

The thirty-nine articles

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Revue internationale de théologie = Internationale theologische Zeitschrift = International theological review**

Band (Jahr): **1 (1893)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **09.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-403270>

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THE THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES.

In the last number of the *Revue Internationale* a notice appeared of a work on reunion between the Oriental Churches and those of the West by Professor Ambrazé. In it he states that twenty-seven of the Anglican Articles of Religion are orthodox, five doubtful, and seven heretical. I desire to offer some considerations in regard to these Articles with the hope of removing prejudices against the Anglican position, which are the result of an imperfect knowledge of the actual state of the case.

Let me frankly say, at the outset, that I am not about to undertake the defence of every theological proposition contained in our thirty-nine Articles. I readily admit that many of them contain statements which no one would think of putting forward, if they were drawing up a theological document at the present moment. The thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England belong to a period in the history of our Church when it was found necessary, not only to make some protest against the teaching of the Roman Church, but to find some definite basis on which to ground the teaching which was to supersede it. There had not been time to go over the whole field of theology with sufficient thoroughness to make quite sure of the soundness of that basis in every detail. And moreover some of the prejudices inherited from mediæval theology in the West continued to survive in the breasts even of those who desired to sweep that mediæval teaching away. But the necessity was urgent, and some provision had to be made for it, and when once made, it was not easy to disturb the arrangement to which our rulers had come. There would be few therefore, among the clergy of the Church of England, who would be disposed at the present moment to deny that the theological statements in her thirty-nine Articles are not every thing that could be wished. It must be admitted that even if on the whole they

are sound in substance, they have become, through the lapse of time, decidedly old-fashioned in form. And more than two thirds of our clergy would undoubtedly be glad if they could be relieved from the necessity of subscribing them, though they would still desire to hold them in high honour for the work they have done in giving a definite shape to English theology during the last three centuries. Whatever objection may be made to them now, they will be found on examination to be on the whole the most rational, the most moderate, the most conservative, of all the Confessions of Faith drawn forth by the controversies of the sixteenth century. While, then, a clergyman of the Church of England in the present day would as a rule decline to commit himself to the letter of all and every dogmatic statement contained in them, he would be prepared energetically to defend their general tone and spirit, and would consider himself moreover entitled to ask that the least unfavourable construction should be placed on any expressions in them which may be regarded as open to exception.

Nor is there anything dishonest in the admission on the part of the Anglican clergy that the literal orthodoxy of every single clause in their Articles can no longer be maintained. For whereas at one time a declaration of "unfeigned assent and consent" to "all and everything contained in" those Articles was demanded, not only of every clergyman, but of every graduate of the Universities, and every authorized teacher of youth, the clergy alone are now required to subscribe them, and this subscription is limited to a simple expression of assent. Consequently no one in our communion is pledged to defend every proposition contained in them. We are simply required to assent to their general drift and tenor. And therefore if on the whole they may fairly be regarded, in the light of fair and candid, rather than captious, criticism to be compatible with the teaching of the Universal Church, particular expressions in them which may appear to well instructed theologians at the present day to be unfortunate, may not unreasonably be left out of the account.

Moreover, as has been just suggested, the true way of looking at the matter is to endeavour to put the best, rather than the worst, construction upon any expressions in them to which exception might fairly be taken. They ought to be viewed

in the light thrown upon them by the writings of the best Anglican theologians. The actual teaching permitted in the Anglican Church at the present day supplies us with information regarding the *animus imponentis* which ought not to be neglected. Nor should those who call any of the statements of the Articles in question forget that Bishop Forbes of Brechin, and the Roman Catholic theologian Santa Clara, have contended that a Catholic interpretation may be put even upon the most doubtful propositions to be found in them.

With this brief preface I will pass on, after a very few remarks on the general drift and tendency of the earlier Articles, to examine the particular passages the orthodoxy of which is impugned. The first five articles owe their position to the desire on the part of their framers to put in the forefront those first principles of the faith on which all Catholic Christians are agreed. The sixth, on the sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for salvation, points to the Scripture as the evidence whereby these fundamental principles may be established. The moderation of its statements will be seen, when it is compared with later Protestant Confessions on this point. The Scriptures are only said to "contain" all that is necessary to salvation. They are not regarded as being themselves Revelation, but only as containing such information as will enable us to understand in what Revelation actually consists. Professor Ambrazé of course takes exception to the *fifth* article. But, as the Anglicans with one consent declared at Bonn, we only hold the Double Procession in such sense as shall be ultimately approved by the Universal Church. We deny that there can be two *ἀρχαί* in the Trinity, and we believe that no more is involved in the Double Procession than the proposition that the Spirit partakes of the Deity of the Son as well as of the Deity of the Father. As will be remembered, Dr. von Döllinger was enabled at Bonn to frame out of the works of S^t John of Damascus, a series of doctrinal statements which explained the formularies of the West to the satisfaction of the Eastern theologians there present.¹

¹ It was pointed out by Dr. von Döllinger that the Latin word *procedo* is not the precise equivalent of the Greek *ἐκπορεύομαι*.

