

Introduction

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When I wrote *The Word in the Desert: Anglican and Roman Catholic Reactions to Liturgical Reform* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1995) some thirty years ago, most of my adult readers (born, let us say, before 1960) would have remembered a time, in either of the Churches, when the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) (whether in its 1662 form, or the 1928 version, retaining Cranmerian English) and what is now known as the ‘Extraordinary Form’ of the Mass in Latin (the Tridentine version of the Roman rite issued in 1570 and variously modified later) were in use in worship.¹ Moreover, those who were then well into middle age, would have had their faith and worshipping experience nurtured by and embedded in those forms, through the formative years of childhood and young adulthood. So, it was not surprising that the replacement of the books, which began to occur in the late 1960s with no substantial input by the laity, caused widespread dismay in the pews. ‘Fifty years ago’, Laszlo Dobszay wrote, in 2010:

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1. ‘The *Novus Ordo* [the “ordinary form”] is actually the form celebrated in the vast majority of churches all over the world [today]; compared to this, the celebration of the traditional rite will be, even after the general permission [by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007, subsequently significantly curtailed by Pope Francis], so rare that it is nearly negligible, and hence “extraordinary.” Also, ‘the Tridentine Rite does not “formally” exist; it is simply one sub-type or use of the Roman Rite’, Laszlo Dobszay, *The Restoration and Organic Development of the Roman Rite*, ed. with a Foreword by Laurence Paul Hemming (London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 61, 8.

a Catholic entering a Catholic church in any part of the world could feel at home because the Latin liturgy he found there was identical to that experienced in his own country. Latin manifests that the liturgy is the worship of the whole Church and not merely of particular or local communities.²

In his assessment, the ‘miserable translations’ subsequently ‘produced in many countries after the [Second Vatican] Council’ are simply ‘unfit’ for use.³ However, it was not only the matter of linguistic change that was agitating people, although that was the principal focus of discontent, but the larger issue of the erosion of the kinds and variety of devotion and the character of the faith that those traditional liturgical experiences (which had been in place for centuries) had developed.

A prominent and telling feature of the reaction against mid-twentieth-century liturgical language reform, from its earliest manifestations, was the protest against it by well-known Christian laity of literary genius, in both Churches. ‘The bugging-up of the Church is a deep sorrow to me’, Roman Catholic convert, the novelist Evelyn Waugh wrote to Nancy Mitford (although, as he died in 1966, he did not live to see the worst of it),⁴ J.R.R. Tolkien, philologist and novelist, a lifelong devout Roman Catholic, hated the *Novus Ordo* Mass so much that he would shout the Latin responses in protest when attending it.⁵ While, in Anglicanism, the English-born poet, W.H. Auden, wrote to his Episcopal parish priest at St Mark’s in-the-Bowery in New York, having abruptly encountered the first of the changes:

2. Ibid., p. 79.

3. Ibid., p. 84.

4. Ian Ker, ‘Waugh the Catholic’, 18 October 2003. Available online at: <https://bridesheadcastle.tumblr.com/post/5463944720/waugh-the-catholic> (accessed 23 February 2023). The timetable of the process, beginning in 1964, culminating in the publication of the *Novus Ordo Missae* in 1970 is set out in Taylor R. Marshall, *Infiltration: The Plot to Destroy the Church from Within* (Manchester, NH: Crisis Publications, 2019), pp. 150-51, and that of a more extensive timetable of liturgical reform, from 1859 to 2007, on pp. 287-89.

5. Brent Klaske, ‘Professor Tolkien Goes to Mass: What the Author and Scholar Saw and that Others Dismissed’, *Angelus Press* [undated]: <https://angeluspress.org/blogs/tradition/professor-tolkien-goes-to-mass-what-the-author-and-scholar-saw-that-others-dismissed> (accessed 12 March 2023).

Dear Father Allen

Have you gone stark raving mad? Aside from its introduction of a lesson and psalm from the O[ld].T[estament]., which seems to me admirable since few people go any more to Mattins or Evensong, the new 'liturgy' is appalling.

Our Church has had the singular good-fortune of having its Prayer-Book composed and its Bible translated at exactly the right time, i.e., late enough for the language to be intelligible to any English-speaking person in this century (any child of six can be told what 'the quick and the dead' means) and early enough, i.e., when people still had an instinctive feeling for the formal and the ceremonious which is essential in liturgical language.

This feeling has been, alas, as we all know, almost totally lost. (To identify the ceremonious with 'the undemocratic' is sheer contemporary cant.) The poor Roman Catholics, obliged to start from scratch, have produced an English Mass which is a cacophonous monstrosity (the German version is quite good, but German has a certain natural sonority): But why should we imitate them?

