

THE ART OF PUBLIC WORSHIP

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The art of public worship by Percy Dearmer

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PERCY DEARMER

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PUBLIC WORSHIP**

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BY

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PREFACE

THE following chapters were originally delivered as the Bohlen Lectures at Philadelphia in January, 1919. Part of their substance was afterwards repeated at S. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, during Lent. That I had thus both American and English audiences in view has helped me greatly in broadening my outlook upon the subject, and will not I hope make these pages less acceptable either to American or English readers. There is considerable difference not only between the rites but also between the customs and traditions of the two Churches; and in this era of Prayer Book revision we English Churchmen have much to learn from the sister Church, which has, with a greater freedom from convention and prejudice, already made considerable alterations in public worship, providing some admirable examples of reform and a few examples also of mistakes to be avoided. I may add that I did not read either the new proposals of American revision—the “Report of the Joint Commission on the Book of Common Prayer,” or the English “Report of the Archbishops’ Committee

of Inquiry on The Worship of the Church " until after this little book was written, so that I am able now thankfully to recognize in how many cases my suggestions fall in with those of two such weighty authorities.

In lectures like these a good deal of criticism and even of denunciation is inevitable, and the present opportunity makes plain speaking more than ever a duty, lest all the widespread desire for better things be thwarted by the weight of habit. The reason why dogmatic statement cannot be avoided in any useful discussion of art, as of morals, is a philosophic one: art and morals are ultimate realities, and cannot therefore be explained, but only declared. We can only say that a certain practice is beautiful, as we can only say that a certain line of conduct is righteous; when we try to explain the reason, we tend always to explain it in terms of utility, and thus to explain it away.

It is difficult again to counter the forces of ignorance and stupidity, as men have to do in the case of any reform, without risking the appearance of unkindness. But the truth is that the strength of ignorance and stupidity lies in this—that we are all apt to follow their lead in matters which we have not made our own; and, in these days especially, it is impossible for the most highly equipped mind to master more than a few of those sciences and

arts which are now almost innumerable. In concerns outside our province we are all enormously influenced by the mass of average uninformed opinion, because that is the opinion which meets us at every turn. This "general innate tendency," as the psychologists now call it, of imitation, leads us to buy our soap or our tooth-paste of the most widely advertised firm, although we know that it costs thousands of pounds to bring them thus before us, and that it is we who pay the money. In more important matters, the imitative tendency pulls us at every turn away from the paths of wisdom—even in our own special concerns, where it produces what we call professional prejudice, a weakness which grows with age unless it is strenuously corrected, and which has cost us many lives during the last five years. The hope of the world lies in the increase of the number of those who follow their highest light in the matters which are specially their own, and, in the far more numerous realm outside, keep themselves from the careless prejudices of the crowd by consulting other specialists. We must all be ignorant about most things, but we need not cultivate the fruits of ignorance.

I wish also to say, very deliberately, because I have had to criticize some things both in the English and American Prayer Books, that, after attending many services both of the Latin

and the Eastern Churches with much admiration and a real respect, to me the services of the Anglican Books seem without doubt to be the soundest, truest, most beautiful, and practicable, in fact the best, in Christendom ; and that, as between the English and American Books, the American, though it has some defects, is the better. Twenty years ago I hoped the clergy would try the experiment of carrying out the services of the Prayer Book as they stand ; nothing would have strengthened us so much, or made us so competent for the revision which now must happen, and that thoroughly and quickly. There has been indeed much improvement ; and now there is a strong demand for a great step forward before this time of unexampled opportunity has passed. Because our services are so beautiful in quality, and because so fine an ideal is now vivid before us, we have most honestly, outspokenly, and hopefully to face every defect and to make it good.

May Day, 1919.

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