Our family story doesn’t end with the Bible. Anglicans claim that the foundations and authority of our belief are three-fold; that they are founded on Scripture, Tradition and Reason. And we claim that this three-fold authority is like a three-legged stool. Take any one leg away and the stool will topple.

Scripture provides the first leg of the stool. Our Scriptures are the books of the Bible, the story of God’s revelation to men and women up until the end of first century CE.

The Scriptures are discussed elsewhere in these pages so it is enough to say that they are our primary source of knowledge about God and that the Anglican Church does not require belief in any truth or doctrine that is not contained in, or cannot be proved from, the Scriptures.

Tradition

Scripture is our primary source of revelation but God’s revelation didn’t stop in 100 CE.

Since the earliest times, the great minds of the Church have studied the Revelation of Scripture in the light of their continuing experience of the God who doesn’t give up. Today we are the heirs of a rich tradition; a tradition of wisdom, prayer and experience which we would be foolish to neglect.

This unique tradition is the second leg of our stool and the Creeds - the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed in particular - are the products of that tradition.

The Creeds

From the beginning the Church has required of those who would become members that they make a public profession of faith and belief in Jesus.

The first creed was probably a simple statement: ‘I believe that Jesus is Lord’. Saint Paul says: ‘... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’. Romans 10:9

Or again, ‘... at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord ...’ Philippians 2:10-11

By the end of the second century this original and very simple creed had developed into a kind of question and answer catechism used to ‘interrogate’ new converts during the service of baptism.

Hippolytus, writing about 200 CE, describes such a creed:

And when he who is to be baptised goes down to the water, let him who baptises lay hands on him and say thus, ‘Dost thou believe in God the Father Almighty?’ And he who is being baptised shall say ‘I believe’. Let him forthwith baptise him once, having his hand laid upon his head. After this let him say, ‘Dost thou believe in Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was born by the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and died, and rose again on the third day living from the dead and ascended into the heavens, and sat down on the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead?’ And when he says ‘I believe’ let him baptise him the second time. And again let him say, ‘Dost thou believe in the Holy Spirit, in the Holy Church, and in the resurrection of the flesh?’ And he who is being baptised shall say ‘I believe’. And so let him baptise him the third time.

Put this alongside our present-day creeds and the similarity is obvious. Yet the creed Hippolytus describes was one of many, because each local church had its own creed.

It was not until the fourth century that the first fixed and official formulas came into use.
These were creeds which had the blessing of the wider Church. They were used for the instruction of new converts and for the public profession of faith at baptism - and our Apostles’ Creed was one such creed.

We don’t know why it is called the ‘Apostles’ Creed’. There is a legend which says that the Apostles composed it on the Day of Pentecost but, more likely it was called the Apostles’ Creed because it was the creed of the Church of Rome - an ‘apostolic’ Church founded by Peter, one of the twelve apostles.

The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed marks further development.

Like the earlier creeds it was used for instruction and for the public confession of faith at baptism. But it also had another use. It was used as a test of correct belief and right teaching.

In the year 319 CE, Arius - a leader of the Church in Alexandria - started to teach that Jesus was not God but a created being; that he was half God and half man.

This teaching spread until it became such a source of dissension in the Church that the Emperor Constantine was forced to intervene.

He called a council of Church leaders to meet at Nicaea. The council decided against Arius and agreed on a creed which was later accepted by the Church and which we now call the Nicene Creed.

The words ‘begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father’ were included in the Nicene Creed specifically to combat the teachings of Arius and to ensure correct belief.

Some Anglican Prayer Books contain a third Creed: the Creed of Saint Athanasius.

This is not a creed in the strict sense for it does not begin with the words ‘I believe’ or ‘We believe’ but with ‘Whosoever will be saved ...’.

The so-called Athanasian Creed is probably best described as a hymn about the Creed.

The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion

The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion represent another important part of our Anglican Tradition.

During the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century the Church of England set out to define its beliefs in relation to those of the Church of Rome and the Reformed Churches of Europe. The Thirty Nine Articles of Religion are the product of that definition.

The Thirty Nine Articles are not a creed. They are short statements dealing with the particular controversies of the Sixteenth Century and stating the Anglican position on those controversies.

For example, Article 28, ‘Of the Lord’s Supper’, rejects the Roman Catholic understanding of Holy Communion that says that the bread and wine actually becomes the body of blood of Christ. But it also rejects the Protestant teaching that the Holy Communion is little more than a memorial service.

While the Thirty Nine Articles have never enjoyed the status of creeds, Anglican Clergy are required to affirm that the doctrine set forth in the Book of Common Prayer and the Thirty Nine Articles is ‘agreeable to the Word of God’, and to undertake not to teach anything which contradicts that doctrine. However lay people are not required to give their assent to the Articles.

The problem with the Thirty Nine Articles is that they are now very dated and reflect too obviously the religious controversies of another age. They remain however, part of our Tradition; part of the evolution of thought and expression which has made us what we are.

Think about it

_I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use._

- Galileo Galilei, Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina