

1. It was a natural response for continuing Anglicans, who knew that the Church had betrayed the gospel and themselves by departing from well-established truth, to affirm anything which seemed to be part of the definition of that truth. The 39 Articles seemed (in England) to be an obvious recourse as they were part of “the Book of Common Prayer” as commonly published (strictly, they are a separate document). However, this may be an over-simplistic response.
2. It should be noted that neither the Affirmation of St. Louis nor the TAC Constitution mention the 39 Articles. There are good reasons for this. Many parts of the Anglican Communion even while it was sound had never included the Articles in their fundamental documents, or required their clergy to make any commitment to them. Some of the Articles made no sense except in the context of a state church. Consequently, even if used, they had had to be modified, as happened in the United States (where, in addition, the Athanasian Creed was removed from Article VIII). They would not, therefore, be an effective means of unity for a world-wide body.
3. For the 39 Articles to be useful, we need a basis for determining what they mean, and also to decide who should undertake what commitments in relation to them.
4. Now the question of meaning is not straightforward. Some of them are perfectly clear and also perfectly orthodox, and do exactly what continuing Anglicans would wish. But this is not true of all of them. At the lowest, do we want to put the legitimacy of conscription and capital punishment on a par with the great truths of the faith (XXXVII)? Do we know *how* “the Church of Jerusalem, Alexandria and Antioch, have erred” (that is, what were the errors, how long did they last, how important were they), because if we don't how can we possibly evaluate the assertion that “so also the Church of Rome hath erred (XIX)? There are further technical problems, because it is not certain whether the Latin or English version has priority, and they sometimes differ. For instance, the Latin of XXXVII legitimises conscription into just wars (*iusta bella*) but the English leaves out the critical adjective. Dr. Pusey commented in his analysis of the Tract 90 controversy: “Every one must have observed that the Articles are drawn up with very different degrees of precision or dogmatic character. Some are framed with great precision (as the five first and the Ninth); some (like the Sixth) have to be supplemented out of some other Article; Art. XXV., as far as relates to the “five commonly called Sacraments,” is ungrammatical; Art. XXIX., though plain and intelligible in itself, can by no possibility be made to mean what is often understood by its heading; some Articles are negative only, disclaiming certain opinions but not stating any positive truth” . . . (“Tract XC on certain passages in the XXXIX Articles” by Newman, with a historical preface by Pusey and a letter by Keble, A. D. Innes & Co 1893 page xl)
5. An instinctive approach is to assume the meaning is that of the original compilers. Unfortunately, many of the articles went through a long process of development. Occasionally, we gain some sense of what the final Article does *not* mean from the earlier stages of the process. For example, since a rejection of the “real and bodily presence, as they term it” was considered but not included in the final text of Article XXVIII, then it is a tenable view that the compilers chose not to exclude this doctrine by an unambiguous form of words (which is not the same as saying that they believed it). In the same way, a rejection of “*ex opere operato*” was dropped from Article XXV. The difficulty is that whereas we think the Prayer Book of 1549 is effectively the consistent work of one person, Cranmer, at one stage in the development of his theological thought, this is not true of the Articles. Many people had a hand in them over a long time. (Nor is it true, incidentally, of subsequent versions of the Prayer Book.) There can be no antecedent certainty that the various compilers agreed with each other, or with doctrines which those of the compilers we can identify (some of them we do not know) elsewhere asserted.