I implore you by the bowels of Christ to stick to Cranmer and King James. Preaching, of course, is another matter: there the language must be contemporary. But one of the great functions of the liturgy is to keep us in touch with the past and the dead.⁶

Even the reforming pope, Paul VI, in an address at a General Audience in 1969, recognised the truth of this last point in praising the Latin Mass as:

a venerable tradition that has gone on for centuries. This is something that affects our hereditary religious patrimony, which seemed to enjoy the privilege of being untouchable

6. The letter is dated 26 November. (The year is not given, but Auden spent each winter in New York City at 77 St Mark's Place in the East Village, during the 1960s, so we can assume a year at the end of that period, when liturgical changes were getting into their stride. Fr Michael Allen was rector at St Mark's until 1970.) See: <http://jesuitjoe.blogspot.com/2012/05/auden-on-liturgy.html> (accessed 1 November 2023).

and settled. It seemed to bring the prayer of our forefathers and our saints to our lips and to give us the comfort of feeling faithful to our spiritual past, which we kept alive to pass it on to the generations ahead.

Nevertheless, he was well advanced in the process of disposing of it, to the point now, more than two generations on from the Second Vatican Council, where the contemporary vernacular liturgical rites, in the Roman Catholic Church, are normative for the vast majority of its members.

The pope's focus on the character of liturgical language, in particular, tellingly reveals a fundamental misunderstanding, as he poses a question and provides an answer that is, as he recognises himself, 'banal' and 'prosaic':

It is here that the greatest newness is going to be noticed, the newness of language. No longer Latin, but the spoken language will be the principal language of the Mass. The introduction of the vernacular will certainly be a great sacrifice for those who know the beauty, the power and the expressive sacrality of Latin. We are parting with the speech of the Christian centuries; we are becoming like profane intruders in the literary preserve of sacred utterance. We will lose a great part of that stupendous and incomparable artistic and spiritual thing, the Gregorian chant. We have reason indeed for regret, reason almost for bewilderment. What can we put in the place of that language of the angels? We are giving up something of priceless worth. But why? What is more precious than these loftiest of our Church's values? The answer will seem banal, prosaic. Yet it is a good answer, because it is human, because it is apostolic. Understanding of prayer is worth more than the silken garments in which it is royally dressed. Participation by the people is worth more – particularly participation by modern people, so fond of plain language which is easily understood and converted into everyday speech.⁷

7. Pope Paul VI, Address to a General Audience on the new *Ordo Missae*, 26 November 1969. Available online at: https://archive.ccwatershed.org/media/pdfs/13/10/14/09-56-20_0.pdf (accessed 31 July 2023).

This is, in fact, very far from ‘a good answer’. The language of liturgy is not and should never be ‘plain language’ or ‘everyday speech’. As C.S. Lewis noted, in his study of *Paradise Lost* – in the context of acknowledging an analogy with epic poetry – liturgical language ‘must be *familiar* in the sense of being expected. But ... it must not be *familiar* in the sense of being colloquial or commonplace’: ‘What is the point of having a poet, inspired by the Muse, if he tells stories just as you or I would have told them?’ It is the same, he continues, with ‘the language of a liturgy’:

Regular churchgoers are not surprised by the service – indeed, they know a good deal of it by rote; but it is language apart ... something set deliberately apart from daily usage, but wholly familiar within its own sphere.

It is, like ‘epic diction’, a ‘ritual’ language.⁸ Moreover, it is of the nature of such language, paradoxically, that, beyond it, ‘there remains a surplus of the unspoken and unspeakable which calls us to silence’.⁹

When Auden, similarly, identifies ‘the formal and the ceremonious which is essential in liturgical language’ (and numerous other writers at the time and since, also practising Christians, such as the Anglo-Catholic T.S. Eliot, agreed with him in this matter and were similarly outspoken about it), Auden is identifying what we would call the poetic qualities, broadly interpreted, of liturgical language. With regard to the Latin liturgy, Dobszay argues (from a position that would cut next to no ice with liturgical modernisers) that ‘Latin creates, as it were, a protective veil by linguistic means around these most holy mysteries’:

This supposedly ‘dead’ language, unknown to most people and far from everyday parlance, has the capacity to inspire a deeper respect for the mystical reality of the liturgy than their everyday language. ... [A]ncient religions in the course of their long history of transmission all developed

8. C.S. Lewis, *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1942), pp. 21-22. Emphases in original.

9. Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), *A New Song for the Lord* (1995), in Robert Cardinal Sarah, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), p. 127.

for themselves a sacred language that was not identical with everyday parlance.¹⁰

For Auden, as for so many others at the time, whether of literary disposition or not, the matter was simple: ‘liturgical reforms are Hell’.¹¹ The source of this, as Laurence Paul Hemming has pointed out, is ‘the dilemma with *all* liturgical reform – that it subordinates the work of the sacred to merely human intentions and planning, however *well* intentioned, or however highly trained’.¹² The path to Hell is paved with good intentions.

