



From the Editor

Public Prayer in the Post-Truth Society: Anglican Liturgy and Politics after 2016

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‘The world, for all its beauty, is hostile to the truth.’²

Common Prayer

Praying, it has often been said, shapes believing. While this maxim is often applied or misapplied to doctrine, prayer is also a means of expressing and forming truths about the world, including the political order. Common or public prayer acknowledges the world in which it takes place, but also calls into being a world where the shape of human experience, and in particular of human society, is offered to divine intention. While prayer begins and ends with seeking the truth of God’s will, in any specific case it necessarily sketches its best sense of what that truth would be, not only with regard to individuals’ needs and yearnings but to the social order as well.

Prayer for the civil authorities has been a feature of Christian witness since very early times (1 Tim. 2.2), and has persisted even under persecution.³ Less attention has usually been given by Anglicans to the alternative and more critical sense of the powers-that-be as provisional or even negative (Eph. 6.12; cf. the Revelation to John). The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century *Books of Common Prayer*, assuming the reality of Christendom, were intended to unite a nation in prayer – not merely

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2. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), p. 47.

3. See Tertullian, *Apology*, p. 30.

the personal or private, nor the narrowly petitionary or intercessory, but the whole of a corporate worship through which participants 'should continuallye profite more and more in the knowledge of God, and bee the more inflamed with the love of his true religion'.⁴ The book was also intended to reflect and create a certain set of attitudes to the monarch and the authorities.

The rites central to corporate worship in the classic forms of the BCP – Morning and Evening Prayer, and the Holy Communion – included recognizable patterns of prayer that reflected and inculcated a world-view that affirmed the divine vocation of leaders, civic as well as ecclesial.

The introduction to the general confession in the Order for Morning Prayer of 1662 provides a pithy rationale for the breadth of common or public prayer:

we assemble and meet together to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to hear his most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.⁵

In the set prayers, what is 'requisite and necessary' is made clearer: in the lesser litany, only prayer for mercy precedes that for the monarch; then the ministers are prayed for, then the people. Peace is emphasized both there and in the collects, where the monarch and the royal family have pride of place, granted that prayer for the King (or Queen) seeks that they may act according to God's will. In the 'Prayer for the Church Militant' in the Communion office, the order is different, but the ingredients similar: the Church is prayed for, then Christian rulers and especially the monarch and Council, and then ministers and the whole people.

The particular words and emphases of the Prayer Book tradition have since come to perform a more diverse set of political and social duties than the creation by word of a coherent English nation or church alone. Across the cultural and theological diversity of the Anglican Communion, common prayer has the strongest claim to providing some continued commonality beyond the accidents of a shared history. In different times and places, the same or similar prayers have shaped how different Anglicans think about the realities of power and order they encountered outside church, as well as the divine realm honored within. Despite never knowing arrangements like those of an

4. Brian Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 4.

5. Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 240, altered.

established church, Anglicans nevertheless prayed for rulers and authorities with some hint of Erastianism, borne not just in the words of the Prayer Book but in cultural expectations and symbols, even if adapted to fit local conditions. Shadows of establishment – a pew for a governor, or a flag over an altar – hinted at a world-view out of place in Sydney or Singapore, even in colonial times and all the more so now.

Anglicans may now have to ask more radical questions about what prayer for authorities might entail. Granted the diversity of political circumstances just noted, the disintegration of any neat alignment of church and state such as the Prayer Book presupposed for the established English Church is still sinking in. Even the more radical strands of Anglican social teaching such as Christian Socialism have often assumed a close and positive relationship between church and state, wherein justice would emerge as part of forming a more genuinely Christian society.⁶ Thus while in some theological discourse of the last century the end of Christendom has been widely acknowledged or even acclaimed, the resulting challenge of how to participate in and shape a secular society – including how to pray for it and for its leaders – seems at best a work in progress for Anglicans.

Political changes, however, continue apace, and the variety of relationships these powers have even with their own populations, let alone with the church, begs increasingly varied questions. The recent election of a right-wing populist president in the USA provides one awkward test case that has made Anglicans there ask about the character or even the fact of prayer for civil authorities.

The President and the Cathedral

The Washington National Cathedral has hosted most services related to the inauguration of US presidents since that of Franklin Roosevelt in 1933; for it to do so again would hardly be surprising. The Cathedral itself is a monument to a particularly American version of how Anglicans might engage in prayer with and for civic leaders and the nation.

