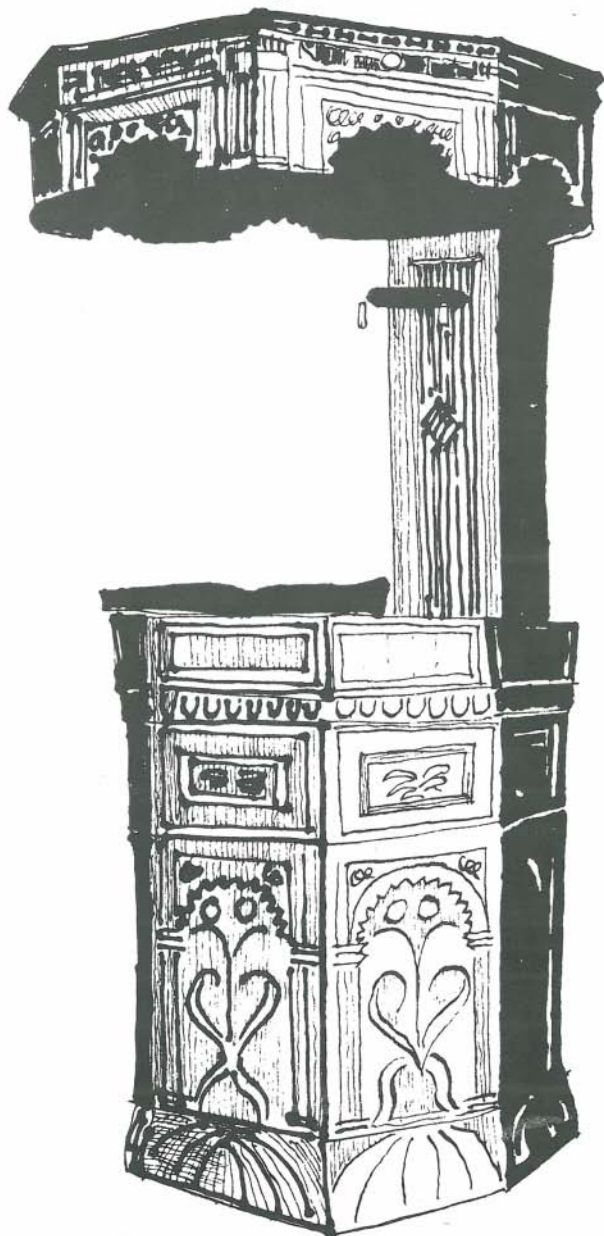


# The Hymn Sandwich



A brief history  
of Unitarian worship

Duncan McGuffie

## INTRODUCTION

There is a renewed interest among many Unitarians in why we worship, how we worship and what - if there is a what - we worship. The Worship Sub-Committee since its inception has sought to stimulate such questionings.

At the Worship Workshop at the GA meetings held in Newcastle 1981, the focus was upon what has become known, irreverently perhaps but irrevocably, as the "Hymn Sandwich". This is undoubtedly the most common form of Unitarian worship in Britain. But how did it evolve? How did we get this way?

Those questions were put to Duncan McGuffie, minister of Bournemouth Unitarian Church. His response took the form of a short but comprehensive lecture on the history of Unitarian worship. This was given at the Newcastle Worship Workshop and was so well received that hopes for its publication were strongly expressed.

Appropriately enough this publication coincides with the 50th anniversary of "Orders of Worship" (1932), which enjoyed widespread usage among Unitarian congregations, representing as it did then a liturgy 'in complete accord with the times'. Today only about one eighth of Unitarian congregations use a liturgy and that number appears to be declining further. If, as Dr. McGuffie suggests, the Unitarian Church was at its most vigorous when it was productive of many liturgies, we might do well to ponder the question with which he concludes his lecture: Is the dearth of Unitarian liturgies today a significant marker of our lack of vitality?

**Keith Gilley**

## THE ORIGINS OF THE "HYMN SANDWICH"

Many streams of religious life have contributed to this denomination, but the central one goes back to the Presbyterians whose ministers were ejected from their livings in 1662. When the Church of England, having been in eclipse during the Cromwellian period, was restored along with Charles II, some Calvinistic ministers could not give "unfeigned assent" to the newly revised Book of Common Prayer. They saw relics of popery in it: they objected, for instance, to the practice of kneeling at Communion, to the wearing of surplices, and to the use of the sign of the cross in baptism. They wanted, too, what they called "the godly discipline" - the power of ministers to refuse communion to those they thought were not living godly lives.

