

KING'S THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

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SUB-CHRISTIAN PRAYER: PELAGIAN DIDACTICISM IN ALTERNATIVE SERVICE BOOK 1980 Stuart Hall

One of the chief faults of the *Book of Common Prayer* is a tendency to nag the congregation. Such features are the long exhortations to repentance at the beginning of both Morning and Evening Prayer (omitted for many years past in almost all churches where the daily office persisted) and at the Holy Communion (which I have never heard read at all except by myself). More particularly one finds the use of prayer itself as a vehicle of instruction or exhortation: the long collect at the end of the Solemnization of Matrimony beginning "O God, who by thy mighty power..." is the worst example, but the one at the end of the Burial of the Dead, "O merciful God..." is nearly as bad, and some of Cranmer's writings or re-writings of Collects for the Day err in the didactic direction (see especially St Thomas' Day, St Stephen's Day and Advent 2). Needless to say, these are exceptions, and most of Cranmer's translations are theologically sound and rhetorically beautiful.

As far as the exhortations are concerned, ASB 1980 has followed the Church in omitting them or reducing them to optional invitations to worship or confession. As far as the prayers are concerned, the example of Cranmer has been followed in both its aspects. Where the old material seemed clear, orthodox and unexceptionable, it has been translated, usually well, into rhythmic modern English. But where new material has been introduced, it has often exposed surprising weaknesses of spirituality or theology, or finds the compilers nagging the people when they should be praying to God in the Spirit. There are exceptions: moralising or didactic intrusions in old prayers, and splendid expressions of the Church's prayer in Christ

among the new ones. Perhaps the good predominates. But the defenders of ASB 1980 against its critics, and of the Gospel against its debasers, have their work made more difficult by the faulty texts.

The faults, generally expressed, are those which one constantly hears where clergy and laity compose prayers for public use. God is told that he has "taught us" something, or is asked to "teach us that" something is so, or asked to make people "know" something. The prayer-leader already knows these things, or intends to do them; he wants the people to share his insight or his concern. So intercession becomes self-concern, the work of the prayer-desk and altar is replaced by the work of the pulpit. Often in what purports to be a prayer for faith or penitence or good works or witness, the congregation is urged to have faith, to repent, to do good and to bear witness. I do not mean that these things do not come from God, quite the reverse. I am protesting against forms of prayer which throw the first responsibility back on the people, and call in God at second place. Here the supremely dangerous formula is "help us to", but there are others such as "may we". True prayer in Christ already believes ("Lord I believe; help my unbelief"). It already repents ("Lord be merciful to me a sinner"). It is already justified and adorned with the good works of Christ ("Give judgment for me O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity"). And as for witness, it is for God to choose how he will manifest the sons of God as the light of the world, and reveal his glory over all the earth. The test of a prayer should be: Does Christ pray this in us? And if we are in doubt about that, we

may look at the classic prayers which Christ uses in the Psalms and the New Testament, and in the expression of prayers in his Spirit in ancient Israel and the early Church.

Judged by such criteria, the prayers of ASB 1980 are often weak and jejune, not only because they are Pelagian or didactic, but because they fail to make the confident, robust demands upon God which the biblical and early Christian writers were prepared to make. The religious and moral experience of the people praying and those they pray for displace the majesty, wrath and mercy of God from the centre of the picture.

We shall consider examples of moralism, didacticism, undue subjectivity, and bad exegesis. The categories often overlap.

1. *Moralism*. "Heavenly Father, whose children suffered at the hands of Herod, though they had done no wrong; give us grace neither to act cruelly nor to stand indifferently by, but to defend the weak from the tyranny of the strong; in the name of Jesus Christ who suffered for us, but is alive and reigns etc." (Holy Innocents/822).

