

# The position of the XXXIX articles in the episcopal church in the United States of America

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# THE POSITION OF THE XXXIX ARTICLES

IN THE

## EPISCOPAL CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

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It is proposed in this paper to reply to a question how far the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion are obligatory upon the Clergy and the laymen of the American Church, and what use the Church makes of them.

It is impossible to discuss this subject without considering three things; in the first place, the history; then, the position; and then, the interpretation of the Articles; and it must from the outset be distinctly stated that in the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America the position of the Articles is very definitely and positively defined.

In the first place, it will be noticed that this Church in America had its independent existence, its Episcopate, its Book of Common Prayer and its organization before, independently of, and apart from, the adoption of the Articles of Religion, which were established in General Convention on the 12<sup>th</sup> day of September, in the year of our Lord 1801.

In the next place, it is to be noted that they are not part of the Book of Common Prayer, but are recognized in the Canons of the Church as separate from it, under the title of "The Book of Articles". They are bound up with the Prayer Book simply for purposes of convenience. While, therefore, it is true that in a sense they are to be considered as part of the authoritative doctrine of the American Church, they are relegated to a position not only inferior to the two Catholic Creeds; but even to a position inferior to that which the Catechism holds, that being bound up and made part of the Book of Common

Prayer; or to such doctrinal statements as are virtually standards of doctrine, in the Sacramental Offices, not only the Baptismal Office and the Office for the Holy Communion, but the Order of Confirmation, the Form of the Solemnization of Matrimony, and the Ordinal; including in this last the teaching of this Church in regard to the right of the priest to remit and retain sins.

No subscription to the Articles is required in this Church, even from its Clergy, except in the general expression of conformity to the doctrine and worship of the Church; and they are not considered in any wise binding upon lay people, whose only requirement for admission to the Church is that they shall accept the Apostles' Creed; and that in being admitted to the Holy Communion they should accept the Creed commonly known as the Nicene.

The history of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which we have received, with two omissions, from the English Church, is a peculiar one. In 1552 Forty-Two Articles of Religion were framed by Archbishop Cranmer at the King's command, and were probably sanctioned by the synodical authority of the Convocation. The fact that Cranmer and Ridley were largely concerned in the compilation of both the Prayer Book and the Articles shows that there can be no real contradiction of doctrine between the two. These Articles were, under Archbishop Parker, in 1559, recast, reduced in number and approved by the Convocation in 1562. In 1571, under the editorship of Bishop Jewell, being now Thirty-Nine Articles, they were set forth with the authority of the Queen, of the Convocation and of Parliament. The changes which the American Church made in them were local and unimportant.

The fact that the language of the Articles is thoroughly scholastic from beginning to end shows two things; in the first place, that they were intended to regulate certain questions which had been much discussed by theologians; and then, to deal with matters more or less in controversy at the time at which they were drawn up. And from this it may well be argued that the whole intention of the Articles being to instruct the Clergy in regard to contemporary controversies, it might well happen, as, in the opinion of the writer, it is not unlikely to happen either in England or in America, that certain Ar-

ticles might be dropped from the number; because the errors which they were intended to combat have ceased to have any real life in the Church; and further, that from time to time other Articles might be added to deal with the actual questions of the day.

They are as far as possible removed from the simple, straight-forward, positive language of the permanent and Catholic Creeds.

And now as to the teaching of these Articles. They divide themselves readily into four heads. The first five, unlike the Continental Confessions, set forth in full the one Catholic Faith of the six undisputed Councils, and then proceed to consider other matters arising in later times in order. It is impossible not to trace in the language of the first five Articles the expressions in the Nicene Creed and in the Athanasian Hymn. In dealing with the question of Holy Scripture, it is to be noted that this Church follows the Canon of Athanasius and Jerome, rejecting the ecclesiastical books commonly called the Apocrypha from the Canon; which, it will be remembered, at Trent were admitted by the Roman Church with only fifty-three Bishops present, "not remarkable for learning, and divided in opinions".

The Articles IX to XVIII inclusive deal with man's individual relations to God; and it is certainly interesting and important to note that in these Articles what are commonly called the five points of Calvinism (unconditional predestination or election to life, eternal and unconditional predestination or election to damnation; particular or limited redemption; total depravity; irresistible grace; final perseverance) are either denied or passed by, so that the general impression that the Articles have not only a strongly Protestant but a decidedly Calvinistic turn is utterly untrue. The Articles are pointedly silent as to reprobation. The statement of Article XVII is that predestination to *life* is the everlasting purpose of God; and it suggests no other predestination at all. Indeed, the whole language of the Article is, as has been well said, "a series of texts of Holy Scripture, with a word or two connecting them together". The outspoken definiteness of the Articles against a particular or limited redemption is very marked. To quote a single one, the XXXIst, "The offering of Christ once made is

that perfect redemption, propitiation and satisfaction *for all the sins of the whole world, both original and actual*". As against the Calvinistic theory of total depravity, the change of expression from the statement that "evil desire is *in itself truly and properly sin*", to the words "concupiscence and lust has of itself the *nature of sin*", shows clearly that there is no Calvinistic meaning in it. And the fact that Article XVI declares that we *may* fall from grace and that we *may* rise again from our fall; is the total denial of the Calvinistic theory that we *can not* fall finally, and that we *must* rise again if ever we have received grace at all.

