

CHAPTER XI.

HISTORICAL NOTICES OF SUBSCRIPTION TO THE ARTICLES.

IT does not fall in with the design of the present publication to enlarge upon the ethical meaning of subscription, nor to adjudicate in respect to the Articles before us, whether it must be viewed as extending to the *positive adoption* of every tenet there propounded, or whether it imply no more than a general obligation on the part of the subscriber to keep himself within definite limits in his treatment of controverted topics. Though the latter view has been occasionally advanced by men of the highest reputation,¹ the former would seem to be more consistent with the nature and intention of the Articles as well as with the ground which the Church has occupied in the Canons of 1571.²

The subscription of the clergy to Formularies of Faith is exacted with the hope of securing a similarity of doctrine in those who have deliberately undertaken the office of public teachers. It must accordingly involve their appropriation of the Articles as the exponent of their individual opinions, so far as they bear upon subjects which are authoritatively determined in that series; and while in this way obliging the clergyman to a full and positive faith, subscription is also the act by which he formally renounces the errors and corruptions which are there either censured or proscribed. It does not indeed assume that every single definition is capable of the same kind of proof, or that all are in the same way needful to salvation, and necessary terms of communion for the

¹ *e. g.* Bramhall, Works, II. 201, and elsewhere; Oxf. 1842: but cf. Bennett, c. xxxiv. on this and other similar passages.

² *Articuli illi . . . haud dubie selecti sunt ex sacris libris Veteris et Novi Testamenti, et cum coelesti doctrina quæ in illis continetur per omnia congruunt.*" Cardwell's Synod. I. 127.

layman; but even with respect to those statements which have been viewed as no more than probable opinions, or which are in truth only matters of history and of morals, the candidate for holy orders must certify his own willingness to shape his teaching by the public standard, and to yield his unwavering assent to the fitness of the whole collection.

The mode of interpreting the Articles has been made a further subject of discussion from the time of their first appearance;¹ one man claiming to subscribe with the mental reservation—"so far as they are in my opinion agreeable to the holy Scriptures;" a second, questioning the obligation of the test where it may seem to have varied from the language of an older school or system; but reluctant as we may be to stigmatize² the subscriber of this kind as disloyal to the Church, or regardless of his own character and position, the claim to such an exercise of "private judgment" is certainly incompatible with the health and continuity of all religious associations.

The following canons of interpretation, which have the sanction of some distinguished living prelates, appear to be more reasonable in themselves and more suited to the nature of the document for which they are intended:

First, to study the history of the period out of which the Articles were originally produced.

Secondly, to read them in this light, approximating as nearly as possible to the point of view which was occupied by the leading compilers.

Thirdly, to weigh the language of the Articles in its plain and grammatical sense (*i. e.* in the sense which it bore in the Edwardine and Elizabethan periods of the Church,) bestowing on it "the just and favourable construction, which ought to be allowed to all human writings, especially such as are set forth by authority."

Fourthly, in case of vagueness in the language of the Articles, or (as might be expected from their history) of comparative *silence*

¹ See above, pp. 113, 193.

² Bp. Conybeare (Sermon on 1 Tim. vi. 3, 4) characterizes the former view as "trifling with common sense as much as with common honesty." The same principle was deliberately stated by the Arians at the beginning of the last century. Waterland, "Case of Arian Subscription," *passim*.

touching some theological topic, to ascertain the doctrine of the Church of England, by consulting the rest of her symbolical writings—the Prayer Book, the Ordinal, the Homilies and Canons.

Fifthly, where all these sources have been tried, without gaining *explicit* information as to the purport of any Article, to yield our assent to the inferences which "the catholic doctors and ancient bishops" have gathered on that point out of the sacred Scriptures; according to the recommendation of the Canon in which the Articles of Religion were originally enjoined.

The first occasion which called for an exercise of these principles occurred in the years 1551 and 1552, when the Edwardine Articles were put in circulation at least by some of the reforming prelates, for the subscription of the English clergy.¹ This, however, was done without any public authority either of the Church or of the civil power, and was not unfrequently resisted by the Romanizing party; but a royal mandate of June 19, 1553, made subscription imperative on all (including the students in the University of Cambridge,) at the expiration of six weeks from the date of its appearance. By this means all the actual incumbents were constrained to subscribe on pain of deprivation, and a similar test was provided for those who might in future be appointed to any office in the Church.² But the death of Edward interrupted the circulation of this mandate, and subscription to the Articles was accordingly abandoned for a period of eighteen years.

