

---

**Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England**

Timothy Rosendale

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 237 p.

---

Was the English Reformation a religious process or a political event? Was reform of the Church forcibly imposed from above or did it percolate upwards from below? Did the consent of individual subjects signify acceptance or was centralized authority the ultimately decisive factor? And was the process swift or slow? Historians of the Reformation have debated these questions heatedly for decades. G. R. Elton and M. Aston are for swift from above. A. G. Dickens, C. Cross, and D. MacCulloch argue for swift from below. P. Collinson maintains slow from below while J. Scarisbrick, C. Haigh and E. Duffy insist upon slow to very slow (and never popular) from above. For a long time the interpretation of the English Reformation has been dominated by a seemingly "zero-sum" struggle between the lingering influence of Whig historiography and its revisionist critics, with the latter in recent years tending to dominate the field. Some continue to portray the Reformation as religiously and politically progressive while others defend the late-medieval church as vital and widely popular. The singular merit of Timothy Rosendale's incisive study of the crucial position of the *Book of Common Prayer* in the cultural life of early-modern England is to cut through this historiographical conundrum of "either-or," and to propose in its place an innovative and highly persuasive attempt at a dialectical synthesis of these troublesome contraries.

The central claim of Rosendale's *Liturgy and Literature in the Making of Protestant England* is breath-taking in its minimalism: "English history from the mid-sixteenth through the late-seventeenth centuries centres on the *Book of Common Prayer*" (25). By any measure this is a most remarkable proposal, and the argument put forward in its favour is at once brilliant, erudite and persuasive. According to Rosendale, the English Reformation was "simultaneously a vertical and coercive exercise of state power and a horizontal distribution of political and religious authority" (3) which must be viewed as both "top-down" and "bottom-up." Religious reform subjected the English people to new, highly centralized, and hierarchical structures of authority and, at the same time, acknowledged these same subjects as autonomous. Rosendale offers the "Oath of Supremacy" as an instance of dialectical synthesis in the expansion of coercive power over individual subjects and the simultaneous validation of individual autonomy over against such power. In administering the oath (e.g., to More and Fisher) the state required universal submission by individuals to the constituted authority of the realm; yet to demand such an oath also contained the even more radical implication that the consent of the individual subject to the established order itself signified. A critical consequence of Reformation was that the spheres of the private and the public came to be much more sharply defined over against each other, and at the same time more tightly bound together. For Rosendale the *Book of Common Prayer*, a long-neglected locus of literary study, provides an invaluable hermeneutical key to understanding this subtle negotiation of the opposed claims of collective and individual identities. "The BCP helped England to navigate the cultural crisis of the Reformation by enfranchising the evangelical subject, and by establishing a permanent dialectic in which the authority, and thus the identity, of nation and individual are mutually constituting (19)." The paradoxical tension between a radically inward Protestant subjectivity on the one hand, and the absolutist, centralizing hierarchical order of the early-modern nation on the other, is worked out "hermeneutically" and "synthesized" in the liturgy of the Prayerbook. A key methodological premise here is that religion constitutes the "foundational matrix and primary language" of early modernity. Or, as Brian Cummings recently asserted, "without reference to religion, the study of early modern writing is incomprehensible." Rosendale's book renders this judgment all the more convincing.

The first half (chapters 1 and 2) of Rosendale's study addresses the Prayerbook from the two standpoints of defining England's common national identity and the identity of individual subjects. The second half (chapters 3 and 4) explores conflicts between church and state, individuals and political order, authority and interpretation, in relation to two literary pairings, namely Sidney and Shakespeare, Milton and Hobbes. Sidney and Milton exemplify the working out of the individualizing implications of Protestantism, while Shakespeare and Hobbes represent the attempt to define communal identity and authority. All four are shown to be profoundly indebted in one way or another to the hermeneutic embodied in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Against the central revisionist thesis that the evangelical logic of Protestantism was intrinsically fragmenting, that the Reformation in effect destroyed England's traditional sense of cohesion and communal order, Rosendale argues that the BCP was the foundation of a very potent collective religious identity, and that the new liturgy was the "textual interface" which shaped and controlled