This prayer is plainly intended to generate the thought in the congregation, "Am I cruel? Am I indifferent? Do I do all I can to defend the weak?" These are worthy thoughts, but to think them is not prayer, and to think them will not do what only God can do, that is, put down the mighty and exalt the humble. We should, in Christ's name, urge upon God the claims of the afflicted, not try to urge them first on each other. The central petition might say: "Let the cries of the innocent and the affliction of the bereaved prevail with you to save us all from tyranny and wrong."

"Almighty and heavenly Father, we thank you that in this wonderful sacrament you have given us the memorial of the passion of your Son Jesus Christ. Grant us so to reverence the sacred mysteries of his body and blood, that we may know within ourselves and show forth in our lives the fruits of his redemption; who is alive etc." (Maundy Thursday/552 and Thanksgiving for Holy Communion/920).

The addition to the traditional prayer "and

show forth in our lives" undoes the spirituality as well as the style of the medieval prayer. Christ apprehends us as we reverently use his gifts; the quest for good works at this point distracts us from him, and is aimed to improve the congregation. A further though incidental point: the old prayer was addressed to the Lord Jesus Christ, and as in all similar cases the collects of ASB 1980 have been changed to fit the regular theological order of prayer addressed to the Father. While the principle is sound, particularly for the central eucharistic and intercessory prayers, there was surely no need scrupulously to avoid invoking Christ directly in Collects. Like the "Christ have mercy", a Collect is an invocation of aid, not least for the liturgical work in hand. But to return to moralism.

"Lord God Almighty, whose Son Jesus Christ has taught us that it is more blessed to give than to receive; help us by the example of your apostle Barnabas to be generous in our judgments and unselfish in our service; through Jesus Christ our Lord."

(St Barnabas/775).

The saying of Jesus from Acts 20, 35 is a warning against covetousness among the clergy, and is irrelevant to the rest of the prayer; that it is moral and intended to instruct the people is exposed by the "taught us" formula. The remainder fixes on the generous judgments of Barnabas, alluding to his support for Paul (Acts 9, 25-27), the gentile converts (11, 22-23) and John Mark (15, 36-69). The BCP preferred to fix on the "singular gifts of the Holy Ghost" praised in Acts 11,24. That is surely better, since it recognizes the source of his various virtues. We could say: "God, who filled Barnabas the Apostle with spiritual gifts for preaching the Gospel, building up the Church, and supplying the wants of your people: renew among us the gifts of your Holy Spirit, that our common service and mutual love may bind us into one in the fellowship of your saints; through..."

"Heavenly Father, give us grace in all our sufferings for the truth to follow the example of your first martyr Saint Stephen: that we also may look to him who was crucified and pray for those who persecute us; through etc." (St Stephen/817).

This is an improvement on the sermonising of the BCP, but persists in drawing from the first martyr of Christ no more than a moral example. Cannot a truly biblical martyr-prayer be composed, that recalls the blood of Abel (Genesis 4,9; Matthew 23,25) and echoes the plea of the souls of the martyrs (Revelation 6,9-11)? "God our Judge, let the blood of St Stephen and all your martyrs cry to you from the ground, speedily to vindicate your elect, and mercifully to convert our persecutors; through him who shed his blood for us, Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Heavenly Father, who sent your apostle Paul to preach the Gospel, and gave him Timothy and Titus to be his companions in the faith: grant that our fellowship in the Holy Spirit may bear witness to the name of Jesus; who is alive etc."
(Timothy and Titus/828)

The saints are taken as an example of friendship, and we are urged to show such spiritual fellowship that we witness to Jesus. But there is no such message in Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus. Those letters rather call for reference to the stabilising of the Gospel in formal and traditional ecclesiastical patterns. We could more scripturally say: "King of the Ages, Immortal God, by Timothy and Titus and others like them you secured the Gospel for us against corruption, falsehood and disorder: Preserve among us the tradition of sound words and sober good order, which you have given us in your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord . . ."