6. Ultimately, we may assume that the complete text satisfied the Queen (since she accepted it) for whatever purposes she had in mind. These were probably more to do with national stability than theology (and she was very discrete about her theological opinions). Likewise, the complete text was agreed by Convocation, but the meaning or intention of a large body of men is not a useful concept. We may suspect that their intention was to head off Parliament from demanding something worse, and to avoid provoking royal displeasure. The one hint which may be taken into account is that the same Convocation required preachers to conform themselves to Christian antiquity (Councils and Fathers). Even this is of limited value. Everybody tended to develop a collection of early Christian proof texts to show that their version of the faith was authentic in these terms. For the mentality, see Jewel's "Apology" of 1562, a work contemporary with the later stages of the Articles: "Further, if we do show it plainly that God's holy Gospel, the ancient bishops, and the primitive Church do make on our side, and that we have not without just cause left these men, and rather have returned to the Apostles and old Catholic fathers; and if we shall be found to do the same not colourably or craftily, but in good faith before God, truly, honestly, clearly, and plainly; and if they themselves which fly our doctrine, and would be called Catholics, shall manifestly see how all these titles of antiquity, whereof they boast so much, are quite shaken out of their hands; and that there is more pith in this our cause than they thought for; we then hope and trust that none of them will be so negligent and careless of his own salvation, but he will at length study and bethink himself to whether part he were best to join him." None of these collections of early Christian proof texts would stand critical scrutiny now. No modern priest, aware of the hundreds of closely printed volumes which make up the Fathers, could successfully so conform his preaching. We do not have the time to read them all!
7. In 1628, the appeal to the meaning of the compilers was rejected. His Majesty's Declaration (customarily prefixed to the Articles) insists on "the literal and grammatical sense". That is to use the same rules as apply to Acts of Parliament; the intention of the legislators consists in the text and the courts should not look beyond the text even if the Government has stated its intentions elsewhere. It is thus evident that the Articles were not thought to convey an unambiguous meaning less than sixty years after they were adopted. This is hardly surprising. The original compilers were mostly theologians with a normal Western training. Long before 1628, the Articles would be criticised (or accepted) not in terms of such training, nor on the basis of disputes in the period from 1530 to 1570, but in terms of Calvin's Institutes and subsequent disputes such as the Synod of Dort.
8. It is however a puzzle how long this rule remained in force. In the Tract 90 controversy everybody seemed to behave as if it did, and that therefore evading "the plain and full meaning" was a grave accusation because that meaning was obligatory. However, the Church of England Doctrine Commission reported that in 1662 "the Declaration was not given any legal or constitutional force" and therefore has ever since been of purely historical interest ("Subscription and Assent to the 39 Articles" SPCK 1968 para. 23). One might add that the variety of opinions expressed by different commentators on the articles who thought they were expounding them in the manner required by the Declaration suggests that this approach was not transparently successful, though of course it does put some limit on the possible range of meanings.
9. The other possible meaning is that of whoever currently requires assent to the Articles. This is of course hideous – it would imply every Bishop his own meaning. Or do we mean the Bishops of a province (and so their meaning might change every time one of them does some thinking, or at the least, whenever there is a new Bishop anywhere in that province)? Clearly this is not a useful approach unless a synod of Bishops makes a public declaration of its meaning, to be binding until there is a subsequent declaration. But if a Synod is competent so to fix the meaning of the Articles, it might be more sensible to declare its meaning directly rather than make assertions about the meaning of the Articles.

10. If we could find something which was “the” meaning, it would of necessity be a statement about 1571. We might assume that the Articles were consistent with the 1559 Prayer Book, and Article XXXVI specifically affirms the Ordinal then in force. However, we do not live in 1571. There is no certainty that the Articles would remain consistent with the 1604 Prayer Book (which added the sacramental section to the Catechism) or with the 1662 Prayer Book (which imposed new meanings on the Communion service) or with the 1662 Ordinal (to which that Article, not having the gift of prophecy and never having been revised, makes no reference). Much less with any subsequent developments in England, or with the various Prayer Books now in force within TAC. Now most Continuing Anglicans in England use a form of Communion Service which at the very least reorders 1662, deletes much material from it, and arguably conforms better with the practice of the early Church. But all this takes it a long way from 1559. Even if the 1559 Communion Service was consistent with the Articles, what we all (I mean all, not just those who affect the English Missal) now take for granted in our worship might not be.
