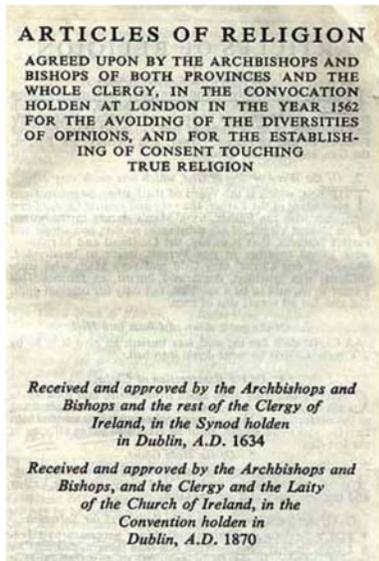




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Should the 39 articles of religion be revised? Part 3

A Three-Part Article by Colin Maxwell



The 39 Articles of the Anglican Religion have become a grave embarrassment to many professing Anglicans. Even in J. C. Ryle's day, the good Bishop had occasion to speak of those who "seem to have a peculiar dislike, an hydrophobic aversion. They seldom refer to them, unless perhaps to sneer at them as the 'forty stripes save one.' They never quote them, never bring them forward if they can possibly help it." Like it or not, these are the official doctrines of the Anglican Church and those to whom they have become an embarrassment have expressed their desire to have them repealed or revised. It may be that many will go along with this cry without even knowing the full issues at hand. It is very easy for some to say that they are outdated. The fact that they have fallen into relative disuse does not mean that they are of no use. The fact that some high ranking clergymen despise them does not mean that they ought to be dropped. It might be

good to remind ourselves that those high ranking clergymen got where they are today by constantly affirming these same Articles. It is the purpose of this paper to defend the Articles of Religion.

THE 39 ARTICLES THEREFORE DO NOT NEED TO BE REVISED

Certainly the Word of God has not changed. Christ still has somewhat against that church which refuses to deal with false teaching.⁴² If these distinctive teachings of Rome were offensive to God's Word in the 16th century, then they are just as offensive in this day and age. Our forefathers were not mistaken in their actions. The blessing of God rested upon their heads as they sought to maintain a pure and viable gospel witness, free from the soul blighting doctrines which emanated from Rome. The Scripture warns that in the last days some shall depart from the faith.⁴³ Paul said that the time would come when there would not be the enduring of sound doctrine, but that teachers would arise to cater for their itching ears.⁴⁴ Such a day has arisen. If ever there was a need for a solid, explicit, confession of faith, then it is the day in which we now live. It would be well nigh suicidal to overthrow or revise the 39 Articles for something less. There is certainly nothing to be gained by embracing the Church of Rome who still holds tenaciously to her erroneous doctrines.

HONESTY IN ASSENTING TO THE THIRTY NINE ARTICLES

An ordination to the Christian ministry is a most solemn affair. God has somewhat to say about those who run in His name without being sent.⁴⁵ In the Anglican Communion, and certainly in the Church of Ireland, the one to be ordained is required to record his agree-



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ment to these Articles. Every minister before ordination or institution as a Rector must declare: "I assent to the 39 Articles of Religion."⁴⁶ The word assent is defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary as: To express agreement (verb); Consent (verb); 1. mental or inward acceptance or agreement (noun); 2. consent or sanction, especially official (noun). By saying that he assents to these Articles, the rector is in effect saying that he accepts the doctrines of the Trinity etc., and also repudiates the Roman doctrines of the mass etc., He cannot both assent and dissent at the same time. Such action would not be based on the honesty which one would expect from a man in the street, never mind a candidate for the ministry. He cannot pick and choose. There is no room for him so to do and rightly so. If there were, then you are back to the thought of a church that is divided in what ought to be its strength i.e. its doctrine. You are back to confusion at least and anarchy at worst. This is why it is incumbent on the Bishop at such ordinations - as on any other occasion deemed necessary - to be ready with all faithful diligence to banish and drive away all erroneous and strange doctrines according to God's Word.⁴⁷ Any preacher who countenances the mass etc., whether in word or deed e.g. by attendance is a danger to his congregation. By his own admission if he says: "I assent to the 39 Articles of Religion", he is acknowledging that his sympathies lie with a doctrine or practice that has given occasion to many superstitions and is repugnant to God's Word. His own mouth condemns him.

Surely common decency demands that those who do not agree with the Articles should not say that they do. What is to be gained by telling, in the most solemn of circumstances, a blatant untruth? How can the blessing of God, Who Himself cannot lie, rest upon the ministry of one who has?

In the 19th Century, a number of ordained Church of England ministers expressed their sympathies for the doctrines of Rome, although they had assented to the 39 Articles. After a long struggle to introduce various Roman Catholic practices into the Anglican Church, several of them resigned their ministries and converted to Rome. John Newman, later to receive the Cardinal's hat, was among this number. I am not a fan of Newman's. To leave the message of salvation by grace alone to embrace a doctrine that teaches otherwise must, by New Testament definition, rank him as an apostate.⁴⁸ But with all my abhorrence of what he did and the legacy he left behind, I admire him in this: He followed through the convictions he came to hold. I do not agree with those convictions. They cast a dark shadow over Christ's once and for all sacrifice upon Calvary. They usurp Christ's priestly office etc., but I would not grudge Newman any respect for following them through. I sincerely wish he had not formed them. I wish he had returned to the Bible as his sole rule of faith and practice. Had he done so, then he would have steered far away from the course he later took. But at least, he was a man of conviction. Seeing that he no longer assented to the 39 Articles, he honestly resigned his ministry and went to where his heart really lay.

CONCLUSION

This tract is a clarion call to return to the truth of the 39 Articles. A return to the 39 Articles is, in effect, a return to the Word of God, for they are most Biblical in their content. One reason why Churches are largely empty today is because they have forsaken clear Biblical doctrine. The preaching of the Cross will ever be offensive to the man in the street.⁴⁹ The apostles were well aware of this, yet they persisted preaching Christ and Him crucified.⁵⁰ Any gains made by trimming the message are but short term and cost dearly.



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Let God be God! Let God take care of His own Word. He has pledged Himself to its success.⁵¹ Counting heads or church offerings does not come into it. The final question ought to be: Am I faithful to God in the solid unapologetic proclamation of His Word? Do I preach the whole counsel of God?⁵²

No one needs be ashamed that he really and honestly believes the 39 Articles. He is entitled to hold to his principles without being despised in any way. If people despise him because he dares to affirm the truth of the gospel and oppose the lie of hell, then they have the problem not he.

Footnotes.

42. Revelation 2:14-15.

43. 1 Timothy 4:1.

44. 2 Timothy 4:3.

45. Jeremiah 29:9.

46. The debate on the 39 Articles --Leaflet produced by the Evangelical Fellowship of Irish Clergy.

47. Book of Common Prayer p 441.

48. Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-31.

49. 1 Corinthians 1:18.

50. 1 Corinthians 1:21-23.

51. Isaiah 55:11.

52: Acts 20:27.