

Editorial

Liturgical revision is a subject which continues to stir passions in all sections of the Church, and there is little sign that controversy over this issue is about to go away. On the contrary, changes in society and the approach of a new millennium both suggest that a new round of argument is about to begin. Today's radicals have taken up the feminist cause, and discovered that even the 'modern' versions of the 1970s usually fail to do justice to their point of view. It is no longer simply a matter of adding words to 'include' women, or even of adopting gender-neutral terminology; nowadays, only the complete feminisation of God will satisfy those who think that women have been silenced by centuries of male oppression in the name of religion.

On the other side, there are signs that bodies such as the Liturgical Commission are becoming more conservative. At least, the traditionalist voice is being heard more often now than it was 20 years ago, and there is a real possibility that a future ASB may contain services which bear a greater resemblance to classical, Cranmerian Anglicanism than anything which we have seen up to now.

A recent book by Barry Spurr, *The Word in the Desert; Anglican and Roman Catholic Reactions to Liturgical Reform* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press 1995 £17.50 ISBN 0-7188-2921-2) helps us put these matters in perspective. Dr Spurr is an Anglican layman who lectures in English at the University of Sydney, and he is extremely well-informed and up-to-date on liturgical and other theological developments in the Anglican Communion worldwide. For good measure, he adds the Roman Catholic Church to his analysis, though its problems in this area are somewhat different from our own, as he recognises.

The book gives a detailed and well-documented account of conservative reactions to liturgical reform since the 1960s, and includes some choice examples of what it is that has so irritated the traditionalists. The outside observer will find it hard to credit some of the stories Dr Spurr tells, since they are so bizarre, but anyone who has attended worship at all regularly in the past two decades will find nothing surprising here. The sheer tastelessness of so many modern revisers beggars all description, and the descent into maudlin doggerel which he documents must surely rank as one of the great cultural scandals of our time.

Dr Spurr is not a theologian and he tends to avoid this aspect of the question, though he acknowledges that the staunchest defenders of

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traditional forms of worship are also likely to be upholders of classical Christian orthodoxy. But this is not universally true, and it is here that churchpeople encounter difficulties. On the one hand, there are the cultured atheists who, though they do not go to church or believe in its teachings, nevertheless want to see the old order preserved for its cultural value. Church representatives not unreasonably respond that their concern is to provide living worship for believers, not to tend museums, and so (as Dr Spurr points out) support of this kind for traditional forms of worship can easily become counterproductive.

On the other hand, there are theologically conservative Christians, mainly from the evangelical wing of the Church, who dislike traditional worship and do all they can to modernise services in the hope of reaching out to the unchurched. Whether this succeeds or not is a very debatable point, but there is no doubt at all that many evangelical clergy refuse to use either the BCP (1662) or the AV because of their supposed 'incomprehensibility'. Dr Spurr records this at some length, and then goes on to list several instances in which quite ordinary people, when they have been given the chance, have opted for traditional language forms of prayer. Experience suggests that here we are dealing with a dialogue of the deaf, for however many young people may be impressed with traditional worship, there will always be a large segment of the clergy who will reply that, as teenagers, they were totally turned off by that very thing, and therefore they will not touch it now!

In such an atmosphere, the hardest thing to achieve is mutual tolerance and respect, and Dr Spurr points this out without fear or favour. He shows how bishops and other church leaders have spoken with forked tongue, lauding the beauties of tradition whilst at the same time doing their best to kill it off. But he also shows how the apparently reasonable objections to this which have been made from the conservative side can rapidly degenerate into mindless polemic, especially when it is necessary to play to the traditionalist gallery. As an example of this, Dr Spurr compares *Faith and Heritage* with its sister publication *Faith and Worship*, both of which are produced by The Prayer Book Society. The former is popular and often strident in tone, whilst the latter is much more scholarly, though not without its more popular moments.

The lesson is that neither side in this debate can claim a monopoly of virtue, and that both have erred in the presentation and defence of their respective claims. Nevertheless, it is plain that the revisers of the past generation bear a greater responsibility, for it is they who have dealt so recklessly with the tradition, and who might reasonably be expected to offer a better defence of their actions than anything which has been forthcoming so far. If, as the late French historian Fernand Braudel

claimed, a person's influence is judged by the time it takes for him to be forgotten after his death, few could doubt that Thomas Cranmer has a better claim on our attention than either Gregory Dix or Roland Jasper. A hymnbook (*Hymns for Today's Church*) in which offerings by contemporary clergy outnumber the Wesleyan classics (most of them bowdlerised in the interests of 'comprehensibility') is unlikely to enjoy a long shelf life. Its authors are due to retire over the next ten years, and there is every likelihood that the book will be retired with them, to nobody's great loss.

The real danger for the longer term is that today's younger generation is being deprived of its spiritual heritage by ageing hippies left over from the 1960s. When they in turn become the leaders of the Church, what resources will they have to turn back to? Few people develop a taste for Tyndale, Coverdale and the like overnight; those men wrote to last, and their work is correspondingly demanding. It can only be properly absorbed by daily repetition from childhood, as the history of the Reformation itself makes clear. For if the BCP was widely available from 1559 onwards, its impact on the nation was not clearly felt until about 1600 – a generation later. The AV came out in 1611, but did not oust its rivals until about 1650. The reason for this is simple; it took that long for the whole Church to be nurtured on what later became its classic texts. Today, the great process of forgetting all that will not be complete until those who were educated before the 1960s are in their graves, something which is still 30 to 40 years away. But by then, will we have any collective memory in the Church at all? Or will the bishops of 2020 be men (and women?) with no heritage to kick against, and nothing left to defend? That prospect is an all too real one, and spells greater long term danger for the Church than anything else. Conservative Christians have no time to lose if they want to see the theological and liturgical heritage of the past preserved for the benefit of future generations. Dr Spurr has done us all a service in pointing out just what the strengths and weaknesses of the conservative case are, and it behoves us to take his message seriously as we contemplate what to do about this problem in the years ahead.

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