

# THE FAITH WE CONFESS:

AN EXPOSITION OF THE  
THIRTY-NINE ARTICLES

BY GERALD BRAY



*The Latimer Trust*

The Faith We Confess: An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles

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# The historic formularies of the Church of England

The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion are one of the three historic ‘formularies’ (constitutional documents) of the Church of England. Along with the Book of Common Prayer and the Ordinal they gave the church its distinctive identity at the time of the Reformation, an identity which has had a formative influence on worldwide Anglicanism. Even if Anglican churches outside England are free to alter their statements of doctrine and patterns of worship, and many have done so, it remains true to say that the English formularies have played an exceptionally important role in shaping the Anglican Communion and that they continue to serve as reference points whenever it is necessary to think in terms of a common Anglican tradition. In the confusion caused by recent developments within the Communion, it is encouraging to see that groups like the Fellowship of Confessing Anglicans have returned to these sources for inspiration and seems determined to bring them back to the centre of the church’s life and witness. Whether or to what extent this will become a pattern for the future remains to be seen, but for the first time in many years there appears to be a genuine hunger for both Anglican tradition and sound Christian doctrine in many parts of the Communion. It is to meet this growing demand that this book has been written.

The historic formularies were designed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) to give the English Church a solid grounding in the three fundamental areas of its life – **doctrine, devotion and discipline**. The Articles provided its doctrinal framework, the Prayer Book settled the pattern of its devotional life and the Ordinal outlined what was expected of the clergy, whose role was the key to the church’s discipline. Until the early twentieth century all three formularies functioned in a recognisable way within the Church of England, and although they were modified to varying degrees in other Anglican churches, the family resemblance among them all was still easily discernible. In the past century however, that situation has changed dramatically. Pressure from the Anglo-Catholic wing of the church led to demands for the reform of the Prayer Book, which was undertaken by some Anglican churches, including the Church of England, in the 1920s. Though successful elsewhere, the revised English Prayer Book was rejected by Parliament in 1928, because of its perceived Romanising tendencies. However, many parishes decided to use it

anyway on the ground that the church's own representative assemblies had approved it, and so the liturgical unity of the church was compromised. In the 1960s renewed pressures, coming this time from modernisers as much as from traditional Anglo-Catholics, led to a round of liturgical experimentation which culminated in the *Alternative Service Book* (1980), which has since been replaced by *Common Worship* (2000). The 1662 Book of Common Prayer has not been withdrawn, however, and is still used by some people, but it is probably fair to say that most parishes use forms of worship which they have cobbled together out of the liturgical resources available, or preferred to do their own thing. As a result, the devotional unity of the Church of England has been destroyed and with very few exceptions, the younger generation has no experience of the Book of Common Prayer in worship.

The Ordinal has suffered less drastically from modernisation, but it has been undermined in another way. It was intended to provide a framework for the admission of full-time stipendiary men to the church's threefold ministry, and it laid a solemn charge on them to preach the Word of God, to administer the sacraments and to undertake their pastoral duties to the best of their ability. That pattern remained intact until the 1970s, but liturgical reforms that have laid more emphasis on the sacraments than on the ministry of preaching and teaching have increased the pressure to ordain significant numbers of undertrained and part-time people who can perform ceremonies but are ill-equipped to teach congregations. Alongside this, the fusion of many parishes, particularly in rural areas, has produced an irregular ministry in many parishes. The concept of a professional minister still survives to some extent, but the traditional vicar is a vanishing breed and will probably be quite rare in thirty years' time if present trends continue.

The Articles of Religion have not been revised or supplemented, but if anything they have suffered an even more drastic fate – they have been sidelined and ignored instead! It is true that official church statements continue to make occasional references to them, but these are for the sake of form more than anything else. Few people, even among the clergy, have ever read them properly and almost nobody who is now active in church life has ever studied them seriously. Historians pay attention to them, as they must, but others tend to dismiss them either as antiquated relics or as inadequate statements of the church's beliefs – or both! The fact that they are less comprehensive than the Westminster Confession of Faith (which was originally intended to be a revision of the Articles) is used to argue that the Church of England is

not a confessional church and that its doctrine must be sought elsewhere – notably in the Book of Common Prayer! There is little understanding, even among those who support the retention of the Articles, of what they are or of why they matter for the church. This book is intended to show that, despite their apparent shortcomings, the Articles are indeed the church's confession of faith and that they remain indispensable to its mission and identity in the world. It is possible to argue that they should be supplemented by further doctrinal definitions and to regret that they were effectively fossilised in the early seventeenth century for largely political reasons, but that does not mean that they can simply be ignored by modern Anglicans. What they say remains of key importance to us, and in the current identity crisis that we face as a worldwide Communion, the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion give us a clear picture of the framework within which we are called to operate.