(Bericht über die vom 10. bis 16. August 1875 zu Bonn gehaltenen Unions-Konferenzen. 1875. p. 13.)

The eleventh Article, on Justification by faith, avoids, it will be observed, that dangerous tendency among Protestants to regard faith as a man's subjective conception about his own condition, from which even the Augsburg Confession is not altogether free. There is no assertion that God "*justificet hos qui credunt se propter Christum in gratiam recipi*", such as is found in Article V of the Augsburg Confession. In the Church of England we are accustomed to preach an objective faith in Christ as the Saviour from sin, and not a subjective one regarding the condition into which our faith may be supposed to have brought us. The thirteenth Article, again, would unquestionably be otherwise expressed, if we had to draw it up now. For we are most of us convinced that *no good works at all* can be done save through the operation of the Spirit of God, and that, if any works are done apart from His influence, they must have been done from a wrong motive, and must therefore be sinful.

The seventeenth Article has given rise to some suspicion in various directions. But a careful examination of it reveals the fact that it affirms no very definite propositions on the mysterious subject of which it treats. The question had been raised, and it could not altogether be passed over. But the framers of the Articles evidently desired to commit the Church to as little as possible on the subject. That the article did not satisfy the Calvinists is clear; for they endeavoured in 1584 to impose upon our Church the famous Lambeth Articles, in which all the peculiar doctrines of Calvin concerning Predestination and Election are embodied. This attempt was defeated by the wisdom of Queen Elizabeth and her advisers, representing, as the government of the day, the feelings of the English laity.

Professor Ambrazé objects to the twenty-first Article as heretical. It must unquestionably be admitted that its form is very defective. It never mentions the Episcopate. It neither defines the "pure word of God", nor explains in what a due administration of the Sacraments consists. It neglects to mention the mode of ordination of the clergy and must be considered in the light of Article XXIII, on Ministering in the Congregation, and still more in the light of Article XXXVI, in which the Ordinal is defended against objectors. In the Ordinal, the

necessity of the Episcopate will be found duly insisted upon. The expression “*a* congregation of faithful men”, again, is certainly unsatisfactory. It should be “*the* congregation”—evidently the proper translation of *cœtus fidelium*. But an Article admittedly defective is not therefore heretical. And the Article supplies a valuable counterpoise to the mediæval tendency, still to be found in some quarters, to overestimate the powers of the hierarchy, and thus to depress unduly the position of the whole body of the baptized. Both in East and West in early times far more respect was paid to the authority of the Church as a whole, including the laity, than has been the case since. S^t Cyprian, advising the laity to be called into council to discuss the readmission of the lapsed¹: S^t Athanasius when telling the Bishops that things can only be canonically settled when the people are gathered together with the Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, as commanded by S^t Paul in 1 Cor. V, 4;²—these would be regarded as theologians of a somewhat dangerous tendency by many in our own day.

We proceed to Article XXI. Here again it should be observed that the Article speaks of General, not of Œcumenical Councils. The formularies of the Church of England do not, it is true, at present contain any mention of the Councils received by our Church. But it was perfectly well understood at the time of the Reformation that the Church of England did not reject the teaching of Catholic Christendom. When the breach took place between Henry the Eighth and the Pope, we took care to state that it was not the intention of our Church to separate itself from the rest of Christendom, but only to reject the usurped authority of the see of Rome.³ And the Statute law of England expressly recognizes the authority of the first four General Councils.⁴ It must be remembered that there have been Councils not improperly called *General*, which are not

¹ Ep. XXVII, XXX, c. 5.

² Epist. Encycl., c. 2.

³ The “Bishop’s Book”, published in 1537, appeals on this very point to the first eight General Councils, and especially to the first at Constantinople. And the Canons of 1603 emphatically deny that the Church of England had any intention to “forsake and reject the Churches of Italy, France, Spain, Germany” &c., except “in those particular points in which they were fallen from themselves in their ancient integrity, and from the Apostolical Churches which were their first founders”.

⁴ 1 Eliz., cap. 1.