In the meanwhile, however, Gardiner had profited by the example which had been set by his rival Hooper; and on forwarding his series of fifteen Articles to the University of Cambridge, he took the precaution of enjoining that they should be punctually subscribed by the students before admission to degrees.³

During the early years of the reign of Elizabeth (1559—1571) the clergy, on entering their benefices, very generally accepted a test of doctrine embodied in "Eleven Articles;" being commanded on the authority of the bishops, without any formal

¹ See above, 87—90.

² Wilkins, iv. 127.

³ See above, p. 86, note (3.)

order of Convocation, to read this document on two Sundays of the year, after the Gospel for the day. The same was also prescribed in Ireland after the year 1566, but in neither country was attention drawn distinctly to the present list of Articles till 1571, excepting so far as the signatures of the members of the Synod, by whom the Edwardine Articles were revised, was a recognition of the principle of subscription.

At the later date two measures, independent in their origin and operation, were adopted for promoting uniformity of doctrine, and for excluding all those from the ministry of the Church who were unwilling to acquiesce in the fitness of this test, as well as of the Elizabethan Prayer Book. The first measure, originating in the House of Commons, and resulting in the Act 13 Eliz. c. 12, required "every one under the degree of a bishop, which doth or shall pretend to be a priest or minister of God's holy Word and Sacraments, by reason of any other form of institution, consecration or ordering than the form set forth by Parliament in the time of the late king, of most worthy memory, King Edward the Sixth, or now used in the reign of our most gracious sovereign lady, before the feast of the Nativity of Christ next following, shall in the presence of the bishop, or guardian of the spiritualities of some one diocese where he hath or shall have ecclesiastical living, *declare his assent, and subscribe to all the Articles of Religion, which only concern the confession of the true Christian faith, and the doctrine of the Sacraments*—and shall bring from such bishop or guardian of spiritualities in writing under his seal authentick, a testimonial of such assent and subscription; and openly on some Sunday, in the time of the public service afternoon, in every Church where by reason of any ecclesiastical living he ought to attend, read both the said testimonial and the *said Articles*."

The early portion of this clause was clearly designed to meet the case of the ministers who had been ordained during the previous reign, while the Ordinal of King Edward was superseded; and on this ground it had to encounter the reprobation of the "Admonitioners to the Parliament," which was published in the following year: but whether the Articles, to which subscription was exacted from the future candidates for ecclesiastical prefer-

ment, were *all* the thirty-nine of the present series, or those which can be regarded as purely dogmatical,¹ are questions very difficult to answer.

In a following clause of the Act it is enjoined that no person shall hereafter be admitted to any benefice with cure, "except he then be of the age of three and twenty years at the least, and a deacon, and shall first have subscribed *the said Articles* in presence of the ordinary,"—where the ambiguity of which we complained above, is no less strikingly apparent.

Bennett² and other writers have contended that the word "only" was not designed to be restrictive but demonstrative, declaring the nature of the subjects handled in the Articles which exclusively concern the true Christian faith and the doctrine of the Sacraments.

But this argument is at the best precarious, and when we bear in mind that such a distinction was actually drawn as early as the introduction of the bill, by its principal promoters,³ and revived in the Admonition to the Parliament in the course of the following year,⁴ and in the Convocation of 1575,⁵ and urged still more emphatically on behalf of the Puritans in the reign of James I.,⁶ it must be allowed that the statute was regarded, at least by many who were in search of a pretext for non-conformity, as binding to no more than one class of statements.

Selden⁷ has alluded to the same fact in the following passage of his "Table-Talk:" "There is a secret concerning the Articles," he writes; "of late ministers have subscribed to all of them, but by Act of Parliament that confirmed them, they ought only to

¹ The Articles relating to faith and doctrine (so far as these may be separated from the rest,) are 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 22. Bp. Gibson's Codex, 321.

² c. xxii.: cf. Collier, II. 531.

³ See above, pp. 143, 144.