### *Articles as statements of doctrine*

The shape and function of the Thirty-Nine Articles reflect a long tradition of intellectual activity that can be traced back to the law schools of ancient Rome. In a world where memory had to be stored in the human head and not on a computer, vast quantities of information had to be compressed into a format that could be absorbed by the average intelligent person. Roman laws were often long and complex in their details, so lawyers had to learn what they contained in general terms, and know where to look for those details if they needed them. As a result, the laws were epitomised in short paragraphs, known as *regulae* (or *canones* in Greek), that were learned off by heart. The early church adopted this practice with respect to the Bible, which was also too long to be memorised as a whole. It developed what was called 'the rule of faith', a series of basic doctrinal points that comes in different (but mutually compatible) versions, out of which emerged the creeds as we know them today. In addition to these, there were a number of canons enacted by various church councils, covering matters of doctrine and discipline. Most of these canons were produced because some controversy had arisen which they were intended to resolve by applying some theological principle to a particular concrete situation. As time went on, collections of canons were made and it was discovered, not surprisingly, that different conclusions had been reached by different churches at different times and in different circumstances. Sorting all this out became a matter of urgency in the twelfth century, when the papacy was trying to unite the whole of Western Europe under its authority, and it was at that time that systematic theology as we now

understand it can be said to have begun.

The two most important people in this process were an Italian lawyer-monk called Gratian (*fl. c.* 1140), and Peter Lombard (1090–1160), another Italian who migrated to Paris and died there as its bishop. Gratian wrote what he called a ‘concordance of discordant canons’ but which we now know as the *Decretum*. His work was soon supplemented by a large number of papal decretals, which were subsequently collected and put in some kind of order by different popes – Gregory X (1234), Boniface VIII (1298) Clement V (1313) and John XXII (1325) being the most prominent among them. This pattern continued until about 1500, when the collections reached their classical form in what came to be called the *Corpus iuris canonici*.

Peter Lombard’s work appeared in four volumes and was known as the *Sentences*, the word being used in its legal sense of ‘decision’ or ‘definition’ (as in ‘passing sentence’ on someone.) Like Gratian, the Lombard assembled as many ancient authorities as he could find and organised them in a logical pattern to produce the first truly systematic theology. His magnificent synthesis, which has only recently been translated into English, remained the theological textbook in common use until the sixteenth century, when other works, especially John Calvin’s famous *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, finally supplanted it. Of course, theology did not stand still in the interval and men like Thomas Aquinas (1226–1274) produced longer and more detailed systematic theologies that are still widely read today, but the *Sentences* were never lost sight of and most medieval theologians, including Aquinas, cut their teeth by writing commentaries on them.

As the medieval universities developed, it became customary to present new thoughts and initiate controversy in a similarly abbreviated form. Debates were frequently started by asking leading *questions* (e.g. ‘Did Adam have a navel?’) or by publishing short *theses* intended to provoke further discussion, and concluded in equally brief *articles* that summarised the main points of agreement between the parties concerned. Such articles of agreement were also used in legal documents, ranging in time from the *articuli cleri* of 1316, which outlined the sphere of jurisdiction allotted to the ecclesiastical courts of England, to the Articles of Confederation, composed after the American Revolution as a prelude to the union of the states that emerged from it.

This was the world into which Martin Luther (1483–1546), Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) and John Calvin (1509–1564) were born. They too believed that complex theological arguments could and should

be condensed into brief statements that could be memorised and expounded, rather in the way that a professor would now lecture from his class notes. To put it a different way, their theses or articles were meant to be understood as the tip of an intellectual iceberg, giving a clear outline of what lay concealed beneath the surface. From a distance of nearly five centuries it is easy to look at them and conclude that they have little to say, but those who do that are liable to discover what the unfortunate sailors in the *Titanic* found out to their cost – there is more to them than what the eye can see, and to ignore their hidden depths is to court shipwreck.