The Presbyterians' theology was highly relevant to their ideas about worship. The Anglican instinct was to say that taking communion was a sort of spiritual tonic, with the power to rescue people from living wickedly; the Calvinistic instinct was to say that communion should only be given to those who seemed to be of "the elect". And within Calvinism there was a further difference between the Presbyterians, who believed in a national church to which everyone belonged, and which was policed, so to speak, by godly ministers enforcing "the godly discipline"; and the Independents, as they were then called - the Congregationalists, as they became - who believed that the only people who belonged to churches should be those who seemed to be "the elect". The Presbyterian hankering after a national church remained with them after their Calvinism faded, and helps to explain the interest they later came to feel in having a reformed Book of Common Prayer.

But that, in 1662, was in the future. The Presbyterians of that time hoped for an improved Prayer Book but there was also a strong Calvinistic tradition of extempory prayer. It should be added that another Calvinistic tradition (which effected the Church of England up to the early 19th century) was a mistrust of hymns in worship. It was thought that only

the words of scripture should - apart from preaching and extemporary prayer - be allowed. Versified psalms were the most that could be permitted.

So the usual pattern of Presbyterian worship in England in the later 17th and early 18th centuries went: psalm; short prayer of invocation; one reading of scripture, which was also expounded by the minister ( a practise which lasted among some Unitarian ministers into this century); a sermon; a "long prayer", praying for spiritual and temporal blessings for the congregation, confessing sins, giving thanks for mercies, and praying for the whole world, the church and the nation, and particular people; and then another psalm.

There you have something beginning to look like a "hymn sandwich". The "long prayer", however, was the climax of the service. The reason for this was that originally in Calvinist services the climax had been communion. The pattern of the service had been, as in the early church and, broadly, the mass: opening prayer, reading, sermon, communion. But the Calvinist idea of "election" - meaning that once God had got you he had got you, so that you were, in essentials, home and dry - tended to make communion seem less pressingly urgent that the notion that it was a spiritual tonic which might save you from backsliding; and so the frequency of communion was reduced in Presbyterian churches, and the long prayer took its place.

In Independent churches by the early 18th century there was something even more like the hymn sandwich, and the pattern was normally: psalm; short prayer; reading and exposition; long prayer; sermon; psalm. Why this should have been so I haven't seen explained; but, speculating, I notice that it breaks up two rather similar items, which come one after another in the Presbyterian service ( the exposition of the Bible, and the sermon), and that it makes the sermon the climax of the service. But it was for another reason, which I will come to shortly, that the sermon came to be put after the long prayer in our main tradition, in which the long prayer followed the sermon up to the beginning of the 19th century.

Speaking of the "long prayer", it is worth mentioning that an account, from the early 18th century, of how Isaac Watts conducted communion services says: "The minister, taking hold of the plate in which the bread lies, calls upon the people to join with him in seeking for a blessing on it, which is done in a short prayer of eight to ten minutes".

It was customary to stand for prayers, and, when hymns were introduced, it was customary for Dissenters to sit for hymns. And having mentioned hymns and Isaac Watts, I should say a few words about hymns. Isaac Watts, who lived from 1674 to 1748, was an Independent minister who, it is worth mentioning, became heretical on the doctrine of the Trinity. He revolutionised hymnody in England, first by producing a new metrical version of the psalms, which updated their theology and made it Christian; and secondly by writing hymns which were not just paraphrases of Scripture, but which expressed personal feelings and became very popular. Among those affected by his example were John and Charles Wesley, who saw themselves as Anglicans; and later in the 18th century, affected in their turn by the Methodists, Anglican evangelicals like William Cowper and John Newton wrote effective hymns of personal feeling. But the Methodists and Anglicans, unlike the Dissenters, stood to sing hymns.

So hymns in England were largely an 18th century development. So, too, for the most part, was the emergence of liberalism and open heresy on the Trinity among the Dissenters, with the label "Presbyterian" tending to become associated with the liberals, and the label "Independent" tending to become associated with the more evangelical and orthodox. But the most important impetus towards heresy and towards set forms of liturgy among the Dissenters came from an Anglican source. In 1712 the rising star of Anglican theology, the still comparatively young Dr. Samuel Clarke, published a heretical book on the Trinity; and Clarke also, privately, revised the Book of Common Prayer to bring it into line with his heresies.

