Primary Source Analysis: “The Thirty-nine Articles”

The primary source that I decided to read is “The Thirty-nine Articles,” a really important religious document from the reign of Queen Elizabeth I in England. I ended up choosing to work with this particular document because I have been interested in Elizabeth for years, but have never really had the time to actually read something from the period during which she ruled. As we learned in class, she played a very significant role in shaping England into becoming a major power in early modern Europe. She was of course also directly behind the establishment of the Church of England, of which religious tradition I am part. I figured reading this primary source would be an excellent way to simultaneously learn more about the Virgin Queen and the history of my own faith.

Regarding the authorship of “The Thirty-nine Articles,” no single author is listed, though the preamble does ascribe it to a meeting of archbishops and bishops of England meeting in London. That makes sense as it is a religious document. However, given the role of the monarch in the English Church, we should also recognize that the document would have also had some direct inspiration from Elizabeth I herself. As far as preconceptions are concerned, it is obvious that the queen and her ministers were Protestant Christians, as we shall see more clearly as the paper progresses. All these people would have been supportive of the Elizabethan regime and the queen’s supervision of ecclesiastical affairs in England. When it comes to the authors’ goal, they state plainly in the preamble that the purpose of “The Thirty-nine Articles” was “for the avoiding of the diversities of opinions, and for the establishing of consent touching true religion.” In other
words, what the authors wanted to do was provide the Church of England with an authoritative statement of its beliefs in light of the presence of other religious beliefs – including Roman Catholicism and other forms of Protestantism – in England and elsewhere in Europe. The authors wanted to make an official statement once and for all as to what the Anglican Church thought and taught.

“The Thirty-nine Articles” was written in 1563. Elizabeth was queen of England from 1558-1603, so it was drafted early in her rule. By the time Elizabeth came to power, England had been undergoing tremendous religious change ever since the reign of her father Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547). It was Henry who launched the English Reformation by separating the church in his realm from the papacy and by declaring himself head of the Church of England. Interestingly, Henry remained Catholic theologically, while refusing to have anything to do with the pope. Under his son Edward VI (r. 1547-1553), England became Protestant. But Edward’s reign did not last too long. After his death, his half-sister Mary I (r. 1553-58), who was ardently Catholic, succeeded him, bringing England back into communion with Rome.\(^1\) When she died, her half-sister Elizabeth came to power. Being Protestant, though not as intransigently Protestant as her brother, the new queen wanted to put an end to religious division in England and provide her people with a single, moderately Protestant church, which she hoped would appeal to all. It was to be Protestant in doctrine while retaining some “medieval,” or “Catholic,” elements, as we shall see shortly. Moreover, the sixteenth century was an exciting time for Europe, as the Renaissance and European expansion were changing how Europeans viewed both themselves and the world in which they lived. Elizabeth presided over a vibrant court life.

where Renaissance culture was on full display. During her reign, and into that of her successor James I (r. 1603-1625), the major Northern Renaissance figure William Shakespeare composed his numerous plays, with the English language being at its zenith with him. Also, it was at this point in history that the famous King James Bible, with its beautiful early modern English, came into being. It was first printed in 1611.\(^2\) As for English expansion overseas, under Elizabeth attempts were made to establish a colony in the New World at Roanoke Island in the Carolinas, though that colony failed. It would not be until 1607 that the first permanent English colony, Jamestown, was established in Virginia. And it was also during Elizabeth’s reign that England engaged and successfully defeated, in 1588, the hostile Catholic Spanish Armada. After this religious conflict, it was clear that England was on the rise as an empire, while Spain was beginning to decline.

As one might expect given the title, “The Thirty-nine Articles” are divided into thirty-nine short sections in which the authors explained the various beliefs of the Elizabethan Church of England. As one can see while reading it, most of what is written confirms the fact that the Anglican Church was theologically Protestant. After affirming in the first five articles doctrines that most Christians of the time believed (the Trinity, Christ’s resurrection, etc.), the document affirms the strictly Protestant tenet of “Scripture alone”: “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man…” The second major Protestant theme, justification by faith alone, is taught in Article 11: “We are accounted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by

faith, and not for our own works or deservings.” In Article 25, the authors, being in harmony with other Protestants, stated the following in regard to the sacraments: “There are two sacraments ordained of Christ the Lord in the gospel, that is to say, baptism and the supper of the Lord.” Protestants had been affirming for decades that there were only two sacraments – those two – and that the Roman Church’s other five were later inventions. And a final example I shall cite for the articles’ essential agreement with Protestantism is Article 32, where it is stated that the clergy “are not commanded by God’s law to vow the estate of a single life or to abstain from marriage. Therefore it is lawful also for them, as for all other Christian men, to marry at their own discretion, as they shall judge the same to serve better godliness.”

However, there are some points made in the “Thirty-nine Articles” that make it clear that Queen Elizabeth’s church was in some ways quite different from other Protestant churches. The most obvious difference is that the monarch – Elizabeth – was in charge of the church. Article 37 states:

The Queen’s Majesty hath the chief power in this realm of England… unto whom the government of all estates of this realm, whether they be ecclesiastical or civil, in all causes doth appertain, and is not, nor ought to be subject to any foreign jurisdiction. Where we attribute to the Queen’s Majesty the chief government, by which titles we understand the mind of some slanderous folk to be offended; we give not to our princes the ministering either of God’s Word or of sacraments…but the only prerogative which we see to have been given always to all godly princes in Holy Scriptures by God himself, that is, that they should rule all estates and degrees committed to their charge by God, whether they be ecclesiastical or temporal, and restrain with the civil sword the stubborn and evildoers.

So, the writers were convinced that Elizabeth’s jurisdiction over the English Church was appropriate. They also clearly believed that Scripture, presumably with figures such as Kings David and Solomon, provided precedents confirming the rightness of the English monarch’s role in religious matters. And in Article 36, we also see that under Elizabeth, the Church of England was going to maintain the traditional ecclesiastical hierarchy that had been in place throughout the Middle Ages, though rejected by most other Protestants:
“The book of consecration of archbishops and bishops, and ordering of priests and deacons...doth contain all things necessary to such consecration and ordering; neither hath it anything that of itself is superstitious or ungodly.” Bishops and priests, therefore, traditionally associated with Roman Catholicism, were retained, with there being no concern that there was anything “superstitious” or “ungodly” about their consecration and ordination.

Concerning the sixteenth-century impact of “The Thirty-nine Articles,” it seems to me that its impact would have been great. With this text, it was established once and for all what the Church of England, under the control of the monarch, believed. Those who were members of the Anglican Church would have of course subscribed to it and held it as authoritative. However, those English people of the time who wanted to see additional reform in the English Church (the Puritans), or who wanted absolutely nothing to do with it (Catholics and Separatists), would have been disappointed and dissatisfied with it. For this primary source’s present impact, the Church of England still exists, though there is a great deal of theological diversity in it. Presumably, those who are in harmony with the historical teaching of the Anglican Church look to this document as a guide for proper belief. As far as the document’s historical value, it gives us a good deal of insight into how Elizabeth I, one of England’s greatest monarchs, sought to compromise religiously and create a single Church of England that could appeal to everyone in her country. “The Thirty-nine Articles,” therefore, gives us valuable insight into the Elizabethan phase of the English Reformation.
http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1601-1700/story-
behind-king-james-bible-11630052.html.

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