 QUEEN ELIZABETH'S PRAYERS

BY A. HYATT MAYOR

Associate Curator of Prints

A recent writer to the London Times remarked that the world of five years ago saw the Victorians as familiar aunts and uncles and the Elizabethans as extravagant and wheeling strangers of here and everywhere, but that today's world of war sees the situation reversed. Our world, like the Elizabethan world, secures no fortunes and no lives and to thousands offers exile, battle, and death for a faith. "Such dissention and hostility Satan hath sent among us, that Turks be not more enemies to Christians, then Christians to Christians, Papistes to Protestantes: yea Protestants with Protestants do not agree, but fall out for trifles. So that the poore little flocke of thy Churche distressed on everie side, hathe neither rest without, nor peace within, nor place almost in the worlde where to abide, but maie crie now from earth even as thine owne reverence cried once from the crosse: My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." This outburst by John Foxe, which was printed in Queen Elizabeth's version of the Book of Common Prayer, is brought painfully close to us by merely changing the names of the Christian sects to the names of our political faiths. It seems natural for communists to fight fascists wherever they may be quartered together, but it comes as a bit of a surprise to read in Froude: "Religion on both sides was not an opinion, but a law. There could not be two laws in the same country."

Religious reform has rarely altered the Church without the backing of authority. Once Henry VIII had seized the treasure and the power of the abbeys, sectarian strife ran its course of heading and hanging and burning, relieved by times of calm when the temporizing tradition of English politics pulled the state church toward a middle course of mildness. As we today know, a middle course is hard to keep when passions run high, so it is not surprising that for over a century each English ruler's first royal act was to remodel the established church and rewrite the prayer book. The history of the changes in the prayer book is the history of England from Edward VI to Charles II.

Centuries after England had had a Bible in the vulgar tongue, Henry VIII started work toward a prayer book in English by requesting the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, to translate the litany and print it in his English edition of the Prymer. The Prymer, containing prime texts such as the Creed and the Lord's Prayer, was "the fyrste boke that the tender youth was instructed in." In the late Middle Ages, it and the Psalter were used instead of the Bible for recording family births, marriages, and deaths. Even as late as 1604 it seems still to have been the layman's handiest religious book, for Guy Fawkes and his fellow conspirators embarked on the Gunpowder Plot "having, upon a primer, given each other the oath of secrecy." The Prymer also contained the Catechism, which Cranmer translated "for the syngular commoditie and profyte of children and yong people." In order to lure youth into the new
ways of the Church, the Catechism of 1548, lately acquired by the Museum, was strewn with charming woodcuts, including some of the very rare book illustrations that Holbein drew while he was in England. The idea of growing, instead of recruiting, God’s militia was not new with the Jesuits.

In 1549, two years after the boy king Edward VI mounted the throne, the first Book of Common Prayer was printed. Largely—perhaps wholly—the work of Cranmer, who was a translator of genius, it established English once for all as the language of the church service. This use of the common tongue encouraged longer Bible readings and enabled the whole congregation to unite in common prayer. The new book was mostly compiled from half a dozen of the many service books that had been multiplying for a thousand years. It was a great accomplishment to pull order out of a confusion of books that had become the worse confounded by the right that mediaeval bishops exercised to adapt the liturgy to local saints and customs. Cranmer’s main source was the rite, or use, of Sarum (so called from a mis-reading of the mediaeval scribe’s abbreviation for Sarisburia), which had been instituted some twenty years after the Norman Conquest in Salisbury, whence it spread to most of England and even to Portugal. Edward VI ordered the old service books burned by Christmas of 1549, to force all England into uniformity. Not long afterwards books of local use gradually ceased to be printed for Catholic dioceses, as the Counter Reformation began to supplant irregularities with the use of Rome.

It is odd how often the Reformation and the Counter Reformation worked for identical ends. In 1544 Cranmer, referring to his English translation of the litany, directed that “the song that shall be made thereunto should not be full of notes, but as near as may be for every syllable a note, so that it may be sung distinctly and devoutly.” In 1577, with the same warning to make the sacred words intelligible and to avoid contrapuntal ornament, Pope Gregory XIII started Palestrina reforming church music for the mass. Both orders turned composers away from the intricately linked and overlapping flow of the widely followed old Netherlands schools of music.

Cranmer’s prayer book of 1549 and its even more radical revision three years later represent the most extreme liturgical reform that was ever attained within the Church of England. Things could have been pushed so far only when the fanaticism of a sickly and adolescent king found an instrument in an ecclesiastic who was convinced that the Church must be ruled by the king.

After Edward VI died, aged sixteen, his sister Mary swept all his work away and for the five years of her reign did what rack and stake and ax could do to turn England back to the old faith.

When Henry VIII’s third heir, Elizabeth, came to power, she picked her way between the extremes of her brother’s reforms and her sister’s reaction. Though she may not have felt that her realm could nurture two faiths, her dogma of indecision enabled her to establish a state church that was comfortable for most of her subjects during most of her reign. A year after her accession to the throne she published a new version of the prayer book, the third in ten years, in which she kept the vernacular for the church service—that national revolution for the benefit of the unlettered—but left out the strident war cries of reform that strike even us across the centuries with the impact of brutality. Cranmer’s version of the Bible was still used, as it is to this day in the Psalter and certain parts of the Communion Service, but Elizabeth’s congregations were not expected to repeat his prayer: “From the tyranny of the Bishop of Rome and all his detestable enormities; Good Lord deliver us.” The dozens of editions of her prayer book and the scarcity of surviving copies show how widely the book was called for and how quickly eagerness thumbed it to shreds. As long ago as 1605, when a collector bequeathed a first edition of 1559 to the Bodleian at Oxford, he noted that it was “very hard to be had” and he “could never see any other of that edition.”