Clarke was so important to our ancestors that a few words about him are in order. Despite his heresy, he enjoyed a tremendous reputation throughout the 18th century. Voltaire called him "a veritable thinking machine"; Rousseau ranked him with Plato; Dr. Johnson read him on his deathbed. Clarke's ideas were, said Rousseau, "so simple, so luminous, so clear". Unfortunately, if you want to see why 18th century people found the (by our standards) prolix and pompous Clarke luminous and clear, you need to prepare yourself by reading a good deal of early 18th century theology; and I must say that the price seems rather a heavy one to pay for the dubious benefit of appreciating Clarke.

But be that as it may, Clarke, armed with by 18th century standards a great gift for clear and concise exposition, and believing that good religion should be simple, decided to clean up the doctrine of the Trinity. He saw the Father alone as truly God, the Son as a subordinate divine being, and the Spirit as subordinate to the Son. This, Clarke thought, was the doctrine which ought to prevail in the Church of England; and so he modified the Book of Common Prayer accordingly.

(Incidentally, when I was a student for the ministry I went to a lecture by Professor Frank Manuel which offered a Freudian interpretation of Clarke, putting a good deal of emphasis on Clarke's exaltation of the Father. Looking at Clarke's manuscript revision of the Prayer Book, said Professor Manuel, you could see his troubled emotional state by the "slashing pen-strokes" with which he had struck out orthodox Trinitarian passages. I hurried back to Manchester College and relayed this theory to the then Principal, the late Harry Short, who responded with a five-minute disquisition on the quill pen. I forget the details, but the upstart of it was that it is virtually impossible to cross anything out with a quill pen without producing an effect of "slashing pen-strokes").

After Clarke's death in 1729, his Anglican disciples continued to hope for a modified Book of Common Prayer. But his ideas about the Trinity, in the long run, found a warmer welcome

among the Dissenters than they did among the Anglicans. Anglican worship, of course, included the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, whereas the Calvinistic emphasis in worship on scripture and the minister's words alone tended, in worship, the heart of religion, to elevate Scripture as individually interpreted rather than Scripture as traditionally interpreted by the Church. So the Dissenting approach put less obstacles in the way of heresy; and at the same time there was in Presbyterianism, as I said earlier, a nostalgia for a unified national church sharing a common worship. Moreover, the Presbyterians, applying their reason to Scripture, and suspicious of "enthusiasm" (or emotional claims to divine inspiration) saw themselves as rational Dissenters. Care and preparation in worship appealed to them, rather than the impulse of the moment. For these reasons, written forms of liturgy started appearing among the Presbyterians.

Meanwhile the liberal Anglicans pressed for reforms in the Church of England. But after the failure of 1772 of their major attempt to get reform, the Feathers Tavern Petition, Theophilus Lindsey opened his Chapel in Essex Street in 1774, meaning, not to be a Dissenter, but to show what reformed Anglican worship would be like. He used a revised form of Clarke's revision of the Book of Common Prayer. Clarke's name continued to be invoked on title pages into the early 19th century.

The tradition of producing set liturgies, which had existed before Lindsey, continued vigorously after Lindsey, with many liturgies being influenced by the Book of Common Prayer. (Of a hundred and twenty-three traceable liturgies produced by our tradition between 1741 and 1946, eighty-nine were based on the Book of Common Prayer). What, then, apart from particular prayers, did the Anglican liturgy add to our tradition?

Most notably, it injected a strong influence from a source other than the mass. The early Christians - or at least the

more devout of them - had prayed privately at set times throughout the day. Later this was transmuted into public prayer at set times throughout the day; and from the later Roman Empire onwards the monks took the lead in developing this kind of worship. Mattins and Evensong in the Book of Common Prayer were based on the monks' daily Offices. The monks had observed systematic cycles of psalms, prayers and readings. Similarly, in the Book of Common Prayer there are set psalms, set prayers for various occasions, and set readings (although the Protestant emphasis on Scripture led to the abolition of non-Biblical readings). This explains why, although Unitarians have not usually adopted rigid cycles, in 18th and 19th century service books there is often a reading from the Old Testament, a psalm or canticle, and a reading from the New Testament. Litanies, too, passed from the daily Offices via Anglicanism into Unitarianism, even though our puritan ancestors had objected to such "short cuts and shreadings, which may be better called wishes than prayers".

