

LUTHER'S OTHER MAJOR LITURGICAL REFORMS: I. THE DIVINE OFFICE, AND THE GERMAN LITANY AND 'LATIN LITANY CORRECTED'

The Divine Office

Both the origin and subsequent development of the Divine Office remain complex subjects. For example, the number of 'hours' comprising the Office vary greatly, the Chaldean Church having only four, whereas one example in the Mozarabic rite has twenty-four.¹ Again, the precise forms of the Office also vary.

In the mediaeval Western rite known to the Reformers, the Divine Office for the clergy comprised eight services – Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline. Of these, Matins, Lauds and Vespers seem to have derived from public services, or the 'Cathedral' Office, Matins being the Vigil service, and Lauds and Vespers being developed from the Synagogue Liturgy.² The Vigil service was probably not a regular Office, and it is by no means certain whether or not Lauds and Vespers were daily services. The 'Lesser' hours would appear to have been of a more private character, based upon the recitation of the psalter, and they were certainly developed and shaped by the monastic movement. However, private prayer at the third, sixth and ninth hours seems to have been an accepted practice in the early church, and the custom may have been apostolic.³ Prime and Compline would seem to have been monastic additions to round off the divisions of the day, though if the evidence of *Apostolic Tradition* is to be taken at face value, Compline may have an earlier origin.⁴

In the West the Divine Office was contained in the *Breviary*, and its form may be traced from that described in the Rule of St. Benedict, the musical additions by Gregory the Great, the modernization by the Papal Curia, and the Franciscan reform of Haymo of Faversham.⁵ During these stages of development, the Office was abbreviated to facilitate the daily recitation by both the Religious and the Secular clergy, but it was also expanded with various prayers, versicles and responses.

Matins was a considerably lengthy service, including a course of bible reading based on Nocturns, or units of psalms. The psalms were worked through in course as far as Psalm 109 every week. The *Venite* and, on festivals, the *Te Deum*, were sung.

Lauds, which followed immediately after Matins, always contained

Psalms 148 to 150, and consisted of psalms, *Benedicite*, a *Capitulum* (short scripture reading), *Benedictus* and Collect(s),

Vespers covered Psalms 110 to 147, excluding Psalm 119, said over the week, together with a *Capitulum*, hymns, *Magnificat* and Collect(s).

The 'Lesser' hours were concerned with the daily recitation of Psalm 119:33-end, with a *Capitulum* and responsary. As well as psalms, hymns, *Capitulum* and responsory, Prime included *Quicumque vult*, and Compline *Nunc dimittis*.

The weekly recitation of the Divine Office had been practically destroyed by the Propers for feasts and Saints days: as the Preface to the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer* complained,

the nombre and hardnes of the rules called the pie, and the manifold chaunginges of the service, was the cause, y^t to turne the boke onelye, was so hard and intricate a matter, that many times, there was more business to fynd out what should be read, then to read it when it was founde out.⁶

For Luther's reform of the Divine Office we have four principal sources:⁷

- (1) *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, January 1523.
- (2) *The Formula Missae*, December 1523.
- (3) *The Deutsche Messe*, early 1526.
- (4) *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors in Electoral Saxony*, 1528; drawn up by Melanchthon with Luther's guidance and co-operation.

As an Augustinian friar and a priest, Luther was well acquainted with the Divine Office; yet this familiarity seems to have given the Wittenberg Reformer very little insight into its origin, and nor did it provide him with a clear course for its reform.

Luther regarded the Divine Office as being of great antiquity; in *Concerning the Order of Public Worship* he expressed the opinion that

The service now in common use everywhere goes back to genuine Christian beginnings, as does the office of preaching.

But at a later date this could be qualified:

In the time after the apostles the bishops with great diligence instituted the morning and evening prayers which are called matins and compline.⁸

Clearly, then, the Divine Office was not 'apostolic'. The reference to Compline being the core of the Office with Matins is an anachronism; from his suggested reforms it is quite clear that Luther regarded Matins and Vespers as the core.

Despite the antiquity of the Divine Office, abuses had crept in:

Three serious abuses have crept into the service. First, God's Word has been silenced, and only reading and singing remain in the churches. This is the worst abuse. Second, when God's Word has been silenced such a host of un-Christian fables and lies, in legends, hymns, and sermons were introduced that it is horrible to see. Third, such divine service was performed as a work whereby God's grace and salvation might be won. As a result, faith disappeared and everyone pressed to enter the priesthood, convents, and monasteries, and to build churches and endow them.⁹

Luther also hinted that the 'Lesser' hours might be regarded as a corruption; referring explicitly to morning and evening prayers he complained:

But later, abuse corrupted this custom; later came the monks, who do not pray but only babble prayers.¹⁰

Certainly the chore of daily recitation of the Office did not impress the Reformer; 'To read the Hours is nothing'.¹¹

Whatever may be the judgement of the contemporary liturgists upon his suggestions for reform, Luther himself regarded them as a 'restoration'. The office of preaching may have been corrupted, but

