

Common Worship; A Challenge?

Common Worship: Services and Prayers for the Church of England (Church House Publishing) was published in 2000. Its scope and intention are indicated in the Preface:

In this volume we bring together the services of *The Book of Common Prayer* as they are used today and newer liturgies in both traditional and contemporary style. *The Book of Common Prayer* remains the permanently authorised provision for worship in the Church of England, whereas the newer liturgies are authorised until further resolution of the General Synod. This combination of old and new provides for the diverse worshipping needs of our communities, within an ordered structure which affirms our essential unity and common life.

It is not the purpose of the present article to review it either as a general contribution to Christian liturgy or for its direct serviceability as a quarry to liturgical practitioners who stand in the shadow of the Westminster Divines – although it surely has its significance and usefulness in both spheres. Rather, it is intended to mention some issues which the publication seems to the writer to raise for the constituency from which the membership of the Church Service Society is largely drawn.

The constitutional position of the Church of Scotland in respect of worship is stated in the second of the Declaratory Articles: “Its system and principles of worship are in accordance with *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* as (that has) been or may hereafter be interpreted or modified by Acts of the General Assembly or by consuetude.” Although the word ‘Directory’, like the earlier, and revived, phrase ‘Common Order’, may seem rather more peremptory than ‘Common Prayer’ or ‘Common Worship’, the qualification placed upon the normative character of the *Directory* by the Articles is such as to make it difficult to discover whether there are any ‘directions’ in place which might render some practices censurable, or any limits to that “liberty in

conduct of worship (which) is a possession which the Church of Scotland will not surrender.” (*Book of Common Order*, 1940, Preface) One wonders, not least after attending a recent Sunday service in which, *inter alia*, there was no reading of scripture, how near we are approaching to anarchy. Of course there must be change. Of course there must be ‘experiment’. But what is the objective of these changes and by what criteria is the success or failure of these experiments judged? Scientific experiments are not conducted without a clear understanding of these matters.

It is of interest to discover that almost contemporaneously with the formation of the Church Service Society in 1865 by some ‘young Turks’ in the Church of Scotland, ‘Rabbi’ Duncan, an older Free Church minister and Professor of Hebrew in New College, and a man whose ‘Reformed’ credentials could hardly be challenged, was recorded as giving it as his opinion that,

In forgetting our Directory we are too little liturgical... The best of our forefathers were more anti-erastian than anti-episcopal, and more opposed to bad liturgy than anti-liturgic... I could say nothing against the use of a liturgy as a catholic question for all the churches; but I am against confinement to it, and as for Scotland, I am opposed to it in any form at present. But a good liturgy forms a fine common bond for the churches.

One wonders whether the vastly changed situation of the churches in Scotland in 2002 and the increased pressure to find common bonds would have persuaded him to withdraw the opposition which he clearly regarded as temporary and, further, whether a production such as *Common Worship* would be sufficiently flexible in its requirements to provide a realistic basis for discussion of standards (a common order) to which ‘confinement’ or conformity might be expected by presbyteries and the General Assembly.

In particular, the first service in *Common Worship*, entitled ‘A Service of

the Word', is surely an indication that the Church of England has been learning from the other Churches of the Reformation. It consists of a three-page Introduction to the service, a single-page outline of the service in four parts (preparation, the Liturgy of the Word, prayers, conclusion – with headings for what should, or may, be included in each part), a further page outlining the incorporation of the Liturgy of the Sacrament in such a service, and two pages of notes commenting on some of the headings. The whole says little to which exception could be taken in the Church of Scotland and much which surely needs to be said to all who are responsible for the conduct of worship among us. Nevertheless, the Assembly seems reluctant to lend the weight of its authority to any directions or even 'models', relying, for the preparation of future liturgical Scholars on faculties (or whatever) in the staffing of which the Church has a decreasing voice, and on their exposure to a small number of examples of current practice of unmonitored quality.

Common Order was issued with the pious hope that it would "prove to be of service to the Church, and that its abundant variety of material will enrich the worship of the Church, and enliven the devotion of the people of God." It no doubt achieves these ends with some degree of success where it is used and where the principles on which it is based are accepted but it is surely a weakness that it is not accompanied by explanatory material and notes dealing with these principles. If that were done and given the authority of the General Assembly, without seeking like authority for every word to be uttered, then we would have recovered a position akin to the position in 1645 when *The Directory* was "established and put in execution by Act of the General Assembly". If the Church cannot take the trouble to attempt to reach a common mind and speak authoritatively on matters like worship (and doctrine) which lie clearly within its own province and to which it can directly give effect, does it not undermine the authority and effectiveness of what it may say on other matters, moral, social, and political with which it is properly concerned but which do not lie uniquely within that province? And does it not put those whom it deposes to speak on its behalf with representatives of other churches at a disadvantage, exposing

them to the temptation of representing their own particular views as those of the Church?

