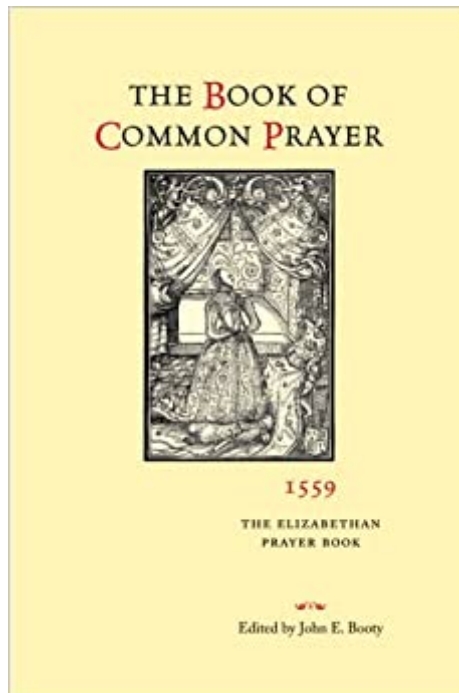




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The Book Of Common Prayer, 1559: The Elizabethan Prayer Book



Synopsis

John E. Booty's edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1559, first published by the University Press of Virginia for the Folger Shakespeare Library in 1976 and long out of print, is now being reissued in the same handsome format as the original edition. In her foreword to the 2005 reissue, Judith Maltby writes, "It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of the 1559 Prayer Book.... Shakespeare was clearly shaped by a culture in which the vernacular was remarkably vigorous." Booty's text derives from a rare copy of the Elizabethan Prayer Book printed by Richard Jugge and John Cawode in 1559, now part of the Josiah Benton Collection of the Boston Public Library. Booty modernized spelling and punctuation, but took care not to distort the style and cadence of the Elizabethan text. To place the Prayer Book in its original cultural setting, he wrote a lengthy critical essay that traces the book's history and use during the sixteenth century. Helpful bibliographical notes enable readers to appreciate all the nuances of particular services and their contents. Particularly useful are the general index and the index of biblical passages, features unavailable in other editions of the Prayer Book. Through this magnificent document one begins to understand not only the Anglican church but also the Elizabethan culture in which Shakespeare lived, for this was one of the books that helped shape Renaissance England in all of its vitality and greatness. As Booty reminds the reader in his preface, each Sunday "in the parish churches and in the cathedrals the nation was at prayer, the commonwealth was being realized, and God, in whose hands the destinies of all were lodged, was worshiped in spirit and in truth." Published in association with the Folger Shakespeare Library

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Customer Reviews

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W.H. Auden used to warn against those who read the Bible for its prose. Ignore this advice. The hoopla of the next few weeks should be interrupted from time to time with quiet moments when we reflect on our lives and the years past and to come, and one of the best ways to do this is by meditating on grave and noble sentences. So, whether believer or not, turn to the Gospel of Luke: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. . . . And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem (because he was of the house and lineage of David), to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." As a boy, I would hear these words spoken aloud toward the end of December, year after year, and they never failed to deliver a shivery thrill of pleasure. I used to wonder why. The sentences were utterly plain, both in diction and syntax. Neither did they possess any narrative excitement, since I knew the story already, indeed knew it far better than any other in all the world. But the language -- like that of so many other passages from the Bible -- enchanted me with what I now think of as its deeply felt seriousness. The solemn harmonies of such prose are largely ignored in these days of text-messaging and political newspeak. Even among our stylists, we prefer breeziness and irony, sometimes laced with snarky wit and street vulgarity. This "in your face" writing somehow feels personal and honest, more sincere or authentic than an elevated and poetical diction. No one wants epithets like "pontifical," "sermonizing" or "artificial" attached to his writing. Nonetheless, there are times when only the full organ roll of liturgical prose can match the glory or sacredness of the occasion. These are, of course, those times when we make our way to church or synagogue for weddings, funerals and religious holy days. In English there are five main sources for this kind of religious eloquence: The King James version of the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan, the hymns of writers like Isaac Watts, Charles Wesley and others, and the classical traditions of oratory and homily. What links them all is a Shaker plainness and cleanness of diction,

