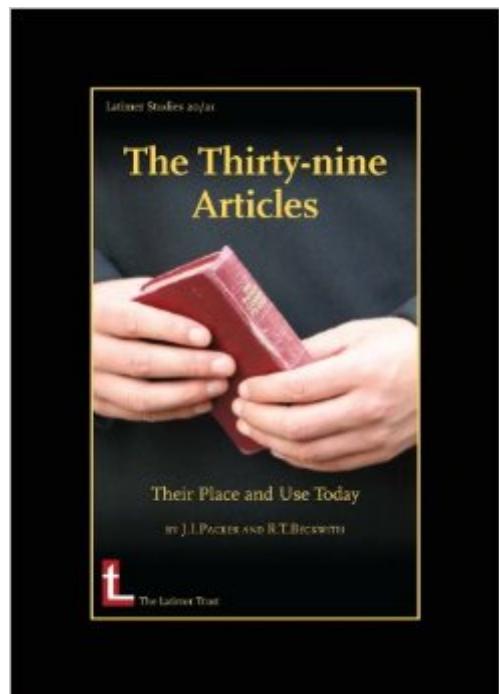


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# The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place And Use Today



## Synopsis

What defines the Church of England? Are the Thirty-nine Articles of any relevance today? Anglicanism, according to Jim Packer, possesses "the truest, wisest and potentially richest heritage in all Christendom" with the Thirty-nine Articles at its heart. They catch the substance and spirit of biblical Christianity superbly well, and also provide an excellent model of how to confess the faith in a divided Christendom. In this Latimer Study, Packer aims to show how the sixteenth century Articles should be viewed in the twenty-first century, and how they can enrich the faith of Anglicans in general and of Anglican evangelicals in particular. He demonstrates why the Articles must once again be given a voice within the church, not merely as an historical curiosity but an authoritative doctrinal statement. A thought-provoking appendix by Roger Beckwith offers seventeen Supplementary Articles, addressing theological issues which have come into prominence since the original Articles were composed. This booklet, first published more than twenty years ago, remains much in demand and as timely as ever. It has proved one of the most popular and enduring Latimer Studies, and is now issued in a second edition. Jim Packer is Board of Governors' Professor of Theology at Regent College, Vancouver. Amongst his many best-selling books are 'Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God' (1961), 'Knowing God' (1973), 'Keep in Step with the Spirit' (1984), and 'Among God's Giants' (1991). Roger Beckwith was librarian and warden of Latimer House, Oxford, for more than thirty years. His recent books include 'Elders in Every City' (2003) and 'Calendar, Chronology and Worship' (2005).

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## Customer Reviews

Packer's book on the Articles of Religion is not a study of the articles themselves but a lament over their disuse and the attitude of indifference toward them that seems to pervade Anglicanism. The result as Anglicanism has developed over the last 175 years or so is an increasing pluralism of beliefs within Anglicanism and a doctrinal "incoherence" unparalleled in mainline protestantism. The book begins by simply reprinting the Articles without comment. Packer then speaks of the "silence" of the Articles in present Anglican life. They have simply been muffled and shunted aside. He recounts their history briefly, grounding the 39 Articles solidly in the Reformation. He makes mention of the erosion of the need for subscription to the articles, the various ways they have been "interpreted" in latitudinarian and Anglo-Catholic circles and laments that fewer and fewer Anglican provinces pay any significant attention to what was once a doctrinal statement which held what Packer refers to as essentially creedal status within the church of England. Packer insists that doctrinal statements and creeds are necessary because we live in a divided Christendom - that is - churches need statements which identify where they stand. Failing to lay out a clear theology, in Packer's view, actually works against ecumenical dialogue and not for it. Lack of clarity only breeds confusion, not unity. Anglicanism, as stated by the Articles of Religion, is firmly committed to both the authority of scripture and the three creeds of Christendom. As such, the articles state a Christianity that is both reformed and historical, and as such the articles express a rich heritage. Where the Anglican communion has drifted is in its commitment to Scripture as the final authority and its commitment to salvation by faith alone. Roger Beckwith's appendix articulates a few recent clarifications that might supplement the Articles regarding historic and evangelical Anglican belief. Packer and Beckwith both stand against the view that sacraments operate apart from faith, as one example of a creeping reinterpretation of a central Anglican principle. One wonders if Packer's stinging critique of recent moves toward a catholic and semi-sacrificial view of the Eucharist raised much attention when the book was written decades ago. Roger Beckwith's contribution suggests that such a sacrificial understanding of the Eucharist overturns the very foundations of Christianity, a stinging rebuke to many liturgical alterations in recent decades. Anglicanism has become a broad tent with Evangelicals in the minority, liberal revisionists attempting to steer the entire communion toward a humanistic relativism and those sympathetic to more Catholic beliefs pulling the communion in a third direction. Most Anglicans seem to float between the three views oblivious to the differences between them. Both of the latter seem to be willing to discard, reinterpret or ignore the 39 Articles of Religion as a doctrinal statement and advance a particular agenda in spite of them. The result is no consistent or coherent theology that

