

A Pragmatist View of Prayer-Book Revision.

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IT is instructive to approach the question of Prayer-Book Revision from the standpoint of the Pragmatist. We must recognize that there is in this matter no "Absolute"—that is to say, in the outward forms in which the spirit of worship expresses itself, there is no Absolute Best, given once for all by a final revelation. The "best" is simply that which works best, which most effectually helps the largest number of people to enter into communion with God and to receive the infusion of His grace. It is obvious at once that this "best" varies in different ages and countries. The object of worship is the same for all Christians; its fundamental principles are the same. The Eucharist is, for instance, its supreme expression always and everywhere (this may, I think, be proved pragmatically by the appeal to experience and results); but the details and arrangements of services are not fixed once and for all.

This, of course, is the most ordinary of commonplaces; but does not Pragmatism glory in its attempt to bring to its own the obvious and the commonplace? And it is a commonplace that has not escaped the usual treatment meted out to its kind. How many of those engaged in the present controversy consistently realize that the fundamental purpose of Revisionist and anti-Revisionist alike should be simply to produce the Prayer-Book which will best help the worship of the greatest number of the members of the Church of England now in the twentieth century?

At this point it may be well to clear away a very natural misunderstanding. Will not our Pragmatist principles, consistently applied, lead to pure Congregationalism and unregulated anarchy? If every one is to have the service which helps him most, why not Benediction, *Ave Marias*, and the observance of Corpus Christi on the one hand, and Salvation Army drums

and the paroxysms of the converted on the other? There is no question that such things do, in fact, "help" certain types of mind up to a point. The answer is, that we are legislating (if the word may be allowed) not for the individual, or for isolated congregations, but for a Church. This implies at once a certain amount of uniformity; in order to help the greatest number, we must consider the needs of the average worshipper; and, further, it is practically—*i.e.*, pragmatically—inconvenient that the member of a Church visiting a place of worship belonging to his own communion should find himself in a completely alien atmosphere. More important is the consideration that to legislate for a Church implies loyalty to a certain doctrinal position. We are not discussing the revision of that position; whether it requires revision is a question which may be raised from many points of view, and may admit of equally varying answers. The point is, that it is not the question immediately before the Church now; and so, when we are told that certain types of service help people, and should, therefore, be admitted on Pragmatist principles, we reply that they are at once barred on the ground that they are out of harmony with the deliberately adopted standpoint of our Church. We can be content to let our Pragmatism work its will in strict subordination to this position.

It has plenty to tell us within these limits. It reminds us at once that the suggested alterations are not of the nature of new and untried experiments. A wise revision will fasten mainly on what has already been tried, and proved by experience to have a "prayer-value." "Take what has worked well; drop what has proved a failure," is the advice of Pragmatism. Vestments: they undoubtedly help, not an isolated congregation here and there, but many Churchpeople, to realize the special presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and we may assume, though here we touch the centre of controversy, that they are *not* inconsistent with loyalty to the Church of England. It is equally certain that they hinder the worship of many others. Then they must be optional, says the Pragmatist, care being

taken to secure that the congregation in which they are used is one which is actually helped by them. This is really the fundamental question; from this point of view it becomes a side-issue, a mere point of archæology, whether they were used in any particular century or country, or whether they are ordered by an ambiguous rubric of the sixteenth century. It may be added, in passing, that the Pragmatist will readily allow that a rite which has worked well in the past may be presumed, with fair probability, to work well in the present also. But he will urge that this is only a presumption, and that it must be tested by the appeal to facts. We are prejudiced in favour of the old, not because it is old, but because it is likely to work well now; if it does not, it must go; or, if it needs adaptation, it must consent to that adaptation, and not invoke the sanctity of an inviolate past.

And then the Athanasian Creed. Here, again, surely the same principles apply, though again I am fully aware that the contention will be vehemently disputed. Some good people are apparently helped by it just as it stands, and can imagine nothing more edifying and uplifting to the soul for a Christmas or Easter morning. But there are others—a section negligible neither in number, intellect, or spirituality—who find that it does not confirm their faith, quicken their sense of worship, or give them a higher conception of God. Their experience has proved that in fact it does not work well, and the Pragmatist claims that the verdict of religious experience should not be ignored.