11. Again, the Articles do not always address important questions. Yes, we know from them what books constitute Scripture (VI) and that worship ought to be in a language understood by the people (XXIV), which implies a biblical translation. But from what text is that translation to be made? In 1571 one might argue for the Vulgate or the Received (Byzantine) Greek of the New Testament; for the Vulgate, Septuagint or Hebrew of the Old Testament. The Articles are silent on what was a matter of current dispute. Necessarily they do not authorise the “authorised version”, which came later. Nor do they address our modern problems. Should one translate the New Testament from the Received Greek or from the best critical text one can assemble, and with awareness of underlying Hebrew or Greek? For the Old Testament, do we work from the Hebrew with vowels (a millennium after Christ) or without the vowels (only a couple of centuries after) or from the best critical text including the evidence of early translations and the Dead Sea scrolls? What theory of translation do we adopt – more or less word for word, as in the Revised Version, or trying to convey the meaning?
12. It might be added at this point that Article VI is simply false. We cannot historically assert that there is a list of books “of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church”. The Reformers were not, perhaps, to know the full depths of this problem, though I think they did know that the “Shepherd” had sometimes been accepted as part of the New Testament, and that some books (Hebrews and the Apocalypse in particular) had been disputed for a long time. We do know, for example, that the New Testament (Jude 14-15) quotes the First Book of Enoch as if it were authoritative scripture (and that the Ethiopian Church drew the obvious conclusion). Like it or not, the New Testament is what the Church came eventually to accept (by no formal process) it was, and the exact limits of the Old Testament and Apocrypha were *never* agreed.
13. Since mention has been made of Tract 90, it might be useful to make a few remarks about it. The text is readily obtainable from “Project Canterbury” on the Internet. Newman was *not* trying to prove that one could believe all contemporary Roman doctrine and honestly subscribe to the Articles (though Ward did think this). Newman was trying to argue that one could be a follower of the Early Church and honestly subscribe the Articles – that what was precluded by them was not ancient, and that what was enforced by them was at least consistent with the Early Church. This might be said to be a simple following of Jewel's “Apology”, again: “Surely we have ever judged the primitive Church of Christ's time, of the Apostles and of the holy fathers, to be the Catholic Church”. And from the same source: “we are come as near as we possibly could to the Church of the Apostles and of the old Catholic bishops and fathers; which Church we know hath hereunto been sound and perfect, and, as Tertullian termeth it, a pure virgin, spotted as yet with no idolatry, nor with any foul or shameful fault: and have directed, according to their customs and ordinances, not only our doctrine, but also the Sacraments and the form of common prayer”.

14. Newman was explicitly rejecting a particular contemporary Protestant myth, which read the Articles in the light of its own (not very Reformation) assumptions rather than in accordance with His Majesty's Declaration. He was trying to use historical methods, though we now have more information at our disposal, so not all of his arguments will work. Nobody has to accept Tract 90, and yet he identified many problems correctly. Tract 90 leads neither to Rome nor to infidelity – Pusey and Keble totally endorsed it because they were committed to the legitimacy of “Catholic Subscription” (Keble's phrase) and yet remained faithful members of the Church of England. Both of them identified the particular danger that what was in practice at stake was a party in the church imposing upon the whole its peculiar views under cover of the “correct” interpretation of the Articles. This is what the Protestant party was trying to do; Tract 90 merely argues (often rightly) that the Articles leave more topics more open than contemporary Protestants alleged.
15. Now there is little point in having the Articles unless they are to do some work. It seems universally admitted that they were never a complete theological position in the way that some Reformed confessions were, and that possibly the decrees of the Council of Trent were, or the current Roman Catechism is. At best, they set limits (sometimes rather wide limits) on a range of points. They were in effect designed to exclude some people from the entering the ranks of the clergy in future (or taking new livings), on the (surprising) assumption that candidates for ordination or for posts in the Church would not be hypocrites, and so would not subscribe to a document they believed to contain doctrinal errors. The Articles were not designed to control public worship (that was achieved by secular legislation) or to control the content of preaching (I have already mentioned the separate instruction given on this point, and most clergy were not licensed to preach at all). It was in fact only in 1604 that a form of subscription was imposed: “I do willingly and *ex animo* subscribe to these three articles above mentioned [the Royal Supremacy, the Prayer Book and the Articles] and to all things that are contained in them”. On the face of it, a person who did not accept one solitary proposition, however trivial, somewhere in Prayer Book or Articles could not hold office.