The Reformation began with ninety-five relatively brief theses that Martin Luther circulated in 1517, in which he challenged the pope's pretensions to an authority that he could not legitimately claim. Debate about this and other related matters soon followed, and before long there was a torrent of literature coming off the presses, including the *Assertion of the seven sacraments*, a refutation of Luther's views written by no less a person than King Henry VIII of England. The pope reluctantly rewarded Henry for his efforts with the title 'Defender of the Faith', which his successors bear to this day, although the content of that faith is no longer quite what was originally intended!

In the early years of the Reformation, there were so many voices wanting to make themselves heard that nobody knew for sure what Luther and his true followers believed. In response to a request for clarification made by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (1519–1556), the Lutherans put together a statement of their beliefs, which they presented to the Imperial diet (parliament) at Augsburg in 1530. This was the famous *Confessio Augustana*, or Augsburg Confession, which remains a basic document of Lutheranism to this day. Those who signed it were protesting (*i.e.* confessing) their faith and so came to be known as 'protestants'. When the Church of England broke with the papacy in 1534 and Henry VIII sought an alliance with the Germans, it was only natural for the latter to ask whether the English were prepared to accept the 'protestant' faith – in other words, were they willing to sign the *Augustana*?

This may seem like a simple question to us, but it was politically and theologically complicated. Henry VIII had not broken with Rome merely in order to submit himself to a rival authority in the shape of a group of German theologians. Nor was he persuaded of the truth of the *Augustana*, at least not in every respect. To his mind, opposing the pope did not necessarily mean supporting Luther, and Luther was well aware of Henry's theological deficiencies. The two men were tactical allies

thrown together by having a common enemy and those who strove to create a lasting bond between the Church of England and the Lutheran churches of Germany had to take account of that fact.

In late 1535 a small group of English theologians made their way to Wittenberg, where they conferred with Philipp Melancthon and other Lutherans and eventually agreed on a series of articles of belief. These articles reflected the Augsburg Confession in substance but were sufficiently different from it in form as to appear to be a fresh statement of faith. What happened to these so-called Wittenberg Articles is unknown. Apart from a few extracts, they disappeared from view almost immediately and were not rediscovered until 1904. They were found in Germany however, and it is not known whether a copy of them ever reached England. But soon after the English theologians returned home the Church of England adopted the so-called Ten Articles, which bear some resemblance to the Augsburg Confession and to the Wittenberg Articles, though mainly in the way they divide their subject matter into a doctrinal section (the first five articles) and one dealing with questions of ritual and devotion (the last five articles). It looks very much as if they realised that they would be unable to persuade either the church or the king to accept anything more radical, and so the Wittenberg Articles were quietly dropped. All that remained was the form – the first doctrinal statement made by the independent Church of England appeared as a series of articles, a pattern that set the standard for the future.

### *The origin of the Thirty-Nine Articles*

The adoption of the Ten Articles in 1536 was soon followed by an extended theological commentary, put out under the authority of the bishops and thus known to us as the 'Bishops' Book' (1537). It was clearly Protestant in tone and we know that Archbishop Cranmer went on to draw up a further series of thirteen articles which were modelled very closely on the Augsburg Confession, along with at least three others which have survived among his papers but whose exact status is unclear. Had things gone smoothly, it is possible that the Church of England would have adopted something very much like the *Augustana*, but before that could happen, Henry VIII had a change of heart. His reformation was moving too fast in a radical direction, and he determined to stop the process by getting parliament to enact six ultra-conservative articles, reaffirming such things as compulsory clerical celibacy and the doctrine of transubstantiation (1539). Four years later he produced a revised version of the Bishops' Book (which we now

know as the 'King's Book') that gave a much more traditional presentation of Christian doctrine, though it did not simply restore the old religion as it had been before 1536.