Two of the more attractive regular prayers are unfortunately infected with moralism:

"Eternal God and Father, you create us by your power and redeem us by your love: guide and strengthen us by your Spirit, that we may give ourselves in love and service to one another and to you; through . . ."
(Morning Prayer/60)

The older collect, printed as alternative to this, prays to be spared danger and guided into doing right; that follows the pattern of the Lord's own prayer, "lead us not into temptation, deliver us from evil". The new one sets goodness above salvation. Worse, by suggesting that the congregation still needs to give itself to God it undermines the status of those who pray in the Holy Spirit, already elect and justified in

Christ. We might base some such petition as this upon our creation and redemption: "... guide and strengthen us by your Spirit, that the love which you have poured into our hearts may overflow in obedience to you and service to each other, through . . ."

". . . May we who share Christ's body live his risen life; we who drink his cup bring life to others; we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. . . . (Holy Communion A/144).

At the end of the eucharist the moral exhortation is almost naked. The alternative which follows is more Christian. ". . . we offer . . . Send us out . . ." In the longer prayer we could properly ask for the eucharistic gifts to be realized in some such way as this: "... Feed with eternal life those who share the body of the Lord; hold us faithful to this covenant in his blood; refresh us and our neighbours with the rich gifts of your Spirit." The rest of the prayer might stand.

"Almighty God, whose Holy Spirit equips the Church with a rich variety of gifts; grant that we may use them to bear witness to Christ by lives built on faith and love. Make us ready to live his gospel and eager to do his will, that we may share with all your Church in the joys of eternal life . . ."

(Baptism and Confirmation/237; also 258 and 277)

This clumsy exhortation to good works and proselytism mars the new confirmation rite and the renewal of baptismal vows. Instead of yielding ourselves to God's purposes, we invoke his gifts for our own. Something like this might be better: "Father, you give your Holy Spirit to those who ask: ever renew in us and all your people his rich and varied gifts, that your light may shine in the world and all men give you glory; through . . ."

"Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, let there be pardon; etc."
(Baptism and Confirmation/237; also 277)

Whether this is a more original form of the Franciscan prayer than that in F.B. Macnutt's *Prayer Manual* (London 1951, No. 32) I do not know. But inevitably the ASB compilers prefer "let us sow love . . . let there be pardon" to a direct petition "give love, . . . pardon, . . ."

faith etc." Pelagius prevails.

2. *Didacticism*. There are places where the prayer is used not only for moral exhortation, but to convey information, usually about Christian duties.

"Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: help us so to hear them, to read, mark learn and inwardly digest them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ." (Advent 2/426)

Seduced by the beauty and popularity of Cranmer's collect, the compilers have made little change. They have changed "grant that we may" into "help us so to", putting the initiative firmly with the people. But the compilers should have rejected an unsuitable explanatory and didactic prayer. If we are to pray about the Scriptures, we might say: "Lord, you gave us holy Scriptures as a perpetual witness to your eternal Word: so graft that Word in our hearts that we may glorify you on earth and praise you in heaven . . ."

"Almighty Father, whose son Jesus Christ has taught us that what we do for the least of our brethren we do also for him: give us the will to be the servant of others as he was the servant of all, who gave up his life and died for us, etc." (Maundy Thursday/552; Pentecost 11/628)

Here is classic didactic moralism: "Christ taught us this and that; give us the will to do this and that." Having listened, the congregation is expected to change its ways. We could more briefly and more reverently pray: "Father, your Son became our servant for love of us, and called us to share his service: make us faithful servants to you and to all our fellow creatures, etc." (Scrupulous students of Matthew 25,30 will observe that Christ speaks not of "the least of *our* brethren" but the least of *his*; the exegesis of ASB 1980 is popular, moral and false.)

"Almighty Father, whose Son Jesus Christ was presented in the Temple and acclaimed the glory of Israel and the light of the nations: grant that in him we may be presented to you and in the world may reflect his glory;

etc." (Presentation of Christ/757)

The long explanation of the subject of the celebration is both didactic and confusing. The petition also is feeble and pointless, except to exhort to good works. The BCP prays that our self-offering may be pure, which is far better. Or we might say: "Father, your Son Jesus Christ was presented in the Temple for our salvation: let his self-offering sanctify our own, that our whole body may be full of light."

