



**Ramie Targoff.** *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. xiii + 162 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-78969-9; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-78968-2.



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**Published on** H-Albion (July, 2002)

## Common Prayer, Uncommon Argument

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In *Life in a Day*, novelist-memoirist Doris Grumbach describes her morning routine: gathering her toast, juice and coffee, and making her way through them while she reads Morning Prayer from the *Book of Common Prayer*. She notes that “nowhere in the *Book* do prayers appear to be written in the first-person singular” and she seems to spend a good deal of her prayer time changing pronouns to suit her solitary situation.[1] I gave up this distracting business a long time ago and, although an Episcopalian like Mrs. Grumbach, adopted the Roman Catholic *The Liturgy of the Hours* with its convenient first-person singulars for my morning devotions.

Given that experience, I was in some ways not particularly startled by Ramie Targoff’s primary observation that, although it is customary to see Protestantism introducing a personal and internal piety in place of the external and corporate worship of the late medieval church, it was in fact the other way around—at least in the case of Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer*. However, there is much more to the book than an argument about pronouns. Although the book is quite brief (really more

like two long essays stuck together), there is a great deal going on here. In many respects, Targoff is arguing for nothing less than a paradigm shift. The book isn’t without its flaws, and its brevity is one of them. Such a bold argument really needs rather more development than it is given. Nevertheless, it is easy to recommend this engaging exercise, which is as successful a marriage of history and literature as I have ever encountered.

There are two roughly equal parts to the book. The first is more historical in nature, focusing on the language and meaning of worship. The second is more literary, investigating the effects of common prayer on devotional poetry. Readers will no doubt find themselves reacting to the parts very differently, depending on their familiarity with the source materials. As a historian, I found myself both more interested in the first part and also more cautious about its conclusions.

In the first two chapters, Targoff highlights the dramatic transformation in the role of the congregation in English worship after the Reformation. In Catholic worship, the priest’s prayers were not to be heard by the congregation, so that they could pursue without dis-

traction their own private devotions, using their beads or the increasingly common primers. In this environment, ringing the sacring bell was especially important because it told the congregation when to cease their private devotions and look up to see the elevated elements. Those who designed the post-Reformation English liturgy, however, followed the fourth-century theologian John Chrysostom in their belief that if the congregation could not hear the priest's prayers, then they could not assent to his words; the prayers were not truly the work of the people, which is what liturgy by definition was meant to be. Thus, to be the people's prayers to God they had to be heard and understood by all. They also followed another Greek—Aristotle—in his belief in the efficacy of habit. Ironically, the very same men who denied that works had any soteriological value designed a liturgy infused with a belief in the value of external practices, which “might ... transform the internal self” (p. 3).

Elizabethan divines such as John Whitgift and Thomas Cooper relied on these principles when defending Cranmer's prayer book against its puritan critics (represented here by John Field, Thomas Wilcox, Thomas Cartwright, and “Martin Marprelate”). Puritans favored a very different sort of service—one in which the principal activity was the preaching of a sermon. The sermon would be framed by extemporaneous prayer, uttered by the preacher as the Spirit moved him. This was unacceptable to Cranmer's successors, because the people's “Amen” required understanding. How was that possible if the prayer was improvised and the congregation had no time to contemplate its meaning? Only familiar prayers could truly win their informed assent. There was also lurking in this disagreement a fundamentally different view of the minister's role and status. Thomas Cranmer had attempted real change in the nature of ministry. Once worship was based on *common* prayer, the minister was no longer what the priest had been—the people's mouth for speaking to God and God's mouth for speaking to God's people. Instead, all spoke to God together with the minister as a sort of first among equals. Ironically, the puritans were actually much closer to the much-hated papists in their understanding of the minister's role. For the puritans, the preaching minister was a mediator much as the mass priest had been. They simply relocated him from altar to pulpit.[2]

Richard Hooker, in his defense of the prayer book, took up the Aristotelian elements of the plan, becoming “the first English ecclesiastic to argue unequivocally for the general superiority of public over private prayer” (p.

