

The Book of Common Prayer and Contemporary Spirituality

By Alexander Peck

This article explores how *The Book of Common Prayer* can be used as a major source of inspiration for a contemporary (21st century) spirituality.

Terms Defined

A starting point is to define the nature of contemporary spirituality. For this task, a framework for spirituality can be suggested involving the interaction between doctrine, discipline, liturgy, and life.¹ *Doctrine* deals with what is believed; *discipline* involves authority and the structure of corporate life; *liturgy* has to do with corporate worship; and *life* refers to the individual lifestyle of the believer.² Woven together, these four factors can provide a basic pattern for understanding contemporary spirituality.³

Furthermore, Christian spirituality may be defined as life in the Trinity. Its characteristics include living in the acceptance of sonship (knowing God as Father), realizing this in the Sonship of Jesus Christ (his work of forgiveness and gift of eternal life), and actualizing this by the gift of the Holy Spirit (who enables the believer to cry “*Abba, Father*”).⁴

Finally, the term “inspiration” needs to be briefly considered. A useful summation is given by Barron: “Inspiration – the divine creative impulse at work in the formation of Sacred

¹ T. R. Albin, “Spirituality”, in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 657.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ J. M. Houston, “Spirituality”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 1139. Note: (1) Knowing God as Father involves a life of prayer, an awareness of God’s sovereignty, and having a sense of God’s continual presence. (2) Being Christocentric entails following Jesus, a union in love, and pilgrimage. (3) Experiencing life in the Spirit means growing in grace and knowledge, sharing in community and fellowship, and living a life that practically manifests the fruit of love.

Scripture and the Church – continues to give life and strength to the Church through the prayerful assimilation of Sacred Scripture in the liturgy, the sacraments, and the teaching of the magisterium”.⁵

The Book of Common Prayer

For *The Book of Common Prayer* to be used as a major source of inspiration for contemporary spirituality, its use must dovetail with the nature and characteristics of spirituality described, as well as be congruent with what can be historically accepted as inspiration. For the purpose of this article, the author has used *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979) from the Episcopal Church in the United States.⁶

A study of the Table of Contents shows the comprehensiveness of the Prayer Book. In one volume, content is brought together that otherwise one would find separately in the missal (for the Mass), breviary (for daily offices), manual (for the occasional offices), and pontifical (for episcopal services).⁷ In addition, *The Book of Common Prayer* includes the Psalter, prayers and thanksgivings, an outline of the faith (catechism), historical documents of the Church, and the lectionary. (The Appendix to this article gives the Table of Contents for the *The Book of Common Prayer*.)

A careful survey of the broad scope of the Prayer Book shows that it addresses matters in the four areas of the framework for contemporary spirituality: doctrine, discipline, liturgy, and life. Using *The Book of Common Prayer* also empowers life in the Trinity.

⁵ Keith R. Barron, “Inspiration”, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 542.

⁶ Episcopal Church, USA, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979), <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/bcp79.pdf> (accessed August, 2010).

⁷ D. H. Wheaton and K. W. Rick, “Book of Common Prayer”, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2d ed., ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 183.

The basis of the Prayer Book is a biblical, threefold foundation consisting of the Daily Office, Eucharist, and personal devotion.⁸

The Daily Office

The adoption of a two-fold Daily Office is one source of inspiration for a contemporary spirituality. The morning prayer sanctifies both the morning and the whole day, consecrating the mind and will to God (see Ps 5:3).⁹ As dusk approaches, the evening prayer is a time of giving thanks for the day past. For some, the theme of redemption may also be recalled during evening prayer (see Ps 141:2).¹⁰ Finally, the evening prayer can help to fix one's hope on the light that knows no setting – the coming of Christ who will bring the grace of eternal light.¹¹

The Eucharist

The Book of Common Prayer includes the Eucharist, and is therefore another rich source of inspiration for contemporary spirituality. The Prayer Book incorporates the thanksgiving and praise, the memorial of the mysteries of salvation, as well as the petitions and foretaste of heavenly glory present in the Eucharistic mystery.¹² Moreover, *The Book of Common Prayer* prepares believers for the celebration of the Eucharist – it inspires and deepens the dispositions needed: faith, hope, love, devotion, and the spirit of self-denial.¹³

⁸ Cheslyn Jones, "The Caroline Divines and the Cambridge Platonists", in *The Study of Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1986), 258.

⁹ Kenneth Barker, ed., *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1985), 1005-1006. Note: Psalm 5:3 states: "In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation."

¹⁰ Ibid. Note: Psalm 141:2 states: "May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice."

¹¹ *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours: Congregation for Divine Worship*, #39, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/CDWGILH.HTM>

¹² Ibid., #12.

¹³ Ibid.