As we do not on that account abolish the office of preaching, but aim to restore it again to its right and proper place, so it is not our intention to do away with the service, but to restore it again to its rightful use.¹²

The overriding concern was to restore to the Office the Word:

Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word. Again, we profit by nothing as much as by the Word. For the whole Scripture shows that the Word should have free course among Christians. And in Luke 10:42, Christ himself says 'One thing is needful', i.e. that Mary sit at the feet of Christ and hear his word daily. This is the best part to choose and it shall not be taken away forever. It is an eternal Word. Everything else must pass away, no matter how much care and trouble it may give Martha. God help us achieve this. Amen.¹³

In practice, this entailed the restoration of reading and preaching, which, as the recommendations of the *Formula Missae* indicate, Luther regarded as having fallen out of the Divine Office.

Daily lessons must therefore be appointed, one in the morning from the New or Old Testament, another for Vespers from the other Testament with an exposition in the vernacular. That this rite

is an ancient one is proven by both the custom itself and by the words *homilia* in Matins and *capitulum* in Vespers and in the other hours, namely, that the Christians as often as they gathered together read something and then had it interpreted in the vernacular in the manner Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 14: 26-27. But when evil times came and there was a lack of prophets and interpreters, all that was left, after the lessons and *capitula* was the response, 'Thanks be to God'. And then, in place of the interpretation, lessons, Psalms, hymns, and other things were added in boring repetition. Although the hymns and the *Te Deum laudamus* at least confirm the same thing as the *Deo gratias*, namely, that after the exposition and homilies they used to praise God and give thanks for the revealed truth of his words.

Thus according to Luther, the Divine Office in embryonic form underlies Paul's words in 1 Cor. 14:26-31 – prophesying, teaching, and admonition. Luther believed 'speaking in tongues' in this context referred to the Latin lections which were then translated and explained, that is, teaching and admonition.¹⁴

Luther's earliest proposals for the reform of the Divine Office were addressed to the congregation at Leisnig in Saxony. Karlstadt had abolished daily mass, but had not filled the gap which this abolition left. In *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*, Luther provided suggestions for daily Matins and Vespers with scripture reading and explanation which would duly fill the gap. Daily Matins was to consist of the following:

- Lesson from the Old Testament.
- Exposition.
- Psalms, and
- Selected responsories and antiphons.
- Collect.

The whole service was to last about an hour. A similar structure was suggested for Vespers.

- Lesson from the Old or New Testaments.
- Interpreting.
- Praising.
- Singing.
- Praying.

The Pastor was to select psalms for the daily services. All festivals of saints – with the exception of the feasts of Purification, Annunciation, Assumption and Nativity of the Virgin Mary, St. John the Baptist and St. Paul – with their legends were to be abolished. On Sundays, however, the principal services were to be the Mass and Vespers, 'sung, as has been customary'.

Towards the end of 1523 Luther issued his *Formula Missae*. Although mainly concerned with the order of the Mass, it also contained suggestions for the reform of the Divine Office. Daily Mass was to be abolished, but the Office could remain.

For Matins with its three lessons, the hours, Vespers, and Compline *de tempore* consist – with the exception of the propers for the Saint's days – of nothing but divine words of Scripture.

If anything was to be changed, the Bishop (Pastor) might reduce the psalms to three at Matins and Vespers, and the responsaries to one or two. Daily lessons from the Old and New Testaments with an exposition were to be appointed. Luther also wanted some vernacular songs.

It would appear that here the eight Offices were to be retained, and changes were optional; no precise order for the Office was specified.

In his *Deutsche Messe* Luther was far more specific. The only Offices mentioned were Matins and Vespers; if the other Offices were retained, they were certainly not regarded as Public Worship, and therefore received no mention.

On Sundays and Holy Days, Matins consisted of the following:

Psalms.
 Sermon on the Epistle of the Day.
 Antiphon.
Te Deum and *Benedictus* (Alternately).
 Lord's Prayer.
 Collects.
Benedicamus Domino.

For Sunday Vespers the traditional order would seem to have been envisaged, for Luther only specifies a sermon on the Old Testament before the *Magnificat*.

On weekdays the Office was especially designed for the youth. Matins was to consist of:

Psalms.
 New Testament chapter in Latin.
 The same chapter in German.
 Antiphon.
 German lesson: Monday and Tuesday, the Ten commandments, Creed, Lord's Prayer, baptism, and sacrament, i.e. Catechism.
 Wednesday, St. Matthew.
 Thursday and Friday, the rest of the New Testament.
 German hymn.
 Lord's Prayer (silently).

Collect.

Benedicamus Domino.

At weekday Vespers Luther gave the following outline:

A few of the Vesper psalms in Latin, with an Antiphon.

Hymn.

Chapter (or half chapter) of an Old Testament Lesson, in Latin. The same Lesson in German.

Magnificat in Latin.

Antiphon or hymn.