16. The exact form of subscription varied over time, and after 1865 there was a myth that only a “general” assent was required to the Articles taken with the Prayer Book and Ordinal, not “complete legal acceptance”. This is for example stated as fact in Bicknell (E. J. Bicknell, “A Theological Introduction to the 39 Articles of the Church of England”, Longmans, 1933, page 27). The Doctrine Commission demonstrated (para. 8) that this was false. However, it also noted that even complete legal acceptance might cover a range of positions, from not contradicting the items assented to in public to “inward commitment to their every proposition”. There is no benefit in giving a status to the Articles unless it is also clear what kind of commitment is demanded.
17. The Articles assume a state church (XXXVII in particular). But this is not our condition. We are not the state religion in England; nowhere else is a TAC body the state religion. We do not expect this; we probably do not want it. There is no point in retaining this Article – indeed, if we in England believed it, should we not return whence we came?
18. Some people are interested in the Articles because they might be thought to have a bearing on the current approach by TAC to Rome. As already indicated, TAC does not have the Articles as a constitutional source and so far forth they are simply irrelevant. However, it might be useful to consider what those who do value the Articles should make of the Roman question. As already indicated, we do not ascribe to the compilers the gift of prophecy. The Articles *may* address the position of the Church of Rome in 1571. Whether they do or not is a matter of historical research. They *cannot* directly address the current situation unless it is assumed first that they correctly addressed the position in 1571 and second that Rome never changes anything. We know that the second position is false. Rome no longer uses “a tongue not understood of the people” (XXIV). It no longer denies the Cup of the Lord to the Lay-people (XXX). Rome has changed. So even if the Articles were right about Rome in 1571, they cannot be assumed to be right about the present.

19. It is therefore necessary to investigate exactly what was asserted or rejected in the Articles and in each case whether it is still true. This is not an easy task. The Council of Trent was in session in 1571, and therefore its completed work had not yet been ratified or received. In some cases, the compilers could have known of a particular (unratified) decision in isolation. So they *could* have explicitly and in so many words condemned that decision recently expressed at Trent. But they *never* do so. They always use vaguer references which have ever since left the question arguable whether the known and deliberately formulated doctrine of the Church of Rome was condemned or merely prevalent errors (some of which Trent indeed also condemned).
20. We might simplify as follows. The early Articles merely summarise the true faith, so there is no dispute (they may be inelegant, but that is not the same as opening out an intended dispute). As to the middle group of Articles, we tend to forget that both the Church of England (before and after the reformation) and Trent were heavily under the influence of St. Augustine, and so the gap between the Articles and Trent is much narrower than between either and the wider body of Church Fathers. (Compare Kung on Justification – Rome accepted his thesis that there was no discernible gap between Trent and Karl Barth!) So in respect of the middle group it is only the most expert scholar who can be confident of proving a major disagreement then – and St. Augustine is not infallible or in himself normative now. So we are best give detailed attention to the Articles from XVIII onwards. Some even of this group do not generate an issue in relation to Rome.
21. XIX “the Church of Rome hath erred” is only important if it is stretched to mean that the Church of Rome persisted in 1571 and persists now in fundamental error. If that were the case, the error should have been identified. The weight of the polemic in Jewel is against abuses, rather than a demonstration of important errors on matters of faith. So all it *has* to mean is that the Teaching Office has at some time in the past made a mistake (which for anything the Article says it may swiftly have corrected). Now while Rome claims that its teaching has a high degree of accuracy, so that the believer can generally rely on it, it is only of a tiny group of doctrines that it claims infallibility. Not being prophetic, the Article does not deny infallibility either as defined in 1870 or in the sense that the Church of Rome now claims it.