While never established like the Church of England, what is now the Episcopal Church was formed in the same tradition of prayer for ruling authorities. While the American Revolution necessitated some readjustment of those expectations, this was by no means the end of a close relationship between the Episcopal Church and the state. In the

6. Most obviously Frederick Denison Maurice, *The Kingdom of Christ: Or, Hints to a Quaker, Respecting the Principles, Constitution, and Ordinances of the Catholic Church*, 2 vols. (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1842).

late nineteenth century there arose a 'national Church idea', associated particularly with William Reed Huntington, author of what was to become the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral.⁷ The proposal for a National Cathedral which gathered momentum in the 1890s sought to present the Protestant Episcopal Church as the institution suited to a national effort for Christian mission and unity. That this was unsuccessful is clear enough; yet there persists in parts of the Episcopal Church a sense of close connection to national institutions. The Cathedral itself, completed only in 1990, can still be said to function as 'a national Church for people of all creeds – or none at all – within the framework of a lightly-worn Anglicanism'.⁸

Even a 'lightly-worn Anglicanism' claims its theological as well as political dues, however. Donald Trump's election, widely perceived as something quite different to a mere conservative victory (even if it is not yet clear exactly how), has made precedent less effective as a basis for public word and action, in church as otherwise. While Episcopalians are not all of one mind about Trump, there can be little doubt that as a group they were less likely to have voted for him.

There was considerable criticism, therefore, especially among more liberal members of the Episcopal Church itself, of the decision to hold a prayer service for the inauguration at the Cathedral.

The Dean of the Cathedral, the Very Revd Randy Hollerith, defended the decision in terms that echoed the historic vocation of the Cathedral, as 'an opportunity to honor the office of the presidency and seek God's guidance for our leaders, our nation and all nations. It is also a moment to seek God's face and the grace that we need to meet the challenges ahead, both for ourselves and for our nation.'⁹

For some it was a different but related decision, to have the Choir of the Cathedral to sing at the actual secular inauguration ceremony, that was more problematic.¹⁰ Dean Hollerith's first public statement began

7. William Reed Huntington, *The Church-Idea: An Essay toward Unity* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1870); see Ian T. Douglas, *Fling out the Banner! The National Church Ideal and the Foreign Mission of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1996).

8. David Hart Nelson, 'Worshipping in the National House of Prayer: Washington National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., Sunday, 19 July 2009', *Anglican and Episcopal History* 79.1 (2010), p. 71.

9. <http://cathedral.org/press-room/statement-dean-randy-hollerith/> (accessed January 13, 2017).

10. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2017/01/13/washington-national-cathedrals-decision-to-participate-in-trumps-inauguration-is-creating-tension/?utm_term=.a5e70e5f5d65 (accessed January 13, 2017).

with this controversy rather than the prayer service itself, leaning further into ideas of national unity and identity:

Let me be clear: We do not pray or sing to bless a political ideology or partisan agenda, regardless of the man (or woman) taking that sacred oath of office. We sing to honor the nation.¹¹

This last reference to honoring the nation, like the opening reference in the earlier quote to honoring the office of the presidency, gives pause. Hollerith did not invoke biblical or other theological warrant for the decision; the rationale was a thoughtful and civically responsible one, but not particularly Christian. The Cathedral is seen to be an institution for the nation; where the nation or its leaders can directly or even vaguely be seen as aligned with the church and the gospel, this tension is perhaps hidden. The Trump ascendancy, however, exposes it harshly.

The problem of whether honoring the nation, as opposed to praying for it or its leaders, is legitimately or adequately Christian does not rest solely with those who made or supported decisions to pray with and for President Trump at his inauguration. Earlier inaugurals seem to reflect the same intention of national and personal honor, but with different characters and hence results. At Barack Obama's first inaugural service, held in the National Cathedral in 2009, prayers from Episcopal Church participants implied that the agenda of the Church adhered closely to that of the new administration, and even to the rhetoric of Obama's campaign. One prayer spoke of a 'new day of hope', echoing a famous election poster and watchword. Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori drew on Lincoln's second inaugural in her prayer, speaking of a 'radiant day ... a time of new beginnings, new ventures, and new visions...'.¹² Such prayer had become a means of expressing support for particular candidates or at least particular office-bearers, as well as of honoring the nation to whose vocation these persons and policies were deemed adequate.

These senses of 'honor' differed considerably, but both sides of this recent argument were talking less about the proper scope of Christian prayer than about the forms of civil religion. In 1968 Robert Bellah published a famous essay, 'Civil Religion in America' which brought that term into currency, and has given rise to a whole literature of

11. <http://cathedral.org/press-room/statement-dean-randy-hollerith/> (accessed January 13, 2017).

12. Laura R. Olson, Adam L. Warber, and Kevin R. den Dulk, 'Mainline Protestants and the 2008 Election', in Gastón Espinosa (ed.), *Religion, Race, and Barack Obama's New Democratic Pluralism* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 49-50.

its own. Bellah suggested that America has a genuinely religious tradition that belongs to nation, not church, which owes something to Christianity but is not limited to it:

Behind the civil religion at every point lie biblical archetypes: Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth. But it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols. It is concerned that America be a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all nations.¹³

While Bellah sees American civil religion as transcending the particularities of religious tradition, it is also possible to see it as the sum of specific religious as well as secular beliefs and rituals. While Episcopalians are not members of an established church, when they hang a national flag in their sanctuaries or engage in other performances that bless the nation and its institutions, they may echo Anglican tradition, but they may also – or instead – be worshipping at a different altar altogether. Some of these practices may seem more liberal and others more conservative, but honoring of nation or office *per se* assumes a sort of benign religious influence in the state, even if the specifics of the religious and the civil, and hence their proper alignment at a given time, are contested.