"Eternal God, you have declared in Christ the completion of your purpose of love. May we live by faith, walk in hope, and be renewed in love, until the world reflects your glory, and you are all in all. Even so; come, Lord Jesus. Amen." (Baptism and Confirmation/238)

An enterprising prayer is marred by the moral didacticism which urges the convert to live by faith, hope and love, and by the obscurity of its sentiments, being unsure whether God's purpose is historically complete or not, and unsure whether the coming of the Lord is complete in the disciples' faith and the world's conversion, or supervenes upon it. At a confirmation, the believer stands already in the fellowship of faith, and should pray more resolutely: "... you have declared in Christ your saving purpose, and filled us with your faith and hope and love: keep us always steadfast in your grace, till he appears as our judge and great redeemer. Even so; come, Lord Jesus. Amen."

"Eternal God, true and loving Father, in holy marriage you make your servants one. May their life together witness to your love in this troubled world; may unity overcome division, forgiveness heal injury, and joy triumph over sorrow; through . . ."
(Marriage/298)

This prayer is at least briefer than Cranmer's long lecture, a modernised version of which follows in ASB on page 299. But it is still didactic, explaining the duties of man and wife, which is what the sermon should have done already. We need a prayer which builds upon the grace in which the couple now stand by entrusting their future to God himself: "Father, you make man and wife to be one flesh. So unite N and N that together they

may endure the trials and temptations of this life, and together praise you for your endless mercy."

"Heavenly Father, in your Son Jesus Christ you have given us a true faith and a sure hope. Strengthen this faith and hope in us all our days, that we may live as those who believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to eternal life; etc." (Funeral Service/308; cf. 936).

The unfortunate mourners are urged to "live as those who believe", and must be reminded of the relevant clauses of the Creed. It would be better simply to say the Creed; or to say "you have given us a true faith and a sure hope in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, and the resurrection to eternal life; hold us fast in that communion, forgive us our sins as we forgive each other, and raise us to new life together in Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Grant us, Lord, the wisdom and the grace to use aright the time that is left to us here on earth. Lead us to repent of our sins, the evil we have done and the good we have not done; and strengthen us to follow the steps of your Son, in the way that leads to the fullness of eternal life; through..." (Funeral Service/314)

This prayer seems to be directed at the inattentive Christian who might be "got at" successfully at a funeral and made to change his ways. But if death is an occasion to number our days and turn from sin to righteousness, then that is what we should do before God, not ask to be enabled to do it. Mourners often do have a sense of guilt, and it is psychologically good for them to express it; under God they may come to a sense of absolution, too. Why not say: "Father, we have sinned against you, and none of us is pure in your sight; pity us, cleanse us and restore us in your love; let the suffering of your dear Son prevail against all our faults and failings; and show us the path of righteousness that leads to everlasting life..."

On page 322-323 are seven "Prayers after the Birth of a still-born Child or the Death of a newly-born Child". The first five (nos. 34-38) all teach, in the guise of prayer, that the parent ought to have faith in God's love, or to "know" it. But is such faith and knowledge what we

should be praying for at a time of bitter disappointment and loss? Is it how Job, or Jeremiah, or the Psalmist prays? Is it how Jesus prays? It resembles rather the pious mouthings of Job's comforters, whom God rejects. Our praying should express the pain, and call God to remember his greatness, his pity and his promises. "God, you have turned away your face from us, and taken away our darling and our treasure. Pity us and comfort us in our bitter loss; heal our wounded hearts; and in your wisdom bring good out of our present sorrow..."

3. *Subjectivity*. The last example of didacticism already illustrates the vice of subjectivity. Instead of making concrete demands upon our Creator and Saviour, modern piety seeks instead only for internal change in the person praying. It is as though in a scientific world we can no longer expect God actually to respond, and so we must confine our praying to a religious exercise for ourselves.

"Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and made man in your own image. Teach us to discern your hand in all your works, and to serve you with reverence and thanksgiving through..." (9 Sunday before Christmas/398)

This starts well, but ends up exhorting the people to interpret the universe religiously. Christ prays that God's kingdom may come; not that we may have a heightened religious awareness, but that the Creator's design may be fulfilled. Instead of the "Teach us..." clauses we might say: "Make your judgments known in all the world, and perfect your chosen servants in the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

"Almighty Father, whose Son was revealed in majesty before he suffered death upon the cross: give us the faith to perceive his glory, that we may be strengthened to suffer with him and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory; who is alive etc." (Lent 4/517) Again, a prayer for religious experience stands in place of the given grace and the concrete prayer. After the colon we might say: "grant that we who have seen his glory may be strengthened to suffer with him etc."

“Almighty Father, who in your great mercy made glad the disciples with the sight of the risen Lord: give us such knowledge of his presence with us, that we may be strengthened and sustained by his risen life and serve you continually in righteousness and truth; etc.” (Easter 1/602)

But why should we pray for *knowledge* of Christ’s presence? It is not the knowledge, but the presence itself, whether God makes us aware of it or not, which saves us. A shorter petition after the colon would be more effective. “strengthen and sustain us by his risen life, that we may serve you continually in righteousness and truth; etc.”

As in the case of those mourning an infant death, the prayers for the sick on p.929 are both partly or wholly subjective in their petitions “comfort and restore those who are sick, that they may be strengthened in their weakness and have confidence in your unfailing love...” “Bless them, and those who serve their needs, that they may put their whole trust in you and be filled with your peace;...” Sin, divine reproof, and the unpredictable mystery of God’s wrath, all of which appear in the biblical prayers and protests about the sick, have all disappeared. Something radically different is needed. We might try: “Spare them, Lord, and in your wrath remember mercy. Grant them true sorrow for their sins, and integrity of heart in the face of pain, and touch them with your healing hand; through Christ our Saviour.”

4. *Bad exegesis.* The worst example is the collect for the new feast of St Joseph of Nazareth, Husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

“Almighty God, who called Joseph to be the husband of the Virgin Mary, and the guardian of your only Son: open our eyes and our ears to the messages of your holy will, and give us the courage to act upon them; through...” (St Joseph/760)

It was probably a mistake to include in the Calendar a figure marginal to the Gospel about whom little can be said and probably nothing at all historical. But if one tries to identify the function of Joseph in relation to the central truth of Jesus Christ, it will not be in his functions as husband or guardian, and certainly not in his

virtue of courage, here introduced on standard moralist principles. There is something in his visions and dreams, inasmuch as in Matthew’s Gospel he bears witness to the miraculous Davidic and virginal conception and birth of Jesus as King and Saviour. We could say: “Merciful God, you speak to us through St Joseph of the wonderful conception and birth of Jesus our King and Saviour: raise up among us seers and prophets to proclaim among us all your marvelous works; through...”

“Heavenly Father, who chose the Virgin Mary, full of grace, to be the mother of our Lord and Saviour: fill us with your grace, that in all things we may accept your holy will and with her rejoice in your salvation; through...” (Advent 4/437)

It is a grave matter to base a collect on the old mistranslation “full of grace”, and sub-Christian to suggest that the church at prayer is not already praying in the fulness of the divine favour. Try: “Heavenly Father, who in your grace chose and called Saint Mary, and by your Spirit conceived in her the manhood of your only Son: by the same Spirit so form Christ in our hearts that we may humbly hear your call and cheerfully do your will; through...”

