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The St. Mark Lion

To Fight With Beasts:

A Review by Dr. Raymond P. Tripp of *The Real
Common Worship*¹



THIS collection of essays addresses the connection between the abuse of language and the condition of Christianity in England. It focuses in particular on the effects of rewriting of The Book of Common Prayer. The problem is not new. As early as the eighteenth century Jonathan Swift, the Dean of St. Patrick's, warned that "Free-Thinkers" "are not reformed by Arguments offered to prove the Truth of the Christian Religion, because Reasoning will never make a Man correct an ill Opinion, which by Reasoning he never acquired." As necessary as it is to try, Swift also warns that it "is no easy Task," to correct unreasoning people, "because it is almost in a literal Sense, to fight with Beasts."² The contributors to this anthology set out on a fresh theological safari.

The first essay, "The Prayer Book and Our English i," by Diarmaid MacCulloch, summarizes "*The Prayer Book in History*," "*The Content of the Book*," and "*The Legacy of the Prayer Book*," tracing first the origin and development of *The Book of Common Prayer*, which was "master-minded by Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556)," and "remained the only legal form of worship in the established churches of England, Wales and Ireland down to the twentieth century." Of particular interest to Americans might be his reminder that:

The bitterness of the American War of Independence made it difficult at first for the newly created 'Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America' to find a sensible way of relating to the Church of England, so the little disestablished sister-Church in Scotland stepped into the vacuum, consecrating the first American bishops and influencing the first American Episcopalian Prayer Book in 1789.

MacCulloch then turns to the content of the *BCP*. He stresses the "middle way" it follows. "As the round of the psalms is repeated,"

the whole of human experience of the divine unfolds: not just the awe or praise, but bewilderment, anger and even downright savagery. That is why it is so important that the Psalter is recited all the way through, not making any cuts to avoid offending our modern squeamishness. Human beings are there, warts and all.

In outlining the legacy of the *BCP*, he makes a valuable point about the role of Evensong and "its continuing popularity in an age of agnosticism and religious doubt":

Here is an unintended function for Cranmer's evening texts. For those who find the classical picture of the Christian God unbelievable or alien, this Anglican performance of patterned liturgical beauty may provide a window on seriousness. Less strident and less excluding than the Christian invitation to approach the eucharistic table, Evensong's understated presentation of the sacred may yet be the solace of those who find other, more demonstrative expressions of Christianity beyond their powers of assent.

Sounding very much like C. S. Lewis (as do other contributors to this anthology), MacCulloch concludes with a rhetorical question about the myth-come-true of Christianity:

Can new forms of worship speak to modern society as powerfully as The Book of Common Prayer has done for four centuries? It is a central document of a culture which has produced a treasure-house of literature. The Prayer Book is a myth, in the profoundest and truest sense of the word. It remains to be seen what, if anything, can replace it.

The second essay is a reprint of a talk given by Prince Charles in 1989 at the presentation of the Thomas Cranmer Schools Prize. In spite of its occasional nature, it presents a lot of common sense in memorable language. Again, in expressing a sentiment which recalls C. S. Lewis, Prince Charles lets us know what he thinks about the supposed need of dumbing-down religious texts, to make them more democratic and less “poetic,”³ “because people . . . read less well than people in the past.”

Supposing it were true, who ever decided that for people who aren't good at reading the best things to read are those written by people who aren't very good at writing? Poetry is for everybody, even if it's only a few phrases. But banality is for nobody. It might be accessible for all, but so is a desert. . . . We seem to have forgotten that for solemn occasions we need exceptional and solemn language: something transcends daily speech. . . . Where is the comfort in a phrase too banal to be remembered? How can we be lifted up by a sentence which itself needs lifting, on a stretcher?

To sum up his opinion of the revision of the *BCP*, Prince Charles cites two people named Sam — Dr. Samuel Johnson, the famous eighteenth-century moralist man of letters, and Samuel Goldwynn, the twentieth-century “master of the banal.” The first said, “I know of no good prayers but those in the Book of Common Prayer,” the second said about the itch to “revise” everything, “You've improved it worse.”

