

How Episcopalians Were Deceived

by

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[NOTE: This work was originally published in the July-August, 1981 edition of the New Oxford Review, and was a review of the then newly-published book of essays entitled *Worship Points the Way* - a celebration of the life and work of Massey Hamilton Shepherd, Jr., published by Seabury Press in 1981 and now out of print]

When the 1979 Book of Common Prayer was undergoing trial use in the Episcopal Church, its theological implications were seriously questioned by a large number of devout churchmen. It was charged that the basis of traditional Anglicanism was threatened thereby and would be eroded and finally undermined if the new book were to be adopted. The Standing Liturgical Commission (SLC) and the champions of the new book craftily refused to meet these charges head on, but by ignoring them (or when this was not possible, by evasion and deliberately ambiguous rhetoric) lulled General Convention and the whole Episcopal Church into thinking that merely liturgical reform and updating were intended, and so obtained final adoption of the book as the Church's one and only authorized liturgy. But now, it has finally been revealed that the new book was actually intended by its framers to alter radically the whole theological basis of Episcopalian worship. The silence, crafty evasions, and ambiguous rhetoric that met charges that theological change was implicit in the new rites are now justified as strategic ploys to secure parliamentary victory.

Chief among those who make these admissions - nay, these boasts - is Dean Urban T. Holmes of the School of Theology of the University of the South. His chapter on "Education for Liturgy: An unfinished Symphony in Four Movements," is the outstanding contribution to this book of essays in celebration of the life and work of liturgist Massey H. Shepherd Jr..

H. Boone Porter, editor of *The Living Church*, touches on the history of Prayer Book revision and Sherman Johnson, former Dean of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, gives some background, but it is Dean Holmes who really gets down to cases. (The remaining 11 essays make interesting reading, but have little relation to the Prayer Book revision of the Episcopal Church.)

It has long been a truism that the law of worship is the law of belief (*lex orandi, lex credendi*), and that as a church worships so it believes. What simpler way, then, could

there be to change the Episcopal Church's theological stance than to alter its worship through Prayer Book revision? So the title of the book of essays is extremely apt: *Worship Points the Way*.

Since the essay by Holmes is the one that really shows how worship points the way, extended quotations therefrom are necessary to show what has really happened. He begins by telling how he and other liturgical scholars in this country were disappointed by what Dom Gregory Dix had to say in his *Shape of the Liturgy*. The scholarship of this prominent English liturgist is impugned and his definitive work, which is perhaps the greatest contribution in this field in this present century, is discounted:

"The Shape of the Liturgy by Dom Gregory Dix (was) published in 1945. I remember as a young, enthusiastic churchman eagerly awaiting the publication of this magnum opus. Dom Gregory Dix was the Anglo Catholic liturgical scholar, we thought, whose erudition would make inevitable of fulfillment the longings of the liturgical movement. The result was both impressive and disappointing. Dix wrote movingly, sometimes with no relation to the facts, occasionally drawing from sources which, as far as other scholars could tell, did not exist. His principal substantive contribution was the identification of the fourfold shape of the eucharistic action. His book met a reading public ready for solid liturgical fare. We were ready to move to the task outlined by Herbert, Ladd, Jones, and others; but Dix was to be more an inspiration than a resource for liturgical renewal."

Perhaps the reason for this outburst against Dix was his theological difference with Holmes on the subject of Confirmation. In *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism* (1946), Dix states and defends the classical Anglican understanding of Confirmation as set forth in the 1928 American Prayer Book.

Very little is said by Holmes about the activities of the SLC in the 1950s which resulted in Prayer Book Studies I-XVI, except that "all show a commitment to liturgical revision based upon Cranmer's work and the 1928 Book of Common Prayer." It may be mentioned here that Massey Shepherd was a member of the SLC during most of this time. These studies, it may also be observed, contemplated a revision of the 1928 book without altering in any way the theology on which Anglicanism had always rested. Almost without exception, the rites proposed therein would have been acceptable to the overwhelming majority of those who opposed the adoption of the 1979 book.

But this work miscarried because some members of the SLC seem to have had a change of heart along the way, Holmes describes what occurred:

The liturgical movement that emerged in the post World War II Episcopal Church was a theological renewal, not the result of a romantic longing for the past, as in the mid-nineteenth century, or of a fondness for sacristies. Its leaders were awakened to what the liturgy is to the Christian's perception of his world. My belief is that it took a long time for us to become aware of the radical nature of that theological revolution. As

evidenced in Jones's statement in Prayer Book Studies IV we do not see that what was ultimately challenged was the theology and, consequently, the content of our "incomparable prayer book."

He later observes:

What made the 1928 Book of Common Prayer a difficult book to revise was that the culture and its theological concepts which produced the Book of Common Prayer in the sixteenth century no longer existed."

How the avant garde theologians gained control of the revision process through the activities of the Associated Parishes and infiltration of the seminaries is detailed by Holmes, who remarks:

If the church was to be educated for liturgy, the theology of liturgical renewal had to be taught and lived in our parishes. This meant that it had to become a part of the curriculum of our seminaries."

This was the beginning of the indoctrination of "The New Breed of Clergy." Holmes goes on to say:

The 1960s was a time when theologians became aware of the bankruptcy of so-called "classical theology." As Hans Urs von Balthasar stated, we discovered that "man has attained a new stage of his religious consciousness."