⁴ See Whitgift's Defence of the Answers to the Admonition, 776, Lond. 1574. Elsewhere, however, it would seem as if the Admonitioners did not themselves recognize this distinction. They speak of the "pontifical, which is annexed to the booke of common-prayer and whereunto subscribing to the Articles we must subscribe also." B. v.

⁵ Wilkins, iv. 284.

⁶ See above, p. 192, note (2.)

⁷ Table Talk, "Articles," 3, 4. Lond. 1789.

subscribe to those Articles which contain matter of faith and the doctrine of the Sacraments. . . . But bishop Bancroft, in the Convocation held in king James's days, he began it, that ministers should subscribe to three things, to the king's supremacy, to the Common-Prayer, and to the Thirty-nine Articles; though many of them do not contain matter of faith."

The writers on the other side have alleged a remarkable opinion from the Institutes of Sir Edward Coke, which is couched in the following terms:—"I heard Wray, Chief Justice in the King's Bench, Pasch. 23 Eliz., report that where one Smyth subscribed to the said Thirty-nine Articles of Religion with this addition "so far forth as the same were agreeable to the Word of God," it was resolved by him and all the Judges of England, that this subscription was *not according to the statute* of 13 Eliz. Because the statute required an *absolute* subscription, and this subscription made it conditional; and that this Act was made for avoiding of diversity of opinions, &c. and by this addition the party might by his own private opinion take some of them to be against the Word of God, and by this means diversity of opinions should not be avoided,—which was the scope of the statute,—and the very Act itself made touching subscription hereby of none effect."¹

Now this opinion of the Lord Chief Justice, soon after the statute came into operation, is certainly entitled to great weight, but it seems to rest solely on a determination that no such reserve or restriction was easily reconcileable with the object of the Church, instead of being drawn from a careful examination of the wording of the Act itself, and the known views of its leading promoters.

The practice also of the high commissioners before whom delinquents were summoned was in favour of the rigorous interpretation; but while this fact is of the greatest service in ascertaining the general feeling of the Church at that period, it does not clear away the ambiguity of language observable in the passages above mentioned. As late also as the opening of the reign of Charles II. the king himself appears to have recognised a distinction between articles of doctrine and articles of discipline:² yet in the Act of

¹ Instit. Part iv. c. 74, 323, 324.

² Cardwell's Document. Annals, II. 300.

Uniformity (13 and 14 Car. c. 4), such a difference is wholly abandoned, and there is now no colourable plea⁴ for seeking shelter in a limitatory clause, however plausible it might have been urged anterior to the passage of that Act.

But while the House of Commons were thus exacting a subscription to the Articles (1) of all the clergy who had not been ordained according to the Edwardine form, and (2) of all future incumbents upon admission to their cures, the Convocation of the same year was actively engaged in devising a second and auxiliary provision. They enjoined³ that all persons approved as public preachers, should have their licenses renewed only on the condition that they subscribe the Articles of Religion as agreed on at the Synod, and pledge themselves to preach in accordance with that standard. In like manner, every minister of a church before entering on his sacred functions is enjoined³ to give a satisfactory proof of the orthodoxy of his creed by subscribing (not some, but) *all* the Articles of Religion;—where the prelates had obviously an eye to the notion that all the requirements of the Church were included in the recognition of what were deemed the *doctrinal* Articles; and consequently, if subscription to the rest could not have been legally enforced, it is indisputable that the whole work was now binding on the clergy, at least *in foro conscientie*.

It may have been this consideration which moved the commissioners to demand the subscriptions of 1572 without any limitation or reserve: and the obligatory imposition of the Articles in general would form the crying grievance of the Puritans, and the cause of the formidable agitations which sprang up in every quarter. The earliest symptom of discontent appears in the following extract:—"Whereas immediately after the laste Parliament, holden at Westminster, begon in anno 1570, and ended in anno 1571, the ministers of God's holy Word and Sacraments were called before her maiesties hygh commysyoners and enforced to subscribe vnto the Articles, if they would kepe theyr places and

¹ Yet Blackburne ventures to affirm, that the limiting clause is not abrogated by that Act. Preface to 2nd edition of the "Confessional."

² Cardwell, Synod. i. 127.

³ Cardwell, Synod. i. 120.