the subject's experience of that order. In place of the multiple and varied liturgical "uses of Salisbury, Hereford, Bangor, York, and Lincoln," there was to be but one homogeneous use for the whole realm, to be used by all individuals of the realm. The Preface to the BCP associates diversity with the old religion, uniformity and national cohesion with the new. The new uniformity, moreover, is in the vernacular, thus no longer dividing the learned from the lay. Over against the opacity and concealment of Latin usage, vernacularism with its emphasis on accessibility and comprehensibility serves to consolidate a common religious identity. The nation itself is constituted as one by regular, common and uniform "textual engagement" (i.e., worship and reading the scriptures). As Rosendale points out, "the only regular and nationally uniform experience of the English language until the advent of radio was the BCP and the English bible." In short the BCP defines England as distinct and autonomous politically, religiously and linguistically. As Hooker put it in his defence of the commonality of prayer, "the service which we doe as members of a publique bodie, is publique, and for that cause must needs be accompted by so much worthier then the other, as a whole societie of such condition exceedeth the worth of anie one of its members" (*Lawes* V.24). Yet, at the same time, through its evangelical doctrine the BCP reinforces the immediacy of the relationship between the soul and God, and thus actively upholds the private sphere of individual subjective identity.

For Rosendale, the differing logics of Catholic and Protestant worship are most clearly manifest in their distinct accounts of sacramental theology. Whereas the doctrine of the Mass and transubstantiation tended to collapse the distinction between signifier and signified in their assertion of an objectified "real presence," the BCP liturgy reasserts (in Augustinian fashion) a sharp distinction between the two. According to John Jewel's critique of transubstantiation in his "Challenge Sermon" of 1559, "first we put a difference between the sign and the thing itself that is signified." This distinction between a literal and figurative interpretation of sacramental "presence" is of crucial significance for the emergence of a distinctively Protestant hermeneutics. The liturgy of the revised BCP of 1552 very decisively shifts the focus of "presence" away from the elements of the sacrament ("Hoc est corpus meum" in the old rite), and transfers it to the inner, subjective experience of the worshipper ("Take and eat this in remembrance ... feed on him in thy heart, by faith, with thanksgiving.") Consequently, "presence" is interpreted in the BCP as a "figural," a conceptual synthesis of word and elements performed in the subjective forum of the minds of worshippers, and thus inseparable from reception of the host. (It is interesting in this connection to note that in the BCP of 1552, as well as in the subsequent revisions of 1559 and 1662, the administration of the communion occurs at precisely the stage in the liturgy at which the elevation of the host had previously occurred—i.e., the moment of transubstantiation—thus serving to underline vividly the difference between the two divergent liturgical accounts of presence.) The chasm between sign and signified is thus bridged not in an external theurgical act, but rather in an inner subjective act of remembrance. As Rosendale points out, "the internalization of this figural sacrament is thus a necessarily interpretative act; though it takes place in a communal context, it ultimately requires a highly individual mode of understanding the elements as metaphors whose effectuality is dependent on faithful personal reading" (96). Careful students of the history of the *Book of Common Prayer* will no doubt be aware that the Elizabethan

revision of 1559 altered the strictly Zwinglian memorialist words of administration of 1552 by combining the words "This is my body ..." with "Do this in remembrance of me." Rather than taking the usual line that this move represents a *via media* muddle, Rosendale portrays the 1559 revision as even more radical than its 1552 predecessor. While it is certainly the case that assertion of the "figural sense" of the Eucharist, and hence of the distinction between signifier and signified, is a key concern of the Protestant reformers—and thus one might well be tempted to regard the strict memorialism of 1552 as setting the benchmark of the high reformed position—in his distinctive and highly original reading, Rosendale argues that 1559 emphasizes even more strongly the importance of the role of the individual subject in interpreting the meaning of the sacrament. By defusing the clarity of 1552, the Elizabethan compromise on the words of administration serves to extend even further the latitude of the worshipper's hermeneutical responsibility. The hermeneutic is all! "The BCP in both form and content holds in tension two radically different discourses, out of which it endeavours to construct a productive textual synthesis. It discursively constructs the Christian nation characterized centrally by order even as it elevates individual discretion over that order. Its theology simultaneously legitimates and undermines its political discourse of autonomous hierarchical authority... The BCP officially instituted the individual as a primary component of religion, without abrogating the normative claims of the hierarchical socio-politico-ecclesiastical order that had traditionally been the sole determinant of religious affairs" (111).