Naming the President at All Saints

One Californian parish, All Saints' Pasadena, announced that it would not pray for the incoming president by name:

If you come to All Saints this Sunday, you'll notice that we have removed the proper names from our prayers for those in authority. Whereas before we prayed for 'Barack, our president,' we are now praying for 'our president, our president-elect, and all others in authority.' This practice will continue for at least the near future.¹⁴

The Rector of All Saints', the Revd Mike Kinman, was also clear about the necessity and importance of praying for leaders, regardless of agreement about them or their policies:

We pray for our leaders because they are human beings, made in God's image, and beloved by God. We pray for our leaders because leadership is important – because it is a sacred trust, power to be exercised for the common good despite all temptation to the otherwise. We pray for

13. Robert N. Bellah, 'Civil Religion in America', *Daedalus* 96.1 (1967), pp. 1-21.

14. <http://ascideas.org/2017/01/06/we-pray-for-our-leaders/> (accessed January 13, 2017).

our leaders regardless of whether or not we like or agree with them. Our prayers are neither endorsement nor censure. Our prayers ask God to guard and guide, to bring out in our leaders what we hope God brings out in us all – the image of God that dwells in each one of us.¹⁵

The given reason for the omission of Trump's name in particular was fairly specific: 'we have a president elect whose name is literally a trauma trigger to some people ... we are also charged with keeping the worshipping community, while certainly not challenge-free, a place of safety from harm'.¹⁶ This rationale echoes a concern for such 'safe spaces' that has also driven some policies on college campuses in the UK, USA, and elsewhere, and which has put particular emphasis on the experiences of women, of queer students, people of color, and other potential victims of violence or intimidation.

The decision at All Saints' of course left Barack Obama's name out of the prayers for the last few weeks of his presidency also. Further, the parish indicated that they had 'also removed the names from the prayers for our bishops for consistency of style'.¹⁷ While the concern about triggers may have been sincere, in the context of the objections being raised to acknowledging Trump more generally the omission seems likely to have served more as an identity marker for a congregation deeply opposed to his candidacy. It also seems likely that these congregants have, like those making a very different decision at the National Cathedral, interpreted their own prayer for the president as a contribution to civil religion, rather than as a Christian vocation to pray for leaders (or even for enemies).

Praying for Those Who Hate You

Episcopal Church Presiding Bishop Michael Curry offered a powerful comparison with the patterns and choices experienced by black Episcopalians during the Civil Rights movement in his response to the controversy about the Cathedral, but which is at least as relevant to the decisions made in Pasadena:

We prayed for leaders who were often lukewarm or even opposed to our very civil rights. We got on our knees in church and prayed for them, and

15. <http://ascideas.org/2017/01/06/we-pray-for-our-leaders/> (accessed January 13, 2017).

16. <http://ascideas.org/2017/01/06/we-pray-for-our-leaders/> (accessed January 13, 2017).

17. <http://ascideas.org/2017/01/06/we-pray-for-our-leaders/> (accessed January 13, 2017).

then we got up off our knees and we Marched on Washington. Following the way of Jesus, we prayed and protested at the same time. We prayed for our leaders who were fighting for our civil rights, we prayed for those with whom we disagreed, and we even prayed for those who hated us. And we did so following the Jesus, whose way is the way of unselfish, sacrificial love. And that way is the way that can set us all free.¹⁸

A similar witness might be found in the prayers of South African Anglicans late last century, among others.¹⁹ While the challenges of Donald Trump's regime may seem very specific and fresh, they have wider significance and reflect challenges that have arisen at many points in Christian history. Anglicans in many places have lived under unmistakably violent and repressive regimes, and have learned to combine prayer and protest, respect and defiance, when and where needed.

The collapse of Christendom challenges assumptions about the relationship between church and state, even where they are formally separated. The angst about prayer for Trump as president suggests a new phase in the reordering of how Christians relate to, and pray for, the state and its leaders in the USA. There seems less and less room for the specifically American solution of civil religion as a stopping place on the way from Christendom to secularism. Other Anglicans will face, or already have faced, their own equivalent moments. It should not be a shock historically speaking, even if it has not been a prominent strand in Anglican social thinking, that prayer for the authorities may now also be prayer for enemies. The Anglican commitment to engagement with the social order demands this rather than disengagement.

The vocation of common prayer includes that of being formed as a community in 'the love of true religion'. It is not really news that truth itself is now contested, in the public sphere as otherwise.²⁰ The vocation of prayer must be to embody, to create, and to seek truth in its discomfiting fullness, and requires frank acknowledgement of the difference between the world as it is and the world of God's reign and human fulfillment. Anglicans may therefore be on the brink of rediscovering that the liturgy is, by virtue of its being a true and beautiful thing, also a subversive one.

18. <http://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/statement-episcopal-church-presiding-bishop-curry-regarding-prayers-president> (accessed January 13, 2017).

19. Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck, *The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer: A Worldwide Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 315-16.

20. See Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).