Personal Devotion

In personal devotion, *The Book of Common Prayer* encourages a life that includes contemplative recollection.¹⁴ Spiritually, recollection is where a person grounded in the Spirit reassembles (or again “collects”) the dispersed self around its true nucleus, the indwelling Spirit of Jesus Christ, which is essential to spiritual growth.¹⁵ Daily using the Prayer Book fosters receptivity to the unifying Spirit of Christ who prays within. The drawing near of the Spirit of Christ is a divine creative impulse in one’s life.¹⁶

Additionally, using *The Book of Common Prayer* links believers with the Church community and allows them to enter more deeply into the life of the Church. Even though they use the Prayer Book privately, their sense of praying *with* the whole Church becomes especially meaningful. Furthermore, Christ had stated: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them” (Mt 18:20), indicating a special merit in the prayer of the community.¹⁷ This presents another reason for the *The Book of Common Prayer* as an important source of inspiration for contemporary spirituality.

Conclusion

This article has briefly argued that *The Book of Common Prayer* can be used as a significant source of inspiration for a contemporary spirituality on the basis that it is built on a comprehensive and biblical threefold foundation consisting of the Daily Office, Eucharist, and personal devotion.

¹⁴ Jones, “The Caroline Divines and the Cambridge Platonists”, 258.

¹⁵ Thomas F. McKenna, “Recollection”, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 806 Note: McKenna further adds that the “recollected person has come to lay more conscious hold of that core which anchors him or her in existence.”

¹⁶ Ibid. Note: Cheslyn Jones states that the Prayer Book combines recollection with repentance and progress towards Christian maturity (page 258).

¹⁷ The New Testament clearly attests to the early Christian community *praying together* (see Acts 2:42; 4:24; 12:5, 12; Eph 5:19-21).

The Prayer Book, seen as a whole, is a foundation, system, and plan for a total Christian life.¹⁸ It is an overall ground-plan for worship, life, and action¹⁹ – ensuring an inspiring contemporary spirituality rooted in the Christian heritage.

¹⁸ Martin Thornton, “John Cosin: Foundation or Embarrassment?”, *The Month* (January 1975): 16.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

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Appendix

The Book of Common Prayer

Table of Contents

The Ratification of the Book of Common Prayer 8
The Preface 9
Concerning the Service of the Church 13
The Calendar of the Church Year 15

The Daily Office

Daily Morning Prayer: Rite One 37
Daily Evening Prayer: Rite One 61
Daily Morning Prayer: Rite Two 75
Noonday Prayer 103
Order of Worship for the Evening 108
Daily Evening Prayer: Rite Two 115
Compline 127
Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families 137
Table of Suggested Canticles 144

The Great Litany 148

The Collects: Traditional

Seasons of the Year 159
Holy Days 185
Common of Saints 195
Various Occasions 199

The Collects: Contemporary

Seasons of the Year 211
Holy Days 237
Common of Saints 246
Various Occasions 251

Proper Liturgies for Special Days

Ash Wednesday 264
Palm Sunday 270
Maundy Thursday 274
Good Friday 276
Holy Saturday 283
The Great Vigil of Easter 285

Holy Baptism 299

The Holy Eucharist

An Exhortation 316
A Penitential Order: Rite One 319
The Holy Eucharist: Rite One 323
A Penitential Order: Rite Two 351
The Holy Eucharist: Rite Two 355
Prayers of the People 383
Communion under Special Circumstances 396
An Order for Celebrating the Holy Eucharist 400

Pastoral Offices

Confirmation 413
A Form of Commitment to Christian Service 420
Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage 423
The Blessing of a Civil Marriage 433
An Order for Marriage 435
Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child 439
Reconciliation of a Penitent 447
Ministration to the Sick 453
Ministration at the Time of Death 462
Burial of the Dead: Rite One 469
Burial of the Dead: Rite Two 491
An Order for Burial 506

Episcopal Services

Ordination of a Bishop 511
Ordination of a Priest 525
Ordination of a Deacon 537
Litany for Ordinations 548
Celebration of a New Ministry 557
Consecration of a Church or Chapel 567

The Psalter, or Psalms of David 585

Prayers and Thanksgivings 810

An Outline of the Faith, or Catechism 845

Historical Documents of the Church 864
(including the Articles of Religion)

Tables for Finding the Date of Easter and other Holy Days 880

The Lectionary 888

Year A 889
Year B 900
Year C 911
Holy Days 921
Common of Saints 925
Various Occasions 927

Daily Office Lectionary 934

Seasons of the Year 936
Holy Days 996
Special Occasions 1000

Source: Episcopal Church, USA. *The Book of Common Prayer*. New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979. <http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/bcp79.pdf> (accessed August, 2010).

Jacobs brings the development of the Book of Common Prayer up to its contemporary editions helping us to see how a book with an initially limited cultural and historical context has been reinvented to meet the needs of various constituencies in a global context speaking diverse languages. With emphasis upon the visions and goals of the many human architects of the Book of Common Prayer, Jacobs describes the prayer books as living documents produced within the context of human faith and human history. Their goal-now as in 1549-is to be living words in the mouths of those who have a living faith