Then there is the question of "O Lord, open thou our lips", a versicle which in Orders of Worship, as in the Book of Common Prayer, comes well into the service, after our lips have been open for some time. This is the result of 16th Century cross-breeding between Protestantism and the monkish Offices. In the later Middle Ages, when the monks assembled to say the Office, they would prepare themselves by saying silently the Hail Mary and the Lord's Prayer. When the leader reached the end of his own Lord's Prayer he said aloud the closing words, "for ever and ever, amen"; and then came versicles and responses. In his 1549 Prayer Book Cranmer followed this pattern, except that, in order to stop anyone from saying the popish Hail Mary, he told the minister to begin the service by saying the Lord's Prayer "in a loud voice". Then came, in the singular, "O Lord, open thou my lips". However, the Protestant feeling that it was wrong to approach God without first confessing our sins led to additions in Cranmer's 1552 Prayer Book. The Lord's Prayer was now prefaced by scriptural sentences about sin, an exhortation to confess our sins, a general confession, and an

absolution. As a result the arrival of "O Lord, open thou our lips" (which in 1552 was in the plural) was considerably delayed. In Orders of Worship there is something like the Anglican pattern, modified yet again by a downplaying of the emphasis on sin: uplifting scripural sentences are followed by a call to worship, a prayer, in most services by a morning or evening collect, and then by the Lord's Prayer and "Open thou our Lips".

Anglican practice also explains the position of the sermon in our services. In the Book of Common Prayer sermons are not provided for at Mattins or Evensong; the only sermon mentioned is one before Holy Communion. Theoretically, the sermons which came to be preached at Mattins and Evensong happened after those services, in preparation for Communion services which often did not take place. Because of the dominant influence of the Church of England, in the early 19th century the Unitarians abandoned the Calvinist pattern, with the long prayer at the end of the service, for the Anglican pattern with the sermon at the end.

Anglican influence also accounts for the strange and (I hope) now dead custom of having the anthem in the middle of the central group of prayers. Elizabeth I wanted to retain cathedral choirs, and so her Injunctions of 1559 allowed for the singing of an anthem after the last three collects of the service (very much as we sometimes have organ music after the service). In what proved to be the final version of the Book of Common Prayer, in 1662, the presence of the anthem was made even more official when it was provided for by the rubric "In Quires and Places where they sing, here followeth the anthem". But the 1662 revisers wanted to add some prayers to the service, and so they did just that - they simply tacked them on after the anthem, with the result that the anthem now came in the middle of a group of prayers. The very influential Common Prayer For Christian Worship, which Thomas Sadler and James Martineau published in 1862, was among the Unitarian service books which faithfully imitated this bizarre effect, even down to the antique spelling of "Quires".

More generally, this tacking-on by the Anglicans of further material at the end of their original, sermonless services explains why anthems, if they are sung at all, are now usually sung in more or less the middle of our services. In the interests of tidiness they have been taken out of the middle of the main group of prayers and put in front of them.

So that is the story of the structure of our services. We began, to go no further back than Calvinism, with: psalm, short prayer, reading, exposition, sermon, long prayer, psalm. Hymns were introduced in the 18th century. Under Anglican influence, we acquired two readings and a sermon after a central group of prayers, together with sentences (now, like the readings, not necessarily Biblical ones) before or after the first hymn. From the same source, the Lord's Prayer came to be widely used near the beginning of the service, and churches with choirs gained an anthem before the central prayers, and perhaps a litany. Those churches which use Orders of Worship also gained versicles and responses, at some distance into the service.

A few miscellaneous remarks are now appropriate. Hymns, in services in Lindsey's Anglican-inspired tradition, were sung standing. Indeed, the influence of Anglicanism and Methodism spread this practice throughout Nonconformity - a change which led to disputes in the mid-19th century. Still on the subject of hymns, it is worth noting that Watts's habit of modifying the psalms in the interests of what he saw as true theology was appealed to by the Unitarians to justify their altering Watts's, and many other people's, hymns.