just barely covering profound spiritual conviction and emotion. This is, in short, the speech of men and women doing the Lord's work, honoring him and praising him with due reverence, ceremony and fervor. For instance, what soul doesn't feel, as well as hear, the sorrowful music in the Prayer Book's "Order for the Burial of the Dead"? "Man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up and is cut down like a flower; he flieth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we be in death." I quote the 1559 Elizabethan version of these words, the version known to Shakespeare and the Renaissance (and now again available in a handsome volume, edited by John E. Booty, from the University of Virginia/Folger Shakespeare Library). These magnificently somber phrases eventually build to one of the great climaxes in English literature: "Behold, I show you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, and that in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye by the last trump. For the trump shall blow, and the dead shall rise incorruptible, and we shall be changed. . . . Death where is thy sting? Hell where is thy victory?" To some readers, those last two emotion-filled questions may be better known from the final pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, when Mr. Valiant-for-Truth enters the river of death and pronounces the same words (though he substitutes "Grave" for "Hell"). As wonderful as they are, these phrases merely cap a farewell speech that would be right at home in Middle Earth: "I am going to my fathers," announces this battle-worn soldier of Christ, "and though with great difficulty I am got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the trouble I have been at to arrive where I am. My sword, I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill, to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought his battles who now will be my rewarder." Bunyan then concludes with positively Handelian grandeur: "So he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side." Theologically, the graceful moderation of the established Church of England was anathema to the ardently Puritan Bunyan. But, apart from the Old and New Testaments, no religious texts have more influenced the English-speaking imagination than the Book of Common Prayer and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The simple beauty of the Prayer Book's prose, especially in its collects (generally thought to have been composed by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer), displays perfect pitch for sound and rhythmical balance: "Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us." Bunyan, in his turn, wrote what Bernard Shaw thought was the most perfect English, at once clear and forceful. Certainly his phrases and *dramatis personae* have passed into common parlance: "Fly from the

wrath to come." "I have laid my hand to the plough." "The Slough of Despond." "The Giant Despair." "The Delectable Mountains." "Vanity-Fair." But besides the allegorical figures (Christian, Mr. Worldly-Wiseman), Bunyan also uses such surprisingly modern phrases as "spending money" and "Were you doers, or talkers only?" And he ends Part One with a chilling sentence. Ignorance has arrived at the Celestial City and knocks on the door. So very close to his heavenly goal, he nonetheless lacks the proper "certificate" and is suddenly, unexpectedly damned, bound hand and foot, and thrust by angels through a door in the side of a hill. Writes Bunyan: "Then I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the Gates of Heaven, as well as from the City of Destruction." On which harrowing note he brings his original vision to a close: "So I awoke, and behold, it was a Dream." Such declamatory moments remind us that Bunyan passed much of his life, when not in prison, preaching in the open air. In our era of so much bland speech-making, we sometimes forget about this sheer power of oratory. Great preachers even now preserve its tradition, one in which human elocution alone, backed by passionate conviction and a desire to save souls, can bring people to tears, to their knees or to their feet. Think, for a supreme example, of Martin Luther King Jr. The almost legendary 18th-century preacher George Whitefield was so magnificent a speaker that the atheist philosopher David Hume declared that he would travel 20 miles on foot to hear him. Once, every high-school student read, with growing terror, the rolling periods of Jonathan Edwards's sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." After describing the horrors of the pit, he reminds us of the sharp precariousness of life: "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood." Our preachers grow most eloquent when describing hell-fire. But our hymns and carols sing of God's mercy and loving-kindness. Here the words tend to be simple and profoundly moving, a truly populist poetry. We cannot read them without the memory of many voices sounding forth on Sunday morning: O God, our Help in ages past, Our Hope for years to come, Our Shelter from the stormy blast, And our eternal Home -- Isaac Watts From H.F. Lyte's "Abide with me" and Blake's "Jerusalem" to "We Shall Overcome," these are the songs that see us through the hardest times. Like the Bible, Prayer Book and Bunyan, like the resounding voices of great preachers, they ask us to think about our lives and how we conduct them. It is good that we should do this. They feed what Philip Larkin called the hunger to be more serious that lies within each of us, even the agnostic. But at Christmas we should, above all, lift our hearts -- and voices -- in joy and hopefulness. In the words of Charles Wesley and George Whitefield: Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the new-born King! Peace on earth, and mercy

mild, God and sinners reconciled." Above all, let us hope again this year, as every year, for peace on earth. Copyright 2005, The Washington Post. All Rights Reserved.