In *The Latin Mass and the Intellectuals: Petitions to Save the Ancient Mass from 1966 to 2007*, published in 2023, Dr Joseph Shaw, president of the Latin Mass Society, details ‘the widespread intellectual opposition and critique of the reform of the ancient Roman liturgy in the wake of the Second Vatican Council’ over four decades, covering a range of responses in the course of that critique: theological, philosophical and aesthetic. The book includes contributions from multiple authors, ranging from priests to professorial academics and musicians, including, in that last group, Anglicans, such as the Australian coloratura soprano, Dame Joan Sutherland, and, amongst the authors, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. There is an irony here: ‘that outsiders (whether artistically or religiously) to the traditional Catholic Faith were able to easily perceive the richness and spiritual value of the ancient liturgy whilst those whose possession it was disregarded it’.¹³

The formidable intellectual critique of the modernisation of the liturgy also expresses a wider concern with the decline of Western civilisation more generally, which writers, such as Eliot, had written

10. Dobszay, *Restoration and Organic Development*, pp. 79, 80.

11. Line from ‘Doggerel by a Senior Citizen, 1969’, which Auden reads here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wezBEBxA6X4&list=RDLVpgAh0wg8T8M&start_radio=1&rv=pgAh0wg8T8M (accessed 22 November 2022).

12. Hemming, ‘Foreword’, in Dobszay, *Restoration and Organic Development*, p. xiv. Emphasis in original.

13. Thomas Colsy, ‘New Latin Mass History Is “a Momentous Work, Exhaustively Referenced and Well Tied-Together”’, *The Catholic Herald*, 23 November 2023, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/new-latin-mass-history-is-a-momentous-work-exhaustively-referenced-and-well-tied-together/> (accessed 23 November, 2023).

about extensively – in his case, in poetry and in prose works, in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1940) and *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948).

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Today, Christianity has been almost totally dismissed from mainstream contemporary culture in Western societies and from any specifically discernible influence on personal behaviour that would indicate informed knowledge and active practice of the faith. The death of God is confidently reported and taken for granted by most. Across local communities in those societies today where churches have not been closed, most are emptying. Christianity, in the West, has reached a crisis point of irrelevance and a demonstrable failure to satisfy identifiable yearnings for spiritual alternatives to the soul-destroying, post-Christian culture of a civilisation in meltdown. Yet:

in the twenty-first century, the appetite for spiritual experience can be witnessed in the welter of meditation retreats, ayahuasca holidays, the multi-billion dollar ‘shroom boom’, the popularity of yoga, tai chi and other mind-body practices, the rise of spiritual communities and centres (Esalen, Findhorn, Damanhur, the Garrison Institute), the spiritual but not religious atmosphere of festivals like Burning Man and of the new breed of activist groups, such as Extinction Rebellion and Occupy.¹⁴

The Christian religion is conspicuous by its absence from this survey. As American author, Mary Eberstadt, observed in 2022, ‘the fact of Western religious decline is nothing new’, but ‘secularisation is now galloping at a pace that even the most prescient observers might not have foreseen’.¹⁵ As Jan Morris noted, in 2020, ‘much of western Europe ... is now almost impenetrably secular. Few of us go to church or chapel, most of us are probably agnostic if not decidedly atheistic,

14. Jake Poller, *Critical Lives: Aldous Huxley* (London: Reaktion Books, 2021), p. 181.

15. ‘American Author Mary Eberstadt Visits Campion’, *Campion’s Brag* 21, no. 4 (Spring, 2022), p. 2.

and the rest are split into infinite sectarian divisions of faith'.¹⁶ In 2022, it was reported that an average of nine churches a day were closing across the United States. A survey of church attendance in America, published in 2010, showed that, while 56 per cent of Americans born before 1928 had been at least weekly attenders, this had halved to 27 per cent in Generation X (born 1965-80) and for Millennials (born 1981 or later) it was further diminished to 18 per cent. Generation Z, those born between 1999 and 2015 are described, in Ken Ham's 2023 lecture to a group of pastors, as 'the first truly "post-Christian" generation'.¹⁷ The recent 2021 Australian Census showed a drastic drop in the number of Australians identifying as Christian, and an increase in those reporting 'no religion': 'conventional religious life is all but dead in Australia'.¹⁸ Only two per cent of Anglicans in the United Kingdom attend church regularly ('the Church of England ... faces total extinction in the 2060s if it doesn't turn around its decline'¹⁹). In the decade 2010 to 2020, the number of members of the Church of England attending its services halved from just over a million to around 600,000.

In the wake of the supposed renewal of the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council, some 460 million of the laity are estimated to have abandoned the faith (including one in three men who were baptised Roman Catholic²⁰ – pertinent to the issue of

16. Jan Morris, 'On Kindness', in Jan Morris, *Allegorizings* (London: Faber & Faber, 2022), p. 203.

17. Ken Ham, 'Why Gen Z Is MUCH Different from Previous Generations': <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SFmICars4Sg&t=309s> (accessed 5 March 2023). 'Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z', *Barna*, 24 January 2018. Available online at: <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/> (accessed 5 March 2023).

18. Christopher Jolliffe, 'The Ashes of Our Fathers and the Temple of Our God', *Quadrant* (January-February 2024), p. 34.

19. Rod Dreher, 'UK Christianity Out with a Whimper', *The American Conservative*, 16 February 2023. Available online at: <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/uk-christianity-out-with-a-whimper/> (accessed 18 February 2023).

20. 'Dressing Like a Man for Mass', 28 April 2015: <https://catholicgentleman.com/2015/04/dressing-like-a-man-for-mass/> (accessed 20 March 2023): '49% of Catholic men are bored in the Mass and 55% of Catholic men don't believe they "get anything out of the Mass"'.