51) because of its internal effects on the participant. For Hooker, the written word accessible to all was the surest guarantee of edification while puritans made edification too dependent on the gifts of individual ministers doling out bits of scripture as they saw fit—“scriptural hoarding” comparable to that of papists (pp. 49-50). Hooker's defense of *common* prayer over extemporaneous prayer by the minister turns the debate inside out. It is not the English prayer book that reeks of popery and desperately needs further reformation to purge it of Romish ceremonies. The English prayer book, by making prayer the property of the congregation, had departed radically from the Roman model and it was the puritans who were the crypto-papists, seeking to set the clock back to the days of sacerdotal tyranny.

This first section of the book is lucid and largely convincing. I did wish that Targoff had read more widely in the sixteenth-century materials, rather than relying on the most familiar texts, but I'm not prepared to argue that her conclusions would have been any different had she used less standard authors and texts as well. I also wish that she had done a more sophisticated job of placing contemporaries along the ecclesiological spectrum. There is rather too stark a contrast made between the defenders of the established church position and nonconformists, with virtually everyone crammed however uncomfortably into one of those two camps, as if these labels described fixed and unchanging parties throughout the period in question. It is a little unsettling to see a serious scholar (let alone an undergraduate!) lump Whitgift, Hooker, and Laud together as supporters of formalized prayer over preaching and extemporaneous prayer as if there were no dramatic differences among them. It is equally alarming to find all ministers who advocated the centrality of the sermon thrust under the blankets as bedfellows of “Martin Marprelate.” She appears to be unfamiliar with the work of Sharon Arnould.[3] However, she seems otherwise to be well in command of the relevant works by historians such as Judith Maltby, Eamon Duffy, Diarmaid MacCulloch, and Patrick Collinson.[4] Whether her argument, so briefly set out in barely fifty pages, will have the effect on historical thinking that she hopes remains to be seen. It deserves to be taken seriously and investigated further.

The second part of the book is literary in its focus and here I can do little more than report the argument. While I found this section interesting and persuasive—and I have read enough of the poets she cites to feel like an informed reader—I leave it to those more familiar with literary scholarship to comment at greater length on the

argument. The argument is quite simply that the language of common prayer transformed devotional poetry in much the same way as it had transformed worship—from private and introspective to public and common. Before the Reformation, poetry was the common form for lay prayer as well as for religious texts such as the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles’ Creed, which existed in a variety of poetic versions. In the reformed liturgy, these texts took on standard wording and appeared as “dense prose paragraphs”; verse was largely abandoned as “a vehicle for public devotion” (p. 66). But there was one exception to this: the metrical psalms, which “more than any other single book of Scripture ... occupied a central position in the Reformed liturgy” (p. 66). In order to pull this off, the psalms had themselves to be transformed into texts of common prayer—not merely translated into English, but turned into texts that lent themselves to communal recitation. The metrical psalms were the transition between medieval devotional poetry and the works of poets like George Herbert. Targoff argues that the evidence is clear in the translation by Philip Sidney and his sister the Countess of Pembroke. The language of the Sidney-Pembroke psalms is not complex and introspective. Rather, the rhymes are simple and the lines brief, resulting in “more of a congregational hymn than a personal meditation” (p. 79). Even New England puritans, who rejected formal liturgy in favor of the sermon and extemporaneous prayer, had to have formal texts of the psalms. Ministers were expected to be preachers, not poets; they were to prepare their own sermons and prayers, but not improvise the psalms, which remained a congregational prayer and a link to the English common prayer style.