22. XX of the Authority of the Church might well be agreed by Rome. The limiting conditions for infallible decrees as defined at Vatican I make it very hard to decree anything beyond a legitimate inference from Scripture to which there is early witness. Now Jewel's “Apology” denies the possibility of a papal ministry: “we say that there neither is, nor can be any one man, which may have the whole superiority in this universal state: for that Christ is ever present to assist His Church, and needeth not any man to supply His room, as His only heir to all His substance: and that there can be no one mortal creature, which is able to comprehend or conceive in his mind the universal Church, that is to wit, all the parts of the world, much less able rightly and duly to put them in order, and to govern them rightly and duly.” It would be easy for this proposition to have been included in the Articles. It seems important enough. But it is not there. Something like it might, indeed, be found casually asserted in the Homilies – but as Tract 82 puts it: “Romanism surely is innocent, compared with that system which should impose on upon the conscience a thick octave volume, written flowingly and freely by fallible men, to be received exactly, sentence by sentence: I cannot conceive any grosser instance of a pharisaical tradition than this would be.”
23. XXI of the Authority of General Councils is in part ridiculous. Nobody would now “think that the commandment and will of princes” had anything essential to do with the faith. The rest of the Article is probably not controversial, as it is a truth of history that even large Councils broadly representative of the Church have fallen into error. The last clause is vacuous – any Council is likely to allege it is following Scripture and what authority can rule on the claim? Since the Church of England indubitably endorsed the first two General Councils (or what is the status of the “Nicene” creed), probably the first four, and some would say the first six or all seven, there certainly have in its opinion been Councils which did not err. The Article does not explain how to identify them.

24. XXII of Purgatory. It is a matter of dispute what “Romish” means. Earlier drafts had referred to the Schoolmen, which would have been an identifiable group with identifiable teachings, so the Article may be taken as *not* referring to them. It is not disputed that there were many vulgar errors in all these areas which Trent to some extent corrected, let alone more recent Roman reformation. Those however who are determined to find fault will note that the Roman Catechism still has a section on indulgencies (though Rome does not sell pardons). The remaining topics condemned suffer the same problem that we do not know what “Romish” meant then and whether it still applies now.
25. XXV see also the end of XXVIII. Both articles truthfully deny “Christ's ordinance” for various practices concerned with the Eucharist. They nowhere assert that we are limited only to what has the explicit and direct institution of Christ - which would condemn many New Testament practices! The Articles do not say that any of these things are wrong – that is a classic instance of reading into the Articles what some people think they ought to have said. Reservation and carrying about of the Holy Communion was positively required for the Communion of the Sick in the 1549 Prayer Book, and is certainly a practice of the Early Church. Worship of Christ present in the Sacrament is not so clearly a practice of the Early Church or of the Universal Church, but the modern Roman encouragement of frequent communion has arguably much reduced the risk of gazing on the Sacrament as a substitute for communicating worthily.
26. XXVIII transubstantiation is (unusually for the Articles) quite tightly defined, and the issue is thus made dependent on a particular philosophical theory. It is probably fair to say that in 1571 the Church of Rome was committed to that theory. Clearly a philosophical theory such as “substance and accidents” cannot be necessary for salvation. The question for these times is whether the Roman Catechism now agrees with what was then asserted and condemned. Naughty people might add that it is also very unclear what the Church of England believed after the changes to the 1662 Communion Service. The charge of “*hocus pocus*” can be thrown at both jurisdictions.
