

Views from the Pews – The 39 Articles of Religion: Part 2

After The Ten Articles of 1536, the next step in the development of Anglican doctrine was the appearance of 'The Bishops' Book' in 1537, a discussion of faith and morals based on the Ten Articles. It was drawn up by a committee chaired by Archbishop Cranmer, as an explanation of the doctrines and practises of the Church of England. It did not have King Henry VIII's fiat, however, and therefore had no authority. The 'King's Book' appeared in 1543, and was essentially a revision of the Bishops' Book based on the King's own criticisms.

Rapid changes followed the death of Henry VIII in 1547 and the accession of Edward VI. In 1552, what became known as the 45 Draft Articles were submitted to the King and the Royal Chaplains. They were closely scrutinised, reduced to 42 and returned to Cranmer.

The 42 Articles were comprehensive but relatively moderate in tone. They were critical both of what were seen as Roman Catholic excesses, and of the Anabaptists. They tried to present a united protestant front and to exclude extremists of any kind. They were published under King Edward VI's authority, but dropped after his death on 6 July 1553 and the accession of the fervently Catholic Queen Mary.

When Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558, she needed to secure religious unity in Protestant England while avoiding criticism in Europe about the English Church. Elizabeth began, not with doctrine but with worship and discipline. She secured the Royal Supremacy, appointed Bishops to vacant sees, and took measures to enforce decency in worship.

It was not until 1563 that work began on a revision of the 42 Articles. They then formed the basis for evolving the standards for guiding future developments of Anglican doctrine. Convocation was given the task of this revision, under the indirect influence of Lutheran doctrine.

When first presented to Convocation, there were still 42 Articles, but four were replaced and a further two were struck out, leaving just 39. These are the ones appearing in the 1662 Prayer Book

Although some of the theological and scientific thought behind these Articles look out-dated to us in 2021, they do still represent a substantial theological statement. They deserve consideration by every Anglican as part of our history. We should all appreciate how the doctrine of the English Church has developed since the Reformation.

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