

The uniquely English problem of the Book of Common Prayer

In almost all parts of the Traditional Anglican Communion, liturgy was not a problem. There was a recent, quite competent Prayer Book, duly authorised by the local church, which the liberals were discarding; to retain it was the obvious and sufficient step.

This was not the case in England. Liturgical history had been far from simple, and there was no one text to retain. The Prayer Book indeed existed, but it was a parliamentary imposition (the Church had approved it only under duress and used it under threat of punishment in the criminal courts). Parliament also had later distorted it, most noticeably in the “Shortened Services Act”, and the secular courts had produced many confusing rulings about what it did or did not require to be done (let alone about what it meant). There were also successive enactments to provide a better series of readings for Morning and Evening Prayer than those in the Prayer Book, which though wise in themselves meant that the Prayer Book was not the sole source, even legally, for what was done in church or by the clergy in their daily prayer.

It is not true to say that *only* Anglo-Catholics departed from it. By 1900 *every* church had its own use. None would be following the Prayer Book requirement to say Morning Prayer, the Litany and at least the first part of the Communion Service as a single rite (thus with up to five occurrences of the Lord’s Prayer in a morning). Almost all would be breaking up the service with hymns (instead of using the tolerated metrical psalms before and after service). Almost all had adopted liturgical arrangements such as the surpliced choir which were hard to square with the rubrics. Almost all had remodelled their buildings. The majority came to have a cross on the Holy Table and candles - which were innovations, though most Anglicans would now imagine they had always been in use. In fact, departure from the Prayer Book was *general*, as indeed a Royal Commission reported in the early years of the twentieth century. The book might indeed be given out to the worshiper (which is itself an innovation), but there would also be a hymn book and quite often a little pamphlet containing the actual form of service in the parish. The prayer book had become little more than a source for the *variable* items in the service - collect, epistle, gospel and (for Morning and Evening Prayer) psalms.

The next step was the idea of “alternatives”. The 1928 Prayer Book was the first instance (for most services it provided both the original Prayer Book text and an alternative, which might itself contain alternative options, thus producing a longer and less coherent book). Parliament rejected 1928, but some bishops then added to the general illegality by tolerating - or even urging - its adoption regardless. (Indeed, most bishops insisted on using the 1928 form of Confirmation, which is one of the most dubious parts of the whole book.) Other bishops, such as Kirk of Oxford, made clear what departures from the Prayer Book (particularly in the Holy Communion) he supported and what he would merely tolerate in his parishes. Eventually, this peculiar process of reform by illegal alternatives was given legal support in the “Series 1” Alternative Services. Notice that a pretence had to be maintained that the alternatives did not change doctrine, only its expression. This was never very convincing.

It is only very recently that the apostate state religion has finally abandoned the production of “alternatives” to the Prayer Book (which survived even in the recently withdrawn ASB) and produced a new liturgical book altogether - though one so full of alternatives itself that the idea of *common* prayer (which was fundamental to the Prayer Book) has been abandoned.

Even the Canons of the Church of England, as revised and published shortly before “Series 1”, were rather distant from the Prayer Book. The “Vestments” canon, for example, purported to authorise possibilities which the Prayer Book probably did not (but who knows for sure?) Again there was the pretence that these alternative possibilities did not change doctrine.

Now we in the Traditional Anglican Church inherit some of this mess. Not all, for we give no formal recognition to the parliamentary, legal and ecclesiastical developments subsequent to the Prayer Book. But that makes our problem worse. We have only the bare text - *and we do not follow it*. At the level of obedience, there is no difference between the “low” parish using something close to (but probably not quite contained within) “Series 1” and the “high” parish using (in its own way) one or other state of the “English Missal”. Both are equally disobedient to that text, and both could reasonably return the same answer: a strict following of the Prayer Book as it stands is impractical and undesirable.

This is true not merely for the Holy Communion, but for almost all of the services in the book which anybody expects to use. This is true not least for the clergy in their daily use of Morning and Evening Prayer. Various lectionaries are followed, but it is most unlikely that any priest uses the lectionary published in the Prayer Book - it is not constructed on wise principles and all the later attempts (which were duly authorised) are better.

Is it so dreadful that Continuers continue what they know, rather than adopting (for the first time in their lives) the *exact* following of a schedule to an Act of Parliament? The Prayer Book is not directly inspired by God; it was the least evil in 1660, which the Church made to work for a time but which was *always* imperfect and *always* needed improvement, if only the state would allow it. Now, for us, the state is no longer a problem.

The recognition of defects in the Prayer Book is widely shared, and there is more common ground in the remedies adopted than at first seems to be the case. Almost everybody accepts that long exhortatory texts do not work now (if they ever did). Everybody accepts that the Prayer Book is too barren either to give God worthy praise or to enliven man, and so uses greater variety, greater colour and music, than was envisaged for parochial use (choral foundations were different). Almost everybody accepts that the inculcation of obedience to the established monarchy by endless repetition of the “state prayers” is not important now, though we do continue to pray for the Queen.

Every parish (I suspect) accepts and uses all those texts in the Prayer Book which have come to be said by all the congregation (this is sometimes a departure from what the Prayer Book requires!) We do not need to change these texts (except perhaps by restoring “holy” to the “catholic and apostolic church” in the creed, which probably most of us have done).

Every parish (I suspect) has a form of Eucharistic Prayer which accepts several important corrections, not least that the proper form is indeed a prayer, as in the classic liturgies of both East and West. It hardly matters whether this is achieved by stitching bits of the Prayer Book together in a more sensible way, or by supplementing 1662 with older Western rites, or by borrowing the texts of other Anglican churches, or even, perhaps, by drawing on Eastern Orthodox or Non-Juror liturgy! These are all similar remedies to the same defect.

Have we changed doctrine? It is hard to say. Is there such a thing as “the” theology of the Prayer Book Communion Service, a bizarre doublethink purporting to combine Cranmer’s subjective memory of the absent Christ with the “hocus pocus” doctrine of the 1662 rubrics? Combine these with other authoritative sources such as the Catechism and the Articles, and you will not, I think, find a coherent theology. Whatever we may wish to assert as *the* doctrine of the Church of England, it cannot be found merely by studying the Prayer Book. This is not to say that there are no limits to that doctrine; merely that the limits were explored in dialogue (sometimes indeed acrimonious) until the recent parting of the ways.

We in England (Scotland and Wales have different histories) are stuck with the Prayer Book, because nothing later has any authority which we can recognise. The 1928 Communion Service was a bad set of compromises rejected by the state and not in practice widely accepted in the Church (1928 Morning and Evening Prayer were more successful). “Series 1” might have been the beginning of wisdom, if it had not been so speedily abandoned, but it was never more than an approved set of alternatives (largely, indeed, a mere way of making legal most of what most parishes were already doing illegally). The English Missal has never been more than a minority practice, and it is not a rite but a set of meccano parts with which almost anything (from 1552 to Tridentine Romanism) could be constructed. None of these are obvious ways forward for the *whole* Traditional Anglican Church in England.

What would we English traditionalists do if we were all compelled to adopt and use a single Prayer Book, of a tolerable size and simplicity? Please God, nobody will demand this of us, for we have not the ability to produce it and we do not want to strain our congregations. Most of our members have already suffered far too much disruption in their worship; there is a pastoral obligation to continue whatever they are familiar with, and any change, whether back to a more exact following of the Prayer Book or forward to a new Book, would be damaging. Perhaps in another generation it will be time to seek an agreed way forward. At present it is better simply to understand that different solutions to the problem of worship do not automatically imply different doctrines.