“Almighty God, whose blessed Son was circumcised in obedience to the law for man’s sake and given the Name that is above every Name: give us grace faithfully to bear his name, to worship him in the freedom of the Spirit, and to proclaim him as the Saviour of mankind, who etc.” (Naming of Jesus/752)

This errs by complication. It apparently says (1) that Christ’s circumcision signifies “obedience to the law” (Lk. 2,22) which gives “freedom” to “worship” in “the Spirit” (Phil. 3,3), (2) that we celebrate the naming of Jesus (Lk. 2,21) with “the Name above every name” at which all creatures bow the knee in “worship” (Phil. 2, 9-11); (3) the “Name” of Jesus designates him “Saviour of mankind” (Mt. 1,21); (4) we ought to “proclaim him” and “faithfully bear his name”. There is material for several sermons here, not all good ones. The name “Jesus” is rightly interpreted “Saviour”. But the “name above every name” in Phil. 2,9-11 is not “Jesus” but *Kyrios*, “Lord”, at least in the view of many competent exponents. Further, when one asks what is the “name” which the believer is called

upon to "bear", it is neither Jesus nor Lord, but could plausibly be construed as Christ, since he is a *Christ-ian*. The prayer should plainly concentrate on (1) circumcision or (3) the name Jesus, and the misleading complications of (2) and (4) should be dropped. In the Liturgical Commission's own *Commentary* p.54 the source of this collect is given as "1662". The Prayer Book in fact wisely confines the collect to the theme of circumcision, and ASB 1980 would have done well to copy it.

Finally, as examples of bad exegesis we may take two of the places—not the only two—where the duty of "witness" is urged upon the people in collects:

"Almighty God, who gave such grace to your apostle Saint Andrew that he readily obeyed the call of your Son and brought his brother with him: give us, who are called by your holy Word, grace to follow without delay and to tell the good news of your kingdom; through . . ." (St Andrew/815)

"Almighty God, who caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world through the preaching of your servant Saint Paul. grant that we who celebrate his wonderful conversion may follow him in bearing witness to your truth; through . . ." (Conversion of St Paul/754)

In 1662 the ready obedience of St Andrew is the theme, and obedience to God is sought in petition. Here we have an intrusive reference to "and brought his brother with him" with a corresponding addition about "tell the good news of your kingdom". The Marcan narrative of the sudden call (Mk. 1,16-18) is fudged with the Johannine account of Andrew bringing

Simon Peter (Joh. 1,40-42), which is bad exegesis. But worse, the moral is drawn that we should all "tell the good news of your kingdom" as if all God's people were apostles and evangelists. This runs clean contrary to the scriptural picture of the body of Christ articulated so that each has his special function (e.g. 1 Cor. 12,27-30). In the New Testament, those called to evangelise are a small, specially chosen group, and for them we should pray that they may be bold in speaking for the mystery of the gospel (Eph. 6,19). The same misguided notion has corrupted the old collect about St Paul. Instead of showing our gratitude for his conversion by following the holy doctrines which he taught, we are now to follow him in bearing witness to God's truth. If "witness" means evangelism, we have no right to ask that God should choose us. If it means martyrdom, we should pray to be spared it (like "lead us not into temptation"). The notion that every Christian should go in for "personal evangelism" or "personal witness" is a falsehood without scriptural warrant it would certainly be better to pray that we may follow St Paul's holy doctrine.

Conclusion. We have criticised comparatively few of the prayers. Some others are poor, but many are good and some very good. We cannot expect a rapid overhaul of ASB 1980. But when the time comes, we must hope the revisers will think again about the content of the prayers, and try to ensure that the prayers are worthy instruments for teaching the people to pray, and above all worthy expressions of the great intercession which the Lord himself makes before his Father for us.

SOME REFLECTIONS ON INDIAN SPIRITUALITY

Friedhelm Hardy

III COMMUTING WITHIN ONE WORLD

It is difficult to envisage in what sort of cultural or psychological circumstances one would decide that the *totality* of one's ex-

periences is worthless. But unlike his European existentialist counterpart, the Indian can fall back on 'extraordinary experiences' to avoid