It seems to have been about this time that revision was given up in favor of a radical rewriting of the Prayer Book, for in view of current theological thought, Holmes says that:

The shift, then, in liturgical renewal in the Episcopal Church coming at this time away from Cranmer and the Tudor deity should not then be at all surprising."

But his conscience seems to bother him about the failure of the SLC to level with the whole Church about it all, for he goes on:

It is unfortunate in one sense - although strategically understandable - that we were not clear to ourselves and to others that a real theological crisis lay behind the liturgical movement. This explication of the theological crisis would have served to make what was happening in the new rites not just a pastoral concern or a question of literary taste, but a theological response to our age. It would probably have also made revision even that much more controversial (emphasis added)."

The theological implications of liturgical renewal are expressly set forth:

The church has awakened to the demise of classical theology.

I know that there are those who do not understand this and protest it vigorously.

As I reflect upon the educational process that has brought the Episcopal Church to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer, it seems clear that it is a symbol of a theological revolution, which is a victory for none of the old "parties" that those of us over 40 remember so vividly from our youth. The new prayer book has, consciously or unconsciously, come to emphasize that understanding of the Christian experience which one might describe as a postcritical apprehension of symbolic reality and life in the community. It is consonant with Ricoeur's "second naivete" and is more expressive of Husserl, Heidegger, Otto, and Rahner than Barth or Brunner. It embraces a Logos Christology. This viewpoint was shaped liturgically at Maria Laach, transmitted to Anglicanism by Herbert, Ladd, and Shepherd, and reinforced by Vatican II and a cluster of theologians and teachers who are, directly or indirectly, part of the theological movement reflected in that most significant gathering of the church in the 20th century."

Failure of the SLC to obtain sanction of the bishops to a radical theological change occurred in 1970, when Prayer Book Studies XVIII was issued. Holmes says:

Its recommendations were more than the bishops of the Episcopal Church could fathom. They had been out of the seminary too long and were too threatened; so it never came to be. Here was an educational failure."

But how the revisers got around the objections of the bishops is subsequently told:

The subcommittee on Christian initiation and the SLC knew that the old understanding of Confirmation was theologically, historically, and psychologically untenable. With a passion that we could only interpret as the result of a deeply invested role image, a number of bishops defended the old understanding of Confirmation. It became clear that we did not have the means to educate the bishops on this matter; so the alternative was to make the Confirmation rite as ambiguous as possible in the hope that eventually greater theological clarity would emerge and the rite would be an appropriate expression of that new clarity and a source - not a resource - for understanding the meaning of the sacrament."

What the revision really does, Holmes tells in these words:

*For those of us that believe that the theological emphases of the 1979 book are appropriate for people in the late 20th and early 21st centuries this is a splendid opportunity. It is why we do not see the choice between 1928 and 1979 as a matter of taste. It is more a question of truth for our time. Two standard Books of Common Prayer would be theologically naive, to put it kindly. The task that lies before us is to show how in fact *lex orandi* is *lex credendi* and to rewrite our theology books in the light of our liturgy."*

But the fact that a theological revolution was taking place under the smoke screen of liturgical revision was carefully concealed from the Church at large. During the time most of the events described by Holmes were taking place, the present writer, as an

Associate Editor of the American Church News (predecessor of the New Oxford Review), repeatedly called for a resolution similar to the one that authorized the 1928 revision, declaring that no proposal involving a change in doctrine be presented or considered. These insistent demands were simply ignored by the SLC when plain honesty demanded that the avowed intentions of theological change be known. This duplicity is admitted by Holmes to have misled the Church, for he justified the failure to respond to the challenge of the Society for the Preservation of the Book of Common Prayer (SPBCP) in these words:

They were correct when they said, as they did repeatedly and sometimes abrasively, that the theologies of the 1928 Book of Common Prayer and STU (Services for Trial Use. i.e., what was to become the 1979 book) were different. The SLC probably was strategically wise in not affirming this too loudly, but its members knew that the SPBCP was correct. There is a clear theological change." (emphasis added.)

He further admits the duplicity of the SLC:

It is evident that Episcopalians as a whole are not clear about what has happened. The renewal movement in the 1970s, apart from the liturgical renewal, often reflects a nostalgia for a classical theology which many theologians know has not been viable for almost 200 years. The 1979 Book of Common Prayers is a product of a corporate, differentiated theological mind, which is not totally congruent with many of the inherited formularies of the last few centuries. This reality must soon "come home to roost" in one way or another."

The result is what he calls a "*fundamental rift in the Episcopal Church.*"

He further admits this dissatisfaction when he remarks: *But I do not see smooth sailing ahead as we seek to develop the theological implications of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer."*

He attributes this predicted stormy sailing to "*an attempt to bring to this country a brand of English Evangelicalism which has never really found much acceptance here before.*"

But he entirely ignores the far more significant movement which led to the 1978 consecrations at Denver and subsequent growth of the traditional Episcopal movement. The book is worth the purchase price for this essay alone, because it demonstrates beyond any possible rebuttal how the Episcopal Church was "sold a bill of goods" in getting General Convention to approve the new book as a mere updating of its liturgy, only to find that it now had a new theology. Is it any wonder that there are so many disaffected, disenchanted, and disaffiliated Episcopalians?