Articles XIX to XXVI inclusive, deal with the Church itself; and with corporate relations as against individual relations to Christ. It is a fact worthy of note that in Article XIX while "Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome", four of the great Patriarchates, are said to have erred, no mention is made of Constantinople. And in regard to the error of Rome, with which the Old Catholics as well as the Anglican Churches are chiefly interested, it will not be forgotten, that, in 1589, the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs made Moscow a Patriarchate, on the distinct ground that "the Patriarchate of old Rome had lapsed from the Faith".

In the Articles that deal with the Sacraments, it is believed that the Catholic doctrine is absolutely retained in regard to them both. And taken in connection with the simpler and more direct teaching, especially upon the subject of Baptism and the Holy Eucharist, which are set forth in the Church Catechism; there can be no doubt but that the Faith of the undivided Church is plainly taught and held: And meanwhile it must not be forgotten that the Articles do not bind the laity as to receiving Holy Baptism, Confirmation or the Holy Communion; except in so far as the first five Articles state the *one* Faith; and that they only regulate the Clergy in their teaching, to the same degree that the Roman Church does in the Decrees of Trent and the Catechism of that Council; and that the Old Catholics have done, in various decisions and declarations.

They were the outcome of a period in the history of the Church in which the leaven of reformation was at work. The two great Councils of Constance and Basle had been nominally

called for a reformation of abuses; and both in England and in Germany the minds of men were strongly directed toward a reform of the Church from within, if it could be brought about; but if not, toward such a change as would enable both Clergy and lay people to remain in the communion of the Catholic Church, without being obliged to submit to recent, unauthorized and unlawful terms of communion; and a comparison of the Thirty-Nine Articles as authorized by the Church of England, the Church in America to-day, and the Church in Scotland, with the various efforts to bring about some agreement with the Continental reformers; or a comparison of them with the different sets of articles which were proposed or adopted before or after them; will readily show, that the Thirty-Nine Articles of the English, American and Scottish Churches are far more in accord with both Scripture and Catholic teaching, than any similar body of divinity which had ever been prepared.

It has been apparently possible for some people to read *into* these Articles, teachings novel, heretical and unsound; but it is not honestly possible to read *out* of them, anything not in accord with the pure faith of Holy Scripture and the primitive Church.

Hardwick, in his "History of the Articles", closes the chapter on the Elizabethan Articles with these admirable words: "One thought must be peculiarly impressed upon the mind, as to the strong and uniform connection subsisting between the Articles which we are now called upon to subscribe, and the actual state of the Church at the time of their compilation. This fact, so steadily attested by contemporary writers, to say nothing of the evidence supplied by the title of the document itself, cannot fail to have modified our views of its character as a standard of Christian truth. It was manifestly *designed* to be pacificatory, and at the same time polemical: it strove either by silence or by general statements of doctrine to calm the feverish speculations of the clergy upon a host of debateable questions; while on the other hand it provided a test by which the advocates of positive errors, whether Romish or Anabaptist, Zwinglian or Puritanical, were excluded from the Office of teaching within the jurisdiction of the English Church. To appeal, therefore, to the Articles of Religion as the one single measure of truth,

or as a full and formal body of theology, sufficient for all times, is to forget the circumstances of the age in which they were produced;—it is to mistake what are justly regarded as a strong though modern bulwark, for the whole of the venerable fortress in which the ark of God is treasured.

