doctrinal authority acknowledged by the Church of England.

The question of assent to the Articles only came up in the closing minutes of the 1968 Lambeth Conference. The tone of the debate was generally dismissive and only a final amendment proposed by Ramsey himself ensured that the positive aspects of the commission's report was recognised.

So, Resolution 43 of the Conference reads:

The Conference accepts the main conclusion of the Archbishops' Commission on Christian Doctrine... and in furtherance of its recommendation

(a) suggests that each Church of our Communion consider whether the Articles need be bound up with its Prayer Book;

(b) suggests to the Churches of the Anglican Communion that assent to the Thirty-nine Articles be no longer required of ordinands;

(c) suggests that, when subscription is required to the Articles or other elements in the Anglican tradition, it should be required, and given only in the context of a statement which gives the full range of our inheritance of faith and sets the Articles in their historical context.

When the Conference report was published it included an Addendum on the Articles and it is not difficult to identify Ramsey's hand in this too. Central to the statement is a paragraph outlining the "threefold inheritance of faith" - Catholic, Reformed and contemporary - and a concept of authority "which refuses to insulate itself against the testing of history and the free action of reason". Among these multiple sources of theology, the Thirty-nine Articles hold a distinct place. For this reason, so it is explained, the English Commission on subscription and assent had not advocated the disposal of the Articles but rather had assigned them to their appropriate historical context in the "continuous, developing, Anglican tradition".

When the Church of England subsequently discussed the Commission's report it ultimately adopted most of its recommendations in the form of a Preface and Declaration of Assent (1975) and expounded in the Alternative Service for the Consecration of a Bishop:

The Church of England is part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, worshipping the one true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It professes the faith uniquely revealed in the holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation. Led by the Holy Spirit, it has borne witness to Christian truth in its historic formularies, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordering of Bishops, Priests and Deacons. In the declaration you are about to make, will you affirm your loyalty to this inheritance of faith as your inspiration and guidance under God in bringing the grace and truth of Christ to this generation and making him known to those in your care?

To which the bishop-elect responds -

I, , do so affirm, and accordingly declare my belief in the faith which is revealed in the holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness....

It is difficult to compare the Church of England's constitutional material with that of other parts of the Anglican Communion. Its unique position as an established Church means for instance that the Articles, along with much other legislation since the time of the Reformation retains the force of law. That is not the only reason why the Articles survive in the Church of England's consciousness however. When Canons A2 and A5 commend the Thirty-nine Articles to the conscience and attention of English Churchmen as agreeable with Scripture and a source of Anglican doctrine, they place the Church of England, in this respect at least, alongside an overwhelming majority of the other provinces of the Anglican Communion.

Conclusion.

Plainly the Thirty-nine Articles are not the focus of attention for many Anglicans. Their actual status and function varies from place to place, between one ecclesiastical pressure group or another, and among different individuals in the Anglican Communion. For the great majority of Anglican Christians they will not seem particularly accessible or important. Nevertheless the Articles cannot be entirely lost from present day consciousness. No responsible account of the Anglican tradition can ignore their existence. They are not intended to provide answers 'from the back of the book', but they do still hold an honourable and significant place in the varied texture of Anglican theological debate. Anglicanism cannot be defined by reference to the Articles alone, but it cannot be understood fully without them.

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Note on sources used.

A study such as that presented, which depends upon the analysis of constitutional documents in the Anglican Communion, is confronted with two limitations. Firstly there is the fact that the actual life of a Province is lived at some stage removed from its legal formularies. It would be strange if it were not so. In the Christian Church at least, people are more important than organisational structures, and the wind of the Spirit should transcend the dictates of history. Just because the Thirty-nine Articles are mentioned among a Church's foundation documents does not say much about their actual function in the life of that Church. None the less, constitutions do have a controlling function in the development of human institutions, and they do provide the one accessible measure of the formal role played by the Articles in Anglican Churches. The second difficulty presented to this study, is that of locating adequate records of constitutions themselves. The documents undergo revision and amendment at regular intervals, and there is no single source available in this country for study of the process. A list of the most recent revisions of the Constitutions or Canons consulted is appended, where geographical contractions have been used by way of referring to the respective provinces, it is hoped that the meaning is clear and inoffensive to those concerned.

Constitutional material available for reference in the archives of the Anglican Consultative Council and in the library of Lambeth Palace:

Church of England in Australia	latest revision - 1978
Church of the Province of Burma	1970 (draft)
Church of the Province of Burundi, Rwanda and Zaire	1979
Anglican Church of Canada	1962
Church of the Province of Central Africa	1977
Church of England	(1985)
Church of the Province of the Indian Ocean	1973
Church of Ireland	1978
Japan Holy Catholic Church	1971
Episcopal Church in Jerusalem and the Middle East	1978
Church of the Province of Kenya	1970
Church of Melanesia	1973
Church of the Province of New Zealand	1978
Church of the Province of Nigeria	1977 (draft)
Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea	1977
Episcopal Church in Scotland	1979 (draft)
Church of the Province of South Africa	1970
Anglican Council for South America	1980 (draft)
Province of the Episcopal Church of the Sudan	1976
Church of the Province of Tanzania	1970
Church of Uganda	(1972)
Episcopal Church in the United States of America	1979
Church in Wales	1980
Church of the Province of West Africa	1970
Church of the Province of the West Indies	1959