These matters rested until Henry died in 1547, leaving his nine-year old son Edward VI (1547–1553) on the throne. Archbishop Cranmer belonged to the regency council and was put in charge of church affairs, which allowed him to introduce more far-reaching changes than had previously been possible. His first public act was to issue a book of sermons, or homilies, which were designed to teach ordinary people the basic truths of the Christian faith. These homilies were a mixture of theology and practical pastoral counselling, and they were written by a number of different people, including at least two men (Edmund Bonner and John Harpsfield) who were not sympathetic to the Reformation. Nevertheless, the homilies demonstrate the fact that doctrine has to be the starting point for Christian discipleship. Unless we know what we believe and why we believe it, we shall not put it into practice with the consistency and conviction required of true Christians. The homilies were designed to bring that message home to people, and to prepare them for the other changes that were to follow.

The next stage was the composition of a Book of Common Prayer, which provided the church with an English-language liturgy that was authorised for use from 9 June (Pentecost) 1549. Annexed to this book (though not part of it) was the Ordinal, which established the form for making bishops, priests and deacons in the reformed church. The impetus for reform now gathered pace, and within three years Cranmer managed to revise the Prayer Book, produce a set of doctrinal articles and prepare a thorough-going church discipline that would supplement the Ordinal and touch every aspect of the church's life. He managed to get parliament to accept his second Prayer Book, which was in use from 1 November 1552, but there seem to have been difficulties with both the articles of religion and the book of discipline. Exactly what happened is unknown, but it is clear that parliament would not accept the latter when it met in March 1553. Whether the convocation of the clergy of the archbishop's province of Canterbury, which met simultaneously with the parliament, ratified Cranmer's articles or not is unclear. Writing many years later, Matthew Parker, archbishop of Canterbury from 1559 to 1575, insisted that it did, and as he was present in 1553, his testimony may be regarded as that of an eye-witness. However, there is no documentary evidence that this happened, and modern scholarly opinion tends to doubt Parker's statement. Either way, the articles received the royal assent on 19 June 1553, only a few days before the king

died.

Cranmer originally composed forty-five articles, which were reduced to forty-two by the simple expedient of combining articles 26-29 on the sacraments into one. In the overall arrangement of their material, they bear little resemblance to the Augsburg Confession and much more to Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, or Calvin's *Institutes*. Of course, as mere articles, they were much shorter than any textbook of theology, but the range of subjects covered (and their order) shows that Cranmer was thinking in terms of a systematic presentation of Christian doctrine. The forty-two articles were not just position statements on disputed points of doctrine but a general exposition of what he thought the church ought to believe. That this is so can be seen from the inclusion of a number of articles on subjects that were not particularly controversial at the time, but which formed an integral part of the church's overall confession of faith.

It is obvious that the articles were composed in an atmosphere which reflected hostility to the church of Rome, but the nature of this polemic is more complex than most people realise. The papacy had long been in conflict with secular rulers over matters of jurisdictional competence, and the fact that Cranmer generally took the side of the state in such things was not necessarily the result of the Reformation. The Catholic states of Europe, especially France and Spain, were doing exactly the same thing, and papal power over them was often rejected with just as much determination as it was in England. For example, the popes wanted to convene a church council to deal with Protestantism, but they were not allowed to do so until the emperor Charles V could be persuaded to permit it. Charles only gave way after insisting that the council should be held on his territory – at Trent, in northern Italy. The council of Trent duly opened in 1545 and continued off and on until 1563, the year that Cranmer's articles reached their final form. This was not a coincidence. The articles of religion cannot be fully understood except against the backdrop of Trent, which was making its own doctrinal definitions of the Catholic faith. It would be wrong to say that Cranmer and his successors reacted against Trent and contradicted it at every turn, though it is true that Trent tended to produce theological definitions which were deliberately designed to be as far away from Protestantism as they could possibly be. The Protestant churches were therefore forced to deal with this challenge and provide a convincing alternative, and the effects of this are clearly discernible in several of the surviving articles.

It is harder to say whether or to what extent the forty-two articles

consciously set out an 'Anglican' position in relation to churches other than the Roman one. Cranmer was aware of the Eastern Orthodox churches but on the points where they disagreed with Rome, he tended to side with the latter because those differences had emerged at a time when the English Church was still in communion with the pope. The main exception to this was the doctrine of the papacy itself, where Cranmer was obviously closer to the Eastern position, though this was an accidental circumstance rather than the result of a deliberately pro-Orthodox policy on his part. With regard to continental Protestants, Cranmer tried to weave a middle course (the famous *via media*) between the rival factions, looking for formulas that would be acceptable to as many different Protestant groups as possible. The one strand of continental Protestantism that he had no sympathy for was Anabaptism, which he openly denounced, though it is interesting to note that many of his references to the Anabaptists were removed from the articles when they were later revised.