Such has never been the language of those who in the period of the Reformation, as well as in the later crises of the Church, have stood forward as our champions against error on the right hand and the left. *Their* views of the nature and design of the Articles are in harmony with the memorable words of Bishop Pearson, who like the prelates of the Elizabethan age, while encountering the emissaries of Rome, had also to contend with opposite party who desired the “reformation of the public doctrine”. After observing that on the puritanical hypothesis the book of Articles was, from the nature of the case, *defective*, he adds: “It is not, nor is pretended to be, a complete body of divinity, or a comprehension and explication of all Christian doctrines necessary to be taught: *but an enumeration of some truths, which upon and since the Reformation have been denied by some persons; who upon their denial are thought unfit to have any care of souls in this Church or realm; because they might by their opinions either infect their flock with error, or else disturb the Church with schism, or the realm with sedition.*”

It is quite worth while to call attention to the teaching of the XXXVI<sup>th</sup> Article, which deals with the question of the ordination and consecration of Bishops and ministers. The expression is used in this Article “rightly, orderly and lawfully consecrated and ordered”, and in the XXIII<sup>rd</sup> Article it is declared to be “unlawful for any man to take upon him the office of public preaching or ministering the Sacraments of the congregation before he be lawfully called and sent to execute the same”. What this means is declared by the reference in Article XXXVI to “The Book of Consecration of Bishops, and Ordering of Priests and Deacons, as set forth by the General Convention of this Church”. And the expression therefore as to what this Church considers to be right and orderly and lawful consecration and ordination is to be explained by the statement of the Preface to the Ordinal, in which these words occur, “No man shall be accounted or taken to be a lawful Bishop, Priest or Deacon of this Church, or suffered to execute any of the said functions,

except he be called, tried, examined and admitted thereunto according to the form hereafter following, or hath had Episcopal consecration or ordination.”

I am glad in confirmation of the statements of this Paper to add an extract from the report of the committee on “Authoritative Standards of Doctrine and Worship”, of which the Bishop of Ely was chairman, and which was presented to the last Lambeth Conference, in 1888.

“From the standards of doctrine of the Universal Church, which the whole Anglican Communion has always accepted, we now pass to those standards of doctrine and worship which are specially the heritage of the Church of England, and which are, to a greater or less extent, received by all her sister and daughter Churches. These are the Prayer Book, with its Catechism, the Ordinal and the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. All these are subscribed by our Clergy at Ordination or admission to office, but the Thirty-Nine Articles are not imposed upon any person as a condition of communion.

With respect to the Prayer Book and Articles, we do not consider it an indispensable condition of inter-communion, that they should be everywhere accepted in their original form, or that the interpretation put upon them by local courts or provincial tribunals should be received by every branch or province of the Anglican Communion. In illustration of this principle we would refer to the differences from the English Order of the Administration of the Holy Communion which have long existed in the Scottish and American Churches, and to the fact that the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion were only accepted in America in the year 1801, with some variations, and in Scotland in 1804, and that the Church of Ireland as well as the Church in America, has introduced some modification into the Book of Common Prayer.

We, however, strongly deprecate any further material variation in the text of the existing Sacramental Offices of the Church, or of the Ordinal, than is at present recognized among us, unless with the advice of some conference or council representing the whole Communion.

With regard to the Daily Offices and such further forms of service as the exigencies of different Churches or countries



may demand, we feel that they may be safely left for the present to the action of the Bishops of each Province. We do not demand a rigid uniformity, but we desire to see the prevalence of a spirit of mutual and sympathetic concession, which will prevent the growth of substantial divergencies between different portions of our Communion.

With regard to those Dioceses which are not yet united into Provinces, we recommend that the Bishop of the Diocese should not act in the way of revision of, or additions to, such Offices without the advice of the Archbishop of Canterbury; or in the case of foreign missionary jurisdictions of the American Church, without the advice of its Presiding Bishop.

With regard to the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion we thank God for the wisdom which guided our fathers, in difficult times, in framing statements of doctrine, for the most part accurate in their language and reserved and moderate in their definitions. Even when speaking most strongly and under the pressure of great provocation, our Communion has generally refrained from anathemas upon opponents, and we desire in this to follow those who have preceded us in the faith. The omission of a few clauses in a few of the Articles would render the whole body free from any imputation of injustice or harshness towards those who differ from us. At the same time, they are not, and do not profess to be, a complete statement of Christian doctrine: and, from the temporary and local circumstances under which they were composed, they do not always meet the requirements of Churches founded under entirely different conditions. Some modification of these Articles may therefore naturally be expected on the part of newly constituted Churches, and particularly in non-Christian lands. But we consider that it should be a condition of the recognition of such Churches as in complete inter-communion with our own, and especially of their receiving from us our episcopal succession, that we should first receive from them satisfactory evidence that they hold substantially the same type of doctrine with ourselves. More particularly we are of opinion that the Clergy of such Churches accept Articles in accordance with the positive statements of our own standards of doctrine and worship, particularly on the substance and rule of faith, and on the state and redemption

of man, on the office of the Church and on the Sacraments and other especial ordinances of our Holy Religion.”

W<sup>m</sup> CROSWELL DOANE,  
Bishop of Albany.

I am permitted to say that this paper has the endorsement of the R<sup>t</sup> Rev. John Williams D. D., Bishop of Connecticut, and Presiding in the House of Bishops.

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