Œcumenical. The Œcumenicity of a Council depends not on its constitution, but on its subsequent reception by the Church, and there are many Councils, such, for instance, as that of Sardica and the infamous Latrocinium, which, though undoubtedly general, in one sense of the word, have no claim whatever to be regarded as Œcumenical. And if exception be taken to the assertion that no General Council should be summoned “without the commandment and will of princes”, it should be remembered that this is equivalent at the present time to declaring that a Council cannot properly meet anywhere in defiance of the law. The Convocation of Canterbury protested in 1536 against the Council proposed to be summoned at Mantua in the succeeding year on the following grounds. “Neither the Pope, nor any one prince of any degree soever, may by his own authority summon any General Council without the express consent of the residue of Christian princes, and specially such as have *imperium merum*, that is, the whole entire, and supreme government and authority over all their subjects.” The mediæval Councils could not be assembled in any place without the consent of the administrators of the law in that place, and as we see by the history of the Council of Basel and even of that of Trent, the place where the Council was to be assembled was a question on which the civil authorities of those days claimed to be consulted. Nor is this all. It was the Emperor who used originally to summon the Councils, and Cardinal Cusanus distinctly admits that “*octo prima Generalia Concilia ab Imperatoribus erant collecta*”.¹ The Article was certainly not directed against the undisputed Councils of the Undivided Church, but was aimed rather at those assemblies, miscalled General Councils, assembled under the authority of the Pope after the separation between East and West, such as the Lateran Councils, the Councils of Florence, Basel and Constance, and above all, the Council of Trent.²

In regard to Article XXV, it should be remembered that it does not stand alone, but must be construed in the light of the Catechism our Church requires to be taught to every

¹ De Concord. Eccles., II, 25.

² It will be observed that the Council at Mantua, though it would have been simply a Western, and in no sense an Œcumenical Council, is spoken of as a “general” one in the protest mentioned above.

young person coming to be confirmed. Taken in connection with the more precise statements of that Catechism, much that is indefinite or even apparently unsatisfactory will be found to bear an orthodox interpretation. The definition of a Sacrament in the Catechism is as follows. It is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace, given unto us, ordained by Christ Himself, as a means whereby we receive the same (i. e. the inward and spiritual grace) and a pledge to assure us thereof". Thus the outward sign of the Sacrament is explained to be a means or channel whereby the inward and spiritual grace of the Sacrament is received, as well as a pledge of its being given. The Article states 1) that a Sacrament is not merely a badge of Christian profession, but 2) a sure witness, and 3) an effectual sign of grace (i. e. a sign which produces the effect of which it is the sign), and that 4) God works invisibly in us through it to strengthen our faith. The statement that the Sacrament only strengthens and confirms our faith in God must be admitted to be defective in itself. It is too subjective. It does not sufficiently emphasize the objective nature of the gift of Christ's Person through the medium of the outward ordinance. But, as will be seen hereafter, when taken in connection with the teaching of the Catechism, it is in accordance with the teaching of the Universal Church. The language of the Article in regard to the "five commonly called Sacraments" is certainly not a little confused. They cannot all be classed under the headings of "corrupt following of the Apostles", or of "states of life allowed in Scripture". But that a distinction exists between Baptism and the Lord's Supper and the other five to which the term Sacrament is frequently applied, is unquestionable. For Marriage and Orders are not "generally necessary to salvation" (to quote our Catechism once more), and Baptism and the Eucharist *are* "generally necessary". Penance can only be considered necessary for those who have fallen into grievous sin. Extreme Unction is certainly a corruption of the earlier custom of anointing for purposes of healing. And Confirmation is simply the completion and attestation of Baptism. But the Book of Homilies (specially commended in Article XXXV), gives the title of Sacraments to the other five rites above mentioned (only declaring that "they

are not such Sacraments as Baptism and the Communion are”), as well as to “divers and sundry other ceremonies”.¹

We now come to Article XXVII. There it is asserted that it is not sufficient to regard Baptism as a sign of Christian profession, but that it must be regarded as “a sign of Regeneration or new birth”, of such efficacy that those “who receive it rightly” are “grafted”, “as by an instrument”, “into the Church”. This statement again, not too clear, it must be admitted, in itself, must be read in the light of the Catechism, where we are told that the “inward and spiritual grace” imparted in Baptism is “a death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness”, and furthermore that in Baptism each recipient is “made a member of Christ”. Surely no clearer definition of the *res sacramenti* than this can possibly be required.