27. XXXI depends on the weight given to the plural “ sacrifices of Masses” and “it was commonly said” - this may never have been intended as a condemnation of the text of the Roman liturgy in itself, but only of errors in the use thereof. Again, the Council of Trent did itself reform at least some of the errors. There is an interesting question for historically minded Anglicans how much weight should be given to the reply of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York to the condemnation of Anglican Orders, commonly known as *Saeptus Officio*. That reply asserts the substantial functional equivalence of the Prayer Book Holy Communion and the (Tridentine) Roman liturgy rather than denounces the latter, so the Archbishops gave their signatures to a carefully written document which suggested they did not have a problem with the text of the Mass as such, only with theories which were applied to that text. I presume the Archbishops therefore did not think this Article condemned the Roman Mass of their own time. Of course, Anglicans are not committed to the private opinions of their Archbishops never approved in Convocation, yet it would seem that the Archbishops were exercising that authority in controversies of faith which the Articles assert the Church must have. I have written about this controversy elsewhere.
28. XXXII Rome has married priests in Uniate rites, as do the Eastern jurisdictions. Between the world wars, Bishops of the Church of England did forbid priests to marry, because of financial restrictions. I know this from personal testimony of a victim! Similarly even Protestant missionary societies have found the need to place restrictions on marriage, for entirely practical and godly reasons. Certainly in the early church there were married bishops and priests continuing to live with their wives and to have children after ordination. I agree therefore that the permission in the Article is not repugnant either to Scripture or early practice, but the general subsequent placing of restrictions did have some good reasons behind it (and some mistaken). This is not a fundamental matter, but within the limits of ecclesiastical judgement.

29. XXXVI it seems that Rome did accept ordinations using the Edwardian ordinal when tidying up under Queen Mary. The issue of Anglican Orders is more about the intention to be assumed when that ordinal was brought back into use in 1559 and later, though an aspect of the text which might be thought to bear on the question of intention was changed in 1662 (allegedly for completely different reasons than the dispute about intention). Again, those who wish to know more about this should revisit Saepius Officio (if they think it has authority). Note that the Church of England never denied the validity of Roman Catholic ordinations (many of its priests in 1571 had been so ordained, and this was a scandal to the more thoroughly “reformed”).
30. XXXVII the issue is “of the civil magistrate” and so in modern terms would merely say that the Pope cannot issue a binding instruction to Parliament to pass or repeal a law. (In 1571, it meant that the Pope's ruling that Elisabeth was not Queen, for reasons which Henry VIII had also found compelling, was not binding.) If more is meant, it would mean that the Church of England makes it a truth of faith that Parliament could and should forbid anybody in this country to be a Roman Catholic. I repudiate any such doctrine. It is now simply the case that as a matter of the law of the land people are free to accept the spiritual jurisdiction of the Pope. Whatever we decide to do about the Roman question, we do not denounce the adherence to the Pope by Roman Catholics in England. The Article no longer conforms with the law of the land, as it once did.
31. The Articles were designed for the purpose of requiring subscription. So we have to consider who should subscribe. It is an irony that the original controversy about Tract 90 was in the context of every member of Oxford University, even undergraduates, having to subscribe. Only later did it become an issue about clergy subscription in the Church of England. Now the original practice was to require subscription whenever a position in the Church was accepted, thus binding the active clergy. This is reasonable enough, but there is a clear case for extending subscription to Readers and Deaconesses (as was done in the revised canons of the Church of England). If the laity are to have any say in matters of doctrine, as they clearly do in the modern Church of England, it would make sense for members of General Synod to be so bound, but notoriously they have not been. It is not clear whether in the more limited role which TTAC gives its Synod subscription should be required of the lay members.
32. Subscription should always be seen as a moral action of the utmost significance. Keble was very clear that the imposition of some forms of subscription would require his abandoning the Ministry and retiring into lay communion. Better no subscription than one which almost everybody does not take seriously. But is it now possible to devise a subscription to the Articles such that it can be taken seriously, and if so, how many priests (and therefore parishes) are we prepared to lose?
