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Editorial

THE New Year has seen the question of the revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles brought into prominence. It is, of course, no secret that the officialdom of the Church of England has it in mind to revise both Prayer Book and Articles once the revision of Canon Law has been disposed of. But the sermon preached by the Dean of St. Paul's, Dr. W. R. Matthews, on Monday, January 18th, at the service held in St. Paul's Cathedral, on the occasion of the opening of the first session of the recently elected Convocation of Canterbury, was used as an opportunity for expressing the opinion that the Thirty-Nine Articles stand in need of amendment at an early date. After expressing certain misgivings regarding the revision of Canon Law, which has for so long been occupying the attention of our Convocations, and suggesting in particular that "legislative zeal" had been "too prolific", with the consequence that the proposed new canons were too numerous to ensure easy and intelligent observance (a view with which we are disposed to agree), the Dean said: "Perhaps the time has come to look beyond the revision of the canons and ask ourselves what is the next task in the process of setting our house in order. I venture to say," he continued, "that the answer to this is obvious. We ought to consider the possibility of revising the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Undoubtedly this would be a difficult and even dangerous matter, but if it could be successfully accomplished it would be of great benefit to the Church." In his view the Articles were "not an adequate presentation of the Christian faith as we understand it at the present time", and were "not adapted to the needs of men of the twentieth century". He believed it would be "hard to overestimate the value of a short, plain, and authoritative statement of the outlines of Anglican belief".

The following day *The Times* supported the Dean's plea for revision of the Articles in a leading article, and this in turn was followed by the publication of a letter from Dr. A. E. J. Rawlinson, until recently Bishop of Derby, who, however, expressed the opinion that there were "definite advantages in the retention of a confessedly dated and historic set of Articles . . . as setting forth the historic position of the Church of England as a *via media* between Rome and Geneva". (The framers of our Articles, by reason of their contact and sympathy with Geneva, would hardly have described the Church's position in these terms. It is largely the current deficiency of contact and sympathy with "Geneva" that causes so many of our officials at the present time to view the Articles with distaste and even animosity.) "Is there not a danger," the Bishop asked, "that any freshly devised set of Articles, acceptable to Churchmen today, would itself quickly become dated and obsolete in its turn, and yet liable, as claiming recent authority, to be found cramping by the theological mind of tomorrow?"

Next to appear was a letter from Canon J. S. Bezzant of Cambridge, who strongly complained of the affirmation in the second of the proposed new canons that "the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion are agreeable to the Word of God and may be subscribed unto with a good conscience by all members of the Church of England". He declared

that to enact this in 1960 was indefensible, not only because (according to him) "the Articles contain statements *not* agreeable to the Word of God as understood by any reputable Anglican theologian", but also because some of them "cannot be either 'subscribed unto' or even be given a general and acquiescent 'assent' *with a good conscience* by any but a 'Fundamentalist'". Letters from the Dean of Winchester and Canon C. A. Wheeler, of the Diocese of Oxford, were also published.

Anyone might be forgiven for suspecting that Canon Bezzant's categorical pronouncements were not free from an admixture of emotionalism. At least the language he uses has this entertaining implication, namely, that the drafters of proposed Canon II, and the archbishops, bishops, and clergy of the two houses of our Convocations who have approved it in its present form, must henceforth be content to be classified as Fundamentalists! Be that as it may, the assertion of the draft canon that "the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion are agreeable to the Word of God" shows that there are others in the Church besides Evangelicals who view the Articles in a different light from Canon Bezzant.

The additional assertion, however, that the Articles "may be subscribed unto with a good conscience by all members of the Church of England" is in our judgment not merely fatuous but also entirely inappropriate for inclusion in a code of laws. It is impossible to legislate for the state of a man's conscience. Were the canon to say that the Articles, when assent is required to them, "*must* be subscribed unto with a good conscience," it would be both intelligible and logical. Those who cannot assent with a good conscience to the doctrine of the Thirty-Nine Articles should not subscribe them under any circumstances. What sense does it make to tell a man of Canon Bezzant's convictions (which we respect) that, as a member of the Church of England, he may subscribe them with a good conscience? That is precisely what he cannot do.

Incidentally, we deprecate the resurrection in this correspondence of the old inflammatory gibe of the "forty stripes save one" as applied to the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Most recent to enter the debate is the Archbishop of York, Dr. A. M. Ramsey, who writes of "The Future of the Thirty-Nine Articles" in the February issue of *The York Quarterly* (which he edits). After considering the various forms which a revision of the Articles might take—either a rewriting of them to make them easily intelligible to the modern reader, or an adjustment of them to make them relevant to the modern errors of Rome, or a redrafting of them in the light of modern scholarship and the present mind of the Church, or the provision of an entirely new document—the Archbishop seems to come down on the side of Bishop Rawlinson. "We have to ask," he says, "whether a new document which seemed satisfactory in one decade might not seem intolerable a few decades later," and he foresees that revision of the Articles "could bog us in unprofitable partisan conflicts".

Evangelicals, of course, have no wish to affirm that the Thirty-Nine Articles are a document of perfection or that they are completely relevant to the contemporary situation. Nor do they wish to deny that

the Articles are, in many of their emphases, a product of the sixteenth century controversy with the Roman Catholic Church, and that in understanding them this circumstance has to be taken into account. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that during the interval between then and now the cardinal tenets of the Roman Church have remained unchanged and that the errors of that Church repudiated in the Articles still prevail. Moreover, the anathemas of Trent damning the distinctive doctrines of the Reformation have never been retracted. These are facts which should not be overlooked in any discussion of the historical setting of the Articles of our Church.

But it is even more important to recognize that the framing of our Articles was a conscious confessional attempt to bring the doctrine of the Church of England once again into harmony with that of Holy Scripture. We cannot in principle object to the revision of the Articles with a view to making them more appropriate in language and content to the age in which we live, always provided that there is no attempt to revise the historic and apostolic *doctrine* of the Church of England.

In his valued article which appeared in our June issue last year Professor G. W. Bromiley drew attention to the fact that "the articles pose an ultimate challenge by their own acceptance of the biblical and therefore apostolic norm which is the test of the only true catholicity". And, as he further pointed out, "the Articles are a genuine attempt to state scriptural doctrine on leading issues. But they do not usurp the place of Scripture. By their own confession, they are themselves subject to the lordship of God's Word."

It is up to Evangelicals and all others who cherish the scriptural heritage of the Church of England, in accordance with their own honest convictions, to hold contemporary drafters and formulators to their unequivocal declaration that "the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion are agreeable to the Word of God", and to do their utmost to ensure that any revision, any attempt at restating the position of our Church *vis-à-vis* leading issues of our day, shall likewise be genuinely agreeable to the Word of God, and subject to it.

P.E.H.

POSTSCRIPT.

Preaching at Cambridge in the University Church on Sunday, February 21st, the Dean of St. Paul's returned to the subject of the Thirty-Nine Articles with considerable vigour. He is reported as having asserted that some of the Articles contain "absurdities and even blasphemies". This is beyond question a charge of the utmost seriousness which reflects not only on the compilers of the Articles, but also on the numberless churchmen who over the centuries have approved and indeed cherished the Articles as a compendium of scriptural teaching on the subjects with which they deal. Were they all, therefore, and are those who think like them today, idiots and blasphemers? It is a charge which the Dean should substantiate or withdraw; for his utterance can hardly fail to start the winds of fierce controversy blowing within our Church, and this we can only deplore. The more temperate approach to this issue of the Archbishop of York is much to be preferred.

P.E.H.