The practice of the Church of England gives much more evident place to the centrality of Holy Communion in the life of the Church than does the present practice of the Church of Scotland. A considerable range of sacramental doctrine and ceremonial practice are to be found in it. That, no doubt, is part of the reason for the rich provision of texts for eucharistic services. They all, however, fall within two main structures of which Order One is closely similar to the First Order in *Common Order*. The differences from it are neither such as would cause a stir in any of our parishes accustomed to *Common Order*, nor such as to call strongly for adoption. For this Order eight alternative eucharistic prayers in varyingly modern language and imagery are provided, some of them with slighter internal variations. There is also a traditional language version of this Order but only two of the eucharistic prayers have been 'translated'. Order Two is that of the *Book of Common Prayer* with some slight previously allowed variations and with a contemporary translation. Save in its more English enclaves this Order has never commended itself widely even to the Scottish Episcopal Church and, however necessary it was for the Church of England to include it here, it is probably the feature of the book which least challenges consideration by the Church of Scotland. What is provided, though it may at times prove puzzling to users of the book who have to move backwards and forwards, demonstrates that it is possible to combine the measure of prescription required for cohesion with a considerable degree of liberty.

The plentiful provision of texts of scripture introducing or related to various parts of the service might be thought to be a feature of the book commending itself to a church of the Word but the writer has reservations about the pepper-pot use of scripture. Nevertheless, if some of these texts seem strained, others, particularly those relating to the 'Peace', do speak cogently in their place.

Another feature of the book from which we might derive both challenge and warning, and even some amusement, is its handling of the Christian

Year. Before any of the services The Calendar is printed. This is in two parts: 1. 'The Seasons' – the sequence of Sundays and Principal Feasts. This is largely the same as that adopted in *Common Order* and lies behind the Revised Common Lectionary which appears with minor variations in both books. Some, including the writer, may regret the fact that the adoption of this lectionary has necessitated departure from the Calendar devised by the Joint Liturgical Group, of which a chief feature was its setting out from a Sunday marking Creation. That, it may be argued, not only better reflected the total Christian message but related to 'green' issues which are a very proper concern of church and world in the present age. One wonders, however, whether the growing welcome which there has been in the Church for the more festal features of the Christian Year, after a long and uniquely Scottish post-reformation period of almost total neglect, has been balanced by a welcome for the more penitential seasons. But perhaps the Scots are not alone in the present day in seeking peace unknissed by righteousness.

If a fuller observance of this 'temporal cycle' is to be desired, the same can hardly be said for the 'sanctoral cycle'. *Common Worship* offers a long list of Holy Days commemorating, in four degrees of distinction, a considerable variety of 'saints'. Scots may find interesting the juxtaposition of the vilified William Laud and the much-admired Mary Slessor on 10th and 11th January and wonder whether her gender led to her claims being preferred to those of David Livingstone who does not appear. Glaswegians may not be altogether pleased to find that Kentigern (Mungo) is on a lower rung of the ladder of sanctity than Ninian and Columba but is allowed to reach their level in churches which bear his name. John Calvin shares a day (and the lowest rung) with his near contemporary Philip Neri but, while the latter is described as 'Spiritual Guide', the former, despite being entitled 'Directeur D'Ames' by one of his biographers, is here dubbed 'Reformer'. John Knox, although he ministered for a time in the Church of England and was reckoned fit to be Bishop of Rochester, finds no place. All of this requires an elaborate set of rules and exceptions from which we may well feel glad to be delivered and happy to be in the position to exercise the judgement of common sense on whom to commemorate in a particular parish or

district. The only principle which we might do well to note, not only in relation to 'saints' but also to the multitudinous good causes which claim our Sundays, is that all Sundays should 'celebrate the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord'.

Common Worship makes no claim to be a candidate for consideration as an ecumenical liturgy, nor could its adoption be reasonably advocated among us, but it does reflect an awareness on the part of its compilers of the Church beyond England and the Anglican Communion not always to be found from this direction and it does make manifest the reasons for many of its prescriptions. As such it also constitutes a challenge to detectable tendencies here to little Scotlandism and liturgical anarchy.

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