

Moravian Moment#153...

What is the significance of the 39 Articles of the Church of England?

The 39 Articles of Religion are the essential beliefs of the Anglican Church codified. The articles were established by a Convocation of the Church in 1563, using as a basis the 42 Articles written under the direction of Thomas Cranmer in 1553. The 42 Articles were overturned under the fervently Catholic Mary I, but under Elizabeth I the pendulum swung back in favour of reform. But what flavour of reform should Elizabeth adopt? There were extremists on both hands, some calling hopefully for a return to more Catholic forms of worship, and others clamouring for various extreme reformist views to be advanced.

As one might expect under Elizabeth I, the articles are couched in ambiguous language, allowing for a broad definition of faith that excluded Roman Catholics and Anabaptists, yet included a spectrum of Protestant beliefs. Elizabeth sought to draw together the people of her realm under one umbrella of faith that allowed for individual variation, yet firmly established the primacy of the Anglican Church, with her at its head.

The articles repudiate Catholic beliefs such as transubstantiation and the sacrifice of the Mass, and affirm the supremacy of scripture. They allow clergy to marry, and affirm the right of the monarch to influence church policy. In 1571 Parliament made adherence to the 39 Articles a legal requirement, and though that statute no longer holds, they remain the basis of Anglican faith in England to this day.

The far-reaching influence of the 39 Articles in Protestant faith cannot be underestimated. The Unitas Fratrum recognizes in the Creeds of the Church the thankful acclaim of the body of Christ. These Creeds aid the Church in formulating a scriptural confession, in marking the boundary of heresies, and in exhorting believers to an obedient and fearless testimony in every age. The Unitas Fratrum maintains that all Creeds formulated by the Christian Church stand in need of constant testing in light of the Holy Scriptures. It acknowledges as such professions of faith the early Christian witness: "Jesus Christ is Lord!" and also especially the Ancient Christian Creeds and the fundamental Creeds of the Reformation.

The 39 Articles of the Church of England along with a number of other Creeds gained special importance in the Unitas Fratrum or the Moravian Church, because in them the main doctrines of the Christian faith find clear, simple expression. It is the position of the Unitas Fratrum or the Moravian Church that every person should be able to read and understand the beliefs of our Church and why.

February 14, 2010