

The Oxford Guide to the Book of Common Prayer

reviewed by [Robert Bruce Mullin](#) in the [February 6, 2007](#) issue

In Review



The Oxford Guide to The Book of Common Prayer

Charles Hefling and Cynthia Shattuck, eds.
Oxford University Press

Nothing illustrates the evolution of Anglicanism more than the changing role of the Book of Common Prayer. For centuries the prayer book served as a primary source of unity—a sign of equanimity, timelessness and grace that bound the communion together and linked it to its roots. It was viewed as a testimony to the majesty of the English language, the senior of the three great monuments to English prose style (the other two being Shakespeare's works and the King James Bible). But at present the position of the Book of Common Prayer is far different. *The Oxford Guide* helps readers to understand how and why this change has occurred.

The editors, Charles Hefling of Boston College and Cynthia Shattuck of Church Publishing, along with over 50 contributors, explain where the prayer book came from, what its state is around the world, how it functions and where it is heading. The historical sections are useful summaries of recent scholarship. Judith Maltby, for example, discusses the role of the prayer book in Elizabethan and Stuart England. Bryan Spinks and Marion Hatchett cover 16th- and 17th-century England and the 18th-century U.S., respectively. Of particular interest is Jeremy Gregory's treatment of prayer book usage in the period between 1660 and 1830, often viewed as the golden age of liturgical uniformity. Here he dispels the notion that pious churchgoers brought their prayer books with them to worship and carefully followed each instruction. The use of individual prayer books was a later phenomenon; in this era churches possessed only one or two copies, and most people followed by memory. Furthermore, there was never complete uniformity. Some modifications in liturgical usage were allowed to meet local needs.

The bulk of the volume concerns the transformation of the prayer book tradition from the middle of the 20th century to the present. Until the mid-20th century, the Anglican Communion was loyal to Thomas Cranmer's liturgy, whether in the form of the 1662 English book or, in the case of Scotland and the U.S., of the Scottish liturgy of 1637, with its distinctive eucharistic prayer. By the late 1950s things began to change because of new liturgical studies and the desire to have liturgies reflect local cultures. The transformation of Anglicanism into a multicultural and diverse body rendered the Cranmerian liturgy inadequate for meeting the spiritual needs of the communion and served as the impetus for the enculturation of the prayer book.

The result has been an explosion of new Anglican liturgies since 1960, all consciously distancing themselves from the Cranmerian tradition. The largest section of the volume, "Family Portraits," is a comprehensive survey of prayer books in use in the global Anglican Communion. The best of these articles shed light on why the prayer book has developed differently in different places. From them we learn, for example, why Australia was the first place in the Anglican Communion where *thee/thou* language was jettisoned, and Wales was the last.

There is now not only variation between the liturgies in the different parts of the communion, but also a significant degree of choice within the liturgies themselves. If there continues to be unity in the prayer book tradition, it is in the shape of the liturgy rather than its words. The International Anglican Liturgical Consultation has identified a fivefold sequence found in all Anglican eucharistic liturgies: 1) gathering God's people, 2) proclaiming and receiving the word, 3) prayers of the people, 4) gathering at the Lord's table and 5) going out. Though such uniformity in shape will mark the future of the Anglican Communion, this fivefold sequence is not limited to Anglicanism; if the communion desires a stronger symbol of unity, it will need to look elsewhere. Indeed, when Anglicans in the second half of the 20th century identified four instruments of unity within the communion, the prayer book was not one of them.

The transformation of the place of the prayer book has resulted in two other phenomena. The first is the loss of the book as an object. The multiplication of options has led many congregations to substitute other printed material for prayer books for use in worship. Praised by some and lamented by others, this phenomenon has resulted in a subtle distancing of worship from the book so that worshipers may be familiar with the way liturgy is done in their own church, but unaware of the full content of the prayer book itself. Criticism of this phenomenon is analogous to the criticism often made earlier regarding the prayer book vis-à-vis scripture. Since the prayer book contained most of the scripture readings, worshipers could have their scripture without ever touching a Bible.

The second (and largely unmentioned) change has been in the way that Anglicans talk about their liturgy. In earlier centuries the Book of Common Prayer was often called beautiful. The aesthetic majesty of Cranmer's liturgy was a source of pride for both clergy and laity. With the shift toward new understandings of the prayer book, talk of aesthetics has largely disappeared.

As for the *Oxford Guide*, it is well conceived physically, graced with both illustrations of historic prayer books and text boxes from the liturgies being discussed, which are a significant help to the reader. There is also a useful glossary. This authoritative guide to the Book of Common Prayer as it once was and has now become will well serve anyone interested in Anglicanism or the prayer book tradition.