

Comments by J. Chester Johnson delivered at Cornelia Street Café on Sunday, June 26th, 2016:

A Word About Auden And The Book of Common Prayer

But for the work of Professor Edward Mendelson, literary executor and principal biographer for W. H. Auden, little is acknowledged or examined in most literary circles about Auden's intellectual and emotional engagement and participation during the late 1960's and early 1970s in the retranslation of the Psalms for **The Book of Common Prayer** of The Episcopal Church and, more broadly, at the same time, Auden's opposition to the general revisions that occurred by The Episcopal Church to **The Book of Common Prayer**, as a whole. There are numerous reasons this lack of observance has been the case, but Auden's attention to each of these two developments in the last phase, the dusk of his life has relevance to a balanced view of his career. I hope and trust that at least a small correction to this oversight will result from the publication of my book, **Auden, The Psalms And Me**, due out in October, 2017. In order to contrast properly his two perspectives, it is essential to look at these two developments within The Episcopal Church separately as far as Auden is concerned.

For instance, Auden had accepted that the retranslation of the Psalms for the prayer-book was necessary; as a scholar, he realized that more complete knowledge of these ancient poems that had been gained over several centuries required adjustment to the Psalms included in the prayer-book since there were many mistakes in the 1540 Great Bible of Myles Coverdale, which had served as the version of the Psalms associated with **The Book of Common Prayer** of 1549 – with virtually no subsequent revision to them at all until The Episcopal Church launched its retranslation during the late 1960s. However, for the overall project of full prayer-book revision, Auden had a different opinion: he would oppose it as an attack upon Elizabethan English.

By 1967, W. H. Auden knew that plans were afoot to revise his beloved prayer-book by The Episcopal Church, the American branch of the Anglican Communion and the Anglican Church for which he had been a choirboy in England and had deep family connections – with both of his grandfathers being Anglican priests. When he was chosen to deliver the inaugural, commemorative T. S. Eliot lecture in the fall of 1967 at the University of Kent in Canterbury, it was not coincidental that Auden decided a principal subject should be “The Martyr As Dramatic Hero,” utilizing the play by Charles Williams entitled “Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury” – Cranmer being the person who had originally compiled **The Book of Common Prayer**. Auden declares in his lecture, “Cranmer was a priest and an artist, and like all artistic priests, then and today, he overestimated the spiritual importance of liturgical reform.” Additionally, Auden suggests that Cranmer and those like him typically underestimate congregational resistance to liturgical changes.

Upon his return to New York City following his Canterbury address, which later would become part of his book, **Secondary Worlds**, Auden was soon met on a Sunday morning at St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, his home parish, with a new trial liturgy. After the service, he shoots off a smoking letter to the officiating priest, saying he, Auden, found the liturgy “appalling.” He also writes, “I implore you by the bowels of Christ to stick to Cranmer and King James.” After his letter shortly finds its way to the national church, he is invited to serve as poet on the drafting committee for the retranslation of the Psalms, part of the overall revision project to **The Book of Common Prayer**. Within hours of the invitation, Auden accepts the position, emphasizing that he would serve in any position of the Standing

Liturgical Commission, that body which was in charge of the revision of the prayer-book, but he had never been offered a position on the Standing Liturgical Commission, leaving one to conclude that this personal request reflected Auden's earnest enthusiasm to impede the foolishness he believed was occurring within The Episcopal Church for prayer-book revision. The drafting committee for the Psalms consisted of five Old Testament scholars with expertise in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, a musicologist and a poet.

I joined the committee in early 1971 to replace W. H. Auden, who had, at that point, announced he would be returning permanently to England, which he did in 1972. He and I had several written communications over this interim period. Auden died in September, 1973, but his mark is upon a multiple number of the Psalms, though the work of the committee continued for years after he left until the new version produced by the committee became part of the revised prayer-book of 1979, which continues. Indeed, our version of the Psalms was then later adopted by Lutherans in the USA and Canada and by the Anglican Church of Canada. Our Psalms also became the preferred (now permitted) retranslation for the Church of England until the COE produced its own revision in 2000.

In July, 1971, I received a letter from W. H. Auden, postmarked from his summer home in Austria. This letter would be his valediction from the work of the committee, but beyond being the last communication with the committee Auden would have on the retranslation of the Psalms, the letter focuses much more on his reservations about the overall revisions to the prayer-book. While some references will sound a little like "inside baseball," the language really is vintage Auden, including the class and touch of humor. Here it is. He makes a reference to the Rite for which he means the Eucharist, communion, the mass.

Ju y 6th, 1971

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Dear Mr Johnson:

Thank you for your letter. What has happened over the last few years has made me realise that those who rioted when Cranmer introduced a vernacular liturgy were right. When this reform nonsense started, what we should have done is the exact opposite of the Roman Catholics: we should have said "Henceforth, we will have the Book of Common Prayer in Latin." (There happens to be an excellent translation.)

In my view, the Rite - preaching, of course, is another matter - is the link between the dead and the unborn. This calls for a timeless language which, in practice, means a dead language.

My own ~~own~~ parish church has gone so crazy that I have to go to the Russian Orthodox church where, thank God, though I know what is going on, I don't understand a single word.

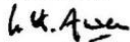
The odd thing about the Liturgical Reform movement is that, it is not asked for by the laity - they dislike it - it is a fad of a few crazy priests. If they imagine that their high-jinks will bring youth into the churches, they are very much mistaken.

As for the Psalms, they are poems, and to 'get' poetry, it should, of course, be read in the language in which it was written. I myself, alas, know no Hebrew. All I know is that Coverdale reads like poetry, and the modern versions don't.

Lastly, I don't believe there is such an animal as Twentieth Century Man.

with best wishes

Yours sincerely



W.H. Auden

Let's give Auden the last word here - his valedictory moment.