

Project Canterbury

Popular Misconceptions of the Episcopal Church.

By William Reed Huntington.

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Chapter I. That It Magnifies Empty Forms and Ceremonies.

EVIDENTLY the weight of the condemnation lies in the word "empty," for it can scarcely be contended that form is, of itself, an evil. Form is one of the ordinances of the Creator, and to escape it we should have to take leave not of our senses only, but of our very bodies themselves. Nature is full of forms; the wild flower, the crystal, the forest tree, the insect's wing--everything, from the cloud to the continent, has figure. Art, the imitator and interpreter of Nature, deals almost exclusively with forms, even color being chiefly serviceable as defining form. Society, like a vine severed from its trellis, would fall to ruin without forms, the forms of friendly intercourse, the good-mornings and good-bys of daily life.

Is there any sound reason for exempting religion from this universal principle? Shall form attend us at every single step we take, and then suddenly be expected to quit us the moment we cross the threshold of the sanctuary? To rule out form from the holy place is tantamount to ruling it out from all places, which in its turn would be like declaring chaos a more excellent thing than cosmos, for of chaos, and of chaos only, is it written that it was "without form."

[4] But it is scarcely necessary to pursue this line of thought.

Every reasonable person will acknowledge that "when two or three are gathered together" for purposes of worship, some sort of form is essential to their doing what they do in concert. Take the extreme case, or what is supposed to be the extreme case, of the Society of Friends. It is often asserted that, whatever may be the fact with regard to other Christians, the Friends, at least, are emancipated from forms of worship altogether. But are they? The silence which prevails at their meetings is of the nature of preparation, and a very excellent preparation it is; few things in life are better than stillness; but the common prayer, the united supplication, begins only when one of the persons present opens his lips to speak; the others are then given a ground-work of agreement, a scaffolding of intelligible thought upon which they can stand together.

It is the same thing in any assembly which has, what the Friends have not, some one person definitely appointed to lead the devotions of the rest. This leader or spokesman makes his off-hand form and turns it over to his fellow-worshippers for immediate use. Theoretically each listener thereupon adopts what he hears as his own; but, really, how fares it with this suddenly prepared form? Why, here, perhaps, is one worshipper who fills the cup to the brim with the wine of his devotion, there another who fills it partly full, and, again, yonder a third, from whose spiritual grasp it passes as empty as it came to him.

So, then, it is plain that the real ground for disparaging the devotional forms of the Episcopal Church cannot be the fact that they are forms, nor yet that [4/5] they are empty forms, seeing that all Christians are committed to forms which may, under some circumstances, be empty;-- what, then, is it? Must it not be the fixedness of the forms that provokes the criticism--the circumstance of their being printed in a book and repeated with slight change from day to day and from year to year? Undoubtedly yes; and to this point, therefore, I shall address myself.

My wish is to present the case for liturgical worship briefly, fairly, and without passion. I shall not attempt to prove that no other sort of worship is acceptable to Almighty God, nor shall I be at pains to deny that there are times and occasions when extemporized forms of devotion may serve the purpose of a gathered assembly even better than precomposed ones. What I do wish to maintain is that, in the long run, the interests of religion are likely to be better served by our having our worship liturgically rendered than by having it extemporized; that the set forms, the established ways, are, on the whole, the best.

A short and easy way of arriving at my conclusion would be to employ what one might call the argument from imitation, and to reason that because so many congregations of Christians, once eloquent in their denunciation of set forms, are now constantly incorporating fragments from the Book of Common Prayer into their Sunday worship, it must be that the liturgical fashion is the wiser.

But instead of taking this irritating line, I would press, rather, the positive arguments in favor of liturgical worship. Prominent among these is the great antiquity of the usage. Only think of the hundreds of years during which the Christian Church followed [5/6] no other custom! Or, if you choose to go back beyond the beginnings of the Christian to the history of the Jewish Church, consider what an elaborate ritual that was which God prescribed for tabernacle and temple. It is common to bar out the appeal to Jewish precedent on the ground that that whole system was superseded by the coming in of the Gospel of Christ. Still, when we remember that our Lord Himself frequented the temple-worship, and that the apostles did the same as they had opportunity, it is tolerably safe to infer that they saw nothing adverse to the principles of the new faith in a beautiful liturgical service as such.

But waiving this point, the argument is sufficiently strong when based on Christian usage only. The precise measure of antiquity that attaches to the "Apostolic liturgies," so called, it may be difficult to determine, but that they can be traced back to a very early period of Christian history nobody disputes, and before we have sailed very far down the stream of the Church's life we find liturgical worship universal.

