



I know that there is a lot of controversy today about the authority of the Bible in the Anglican Church, but I haven't heard anything about the Thirty-nine Articles in decades. They are in the back of the 1979 Prayer Book, but what is the place of the Thirty-nine Articles in Anglicanism now?

The articles of Religion—popularly called “the Thirty-nine Articles”—were a key element of what is known as the “Elizabethan Settlement” in mid-16th century England.

In order to understand what the Articles of Religion are we need to remember that:

- In all countries in Europe in the 1500's there was absolutely no separation whatsoever of church and state. A loyal subject was a good churchmember, a disloyal churchmember was at best a disloyal subject if not a traitor. Even the very concept of the separation of church and state is just over 225 years old.
- There was only one legal church in the 1500's in any European country: the state church, the church of the national ruler. Not only was it illegal to belong to any other church, but a person's civil rights—the right to vote, to attend a university, to hold civil office, etc.—depended on one being a loyal member of the state church (i.e. attendance each Sunday and obedience to the state church's teaching).
- Criminal law and secular courts enforced canon [church] law. There were civil penalties—including the death penalty—for infractions of church law in all European countries. After the Reformation, in Spain and Italy there was the Roman Catholic Inquisition. In Switzerland the radical Protestant reformer Ulrich Zwingli had those suspected of Catholic convictions drowned in Lake Zurich. In France there were Roman Catholic massacres of Protestants. In England Roman Catholic Queen (“Bloody”) Mary had many non-Roman Catholics burned at the stake.
- The England which Elizabeth I inherited from her father Henry VIII, her half-brother Edward VI, and her half-sister Mary was an under-developed, vulnerable, backwater nation which was weak militarily and economically as well as politically unstable and was facing the threat of imminent invasion by Spain. Elizabeth, a very astute politician, realized that her highest priority had to be building a strong nation as quickly as possible. England could not afford to have religious in-fighting prevent the achievement of this crucial national development, as for example is happening today in Northern Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Elizabeth imposed a political solution to the divisive controversies among Protestants, Papists, and Anglicans which historians call “the Elizabethan Settlement.” She has been quoted as saying “I will not make windows into men's souls,” a 16th century equivalent of “don't ask; don't tell.” Unlike both Zwinglians in Switzerland and Roman Catholics in Spain, there would be, she said, no inquisitions in England which would attempt to force suspect individuals to confess that they did not truly hold the faith of the state church. However, Elizabeth said, all persons in England must attend their (state) parish church weekly and use the Book of Common Prayer, liturgy which could be celebrated with either “high church” or “low church” ceremonial “externals” (vestments, incense, chanting, etc.) as desired.

It is important to understand that this was a political solution to an internal conflict that threatened the survival of the nation. The Articles of Religion (“Thirty-nine Articles”) were a document which established legally what constituted “non-conformity” for the purposes of prosecution in the secular courts, that is, the legal boundaries of conformity to the Use of the Book of Common Prayer (what an individual did and said publicly, not what one believed). The Thirty-nine Articles, however, are a specifically English legal document, not a theological statement of world-wide Anglicanism.