can lay claim to being the official Anglican position on many, many issues. Packer's case is that the Articles need to be returned to their status as a statement of faith Anglicans should subscribe to. It makes sense, because the alternative is the dissaray that Anglicanism is currently experiencing.

While many commentaries on the 39 Articles were written in the past, particularly during the 19th and early 20th centuries, not nearly as many works have been written which discuss the place and use of the Articles. Packer and Beckwith's "The Thirty-nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today" is therefore an important and practically unique work, and one that should be of great use to Anglicans. Many of the earlier commentaries on the Articles are still excellent reference works, but without an understanding of the importance and place of the Articles in the 21st century the point of any commentary is a moot one. This treatise on the place of the Articles by two traditional Anglicans who are also scholars is a very welcome one. While Packer and Beckwith are Evangelical Anglicans, they are also, in a sense, "old school" Evangelicals who still value the role of the Prayer Book. In other words, they have a firm grasp of historic Anglican identity. At a time when Anglicans, including orthodox Anglicans, are confused about their identity, a discussion of the place of the Articles in Anglicanism, such as this one, is essential. This is especially true in North America, where the newly formed orthodox province, the ACNA, has the Articles as one of their theological norms. For all Anglicans who want to learn more about their identity and especially those who understand that the Thirty-nine Articles are an important part of Anglican identity, this work is an invaluable one. I highly recommend it. Packer and Beckwith discuss the Articles under the following topics:

- 1. Introduction
- 2. The Silence of the Articles
- A. The Articles have No Voice in Anglican Theology (this is their assessment of the way things are - not the way they should be)
- B. The Articles have No Voice in Anglican Liturgy
- C. The Articles have No Voice in Anglican Community
- 3. The History of the Articles
- A. The Establishing of the Articles as a Doctrinal Standard
- B. The Developing of Different Traditions of Interpretation
- C. The Devaluing of Clerical Subscription
- 4. A Place for the Articles
- A. What authority may the Articles claim?
- B. What functions can the Articles fulfill?
- C. What responses do the Articles require?
- 5. A Use for the Articles
- A. Assimilation
- B. Application
- C. Augmentation

Appendix: Supplementing the Articles

The Thirty-nine Articles of Religion probably stood the English Church in good stead until the late nineteenth century. There are so many interpretations of these Articles that my head spins. The Broad Church folks argue the Articles were never intended to be the Church's Confession in the way that the Augsburg Confession or the Westminster Confession function for Lutherans and the

Reformed respectively. The High Church Anglicans began to read the Articles as if they were in agreement with the Council of Trent since John Henry Newman's famous Tract Number 90. The Low Church Anglicans have sought to read the Articles in their historically intended sense as being indicative of a very Reformed Catholic tradition inside a very Protestant tradition. J.I. Packer is certainly in the last category and argues that the Articles must be revived for today. His argument strikes me as quixotic since it is highly unlikely that the Broad and High Church traditions are going to turn back the clock and become Low Church Protestants. That said, I found it helpful to find out W.H. Griffith Thomas's exposition of the Articles is Low Church Protestant while Gibson's is liberal Catholic. Packer was most helpful in helping me get a better grasp of the three major traditions inside Anglicanism.

This is the perfect book for an Anglican Bible study. Packer is always precise and articulate in his writings and very much so in this. Every Anglican or Episcopalian should have one for his family and keep it handy near their Book of Common Prayer.

J.I. Packer nails it! Tremendous book that addresses the Thirty-nine Articles. I wish I had it in leather or hard bound. I can't say enough about this book. It was a fantastic read.

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