In reply to this argument from antiquity, it may be urged that the very fact of present dissent on the part of a large fraction of Christendom from a usage once universal proves that there must have been good ground for change. Why, for instance, has so considerable a minority of the people of England, ever since Queen Elizabeth's day, refused to conform to the worship of the national church? I might answer that the objections of the early Puritans stood not so much against a liturgy as such, as they did against the particular liturgy which was urged on their acceptance. They would have been well content with a prayer-book, [6/7] could it have been one of their own making. Baxter, in some respects the greatest of the Puritans, offered to make a liturgy; and did so in three weeks' time. It is needless to add that his work survives only as a curiosity of literature. Liturgies are not made in that way. Moreover, I might answer that, in the

light of experience, it is evident that had the English rulers aimed at a less rigid *uniformity* than they did, they might have secured a much wider *conformity*. But instead of availing myself of these possible replies, I would rather admit frankly that there is force, real force, in this counter-argument, and that the wide adoption by many of the reformed communities of the extemporary mode of worship does prove that that method has certain excellencies and certain advantages of its own. The question is, Which system has the preponderating advantages? or, as I put it before, Under which system are the public interests of religion, in the long run, more likely to be well served? It may be true that your man of rare abilities, endowed like Barnabas with singular gifts of the Holy Ghost, and possessed like Apollos of an extraordinary power of religious utterance, could lift a congregation on the wings of prayer more effectually with his extemporized form than they would commonly be lifted by the Church service. I do not say that such would always be the case; I say that conceivably it might be the case. But supposing it to be so, what then? Every congregation cannot have a Barnabas or an Apollos to lead its worship. The proportion of such bright particular stars in the firmament of any Christian denomination is small. In considering the merits of a system which undertakes to meet and minister to the needs [7/8] of large bodies of men, we are bound to consider what will be best on the whole. And even in the case of the highly endowed leaders of extemporary worship, it is commonly more the personal magnetism of the individual and the subtle power of his bodily presence that produce the effect, than it is a positive superiority in the form which he provides for the people's use. Take any one of the published volumes of extemporaneous prayers which have within the last ten or twenty years been given to the world, such as Beecher's or Parker's or Dawson's, and compare them with the prayers of the Church service. I will venture to say that there is no one of any taste or judgment, no matter what his denominational belongings, who would not say, after making the comparison: "If I must have the same prayers every Sunday, give me the plain majesty, the dignified simplicity, the gentleness and sweetness of the Church prayers, rather than these eloquent--yes, too eloquent addresses to the throne of grace."

Another positive argument in favor of liturgical worship is its comprehensiveness. No matter how large the mind, how warm the heart, how wide the sympathies of the maker of the extemporized form, he would be more than human if he succeeded in remembering and providing for the needs of all. But what human want can be named that does not find expression in the English Litany? Some of the most touching and tender of the petitions are such as you will never hear from one year's end to another from the lips of any extemporizer of forms. And yet how hard it would be to give them up!

Again, a positive advantage may be claimed for liturgical worship on the score that it cultivates [8/9] reverence and reverential ways. There can, of course, be no genuine worship without reverence. The adoring soul looks up. Coarse familiarity with the Almighty, whatever else it may be, is not prayer. The liturgy is a constant safeguard against irreverence of speech, and, so far as suggestion can go, it is also a preventive of irreverence in bearing and manner. It is easy to say that postures and attitudes are of no account in matters spiritual, and it is perfectly true that they are sometimes made of too much account. But our Maker has lodged the spirit in the body; we are creatures of association, and, whether we will or no, we feel the influence of reverent ways to our good and the influence of irreverent ways to our hurt. You enter, let us suppose, a congregation after the service has begun, and you find the people evidently in an attitude of prayer. It makes an impression. You enter another congregation and you find it necessary to wait a minute or two before you can be quite sure whether the people are engaged

in prayer or not. This also makes an impression. Now I will not claim any more real devotion for the first congregation than one of its own members might be disposed to claim for the second; I merely suggest that possibly you would find yourself more disposed to seriousness of feeling, more readily thrown into the devotional mood, the temper of worship, in the one case than in the other. The Episcopal Church accounts reverence to be one of the indispensable foundation-stones of noble character; and so holding, she is willing to run some risk of formalism rather than not do all she can to foster in young and old the spirit that in humility adores.

So much for "forms;" a few words now as to "ceremonies." [9/10] "Empty forms and ceremonies" were the two things into which we undertook to look. When people speak of "the forms and ceremonies of the Church," they commonly mean by the "forms" the prayers and other spoken portions of the worship, and by the "ceremonies" the ritual acts, such as the changes of posture on the part of minister and people, bowing at the name of Jesus, the sign of the cross in Holy Baptism, and the like.