Article XXVIII requires also to be read in the light of our other formularies. We are told negatively that the Sacrament of Holy Communion is not only a sign of the mutual love Christians should bear to one another. And then the positive assertion follows that “to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the Bread which we break is the partaking of the Body of Christ, and the Cup of Blessing is the partaking of the Blood of Christ”. That Body and Blood, the Catechism adds, “are *verily and indeed* taken and received by the faithful in the Lord’s Supper”. And in the Exhortation before Holy Communion the worthy receiver is declared “spiritually to eat the Flesh of Christ and to drink His Blood, to dwell with Christ and He in him, to be one with Christ and He with him”; while the unworthy receiver is warned that he is “guilty of the Body and Blood of Christ our Saviour”. That the Presence of Christ in the Sacrament can only be discerned by faith, seems involved in S^t Paul’s language in regard to the unworthy recipient as *μὴ διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα*. While as to Transubstantiation it should be remembered that substance, in modern English, means *physical* substance. A large majority of the English clergy, undoubtedly, would hold that a new and heavenly reality was superadded to the earthly one (to use the words of Irenæus²) when the solemn words of consecration have been pronounced, although most instructed theologians

¹ Homily on Common Prayer and Sacraments.

² Adv. Hær., IV, 18, 5.

among us would subscribe to Cardinal Newman's *dictum*, that this reality is one of which the senses can by no possibility take cognizance.

Professor Ambrazé has also taken exception to Article XXXI. But this Article simply rejects the mediæval Western idea of a *repetition* of the Sacrifice of Christ. But that I fear to encroach too much upon your space, I could shew that the idea of the *presentation* of the one Sacrifice of Christ once offered, in Holy Communion, has been the doctrine of almost all our leading Divines. That doctrine is now held, as I shewed in a recent notice of his works in the *Revue*, by Professor Milligan, a minister of the Scotch Presbyterian communion. The idea of the priest offering Christ again, as He did Himself on Calvary, would seem to deserve the name of a "blasphemous fable and dangerous deceit". In a secondary sense, no doubt, the priest may be said to offer Christ, when he pleads the One Sacrifice once offered in the appointed memorial of the Saviour's death. And the whole history of English theology will shew that the Article was not intended to prohibit the clergy of our Church from teaching that the Slain Lamb was offered and presented unto God in this last sense.

It is time that I brought these remarks to a close. They have been penned in no polemical spirit, but with the sincerest desire to promote the growth of a better understanding between the severed branches of the Church of Christ. I do not maintain that every single proposition in the Articles of our Church is perfect and cannot be improved upon. I would not make such an assertion of any portion whatever of our Prayer Book. The clergy of the Anglican Church are not pledged to the belief that no single sentence in that Prayer Book is open to exception. They have simply given their assent to it as a whole, and have promised to use it and no other, in their public ministrations. It is no doubt capable of a good deal of improvement. But most of us here in England feel that if we set about revising it, no two persons among us would be exactly agreed as to what the improvements ought to be. Such revision, however desirable, will thus be a work of difficulty and of time. And therefore, while I venture to plead that foreign critics of our formularies should make a point of putting the most and not the least favourable construction on their phraseology, I do not

wish to be understood as contending that this most favourable construction must necessarily involve unqualified approval. The clergy of the Church of England are in the happy position of being required to teach as *de fide* nothing but the Creed of Universal Christendom, and the Bible as explaining, enforcing, and applying that creed to human needs, and as witnessing to what has been taught *ubique, semper, et ab omnibus* in the Catholic Church. I believe that in a firm adhesion to first principles, combined with the fullest liberty to draw and to discuss conclusions from those principles, and to apply them in such a manner as suits the needs of the age, we shall best promote the cause of the Catholic Church and the ultimate victory of the truth.

J. J. LIAS.

Note de la Direction. — Cet article, conçu dans un sens essentiellement pacifique, contient sans doute des opinions qui ne sont pas les nôtres, notamment sur quelques sacrements; mais il contient aussi des déclarations que nous enregistrons avec une joie sincère, et qui ne peuvent que contribuer à l'avancement de l'union désirée. Etant donné, d'une part, que les Trente-Neuf Articles sont simplement considérés comme un document théologico-historique, dont on reconnaît les défauts en même temps que la valeur sur certains points, et, d'autre part, que l'on accepte le critérium catholique formulé par Vincent de Lérins, et qu'on veut distinguer à sa lumière le véritable dogme chrétien et les spéculations purement théologiques, l'entente n'est plus qu'une affaire de temps, de travail et de sincérité. Que notre collaborateur nous permette, en lui adressant nos remerciements, d'exprimer le désir que son point de vue compte dans son Eglise de nombreux adhérents.