Under these circumstances the Museum is particularly lucky to have received as a gift from Christian A. Zabriskie an immaculate
A page from "A Booke of Christian Prayers . . . worthy to be read with an earnest mind of all Christians, in these dangerous and troublesome daies."

London, 1590
copy of the 1590 edition in a lovely binding of the time with gilt and gauffered edges. The rich brown calf skin of the covers is tooled with scrolls and flowers of gold, mellowed with handling. In the center stands the initial A. Into what lady’s hand did this book once snugly fit? A Lady Anne? A Mistress Alison? A lady it surely was, and a rare and delicate one at that, for the opened leaves, even today, breathe out a pungency of musk. The manner of perfuming a book is described in an old bookbinder’s manual in the Museum. Either you paint the still unbound leaves with orange-flower water in which grains of musk have been crushed, or else you enclose the bound volume, half open, near a saucer of musk in an airtight box. The Museum has one other perfumed service book, a precious Book of Hours printed on vellum in Lyons in 1499. Both are such books as a lady might have kept in her clothes chest and fetched out on a Sunday morning when making herself fine for church.

Each page of Queen Elizabeth’s prayer book is bordered all round with woodcuts in the charming fashion of the Paris Books of Hours. The publishers must have known that they could recover the great cost of so many woodblocks from the profits of repeated editions. Each tiny picture speaks the medieval language of allegory and usually carries a little tag of text to rub in the meaning. The prayers open with a long series of cuts of events in the life of Christ that are prefigured by events in the Old Testament, the birth of Christ being foreshadowed by the flowering of Aaron’s rod, and the Last Supper by Melchizedek’s sacrifice of bread and wine. This series of comparisons goes back to the Biblia pauperum, the old blockbooks that helped poor, busy preachers to throw sermons together. The last third of the book deploys an interminable and reiterated Dance of Death, showing all sorts and conditions of men and women being jostled into the grave by skeletons, who mock the great and console the lowly with couplets such as these:

“Thou art clothed in scarlet: and yet art but my varlet.”

“Sir Justice arise: come to my assise.”

“Come Bailife, no bale with me shal prevail.”

“Begging is done, for I am come.”

At the foot of the pages cadavers sprout worms and mutter gloomy jingles:

“We Earles and Barons were sometime: Now wrapt in lead, are turnd to slime.”

What brand of communism can menace the individual with a finality like this careless trampling of a clod into the clay? The Dance of Death is preceded, one might almost say prepared for, by the Works of Mercy, which afford vivid peepholes into the London underworld with its grilled prisons, its hospital wards where the sick were packed many in a bed and the itch was endemic. The average Paris hospital bed in 1525 held fifteen to twenty patients, counting the dead with the dying.

But all of these pictures are not grim, for there are two choruses of severely handsome girls in antique attire, one of the Virtues, who gaze aloft while squashing masculine Vices underfoot, and another of the Five Senses, who rebuke mankind with proverbs like that put into the mouth of Hearing: “The care of ie lousie (jealousy) heareth all things.”

The eloquent cadences of the Book of Common Prayer did more than any other one book to tune Elizabethan utterance, for its language was heard by most men once a day and by all once a week. Pervading the whole of man’s life, like the medieval Church, it supplied prayers to be said “At the putting on of our clothes,” “At our first going abroad,” “At the setting of the sunne (A droopie night overdeepeth the mindes of them even at high noon-tide, which depart from thee. But unto them that are conversant with thee, it is continualie cleare day light),” “At the lighting vp of Candles (Lord Jesu Christ whiche hast graunted vnto all men the sweete stilnesse of the night,
Another page from Queen Elizabeth's Prayer Book
to refresh the pores of their sillie bodies, and

to put away the cares of their minds, and to

assuage their sorrowes, I beseech thee lighten

thou then the eyes of my mind.)"

No wonder such a book was loved during

Elizabeth's long reign. But when she died the

secret of her policy of vacillation died with

her, and so the Elizabethan harmony broke

asunder. One of James I's first acts was to

eemend the prayer book through a conference

between Church of England dignitaries and

four Puritans "who had the reputation of

being the most grave, learned and modest of

the party." James so disliked the ensuing

wrangle that he broke up the meeting after

three days, but it gave him the idea of calling

together the great committee of forty-odd that

translated our Bible. James's prayer book,

printed in the second year of his reign, lasted

until 1645, when the Long Parliament sup-

pressed it in favor of the Commonwealth's

Directory for the Public Worship of God.

Charles II, two years after his restoration to

the throne, issued the Revised Prayer Book of

1662, which is to all intents and purposes the

one now in use.

All this labor may seem much to have put

into a slim little book, but it is only a tiny,

late fraction of the whole. As Dean Stanley

remarked: "The Prayer-book as it stands is a

long gallery of ecclesiastical history. To Am-

brose we owe our Te Deum. Charlemagne

breaks the silence of our Ordination Prayer

by the Veni, Creator Spiritus. The persecu-

tions have given us one creed; the Empire an-

other. The name of the first great patriarch

of the Byzantine Church closes our daily serv-

ice; the Litany is the bequest of the first great

patriarch of the Latin Church amidst the ter-

rors of the Roman pestilence. Our Collects are

the joint productions of Fathers, Popes, Re-

formers. Our Communion Service bears the

traces of every fluctuation of the Reformation,

through the two extremes of the reign of Ed-

ward to the conciliatory policy of Elizabeth

and the revolutionary zeal of the Restoration."