

# Common Prayer, by Ramie Targoff

reviewed by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [June 19, 2002](#) issue

Preaching at St. Paul's Cross in London in 1625, John Donne responded to Puritan critics of the Church of England: "If I come to extemporal prayer, and extemporal preaching, I shall come to an extemporal faith, and extemporal religion; and then I shall look for an extemporal Heaven, a Heaven to be made for me." Donne continued: "Let us not pray, not preach, not hear slackly, suddenly, unadvisedly, extemporally, occasionally, indiligently."

Donne's protest against an ad hoc kind of Christianity for producing a self-centered and privatized form of religion led to the accusation that the establishmentarians wanted to stifle the nonconformist freedom to cultivate an inward personal piety, and to replace it with a stiff and unfeeling adherence to the Book of Common Prayer. Ramie Targoff, a professor of English at Yale, shows what is wrongheaded about such a view, and in so doing she offers important help, albeit unintentionally, for the contemporary church in making the link between formal worship and well-formed Christian lives.

Targoff is one of the New Historicists. She wants to uncover the radically particular historical circumstances, often political and religious, that helped shape literary texts. The Book of Common Prayer, a work that has influenced worship in the Anglophone world perhaps more than any other, did not drop pristinely from the skies. Nor was it merely Thomas Cranmer's clever theological compromise between Romanists on the right and Calvinists on the left. It was the product, instead, of the Church of England's deliberate insistence that carefully scripted public worship decisively shapes and transforms Christian worshipers.

Sixteenth-century Anglicans hardly came upon this conviction afresh. Aristotle had insisted that there is a causal link between ethics and habits. Moral virtue depends, according to Aristotle, on practices that we carefully learn and often repeat. As important as doctrinal orthodoxy always remained, the early church agreed with Aristotle, insisting that public liturgy gave character to the lives of Christians. Gradually, especially in the late Middle Ages, this link between the public and the

personal was obscured. As the Latin mass came to be celebrated behind the rood screen, so that parishioners could neither see it nor even hear it in their own language, the church supplied worshipers with mass books for lay folks. These worship guides, Targoff shows, encouraged individual worshipers to undertake their own meditations and examinations of conscience while the monks said and sang the service beyond the wall. Catholics rejected a common liturgical text, even in the vernacular, on the grounds that it would distract laypeople from their private devotions.

The reformers in the Church of England regarded the Puritan exaltation of original prayers and extemporal sermons as an odd return to Catholic practice insofar as it made worshipers into virtual nonparticipants at a service which itself lay at the mercy of the minister. Like Luther, these Anglicans exalted the aural over the visual. When worshipping, "stick your eyes in your ears," said Luther. Richard Hooker, the chief defender of the Book of Common Prayer, agreed with Calvin that human nature is far too weak and fallible ever to rely on a spontaneous spiritual life, always needing external props and aids. Yet his concern went beyond religious order and control. The bookless and unreading masses convinced him that standardized liturgical practices deepen devotion to God in ways that private promptings of the Spirit do not.

Like the Puritans, the Anglicans sought the transformation of the human heart. Yet the heart remains notoriously invisible and unreliable, whereas outward postures and gestures and enunciations can be both seen and measured. The Puritans charged that such public repetition of Prayer Book confessions and litanies encourages hypocrisy. Lancelot Andrewes and a host of other Anglicans rejected this easy divide between the authentic and the theatrical. We become the things that we perform, they argued, for it is the outward life that shapes the inward. Against the determination of our culture and our churches to reverse this order, the Anglican poet W. H. Auden observed--three centuries after the Anglican-Puritan controversy--that there is no real divide between the sincere and the insincere, but only between the sane who know they are acting and the insane who do not.

Targoff's rich work is especially good on the poetry of George Herbert, revealing how he draws on the combined public and private quality of the Prayer Book to create an art whose profound inwardness springs from an even profounder sense of the public and liturgical quality of the Christian life. Targoff's *Common Prayer* was given the Conference on Christianity and Literature's outstanding book award for 2001. Apart

from its considerable scholarly merit, it is a splendid corrective to the makeshift quality of much contemporary Christian worship.