Cranmer composed his articles in Latin, the theological language of his day, and the English translation was only an approximation to that and had no formal authority of its own. It is important to understand this, because Latin terminology was subsequently absorbed into English and may seem more natural to us today than Cranmer's translation does. For example, in the first article we read that God is 'without...passions' which is somewhat ambiguous (at least to a modern ear), but the Latin is *impassibilis*, or 'impassible', which makes the meaning immediately clear – to a theologian, at least! Modern students whose Latin is shaky or non-existent must therefore be especially careful not to read meanings into the English version of the articles which the official Latin text cannot support. On the other hand, English was obviously the mother tongue of those who composed the Articles, and so it is not unreasonable to think that the translation can shed light on the true meaning of the Latin whenever the latter is ambiguous or obscure.

### ***The revision of the Articles***

The death of Edward VI on 6 July 1553 and the accession of his sister Mary I (1553–1558) was a disaster for the Protestant cause. Cranmer was soon imprisoned and was eventually put to death, as were a number of other leading Reformers. The second Prayer Book went officially out of use on 20 December 1553, though no doubt it had disappeared some time before that, and the forty-two articles were stillborn. Mary did her best to put the clock back to 1534 and if she had lived, or produced a

credible heir, she might have succeeded. As things turned out however, she died before any real reaction could set in and her persecution of leading Protestants won sympathy for their cause among the general population. This enabled her successor, Elizabeth I (1558–1603) to restore the position that had existed at the death of Edward VI, though she took the opportunity to make some changes along the way. In particular, the 1552 Prayer Book was slightly modified to make it more acceptable to traditionalists, and the forty-two articles received a more thorough overhaul.

The revision of the articles was entrusted mainly to Matthew Parker, the archbishop of Canterbury and to John Jewel, bishop of Salisbury, both of whom were Protestant in their sympathies. Many of the changes they made were cosmetic and of little or no doctrinal significance. This is particularly true in those cases where only the English translation was altered, or where modifications to the Latin were not enough to force any change in the English. In several cases, the text was reworded or rearranged to make it flow better, but there was no significant alteration in meaning. The most important changes were those which involved the deletion of Cranmer's text and its replacement by something else. This happened, for example, in article 7, which deals with the Old Testament, where the revised version is completely different from the original, even though it covers the same subject matter. Also in this category are articles which were added by the revisers, like article 5 on the Holy Spirit, or simply deleted, like articles 39-42 which discussed eschatology, an ever-controversial subject about which the divines of the English Church evidently decided it was best to say nothing at all.

The revised articles, now numbering only thirty-nine, were brought to the convocation of Canterbury on 29 January 1563 (1562 according to the old calendar then still in use) and signed by its members on 5 February. But when the queen was asked to ratify them, she struck out article 29, probably because she thought that it might offend the Lutherans. It was only in 1571, after the pope had excommunicated her, that Elizabeth allowed the issue of the articles to be reopened, and the opportunity was taken to make several more revisions to them. Among other things, article 29 was restored and the Cranmerian text of article 7 was put back alongside (rather than instead of) the 1563 version. In this form, the Thirty-Nine Articles were approved by the Canterbury convocation on 4 May 1571, after which they remained unchanged. The clergy were expected to subscribe to them at ordination and on admission to a benefice, a requirement that was

formalised in canon 36 of 1604. That requirement remained in force until the late nineteenth century, after which it was progressively watered down so that today it is only necessary for the clergy to affirm general assent to the historical traditions of Anglicanism, of which the Articles are one representative text. As a result, it is still possible to claim that the Articles are an integral part of Anglican identity but difficult, if not impossible, to prosecute anyone who dissents from them for heresy.

Theological debate did not cease in 1571 of course, and nobody at the time thought that the Articles were immutable. When controversy erupted over predestination in the 1590s, Archbishop John Whitgift produced nine articles on the subject which were signed by him and a number of other bishops on 20 November 1595, but these so-called Lambeth Articles were rejected by the queen for reasons that remain unclear. She probably objected to the idea that her bishops could act without her prior consent, but may also have felt that a statement on such a controversial subject might undo her hard-won settlement of the church.

