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Revising the Revision

Roger Beckwith

The authorization of the *Alternative Service Book 1980* is for twenty years, and comes to an end in the millennium year. The Liturgical Commission, which has the responsibility of making official proposals about what should follow, clearly envisages revision, but has been giving somewhat conflicting signals as to how it thinks this work should be done.

In two reports, *Lent, Holy Week, Easter* (1986) and *The Promise of his Glory* (1990), the Commission seemed to feel free to move a further stage away from traditional Anglican worship, beyond what its predecessors had done in producing the *ASB*. In another report, *Patterns for Worship* (1989), it even seemed to be moving away from liturgical worship altogether. Again, in its programmatic report, *The Worship of the Church* (1991), it spoke of the possibility of replacing the *ASB* by a range of books rather than by a single book (shades of the Middle Ages!) and, at the same time, of making concessions to various fashionable cults of the day, such as multi-faith worship and what is called 'inclusive language'. On the other hand, in its more recent report, *The Renewal of Common Prayer* (1993), it clearly acknowledges the Anglican ideal of common prayer, or prayer for use by everybody, and the important place of *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662) in maintaining or restoring it.

How these divergent tendencies in the Commission's thinking can be reconciled is hard to see, and in the latest proposals it has brought before the General Synod there seems to be a mixture of ideas, some conservative and others venturesome. The quality of what has been proposed has not been very impressive, however, and the rejection of *Additional Eucharistic Prayers* by the Synod in February 1996 was the occasion of some straight speaking about that from a variety of quarters.

The reverberation of this defeat has continued for a long time, and Bishop Colin Buchanan has tried to persuade the Standing Committee of the Synod that it is facing a crisis in its liturgical plans, which may be true (though not necessarily for the reasons he supposes). At all events, the passing of twenty years since the authorization of the *ASB*, and especially the opening of a new millennium of Christian history, is a proper time for the Church to take stock of what it is doing, and to think more deeply than usual about its past as well as future actions; and if the shock of this defeat prompts it to do so, it can only have healthy results.

The Alternative Service Book 1980, as its title indicates, was intended as an alternative and not as a replacement for the 1662 Prayer Book. The latter remains the permanent, official standard of Anglican worship, as the *Worship and Doctrine Measure of 1974* (now the legal basis of Anglican worship) makes quite clear. Only in cathedrals and in a few parish churches might the ordinary worshipper realise that this is the case, yet so it is. The Measure adds that *The Book of Common Prayer*, alongside the Creeds which it contains and the Thirty-nine Articles which are appended to it, is one of the standards of Anglican doctrine, subject only to Holy Scripture itself. Alternative services should conform to these norms, but are not norms themselves.

One day the Church of England may come back to the question of revising the 1662 Prayer Book itself, but that lies well in the future. If the Church does, it will have to give careful attention to the cautious principles for liturgical revision laid down in its own Preface, which are designed to ensure that, with any necessary updating, the book remains recognizably the same, still reflecting the liturgical mastery of Cranmer and grounded on the pure teaching of the Bible. But that is a task for another day. At present, we are concerned with revising the *ASB*.

The Alternative Service Book 1980 was the culmination of a process of liturgical revision beginning soon after the Second World War, in which the first publication was the Liturgical Commission's report *Prayer Book Revision in the Church of England* (1957). It was followed by three series of Alternative Services, in paperback and pamphlet form (the third series being in a modern idiom of English), and then by the *ASB*, which combined a selection of the services (mostly from the third series) into a bound volume. Remarkably enough, the principles on which the Liturgical Commission worked in producing this report and these series of services were not the same as those embodied in the legislation (drawn up by the Church Assembly and General Synod) which afterwards authorized the services for use. The Commission told us that it wished to set *The Book of Common Prayer* aside as a standard for worship and a starting point for revision, and that in matters of doctrine it wished to pursue 'studied ambiguity'. The greatest opportunity which the coming revision of the *ASB* offers is to introduce a 'studied consistency' into the liturgical process, by recognizing that the *ASB*, though different from the Prayer Book, *must* conform to the doctrine of the Prayer Book, and that in liturgical matters it ought to show due regard to the fact that the Prayer Book will continue in use, and continue to be the standard. It is to be hoped that the present Liturgical Commission, with its quite altered membership, will be willing to reopen these basic questions, and to give different answers to them from those given by its predecessors. If it should not be willing, the General Synod has the authority to tell it that it must

change its mind.

An English Prayer Book has been produced by a committee appointed by Church Society, and is published by Oxford University Press. It sets out to show, in practical terms, what such a change of policy might mean.

Though using the modern language of the *ASB*, and including many detailed features of the *ASB* where these have proved valuable, it aims throughout to give clear expression to the doctrine of the Prayer Book and to show proper respect to its liturgical usages. It restores doctrinal items which are conspicuously absent from the *ASB* (the Catechism, the Thirty-nine Articles and the Athanasian Creed), it conforms to the calendar of the Prayer Book and to its incomparable set of collects, and in many other respects it attempts to bring the *ASB* closer to the Prayer Book, where there had been no adequate reason for moving away.

The compilers of *An English Prayer Book* recognize that there is a widespread desire for services in modern English that adhere to the biblical teaching of *The Book of Common Prayer* (a desire which the *ASB* has excited but not fulfilled). They therefore earnestly hope that their work will be judged a worthwhile contribution to the forthcoming revision of the *ASB*. At the same time, they acknowledge their consciousness that many faults may be found in their attempt, but say they trust that nevertheless it may be acceptable to Almighty God, and may in a small way bring glory to him and edification of his Church and people.

ROGER BECKWITH is Librarian, Latimer House, Oxford.

This article is available in leaflet form without charge from Church Society.

Details of An English Prayer Book appear inside the front cover of this issue of Churchman.