With regard to these matters I may say that the general mind of this Church finds excellent expression in one of the paragraphs prefixed to the Prayer Book of the Church of England. The passage is entitled, "Of Ceremonies, why some be abolished and some retained," and very full of good, sound common sense it is. It was written at a time when the rough weather of the Reformation was by no means over, and in every sentence we seem to see the pilot tightening his grip upon the wheel, determined that the ship shall not swerve in either direction from the chosen track.

"Whereas in this our time," the writer says, "the minds of men are so diverse that some think it a great matter of conscience to depart from the least of their ceremonies, they be so addicted to their old customs; and again, on the other side, some be so new-fangled that they would innovate all things, and so despise the old that nothing can like them but that is new; it was thought expedient not so much to have respect how to please and satisfy either of these parties, as how to please God and profit them both. And yet, lest any man should be offended whom good reason might satisfy, here be certain causes rendered why some of the accustomed ceremonies be put away and some retained." [10/11] The writer then goes on to give the reasons that had weighed with the Reformers in this matter of discriminating. The ceremonies discarded were those which either "did weary by their multitude," or confound and darken by their obscurity, the sacred meaning they had been intended to illustrate. Of those retained, he declares that "they be neither dark nor dumb ceremonies, but are so set forth that every man may understand what they do mean, and to what use they do serve." He closes with the following large-minded and philosophic reflection: "In these our doings we condemn no other nations, nor prescribe anything but to our own people only, for we think it convenient that every country should use such ceremonies as they shall think best to the setting forth God's honor and glory . . . without error or superstition; and that they should put away other things which, from time to time, they perceive to be most abused, as in men's ordinances it often chanceth diversely in divers countries."

Following out the spirit of this ancient preamble, the framers of our American Prayer Book went further still in the direction of conciliation and concession. Take, for example, one of the two or three ceremonial acts to which I just now made reference, the sign of the cross in Baptism. In the Church of England this is strictly required, but if you will examine the

baptismal service of the American Prayer Book you will find in the paragraph of directions, or "rubric," as it is technically called, which accompanies the words of Baptism, the following words: *"If those who present the infant shall desire the sign of the cross to be omitted, although the Church knows no worthy cause of scruple concerning the same, yet in that case the Minister may [11/12] omit that part of the above which follows the immersion or the pouring of water on the infant."*

And what has been the result of this wise concession which the English Church never could see its way to making? Simply what might have been expected. Nobody ever asks to have the sign of the cross omitted. I say "nobody;" of course I am speaking generally. I never knew of an instance in my own experience, and do not remember ever to have heard of one. The moment the ceremonial act was put upon its proper basis, as a thing indifferent in itself, but still beautiful and fitting as an emblem, that moment all objections to the use of it vanished. So long as the sign of the cross was superstitiously regarded as possessing a special efficacy of its own, so long the scruple about using it had force, but no longer.

Similar observations might be made with regard to the other ceremonial usage I mentioned, that of bowing at the name of Jesus. In the Episcopal Church of this country there is no law upon the point whatsoever. It is wholly a matter of personal preference. Some persons bow the head at the name of Jesus when it occurs in the Creed, and not at other times. Others, with more consistency, as it would seem, make the same sign of reverence whenever the sacred name occurs, whether in the reading of the Scriptures or in common conversation. Others still, who are not satisfied with the reasons commonly assigned for the custom, refrain from observing it altogether. The Church has no word of reproof for this one, that one, or the other; it is a thing indifferent, upon which she has not pronounced and does not care to pronounce. These are but detached illustrations of a general principle to [12/13] which we may find ourselves returning later on when we come to consider the relations of this Church of the English-speaking race to the Church of Rome. For the present it suffices to have shown that the users of forms are not necessarily formalists, nor the respecters of ritual necessarily ritualists. Form and ceremony have their place, a secondary place no doubt, but still a place. They are the manners of religion, and though we be as yet, while this earth-life lasts, only in the outer courts of the palace of the Great King, it cannot be amiss for us to bear ourselves as those might do who hoped one day to stand before the throne. Meanwhile this charge of emptiness need trouble us not at all, for it is of the very nature of a form, whether devotional or ceremonial, that it be empty until some one fills it. An outline sketch is an empty form; the artist, so the phrase runs, "fills it in." A basket is an empty form of wicker-work; the gardener fills it with roses. The water-pots at Cana in Galilee were empty forms, until the servants filled them at the word of Christ, and then they ran with wine. And even so a liturgy is an empty form, but the man who worships in spirit and in truth may fill it with his heart.

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