While it has been common to see late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century devotional poetry as in some way the opposite of liturgy—meditative, introspective, spontaneous, and emotional—Targoff argues that the most admired Protestant lyrics of the period are actually rooted in the Protestant liturgy. She sees John Donne as a failure in this respect. His poems were too complex for congregations and he, recognizing his inability to write effectively in that idiom, gave himself to preaching instead.[5] George Herbert, on the other hand, did master the art. Targoff provides fascinating readings of several poems from *The Temple* to show how they lend themselves to common prayer and reflect its dynamics.

Even more intriguing is her analysis of the printing of *The Temple*, the only work of poetry published by the Cambridge University printers (who mainly did Bibles and—yes, you guessed it—prayer books). *The Temple* was

printed with no attention to biography, no dedication, and no commemorative material. Instead, it looked much more like a liturgical work than a volume of poetry. The poems were separated from each other by a pilcrow (¶), the same symbol used to mark the collects in the prayer book—a practice not copied in other volumes of poetry at the time. Moreover, *The Temple* was printed in the small duodecimo format, while poetry was usually published in quarto volumes. Duodecimo was the size used for personal copies of the prayer book and psalter—a size suitable for depositing the book into one’s pocket. Targoff concludes, “To a seventeenth-century worshipper, Cambridge’s editions of Herbert’s *Temple* would have visually conjured up the liturgical texts of everyday life. Holding the book, absorbing its exquisite poems, the reader could have experienced the perfect fusion of personal and universal voice that common prayer sought to achieve” (p. 117).

This is a book that is exceptionally well worth the time spent reading it. It is brief, jargon-free, and well written. This is not the last word on the subject, but I suspect that Targoff has drafted a new agenda for many of us and it is much to be hoped that historians will not dismiss this work unread because its author is a professor of English literature. If Targoff argues that the *Book of Common Prayer* was intended to build congregational prayer in place of private introspection at times of worship, I would argue that her book deserves both deep contemplation in the quiet of our places of study as well as much discussion in our public gatherings.

#### Notes

[1]. Doris Grumbach, *Life in a Day* (Boston, 1996), pp. 8-10.

[2]. This is a subject that I have developed at great length in an essay which was in press when Targoff’s book appeared: Eric Josef Carlson, “The Boring of the Ear: Shaping the Pastoral Vision of Preaching in England, 1540-1640,” in *Preachers and People in the Reformation and Early Modern Period*, ed. Larissa Taylor (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), pp. 249-96.

[3]. Sharon L. Arnoult, “‘Spiritual and Sacred Public Actions’: The *Book of Common Prayer* and the Understanding of Worship in the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church of England,” in *Religion and the English People, 1500-1640: New Voices/New Perspectives*, ed. Eric Josef Carlson, Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, vol. 45 (Kirksville, Missouri: Truman State University Press, 1998), pp. 25-47; idem, “The Face of an English Church’:

The *Book of Common Prayer* and English Religious Identity, 1549-1662" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1997).

[4]. Unfortunately, Judith Maltby's extremely important and very relevant work on the poet Christopher Harvey (mistakenly called George Harvey by Targoff) appeared after Targoff's book was in press: Judith Maltby, "From *Temple* to *Synagogue*: 'Old' Conformity in the 1640s-1650s and the Case of Christopher Harvey," in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c.1560-1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael Questier (Woodbridge and Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2000), pp. 88-120.

[5]. Targoff misunderstands Donne in one important way. When Donne says that ministers should not preach "rudely, barbarously, extemporally" but only with careful preparation in order to edify the congregation, Targoff sees in this "the establishment's overwhelming presumption that spontaneity and eloquence were rarely if ever intertwined" (p. 89). In fact, Donne was commenting on the contemporary debate over delivering sermons from a prepared text (also known derisively as "reading"). Careful preparation should not be understood to mean that the minister had a formal text, which was not a practice commonly accepted by contemporary preachers. On this subject, see Carlson, "The Boring of the Ear."

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**Citation:** Eric Josef Carlson. Review of Targoff, Ramie, *Common Prayer: The Language of Public Devotion in Early Modern England*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6496>

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