The next occasion for reform came in 1615, when the Church of Ireland decided to adopt its own articles of religion. The Irish Church had gone along with the English articles, more or less by default, but by the early seventeenth century some Irish theologians felt that a more thoroughgoing revision was needed. They took the Thirty-Nine Articles as they stood (though with the notable omission of numbers 34-36 and 39), added the Lambeth Articles and filled in the rest with subjects that the English articles had not touched on or which had been deleted in the 1563 revision. The result was a text of 104 articles which became the official doctrinal statement of the Church of Ireland and which many hoped would be adopted in England as well. The most important innovation of the Irish Articles was its change of theological method. Whereas the English ones followed the medieval tradition of starting with God the Holy Trinity, the Irish ones adopted the pattern first found in the Second Helvetic Confession of 1566, whereby the doctrine of Scripture claimed pride of place and was followed by the doctrine of God. The reason for this was that our knowledge of God is derived from Scripture, even though in the absolute sense, God exists independently of the Bible, which he gave to us.

The subsequent history of the Articles was determined by the reign and policies of Charles I (1625-1649). Charles wanted to restore the church to what he believed was its former glory and to that end he did his best to go back at least to 1559 and perhaps earlier. In December

1628 he issued a curious declaration forbidding discussion of theological points like predestination, which had become the subject of bitter controversy within the church, and imposing the Thirty-Nine Articles on the church as definitive for all time. A few years later he tried to extend this policy to Ireland, but although he got the Irish to accept the Thirty-Nine Articles in place of their own ones, he could not persuade them to rescind the latter and they remained available for use at least up to the outbreak of civil war in 1641. Only at the restoration were they definitively retired, but even then it would be more accurate to say that they were in abeyance and not actually revoked.

The revolt of parliament against the king had deep religious causes, and so it is not surprising that in 1643 an assembly of theologians was called to meet at Westminster, in order to hammer out a common confession for the churches of England, Scotland and Ireland. The Thirty-Nine Articles were the agreed starting point, but it soon became apparent that they would need considerable supplementing, as the Irish experience in 1615 had already demonstrated. The resulting Westminster Confession of Faith, which like the Irish Articles, also starts with the doctrine of Scripture rather than with the doctrine of God, was finished in 1646 and imposed by parliament on the churches of the three kingdoms, only to be rescinded at the restoration in 1660. Further turmoil led to the Scottish rejection of episcopacy in 1690, at which point the Scots adopted the Westminster Confession as their doctrinal standard. In England and Ireland however, the Thirty-Nine Articles remained in place, with the curious declaration of Charles I prefixed to them as a reminder (and a warning) to anyone who might want to reopen the question of their adequacy.

In the eighteenth century John Wesley reduced the number of articles to twenty-five by omitting the ones he did not like (like article 17 on predestination) or felt were irrelevant, and many of his Methodist followers went along with that, though it meant leaving the Church of England. After the American revolution the remnants of the Anglican church in that country regrouped themselves and adopted a slightly pruned version of the Articles, omitting those with political references and doctoring a couple of others, notably the one on the creeds, where mention of the Athanasian Creed was removed (1801). Since that time, other emerging Anglican churches have either accepted or rejected the Articles as a whole. None has attempted to modify them and the 1571 text remains their standard as far as it is applicable to their circumstances.

Those who wish to study the history of the Articles in greater detail are referred to the books mentioned in the bibliography which deal with the subject. The intention of this book is to take them as they now stand and interpret what they mean for us today. Historical circumstances cannot be avoided completely and will be mentioned as necessary, but the main emphasis here is theological. What do the articles say about what we believe and how should they be understood and applied by us today? Read on!

### *The structure of the Articles*

Do the Articles possess a clear structure in the way in which they are set out? This is a difficult question to answer, and the Articles themselves give us no clue as to how (or whether) they can be subdivided according to theme. Various commentators have tried to construct a rationale for them and there are certain things which point in a particular direction. For example, it is clear that the first few articles deal with the doctrine of God, and that the sacraments are also grouped together later on. Whether this is enough to produce an overall pattern is less clear, but for our purposes the following subdivision seems to be the most appropriate.