The third essay, “The Liturgy: Experiments and Results,” by Roger Homan, is a more technical, but fully accessible step-by-step social analysis of the “reforms” worked upon The Book of Common Prayer by the Liturgical Commission and their *actual* as opposed to their *supposed* effects. He introduces each section of his argument with hard evidence, in the form of surveys, letters written to the Commission (and ignored), etc., and wraps up each point with a clear summary. He points out, for example, that when the Commission's own surveys did not agree with their presuppositions, those “respondents expressing dissatisfaction were disregarded as old, or middle-aged, naturally conservative, cranky or bad tempered,” so that “by eliminating from the sample the returns so marked, those conducting it were able to report to the Liturgical Commission that 90% of church members were calling for change.” Homan offers many similarly penetrating evaluations of the logic and honesty of

the “studies” conducted by the Liturgical Commission. By “bewildering the laity with words like *anamnesis* [recalling to memory, recollection] and *anaphora* [deliberate repetition of an introductory word or phrase] and appeals to ‘the meaning . . . of the original Semitic language behind the Greek,’” etc., the end result has been that “relevance and contemporary feeling were achieved at the cost of devotional — even mystical — focus.” The real effect, however, of the Commission's supposedly “modern” language has been an:

implicit redefinition of the sacred and the relationship of the divine to the human. . . . In all the professed desire is to imitate the practice of the Early Church: anything from the fifth century has been willingly embraced. . . [but] the Prayer Book has been set aside as archaic and rooted in the seventeenth century. . . . [and] the whole conceptual apparatus of Christians as spiritual beings was eliminated from Rite A. The ancient response to the Peace, ‘*And with thy spirit*’ was replaced with the vulgar ‘*And also with you.*’⁴

Although Homan backs off from seeing any *direct* connection between reform and decline, he does point out that the Liturgical Commission's changes are a “conspiracy against the laity,” and that “the decline in church support dates back to the years that are claimed for the beginnings of the Liturgical Movement.” The “*Soul of Britain*” poll, conducted by the BBC independent of the Liturgical Commission, actually reveals that “people are seeking support for deeply spiritual feelings and do not find these in social and secular tendencies of the worship offered by the Church of England.” It is not emotional appeal, he concludes, that accounts for the growth of Orthodox and Baptist Churches, but “their rejection of secular values.”

The fourth essay in this collection is actually written by the “beasts.” In order to offer a fair picture of the Liturgical Commission's stance, the editor has chosen to let them speak for themselves. This brave move is accomplished by printing their document entitled “Planning for Change: Suggestions and Ideas, written and produced by the Education and Communication Sub Group of the Liturgical Publishing Group.” Reading this document is like hearing a conversation between Fairy Hardcastle and Mark Studdock, the two characters in C. S. Lewis' *That Hideous Strength* who sit down and invent tomorrow's “news.” One meets a maddening perversion of logic and language disguised as rational “dialogue.” In a section entitled “Why do we need new services?” the Commission announces that:

Our world is constantly changing and our understanding of God is always developing. God may not change, but in every generation we find new ways of expressing ourselves to one another and to God.

Does the Liturgical Commission expect that good

Christians will miss (1) the double talk of “developing” (in what direction?), (2) the outrageous subjunctive *may* in “God *may* not change” (and then again on the other hand He may!), (3) the assumption that “new ways” are always good just because they are new, and (4) the idea that “expressing ourselves” should enter into our relationship with God, etc. In another section euphemistically entitled “Grasping a golden opportunity” we read further:

If we are to make the most of the new material, we need to see it as an opportunity to renew our whole understanding of public worship and of the individual services in question.

In all these innocuous *sounding* proposals, the essential question *Why should we?* is, of course, never raised. The basic question of whether or not there is any need to “renew our whole understanding of public worship,” etc. is quietly passed over. Although it is a wise move to include such theological “New Speak,” as a convincing example of what the contributors are talking about, Homan is perhaps a little too polite in not labeling this malicious nonsense exactly for what it is — a mixture of half-truths and subtle lies.

The fifth essay, “Common Prayer and the Pirates,” by A. C. Capey, lays it on the line. The Liturgical Commission has stolen the tradition by redefining the meaning of “common.” Capey traces the steps by which the Liturgical Commission “hadn’t quite decided upon, or was not ready to divulge, its ultimate objective,” which was to substitute “a sense of the word *common* which it has never had in the Church of England.” “Common” prayer, Capey argues, means the Book of Common Prayer, not “the disembodied notion, a merely clever pretense,” by which the real thing is reduced to “a continuing doctrinal reference point,” “a new understanding of the concept . . . an ‘evolving common core’ of texts” among others. And by this move the “the ‘mission of redefinition’ . . . to attach the connotations of old phrases to the denotations of a new scheme” was completed — and pirated.

