

Views from the Pews – The 39 Articles of Religion Part 1.

The 39 Articles of Religion appeared in the Book of Common Prayer of 1662, though not in the New Zealand Prayer Book (He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa). They were the product of the English Church as it gradually emerged from the Reformation. The present 39 Articles began life as a series of doctrinal statements on issues to meet new questions as they arose. Hence, several different formulations preceded the published version.

Of course the reformation was not a single event, but a cumulative series of adjustments over a long period, beginning in about 1534 with Henry VIII's repudiation of papal authority in England. There had already been differences between the Sovereigns in England and the Popes back as far as William I's objection to the Pope raising a tax in England, referred to as Peter's Pence. Henry's action was simply the completion of the breach with Rome.

Lutheran ideas had reached England by the early 1500s. At that time, the previously unheard-of notion of introducing changes into centuries of religious doctrine and practice was being raised by European theologians. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, and Tyndale's translation of the Scriptures into English, strongly influenced how people in England understood their faith. Some people saw the European break with Rome as an acceptable development. Others saw some reforming doctrinal positions, such as those of the Anabaptists (requiring re-baptism) as contrary to historic Christianity. Even so, England remained resolutely Catholic throughout the arguments, although outside Papal authority.

The first attempt of the English Church to state its position came in the form of The Ten Articles of 1536. The first five of these Articles dealt with matters of doctrine, especially the sacraments and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. They also laid a strong emphasis on the sacraments of Baptism and penance. The remaining sacraments were named, but not considered essential to salvation. Also included were the use of images to aid worship, and the invocation of Saints to intercede *with* us rather than *for* us. There was no explanation of how the doctrine of the real presence works, and no mention of Transubstantiation.

The Ten Articles reassured most people that England was still Catholic. But the wording achieved a subtle compromise by infusing sufficient traces of Lutheranism to reassure the reformers that they had been heard.

To be continued
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