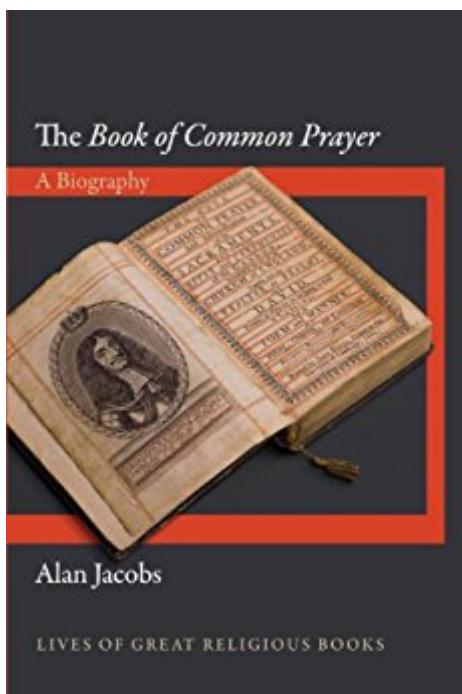


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The "Book Of Common Prayer": A Biography (Lives Of Great Religious Books)



Synopsis

While many of us are familiar with such famous words as, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here. . ." or "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," we may not know that they originated with The Book of Common Prayer, which first appeared in 1549. Like the words of the King James Bible and Shakespeare, the language of this prayer book has saturated English culture and letters. Here Alan Jacobs tells its story. Jacobs shows how The Book of Common Prayer--from its beginnings as a means of social and political control in the England of Henry VIII to its worldwide presence today--became a venerable work whose cadences express the heart of religious life for many. The book's chief maker, Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, created it as the authoritative manual of Christian worship throughout England. But as Jacobs recounts, the book has had a variable and dramatic career in the complicated history of English church politics, and has been the focus of celebrations, protests, and even jail terms. As time passed, new forms of the book were made to suit the many English-speaking nations: first in Scotland, then in the new United States, and eventually wherever the British Empire extended its arm. Over time, Cranmer's book was adapted for different preferences and purposes. Jacobs vividly demonstrates how one book became many--and how it has shaped the devotional lives of men and women across the globe.

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Customer Reviews

I gladly attend an Anglican church, but I am not Anglican. There are four major reasons I give to those wondering why we shifted from low church evangelicalism to the Anglican church: an intentional theology of the body (and the physical world), a conscious tie to the whole church throughout its history and in the world today, truly keeping primary doctrines primary which translates to giving much space to differ over a variety of non primary doctrines, and a protection against personality cults emerging with respect to the ministers. The Book of Common Prayer (BCP) is integral to the lifeblood of Anglicanism. Its history and use is fascinating. Jacobs tells the story with great skill. Jacobs is a skilled writer, has a nose for the telling anecdote, and does a nice job of giving the overall history of the English Reformation as he tells the story of the BCP. Even if you are not an Anglican (like me) or don't go to an Anglican church (not like me), you will still find this book worthwhile reading indeed!

Only those who care so little about religion or religious history that they count it all as nonsense will find anything to dislike about this book. Alan Jacobs has outdone himself in both in the quality of his historical research and the more difficult trick of rendering complicated history in plain language and a merciful page count. His own practice of Anglicanism has apparently only increased his attention to contradiction, foiled plans, multiple visions, and historical change throughout the life of the Anglican Church's second-most-treasured book. One sometimes sees the shape of present religious struggles in his account of the Book of Common Prayer, but more often--and perhaps more fruitfully--he gives readers a lucid look at people whose hearts were far closer to the heart of religious belief and observance than the modern world often affords us. The choices they made, the worship they attempted to craft, and the battles they fought with each other need to be told with a keen attention to the structures and motivations of religious belief. In this, Jacobs has surpassed many modern historians who attempt to account for religious movements by all manner of reductive tactics, refusing stubbornly to grant religious belief and observance its own oeuvre, its own life. Jacobs's deceptively slim volume--a part of a larger series, it should be noted--is an uncommonly insightful work of religious history with much to teach our modern minds.

I grew up low church baptist and have only come to see the value of the Book of Common Prayer fairly recently. So this was a great book to bring some history to my understanding. Alan Jacobs is an excellent writer and his history of the book is both of solid history and readable. To me, what is most interesting about story of the BCP, is how it was intended as a tool of unity but from the very beginning that was thwarted. Cranmer, who compiled the BCP thought that a single prayer book with a single service was important both theologically and politically to the unity of the Church in England. This was not a simple expedient or politically motivated conscription of Christianity but a different world view on how church and state should relate. But from the beginning the minutia of the BCP and its practice were used to factionalize the church. As one very small example, John Knox insisted that communion should be taken while sitting (instead of kneeling) because he wanted to distance the church from the Catholic view of transubstantiation. Others wanted kneeling to show honor and devotion during the Eucharist. But as theological and cultural movements between high and low church Anglicans and Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals and other groups, the prayer book became like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Unchanging not so much because it was perfect, but unchanging because no one can agree on how to change it. And now it is venerated in part because it was unchanged. Outside the UK, most other Anglican churches have adapted their own Books of Common Prayer (and most have updated theirs several times), but in the UK it is still the 1662 version that is the authorized one. So now there are a number of options for the Anglican world to choose their Books of Common Prayer. This is a fascinating and important history. The Book of Common Prayer has molded English speaking Christianity in ways that most probably do not realize. The common marriage ceremony "Dearly Beloved" and funeral "Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust" are part of the cultural language of the English speaking world, but also from the Book of Common Prayer. I read the kindle version, but I have heard a number of comments about the beauty of the actual printed book.

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