This is a thoughtfully edited presentation of an important piece of English literature. Spelling and punctuation have been mildly updated and standardized. The rhythms and expressions of the BCP shaped the language and style of those who heard, performed, and experienced it weekly. Gaining some familiarity with the book opens new doors of understanding on Renaissance and early modern England. The essays and notes in the back provide much useful information and background. I also own the Oxford "Book of Common Prayer: the Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662", which is useful in its own right, but bought this volume because the Oxford presents only the 1662 in its entirety, with sections of the earlier books omitted when they largely conform to the later version. It is very nice to have 1559 complete and in one place. The volume is well-bound and should prove durable for many years of study/prayer.

Of the many editions of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), the principal doctrinal and liturgical text of the Church of England, the 1559 Elizabethan Prayer Book has been the most influential. Along with the plays of William Shakespeare and the King James Bible, its stately and majestic prose has shaped the language and imagination of the English-speaking world. The much beloved Collect for Purity is but a sample of the incomparable liturgical prose of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the principal author of the original versions of the BCP (1549 and 1552): Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets be hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name; through Christ our Lord. Amen. Fortunately, the University of Virginia Press has recently (2005) reissued the 1976 edition of the Elizabethan Prayer Book masterfully edited by John E. Booty, a noted church historian and Episcopal priest. This is a fully "working" edition of the 1559 BCP, complete with all liturgical services (Daily Office, Communion, etc.) and instructional rubrics appropriately in red print. (I use it daily for Morning and Evening Prayers.) It also contains an informative Preface written by Judith Maltby, a well-known Tudor scholar from Oxford University. Lastly, this edition concludes with an elucidative "History of the 1559 Book of Common Prayer" written by the editor, which highlights the sources, creation, intent, and influence of the Elizabethan Prayer Book. I highly recommend this version of the BCP to students of Tudor history as well as to all Anglicans/Episcopalians interested in the development of their Church's timeless liturgy.

The 1559 (Elizabethan) Book of Common Prayer sits somewhere between the 1552 (Edwardian) Prayer Book and the 1662 (Carolingian) Prayer Book that we all know, use and love - if we are Anglicans of some description, whether in or out of the established Church of England. This 1559 Prayer Book is well-bound and presented and is a privilege to use. It is the one that Shakespeare would have used and comes with red-lettering and quotes from that Bible that fore-dated the AV, the Bishop's Bible (which is most like the AV). It is large but easy to hold, to read from during service; but lacks the Articles of Religion in the back which had, by 1559, not been finalised. The spelling has been updated; and this is maybe one of the greatest attractions to having it. It also comes with an historical and very informative introduction. I would say that for both the antiquarian and the contemporary worshipper this is a must theologically, spiritually and historically.

John Booty has done a good job of making 1559 Prayer Book accessible to us. Even if you're not an Anglican Christian (Episcopalian for those of us in the U.S.) it's very interesting to read the worship tradition of so long ago, including Psalms and Gospel readings in Elizabethan English. But there are other interesting traditions lost today like a rite of thanksgiving blessing given to women who had just survived childbirth. The chapter on the History of the book itself is well worth the price of the book. I remember seeing copies of the 1559 Prayerbook as a child and wanting to read them but was unable to read the old English script they were invariably published in. This is fun.

Although George Washington used the 1662 edition of the Common Book of Prayer, this 1559 edition is basically the same prayers/readings that George Washington used. The chapter entitled 'Commination' will get your heart/mind to thinking. I would recommend this to all interested in our Founding Father, George Washington, and his Christian walk.

Classic work offered at a great price.

This is a handsome, economical and reader friendly edition of the 1559. It is a wonderful resource for private devotions and or scholarly minds.

For Episcopalians, Anglicans, or anyone who is interested in one of the great masterpieces of the English language, this is a must-have book. Of special interest is the section entitled "History of the 1559 Book of Common Prayer."

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