We may now submit to his decision matters which are less controversial, but of at least equal practical importance. We take him to a Sunday evening service, and show him an average congregation, whether in town or country. He will notice at once that most of those present are very simple, and we feel bound to point out to him that they are also very irregular in their church-going; perhaps half are "oncners"; a good proportion are attending their only service for a fortnight

or à month. It is very regrettable, no doubt ; but it is a fact which no one at present seems able to alter. It is then of supreme importance to make the most of the opportunity ; if they are sent empty away now, many of them will go fasting for an indefinite period. Evensong ? Well, as a whole, it is supremely beautiful, and even the simple love it. Our Pragmatist may pass that ; he does not want us to throw the Prayer-Book into the melting-pot. We can keep the general outline ; but what of the details ? The Psalms may chance to be very long, somewhat unintelligible, and perhaps even a little unedifying. He cannot help noticing that the congregation, so far from finding in them a help to worship, is actually bored. And knowing something of his Psalter, he asks us why we have picked out these particular Psalms when there are many others which would appeal so much more certainly to the spiritual sense. Do we think that what we have chosen will really help our people most ? Is it not possible that if they saw they were to join in a smaller number of appropriate Psalms they would make more of an effort to enter into their spirit than they do when they are appalled at once by a solid fifty to seventy verses ? We answer that the choice of our Psalms is not dictated by anything so superficial as the needs of our people ; they are what they are because it is the *n*th day of the month.

Our friend waits, still hopefully, for the lessons, and he hears perhaps a long historical narrative from the Old Testament of no very obvious spiritual value, and when it comes to the turn of the New Testament the fragment of a difficult technical argument from an Epistle. It may be a Sunday in Lent or after Easter, but there is nothing appropriate to the thought of the season. Again he asks us whether we could not give our sheep better provender from the rich store ready to our hand ; he reminds us that many of them will be hardly fed at all till their next monthly or fortnightly visit. And again we reply that our Old Testament lessons have been fixed once for all a generation ago, and that for the New Testament lesson we are usually guided by our consideration of the position which the

earth has reached in its annual journey round the sun ; it is the n th day of the x th month, and this algebraic formula is of supreme spiritual value. He retorts by asking why we have not chosen our hymns according to the same sacred principle, instead of condescending to have some regard to the teaching of the day and the needs of our congregation ; and he goes on to point out that we have deified our *sors liturgica*, and that, though our goddess may sometimes treat us well, at other times she plays us scurvy tricks, and even exercises an ironical humour which is a little out of place when so much is at stake. Do we really think that our present use of the Psalter and our existing Lectionary are the best calculated to nourish the spiritual life of our people ? If not, it is a small matter that we offend the Pragmatist ; we may be incurring the condemnation of the shepherds who feed the flock amiss.

But we must set some limits to the eloquent indignation of our friend, though he will have a few other criticisms to pass on the details of our services. We can only emphasize the fact that his principles are of wide application. They test the Men's Services which are popular, Three Hours' Services, Harvest Festivals, Special Mission Services, and so on. These are not recognized in the Prayer-Book, but they have been tried and work well, without in any way coming into collision with the teaching of the Church of England. "By their fruits," says the Pragmatist. He does not ask us to surrender anything that really answers its purpose, or to embark on new and hazardous experiments, but to open our eyes to the facts of religious experience, and to recognize once for all that services are made for man, not man for services.

A word in conclusion as to method. Will not the Pragmatist give his vote for something in the way of an Appendix or Supplement ? He will do this not merely on the obvious ground that such a reform is the most easily secured under present conditions ; he will probably prefer it on its own merits. He insists that though all have at bottom the same spiritual needs,

the ways in which they may best be met vary greatly. He therefore asks for as much variety as is consistent with a due regard for other principles. A formal revision of the Rubrics and text of the Prayer-Book will tend to be on hard-and-fast lines. An Appendix can work its way by means of permission rather than of command, by including as much as possible, rather than by making a final choice between alternatives.

Again, an Appendix will not fetter a future generation. The complaint of the Pragmatist is that what may have helped the sixteenth century, does not help us now, and he recognizes equally that the needs of our grandchildren will not be precisely the same as our own. Therefore, he does not wish to fashion for their shoulders a yoke similar to that which has been too heavy for our own. He asks for a Prayer-Book which can be adapted to the varying needs of successive generations, and which will leave the door open for properly regulated experiments in order that all that from time to time is proved to work well may in due course receive the stamp of formal recognition. The Pragmatist is bound to follow the teaching of experience, but he does not believe that the experience of his own generation closes the chapter.