33. What would an attempt to take the Articles seriously mean in practice? I think there is little point in having them without subscription, and nobody should be asked to make such a commitment without the knowledge to do so intelligently. So if we were to take the Articles seriously, we (presumably the TAC Bishops?) must first decide how the Articles are to be understood. Secondly, we must choose an existing commentary on the Articles which is written in terms as little divergent as possible from that understanding (we do not have the resources to write and publish a new commentary, a work of several hundred pages). Since whichever commentary we choose will be out of print and unlikely to be reprinted, we will have to be sure that every person who is to subscribe now and in future anywhere in the world can obtain a copy, which will be far from easy and incidentally imposes the English language upon everybody. Thirdly, since the commentary will inevitably not be acceptable at every point, and will certainly not address the situation of a non-established Church, we must publish a Supplement to address these points. The Bishops will then be able fourthly to require their Examining Chaplains to examine candidates as to their knowledge of the Articles so interpreted. We will also fifthly have to draw up a form of subscription, decide who is to be required to subscribe, and what is to be done about somebody whose subsequent teaching is inconsistent with his subscription. This is a monstrous programme. I suggest it is impossible to perform. But anything less merely puts the Articles on a pedestal.

34. This is not to deny that we need a definite understanding of what it is to be Christian and (within that) Anglican. Nor is to deny the need for clergy discipline, not merely about moral living, but also about forms of worship and the content of teaching. It is merely to say that, in England at least, the appeal to the Articles (for teaching) and, I would incidentally add, to the letter of the Prayer Book (for worship) is not a fruitful route without an enormous amount of explanation – and the explanation thus becomes the effective source of authority, not the Articles and Prayer Book.
35. The underlying reality has already been hinted at. The claim of the early reformed Church of England was that it was a scriptural church, with the interpretation of scripture to an important extent controlled by the experience of the primitive church. Now, like it or not, this exposes a dichotomy. Was the Anglican reformation perfect, so as to be in effect a new revelation? This is occasionally imagined, but what is the evidence that God so acted? If not, then we must admit that the Church of England knew little enough of the scriptures, for their knowledge of languages and texts was very inadequate by modern standards, and even less of the primitive church, for so many documents of first importance were only rediscovered later. Yet it was to scripture and the primitive church that they appealed. Therefore our greater knowledge means that we cannot be bound by their conclusions, however honestly reached. They may for the most part be right. They may be less wrong than those reached by anybody else at their time. It might be that we should endorse their foundation documents in the tortuous sense that “if I had been alive in 1571, I would on balance have been an Anglican rather than anything else” (compare “Subscription and Assent” para. 61). But this is a very tenuous endorsement. I am alive now. I have, with whatever personal limitations, the knowledge of recent (not perhaps contemporary) scholarship. My obligations (and therefore the ability of others to criticise me) are surely best expressed in terms of the situation now.
36. TAC has committed itself, much as the early reformed Church of England did, to scripture and the primitive church. I think we have to accept that, by these standards, the official documents of the sixteenth century cannot be final for us. The Church of England moved on, as did the other Anglican churches (not all of them “daughters”). TAC does not start from 1559 – 1571 as if nothing happened since. Even the Church of England changed quite radically in the period from 1571 to 1662. TAC is not based on the early reformed Church of England in the way that (perhaps) Sydney and its associates are. It starts (see its Constitution and the Affirmation of St. Louis) from scripture and the primitive church as now known, and accepts the wise continuing reforms of various Anglican bodies at least down to the 1920s, if not further.
37. The inability of the Church of England to make changes after 1662 (until the errors of the last forty years or so) is unusual and cannot bind the rest of the world. Anglicanism (whether “Continuing” or not) is not defined by the English state religion.
38. Then 39 Articles simply cannot now be made the object of a morally convincing subscription. The positive programme of TAC, as stated in its constitution, could be – but is too short to cover all the issues. I suppose a modern “syllabus of errors” or “anti-modernist oath” could be added (and frequently revised), but the precedents for such devices are not good.
39. Alternatively, one could subscribe (inevitably in a somewhat more general sense) a comprehensive theological statement. Which leads me to the conclusion that our Bishops acted wisely and perceptively in signing the Roman Catechism! There was simply no other document available which was adequate to convey their good faith.

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