David Martin’s sixth essay, “Retrospective Reflections on the Sacred and the Prayer Book,” continues the analysis of the Liturgical Commission’s linguistic subversion of the sacred. The trick, he explains, is the superficially reasonable statement that “the ‘man of God’ should not be marked off by difference, including the public identity conferred by a collar, but should be out and about in the secular reality.” Yet at the same time the *BCP* is cut off and regarded not as “the liturgy of a national Church, but now the ‘Anglican Communion’.” The result is a “transfer of the forum of conflict from the heartland of governance to culture and the inner life of the Church [comes to be taken] as an increasingly private and voluntary association.” The curious might want to compare Martin’s essay with C. G. Jung’s *The Undiscovered Self*, where he points out that the “fiction of the sovereign

state,” read “culture,” always tries to “cut the ground out from under religions,” because “the individual who is not anchored in God can offer no resistance on his own resources to the physical and moral blandishments of the world.”⁵ Martin wraps up his essay with a telling look at the ways “the assumption of ecclesiastical reformers mirrored those of education reformers.” And we all know what that means — the people of God are reduced to:

well-intentioned citizens whose understandable mistakes represented just the kind of poor judgment capable of redress by decent counseling. Evil was little more than ‘unacceptable behavior’, mildly ‘out of order’, as if the twentieth century were not the century of Auschwitz, Cambodia and Rwanda.

In the seventh essay, Ian Robinson provides a close analysis of the language of the Commission’s latest theological project, the “Common Worship,” a document designed to replace the “Alternative Service Book.” As far as language goes, Jonathan Swift, again, wrote: “Proper Words in proper Places, makes the true Definition of a Style. But this would require too ample a Disquisition to be now dwelt on.” In this essay Robinson supplies this “ample Disquisition,” based on the proposition that:

There cannot be a good liturgy with a bad style, though it is possible to have a bad liturgy in a good style, which in a nutshell is what Dix⁶ thought of Cranmer — good in the sense of making something in language with deep clarity, bad because Dix thought he should be making something else.

Robinson reminds us that “the word can only possibly be preached in the act of redeeming language.” In his judgment “the functional importance of style was not sufficiently understood [by the Liturgical Commission] in the years of experimentation that led to the New English Bible and then to the A[lternative] S[ervice] B[ook].” “Any claim,” he points out, “that new liturgies are modern or colloquial is sheer bluff.” Much of Robinson’s analysis may be somewhat specialized for a general American audience less fastidious about the Mother Tongue, perhaps, than their English compeers. He discusses such matters as the confusion of prose and verse rhythms and such blunders as shifting from “a kind of iussive [jussive, imperative] subjunctive” in which blessings and curses are cast in English, into the use of the third-person indicative and the far weaker auxiliary forms of the subjunctive using *may* and *might*. Close arguments, however, are made fully clear with good examples. The “reform” of “Thy kingdom come” into “*May your* kingdom come” [emphasis added] tells the whole story. Many times over, Robinson contrasts the new wording of the “Common Worship” with the Book of Common Prayer, as in the following example, first from “Common Worship”:

A priest may say
May the almighty and merciful Lord

grant unto you pardon and remission of all your sins . . . (emphasis added)

And then from the *BCP*:

Almighty God . . . Have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins; confirm and strengthen you in all goodness; and bring you to everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

“These [*BCP* words] are all subjunctives,” Robinson, concludes. “but it would be diluting the Prayer Book’s theology to say that they only express a wish. The use of the single subjunctive/imperative form is much more naturally performative, expressing actual remission of sins.” “Whatever the explanation, they [Liturgical Commission] produced a number of collects of the form ‘O God, who does so and so . . .’ If any sense is made of the change from the address to God to a third-person verb it can only be that prayer is relinquished in favour of an aside to the congregation, as, ‘O God, our Heavenly Father [*aside*] who has brought us together as members of the Army Cadet Force . . .’ With the ‘has’ this ceases to be a prayer and becomes an announcement.” In the worst case scenario such insensitivity to language produces utterances like “You who receives our prayer.” In sum, while Robinson correctly acknowledges that the vocabulary “of prayer is always and necessarily special,” he goes on to affirm that it should not be “insulated from the modern world,” that is, in Swift’s words, put into language “never made use of in Common Life.” After examining the language of “Common Worship” in detail, however, he concludes that “what is meant by ‘modern’ is principally verse lineation [of what once was properly rhythmic prose] and paragraphing by line-space not indentation.”