⁴ Pref. to the First "Admonition to the Parliament."

liuyngs, and some for refusing to subscribe vnbrotherly and uncharitably intreated, and theyr offyces and places removed: May it please therefore thys honorable and high court of Parliament, in consideration of the premises to take a view of such causes as then dyd withhold, and now doth, the foresayd ministers from subscribing and consenting vnto those foresaid Articles," &c.

This attack on the general principle of subscription without regard to the nature of the document propounded, was speedily followed by others of the same unsparing tone. "The wound grows desperate," they cried,¹ "and wants a corrosive; 'tis no time to blanch or sew pillows under men's elbows." Yet instead of meeting this furious onslaught and repelling the demon of non-conformity at its first invasion of the Church, too many of the Elizabethan prelates, after a few feeble efforts, sunk down into lethargic acquiescence, or even fostered the growth of the evils which were to issue in the Great Rebellion. The whole of the primacy of Grindal was marked by his tenderness in favour of the Non-conformists, and in his later years he seems to have almost wholly neglected to press the Articles, or any other test of doctrine, upon the clergy of his province.² The result was that when Whitgift succeeded to his post in 1583, he found it necessary to enter upon more stringent measures for preserving the Church from the rising inundations of the Puritanic principle. He accordingly proposed a number of declarations which are known as "Whitgift's Articles," and which finally received the sanction of the Church in the 36th of the Jacobean Canons. They were designed for all who had been admitted to the cure of souls,³ as well as for all who should in future be licensed to preach, read, catechize, minister the sacraments, or execute any other ecclesiastical function.⁴ The first relates to the royal supremacy, the second to the Prayer-Book and Ordinal, while the third immediately bearing

¹ The number actually deprived for non-subscription was about one hundred. Neal, i. 284: cf. Preface to Rogers, On the Articles, who describes the mal-contents as "divers of the inferior ministers in and about London and elsewhere in this kingdom."

² Neal, i. 285.

³ Fuller, Church Hist. Bk. ix. p. 138. ed. fol.

⁴ Pref. to Rogers, On the Articles. ⁵ Bennett, 398, 399.

on our subject is expressed in the following terms: "That I allow the Book of Articles of Religion agreed upon by the archbishops and bishops of both provinces, and the whole clergy, in the Convocation holden at London in the year of our Lord God 1562, and set forth by her Majesty's authority, and do believe all the Articles therein contained to be agreeable to the Word of God. In witness whereof I have subscribed my name."

"The brethren," as the Puritan party was now generally designated, were so pressed by this vigorous measure of the Primate,⁵ that the year 1584 is noted in their annals as "the woful year of subscription."⁶ Nor was the indignation excited at this period confined to the bosoms of the clergy. The House of Commons also, which was now more and more strongly tainted with the democracy of Geneva, addressed a petition to the Lords in 1585, desiring that "hereafter *no oath or subscription* be tendered to any that is to enter into the ministry, or to any benefice with cure, or to any place of preaching, but such only as be expressly prescribed by the statutes of this realm," &c.⁷

Yet the impulsive efforts of one true-hearted prelate appear to have had little force in curing the laxity of discipline which prevailed in the Church at large. Non-conformity went on silently increasing, and that with the connivance of the bishops, until it leavened the whole lump. "How carelessly subscription is exacted in England," was the lamentation of Bancroft in 1593, "I am ashamed to report. Such is the retchlessness of many of our bishops on the one side, and their desire to be at ease and quietness to think upon their own affairs; and on the other side, such

¹ For another form of subscription employed at this period, see Bennett, 399.

² In the same year the Convocation put forth certain "Articuli pro clero," enjoining among other things that no bishop hereafter shall admit any person to holy Orders, except he is of his own diocese . . . "vel saltem, nisi rationem fidei suæ juxta Articulos illos Religionis . . . Latino sermone reddere possit, adeo ut sacrarum literarum testimonia, quibus eorundem Articulorum veritas innititur, recitare etiam valeat." Cardwell, Synod. i. 141.

³ Rogers, Ibid.

⁴ D'Ewes, 358. The Archbishop of York (Sandys) replied, that "for subscription, he doubted not it was lawful, and might prove the cause of much order and quietness in the Church," 360.