#### *1. The Catholic doctrines*

This is covered in articles 1-8, which deal with God the Holy Trinity (1-5), the Holy Scriptures (6-7) and the ancient creeds (8). The order is the right one, in that God inspired the Bible and the creeds summarise its teaching, and on the whole, the contents of these articles can be regarded as pan-Christian. The only exceptions to this are the list of canonical books in article 6 and the inclusion of the Athanasian Creed in article 8, but these are minor. In the first case, the canon given is that of Jerome which had a strong claim to catholicity even though it was rejected by the council of Trent. In the second case, the Athanasian Creed was never accepted in the eastern churches, but although this may be an issue in modern ecumenical dialogue, it was not so in the sixteenth century, when most people believed that it had originated in the east with Athanasius and would not have understood the objections to his authorship that are put forward today.

#### *2. The Protestant doctrines*

This includes articles 9-34 and forms the main body of the Articles

taken as a whole. This is hardly surprising, given the fact that both Thomas Cranmer and the later revisers were mainly concerned to expound the Church of England's teaching in the light of the Reformation and to chart a course that would keep it firmly allied with both the Lutherans and the Reformed, even though they were falling out with each other. The main thrust of these articles is directed against Rome, which was perceived to be the chief opponent of orthodox Protestant views, but there was also hostility to the kind of radical reformation usually associated with the Anabaptists. However, it is noticeable that in the course of revision, hostility to Rome remained unabated whereas adverse references to Anabaptism were modified and often deleted entirely.

Within this section, there are seven subdivisions as follows:

- a. the need for salvation (9-10)
- b. justification by faith and the place of good works (11-14)
- c. the Christian life (15-18)
- d. the church (19-22)
- e. the ministry (23-24)
- f. the sacraments (25-31)
- g. church discipline (32-34)

Each of these subdivisions follows on logically from the preceding. We begin with sin and the fall of mankind, which is the inevitable starting point, since if that had not happened, the Christian message would have been unnecessary. From there we move on to how things are to be put right, which is by faith and not by works, however good and even necessary the latter may be in their proper context. After that, we look at the Christian life as the imitation of Christ, who alone is sinless. Our relation to him is established by pointing out that we are still sinners, but that we have been called and chosen by God for a particular purpose, which can only be fulfilled in Christ, our unique Lord and Saviour.

Next we move on to the church, which is the body of all who believe in Christ and which exists in both invisible (perfect) and visible (imperfect) forms. The invisible church is not our concern because it is directly in the hand of God. At the same time, God has committed the government of the visible church to us, and we must rule it in a way which furthers his divine and invisible purpose. The authority of the visible church is clearly delineated, and the pretension that it can extend to souls after death is denied. From there we move logically to the ministry and the way in which it is called to function in the church.

After that come the sacraments, both in general and in particular, with various abuses singled out for special treatment. Finally, there are three articles dealing with matters of church discipline – clerical marriage, excommunication and tradition(s). None of these has the status of an official doctrine but each of them affects the way the church lives in the world and so they are dealt with together.

### 3. *The Anglican doctrines*

These are found in articles 35-37 and deal mainly with matters specific to the Church of England or to the civil order. Included here are the *Homilies*, issued for the instruction of the people but confined to the English Church, the threefold order of ministry, which again is seen as something practised in the Church of England but not necessarily of universal application, and finally the relationship of church and state. The last two articles (38-39) are not specifically ‘Anglican’ or even ‘Protestant’, but because they concern matters of civil government, they are logically appended to the article on church-state relations.

Understood in this way, the Thirty-nine Articles have a logical and harmonious symmetry, starting with what is universal and going on progressively to what is more particular, first to the protestant world in general and then to the specific circumstances of the Church of England. The passage of time has brought changes to some of the individual provisions contained in the Articles, but the basic structure is sound and shows that, at the time of their composition, the Articles of Religion were the most systematic and comprehensive concise statement of faith that the Reformation had up to then produced.

#### ***A NOTE ON THE FORMAT OF THIS BOOK***

Each article is treated individually, with some questions for group discussion and suggestions for further reading appended at the end. The lists of books are not intended to be a definitive guide to their subject but only an introduction for those who want to pursue the matter further for themselves. Some of these books are important contributions to their subject but their authors do not share the same Evangelical faith as the members of the Latimer Trust, which does not necessarily endorse every view expressed in them.