Robinson’s essay is full of examples of the sadly amusing but bad language which has been introduced as “reforms” by the Liturgical Commission. From these he concludes:

The failure of style under discussion being so elementary it is not uncalled for to restate a truism of literary criticism, that in language sound *is* sense: get a rhythm wrong and the sense must be wrong. Anybody who doesn’t realize that prose rhythm is not verse rhythm, but that both are at the heart of language, should leave liturgy well alone. . . . There ought to be a society for the prevention of cruelty to English.

This is indeed the case, because, as Swift put it, the Liturgical Commission has forgotten that “a Divine has nothing to say to the wisest Congregation . . . which he may not express in a manner to be understood by the meanest among them. And this Assertion must be true,

or else God requires from us more than we are able to perform.”

The eighth essay in this collection is Peter Mullen’s “The Theology of Common Worship,” takes its title from the liturgical document intended to replace the “Alternative Service Book.” Mullen’s main point is twofold: (1) it is basic to Christian belief that the human condition and psychology – ‘the soul of man’ – does not much alter with the passing years, and (2) it is “the character of the doctrine that determines which words shall be used.” The structure of his essay follows the resulting logic. Namely, since Christianity does not change, its language as well should not, so that a change in language signals a change in theology. This is the “obvious truth.”

This “obvious truth” reveals the fact that a “Pelagian tendency permeates the entire book.” And “to play down the evilness of evil and its spoiling presence in the human heart is at the same time to play down the redeeming work of Christ.” Mullen provides many telling examples. For one, the traditional “With this ring I thee wed,” is changed to the considerably weaker and more abstract, “I give you this ring as a sign of our marriage.” In this way “Pelagian evasiveness and coy euphemisms are followed by a sentence devoid of meaning.” The *BCP*’s, “Jesus wept,” is reduced to, “Jesus Christ was moved to tears.” “In the same night that he was betrayed,” becomes “He had supper with friends.” “On the third day He rose again,” becomes “. . . and reveals the resurrection by rising to new life.” The “visible and invisible” of the traditional Creed becomes the merely physiological “seen and unseen.” In summing up these and a multitude of other changes, Mullen concludes, “Once again a flawed understanding of the meaning of ordinary English produces misleading theology.” This conclusion, however, seems somewhat over-polite and contradictory in blaming the destruction of the *BCP* upon bad grammar rather than the evil of perverted theology. One suspects that the Liturgical Commission understands ordinary English all too well, but simply wanted to say something different.

The ninth and concluding essay, “Prayer Book and the Modern World,” written jointly by Peter Mullen and Ian Robinson, is the most wide-ranging and difficult to summarize. It is full of telling observations about language and society. At the heart of this essay is a penetrating insight into the vapid sameness of everything modern, including the document entitled “Common Worship.” The authors recognize that appeals to “multiculturalism” are in fact anti-cultural and camouflage a monolithic banality. Everything is actually “uniculturally the same,” since the word “multicultural” may be applied to the “predominance of one style.” They are not deceived by the ruse of an “assertion of equality made on authority by a class which has no intention of surrendering its power.” Everything now is supposed to be “fun,” including going

to Church, “and run by the department of ‘light entertainment’, not a bad disguise for the Prince of Darkness. It is banal. St. Thomas said banality is evil.” Everything these days has “to be cool — which means trivial and infantile.” On the so-called public radio (Called “Radio Three” in England) “there is too much repetitive jazz and Peruvian nose flute music, everything presented with a sickly smartness and brightness such as in life makes you want to hit people; one after another lachrymose sentimentalist . . . coming on to present their choice of music.” With considerable wit it is pointed out that nowadays a:

‘gay’ lifestyle is no better and no worse than marriage, though perhaps equality does not stretch as far as celibacy, which is distinctly not of the age; and, rather mysteriously, there is a universal condemnation of ‘child abuse’.

In keeping with the linguistic focus of this collection, Mullen and Robinson ask, “How can religion be possible in any of the varieties of language of this age?” They are alert to the ruse of appealing to a leveling “equality” in order to “restore unity.” “The Common Worship services are intended to signal an end to any sense that the old and the new are at odds,” when in fact they are. “But the line between reuniting and simply reorganizing division is not easily drawn.” “The use of ‘inclusive language’ is in fact very divisive.” The truth is, however, that “If you know the Prayer Book there is no way of taking either the A[ternative]S[ervice]B[ook] or Common Worship except as a parody of it.” “The whole liturgical impulse towards the spirit of the age, from the 1960s onward, has been an aberration.”

