

ONE BCP but in Three Editions in North America

Which one do you use?

To speak of *The Book of Common Prayer* in The Episcopal Church [TEC], and in much of the new Anglicanism in the U.S.A. since 2000 (e.g., ACN, AMIA, CANA etc.), is to refer to that relatively new (in terms of Anglican history) and experimental prayer book, that was authorized by the General Conventions of 1976 and 1979 and which, therefore, carries the date of 1979.

Before 1979, the same Episcopal Church (then known as The Protestant Episcopal Church of the U.S.A. [PECUSA]) called a very different prayer book by the title, *The Book of Common Prayer*. This was dated 1928 because it was finally authorized by the General Convention of 1928. However, this prayer book was not a new and experimental prayer book; but a gentle revision of *The Book of Common Prayer* that had been the official prayer book of PECUSA since 1892. And to complete the story of gentle revision, the 1892 edition of The BCP was itself a revision of the first edition of the American form of The BCP, dated 1789. So the editions of 1789, 1892 and 1928 are three of a kind, while the 1979 belongs to a wholly new genre.

The differences between the BCP 1928 (together with those of 1892 and 1789) and 1979 are very obvious when the two are carefully compared; and, further, the similarities of 1979 to other experimental prayer books of the 1970s and 1980s, in terms of structure and content, and produced within the Anglican Family are also obvious. However, there is one important difference and it is this new prayer books in Canada, England, Australia and South Africa during the 1980s were deliberately not called The BCP but by another title specifically to distinguish them from the traditional *Book of Common Prayer*. (However, in the 1990s other provinces in the Anglican Family followed the lead of TEC and called their new prayer books by the name of The BCP. The West Indies and Nigeria are two obvious examples.)

If we cross the northern border of the U.S.A. and enter Canada, and there listen in to Anglican conversation, we learn the following. That “The Prayer Book” refers to that which is called “The Book of Common Prayer,” and that which is called “BAS” is a book of services existing as an alternative to The BCP. Strangely we may think “The Book of Alternative Services” of 1985 in Canada is very similar to “The Book of Common Prayer” of 1979 in the U.S.A., and yet both are very different from the official “Book of Common Prayer” of the Church of Canada.

To go in a different direction, if we cross the Atlantic Ocean and visit parishes of The Church of England, the situation is similar to that of Canada, although more up-to-date. “The Prayer Book” for everyone inside and outside the “Cof E” is the classic “Book of Common Prayer” used for centuries in this Church, and an important part of both the cultural heritage of the English people and the development of its language. The alternative to it was from 1980 to 2000 known as “ASB” [*The Alternative Service Book*, 1980], which is not unlike the American

1979. However, this book was pulped and replaced from 2000 by the massive *Common Worship*, appearing in multiple volumes.

Let us now return to the United States and listen to conversation amongst members of The Prayer Book Society of the U.S.A. , parishioners in a small minority of parishes in TEC, and parishioners of parishes in what is called “The Continuing Anglican Church[es]” (origins in 1977 by secession from PECUSA). Here we hear references to “the 1928 Book,” and “the classical Prayer Book,” and “the real and genuine Prayer Book.” And this book is contrasted with “the 1979 Book.” What is going on here is that this people believe that the genuine form of *The Book of Common Prayer* for American Anglicanism (Episcopalianism) is that found in the 1928 edition, authorized by PECUSA and never officially revised, and that the 1979 edition is a very different kind of prayer book. And some of this number would add that TEC gave the wrong title to the 1979 prayer book, arguing that the edition of 1928 should have been retained as The BCP, and the 1979 prayer book called by a title that distinguished it from the historic, classic prayer book—e.g., ASB, BAS, or An American Prayer Book, 1979.

Now instead of moving through space, let us move through time and go back in history to the time when much of the East of North America was in British control as various colonies. As part of the British Empire, the official prayer book in the colonies for those who were not Protestant Nonconformists or Scottish (Presbyterian) Churchmen was *The Book of Common Prayer* as used in the national and established Church of England, of which the monarch was the supreme governor.

Only after the revolutionary wars and the birth of the United States of America, did the former Church of England members of the thirteen former colonies organize themselves into what they called “The Protestant Episcopal Church of the U.S.A.,” and begin the work of preparing their own form and edition of *The Book of Common Prayer*. This was approved in 1789 and received the blessing of the C of E bishops. In Canada, which became independent later, the relation with the British crown continued after independence and so, when eventually a Canadian edition of *The Book of Common Prayer* (based on the English BCP) was published in 1918. This was still a prayer book for a monarchy and thus was very different to the American BCP, most obviously in its prayers for the State, for Canada was not a republic.

We are all familiar with the fact that significant books such as text-books and dictionaries are both reprinted and also revised to make new editions. *The Book of Common Prayer* began its life in England as an official, printed book in 1549, was revised for a 1552 edition and then was further gently revised for re-publication at the beginning of the reigns of the English monarchs from Elizabeth I through to Charles II. It has been re-printed hundreds of times. The edition of 1662 from the beginning of the reign of Charles II became the edition that went forth into the British Empire, and it was eventually translated in whole or part into over one hundred and fifty languages. It is still used widely especially in Africa, and is beginning to be used again in the U.S.A. within the Common Cause Movement.

In North America since the arrival of the British in the seventeenth century and until the present, there has been the use of *The Book of Common Prayer* in one or another of its authentic editions—first of all, the English edition of 1662 until the end of the eighteenth century in the U.S.A., and in Canada until 1918; secondly, the use of the 1789-1892-1928 American editions in the U.S.A. to the present; and thirdly, the use of the Canadian 1918 and then 1962 editions in Canada – in both English and French. Both the U.S.A. and Canada have official alternatives to the classic BCP, in Canada the “BAS” of 1985 and in the U.S.A. the innovatory “Book of Common Prayer” of 1979. Regrettably TEC has effectively placed the 1928 edition in its archives, from which only a few parishes in this Church recover it for use in public worship, while thousands outside it still use it as their only prayer book.

The Prayer Book Society of the U.S.A. (founded in 1971 as The Society for the Preservation of The Book of Common Prayer) exists to keep the BCP 1928 in print and to encourage its use with understanding. However, it also supports the use of the other two editions of the classic Common Prayer Tradition in North America, which in an Anglican sense is become one area of global Anglicanism. And, further, the Society is actively engaged in helping cathedrals and parishes in East Africa obtain good used and new copies of the 1662 edition, to replace their worn out copies, for this is what they prefer to use (many knowing much of it off by heart from its use by the Anglican missionaries).

([Note that **AN ANGLICAN PRAYER BOOK** (2008) published for use by the AMIA and its friends is a contemporary language attempt to bring together the main contribution of all these Three editions of The BCP for use in North America, USA and Canada, by the Common Cause Partners. Available from www.anglicanmarketplace.com or for bulk orders call 1 800 727 1928]