For Rosendale, the Prayerbook's deliberate use of "figural representation" combined with the demand that all individual worshippers read the Scriptures critically—"hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest" as Cranmer's Advent Collect has it—served to effect nothing less than "the literary flowering of the English Renaissance." Rosendale aims to trace a deeper and broader route of cultural consequence from Reformation to Renaissance, from liturgy and theology to literary theory and practice. Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* and Shakespeare's history plays embody the hermeneutical revolution blazed by the BCP. Thus, both the sacrament as interpreted by Cranmer's liturgy and the Sidneian poetic require the hermeneutic of "figural understanding" as a decisive means of bridging the gap between sign and signified. Without the Prayerbook's recasting of semiotics, the flowering of the English Renaissance may very well not have come to pass. By means of the order of worship according to the rites and ceremonies of the BCP, the English Reformation substituted belief in the power of representations and their interpretation to define the human relation to the divine in place of belief in the immanent externalized sacramental presence of God in the Host. The grand terms of reference for 17th-century discourse on the balance between the competing claims of hierarchical order and individual autonomy are worked out with significant reference to the BCP. Yet the BCP shows itself unable to contain this conflict. The Civil War itself is defined in terms of two parties with diametrically opposed positions on the form of public prayer. For Hobbes, the problem was not the accessibility of the vernacular Bible, but rather the multiplication of interpreters and the threat to the common order this multiplication implied. Milton, on the other hand, denounces liturgy itself as inherently "evil." In these two representatives and in of the conflict of civil war Rosendale presents the collapse of the dialectical synthesis of individual and order.

There is a very small but, hermeneutically considered, very significant typographical error to which I must draw attention (if only to underscore Dr Rosendale's point concerning the enormous interpretative weight of liturgical language). In the Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper in the BCP, prayers are offered for the king's council "and all that *he* put in auctoritie under him"—the word "he" should in fact read "be." While just a small error of transcription (which occurs twice on p. 51) it nonetheless carries enormous (proto-Hobbesian?) significance. Cranmer's use of "be" instead of "he" suggests that it is not the sovereign's will that sets those in authority under him, but rather draws attention to the ontological givenness of their hierarchical subordination—"all that *be* put in auctoritie"—it is not that the king who puts them there, but that they *are* there in the divinely given order of things, duly subordinated to their sovereign.

That liturgy and, through its hermeneutical influence, literature had an influence on the making of Protestant England there can be no doubt. Rosendale makes a compelling case in this excellent and highly discerning monograph.

Torrance Kirby  
McGill University

---

### **What Have They Done to the Bible?: A History of Modern Biblical Interpretation**

John Sandys-Wunsch  
Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005. xx + 378 p.

---

*What Have They Done to the Bible?: A History of Modern Biblical Interpretation* is author John Sandys-Wunsch's ambitious attempt to explain the transformation that occurred within biblical exegesis during the modern period. Sandys-Wunsch divides his text into seven chapters and a short epilogue of personal reflection. After an opening chapter aimed at orienting a largely introductory audience to the field of biblical exegesis, Sandys-Wunsch proceeds to consider first, the broader historical, social and intellectual context, and second, specific developments in biblical interpretation, within six separate periods of history, roughly between the years 1450–1900.

In chapters 2 and 3, Sandys-Wunsch examines the state of biblical interpretation during the Renaissance (1450–1600), and the Baroque period (1600–60). He concludes that during this time, biblical exegetes concerned themselves primarily with the tasks of lower-criticism, such as advances in philology, comparing and removing errors from manuscripts, and the production of more accurate translations. Next, in chapters 4, 5, and 6, he explains that it was not until the early Enlightenment period (1660–1700) with figures like B. Spinoza and J. Le Clerc, and more importantly in the eighteenth century, with thinkers such as H. S. Reimarus, J. S. Semler, G. E. Lessing, J. G. Herder, and J. G. Eichhorn, that the façade of biblical authority began to collapse under the weight of primarily, German higher-criticism. Sandys-Wunsch goes to great lengths to illustrate that during the 18th century, the rising prominence of history and reason as arbiters of truth began to seriously challenge the privileged place that the Bible previously held, not only among Biblical scholars, but also within the wider sphere of Western European civilization.