Although this collection of essays is unlikely to make liturgical beasts change their ways, it is far from being another Jeremiad on the sad state of affairs in this latter-day world. It is, if only by informed and wholesome contrast, a reminder of the true and profound value of The Book of Common Prayer. From these essays we can learn that with the products of the Liturgical Commission:

as with all dangers, we can guard against the risk of psychic infection only when we know what is attacking us, and how, where, and when the attack will come.⁷

To him who has more is given, and faithful readers will come away stronger and wiser for their efforts.

¹ Peter Mullen, ed., *The Real Common Worship* (Denton, England: Edgeways Books, 2000), pp. 200.

² William A. Eddy, ed., *Satires and Personal Writings by Jonathan Swift* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958, “A Letter to a Young Gentleman, Lately Entered into Holy Orders,” pp. 290-91.

³ “Biblical critics. . . . seem to me to lack literary judgment, to be imperceptive about the very quality of the texts they are read-

ing,” in “Fern-seed and Elephants,” from a collection of essays published under the same title.

⁴ Emphasis added.

⁵ *The Undiscovered Self*, pp. 29, 34.

⁶ George Eglington Alston Dix (Dom Gregory), 1901-1952, who in 1945 published *The Shape of the Liturgy*, in which he criticizes Cranmer.

⁷ *The Undiscovered Self*, p. 16.

The Real Common Worship

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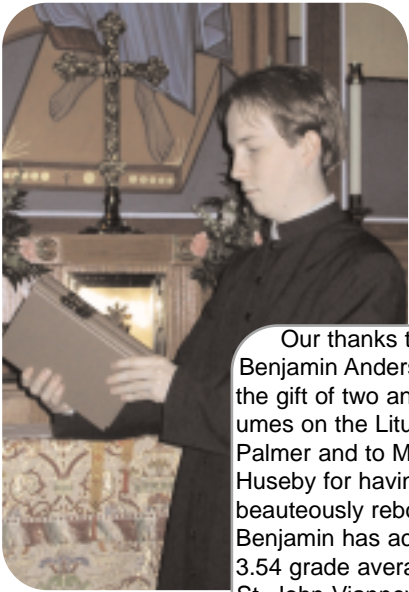
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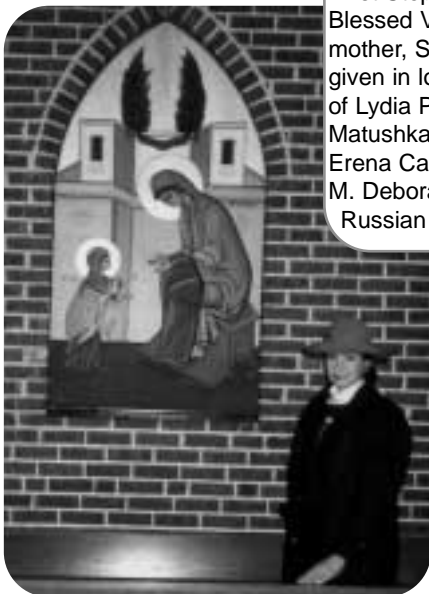


Our thanks to Benjamin Andersen for the gift of two ancient volumes on the Liturgy by Palmer and to Michael Huseby for having them beautifully rebound. Benjamin has achieved at 3.54 grade average at the St. John Vianney Seminary.



Recently, I was cleaning closets, drawers and bookshelves and I became nostalgic thinking about the wonderful book fairs we had when I attended Graland Country Day School. It occurred to me that we at St. Mark's should have a used book sale. Not only could we all get rid of our old and not-so-old books. We could raise some money and once again expose our good parish to the neighborhood. While listening to the Uhl family tell about they wonderful opportunity for our youth to travel to Greece, I thought "Why not use the sale to help someone go on this once-in-a-lifetime trip?"

So, I'm asking you to start collecting the books you no longer read so we can have a great sale in the spring. If you have any suggestions or wish to help please contact me at 303 278 2580 or at Kitbrown101@AOL.com



The icon of the First Steps of the Blessed Virgin with her mother, St. Anne was given in loving memory of Lydia P. Witmer by Matushka Deborah and Erena Campell. Lydia is M. Deborah's holy Russian grandmother.

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