You may wonder why Anglican influence should have been so powerful. One reason is that in the first half of the 19th century the most vigorous devotional life in Britain was to be found in the High Anglican Oxford Movement. The Movement pioneered various practices which are now thought to be fairly innocuous: these included flowers on the communion table, robed choirs, and the processing in of minister and choir. It is also noteworthy that our communion tables stand "altar-wise"

- something which enraged our puritan ancestors, who preferred them to stand "table-wise", away from the wall and with the shorter sides at the east and west. Nowadays, our Ministers can use the sign of the cross in baptism without annoying at least the liberal Christian element in their congregations; but that, too, was a practice which enraged the puritans. And if our ministers today were to emulate the Socinians and the puritans by refusing communion to people whose lives they didn't think were up to scratch, it would prove to be quite a talking point.

Finally, I should mention a notable feature of Unitarian liturgies. In the 18th and 19th centuries they proliferated. We were not static. In the preface to Sadler and Martineau's Common Prayer for Christian Worship of 1862, and again in the preface to Martineau's revision of the book in 1879 (Ten Services of Public Prayer), it was emphasised that liturgies must change to meet changing needs. This theme was echoed in the 20th century by the Free Catholic movement, who lived in the days when the saying that the Church of England was the Tory party at prayer has been amended by the saying that the Anglo-Catholics were the Socialists at mass. Like their Anglo-Catholic contemporaries, the Free Catholics practised a rather jolly Merrie England ritualism; but they were prepared to be flexible, and to have the sermon, for example, early in the service if they wanted the high point to be elsewhere. Similarly, in 1932 Mortimer Rowe, who compiled and to some extent wrote Orders of Worship, wrote in his preface of the need for "a more complete accord with living convictions of truth and religious aspirations of the present time".

However, since Orders of Worship we have produced very little liturgy. The book has been clung to, and then, if it has been abandoned, has usually been abandoned for no set liturgy whatsoever. The result is that only about one eighth of our churches now use set liturgies. We should give due credit to the late Will Hayes, whose book of services, Every Nation Kneeling, was published in 1954; and we should give all honour to Peter Godfrey, whose Unitarian Orders of Worship is, as far

as I know, the only viable, full-scale alternative to Orders of Worship we have produced so far. But with a few such honourable exceptions, our liturgical barrenness has been startling.

The late Alec Peaston was proud that, as he put it, "The Unitarian Church is the cradle of Nonconformist Liturgies". He was also proud that "Nineteenth century liturgy is eloquent of a vigorous intellectual life among Unitarians". What, then, is our late 20th century dearth of liturgy eloquent of? Let us try not to rest on our rather battered laurels.

## FURTHER READING

Horton Davies's books on Worship and Theology in England provide a very readable guide to the overall scene. Have only at this moment got before me details of From Watts and Wesley to Maurice 1690 - 1850 (Princeton, 1961) and From Newman to Martineau 1850 - 1900 (Princeton 1962).

As far as Unitarianism is concerned, there are some excellent writings by H. L. Short. His two articles on "Tradition and Renewal in Worship", in the Spring and Summer numbers of Faith and Freedom in 1970 (Volume 23, Part 2, Numbers 68 and 69) will be especially interesting to the general reader. There are also the specialised studies, "From Watts to Martineau: A Century of Unitarian Hymn-Books in England", in Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society, and "From 'First Cause' to 'Indwelling Life': The Influence of American Hymns in English Unitarian Worship in the Nineteenth Century", in the Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society, Vol. X, No. 2, 1952.

Also valuable are A. E. Peaston's The Prayer Book Reform Movement in the XVIIIth Century (Oxford, 1940); and, about non-Unitarian Nonconformity, The Prayer Book Tradition in the Free Churches (London, 1964). There are also, in the Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society his "Nineteenth Century Liturgies" Vol. VII, No. 3, and "The Unitarian Liturgical Tradition" (Vol. XVI, No. 2, 1976).

There is also an interesting discussion of 19th century Unitarian worship in Dennis G. Wigmore-Beddoes, Yesterday's Radicals (Cambridge and London, 1971).

A fairly recent article on liturgy is Jonathan Sinclair Carey's "The Art and Science of Belief - The Nature of Unitarian Liturgy", in Faith and Freedom for Summer, 1978 (Vol. 31, Part 3, Number 93).





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