Lord's Prayer (silently).

Collects.

Benedicamus Domino.

At some point in Vespers there was a 'German Lesson', or instruction, for St. John's Gospel was appointed for Saturday afternoons.

Luther concluded this particular section with the words, 'This is the daily service throughout the week in cities where there are schools'. This daily Office was concerned to instruct the youth in the Bible, and to make sure that they were still acquainted with Latin. A German translation of the scripture reading was given 'for the benefit of any layman who might be present and listening', suggesting that these reforms of the Office were primarily concerned to provide 'Youth Services' of a didactic nature.

In 1528 Melanchthon drew up the *Instructions for the Visitors of Parish Pastors* in Electoral Saxony, though in fact Luther was its instigator and had co-operated with Melanchthon in its formulation. It is worth while, therefore, to compare the directions for Daily worship with the previous suggestions of Luther. For Matins, the following was suggested:

- (1) Three Latin or German psalms may be sung.
- (2) When there is no sermon, a reading from, for example, Matthew, Luke, 1 John, 1 and 2 Peter, James, some of the epistles of Paul, as well as 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, Ephesians and Colossians.
- (3) An exhortation to pray the Lord's Prayer for some common need appropriate at the time.
- (4) A German hymn.
- (5) Collect.

Vespers had a similar outline:

- (1) Three evening hymns in Latin, for the sake of the youth.
- (2) Simple Antiphons, hymns and responses.
- (3) A Lesson in German from Genesis, Judges or Kings.

- (4) *Magnificat* or *Te Deum*, *Benedictus*, *Quincunque vult*, or simple *preces*.
- (5) German hymn.
- (6) Collect.

From the suggestions regarding the Divine Office found in these four sources, it becomes apparent that Luther had no overall detailed plan of reform; it was far from his intention to impose a *Breviarium Lutheranum*.

In the *Formula Missae* the 'hours' seem to have been retained, for there they were described as 'nothing but divine words of Scripture'. The silence of the *Deutsche Messe* and the *Instructions* for Saxony on these services suggest that they were falling into disuse and needed no comment; they were certainly not regarded as Public Worship.

Sunday Matins and Vespers were retained, and Luther was keen to provide suggestions for Daily Matins and Vespers. German hymns may be sung to encourage congregational participation. The Canticles were retained, and in the *Instructions* for Saxony, Luther could recommend traditional morning Canticles for Vespers. However, the main innovation was the didactic element, the reading and exposition of scripture. The main purpose of the Daily Office appears to be for the instruction of the youth; praise to God is overshadowed by a concern for teaching.

The lack of systematic reform and of full details for the order of each Office is indeed unsatisfactory. But it may be that the key to Luther's vague directions of the Office is to be found in his strange exegesis of 1 Cor. 14:26-31. Providing that 'prophesying, teaching and admonition' were the centre of the service, its precise form appears to have been of little consequence to the Reformer.

The German Litany and the Latin Litany Corrected

The earliest evidence for litanies is found in the eighth book of *Apostolic Constitutions*, and in allusions by St. John Chrysostom, both pointing to an Antiochene origin. The Litany consisted of biddings recited by a deacon and formed part of the Eucharistic liturgy, corresponding to the solemn prayers mentioned by Justin Martyr. At some stage litanies became detached from the Eucharist, and came to be used in times of penitence and in processions.

The medieval Western Litany known to Luther, the Litany of Saints, was derived from a Greek Litany introduced by Sergius I.¹⁵ In its developed form it consisted of invocations for mercy and deliverance addressed to the three Persons of the Trinity, and for intercession to the Blessed Virgin Mary and a list of prophets, patriarchs, angels, apostles, saints, confessors and virgins individually

and in classes. It included the recitation of Psalm 70, *Deus in adjutorium*, versicles and responses, and collects. The list of saints varied locally.

The Litany seems to have fallen into disuse both on account of its contents, and because Luther disapproved of the processions at which it was used; both the glorification of saints and processions were condemned in his *Address to the Nobility* in 1520. However, the threat of the Turks prompted Luther to reconsider its liturgical merits; in *On War Against the Turks*, 1528, Luther wrote:

Therefore I would advise against processions, which are a heathenish and useless practice, for they are more pomp and show than prayer. I say the same thing about celebrating a lot of masses and calling upon the saints. It might, indeed, be of some use to have the people, especially the young people, sing the Litany at mass or vespers or in the church after the sermon, providing that everyone, even at home by himself, constantly raised to Christ at least a sigh of the heart for grace to lead a better life and for help against the Turk.

But clearly it would not be the traditional Litany of Saints, which in 1530, in *Exhortation to all clergy Assembled at Augsburg*, he listed as a mark of the 'pretended church'. In order to implement his suggestion, Luther had to revise the traditional Litany. On 13 February 1529 he could report to Nicolas Hausmann:

We sing the Litany both in Latin and German here. Perhaps a printed form may soon be issued.¹⁶

Shortly after this the German Litany with music appeared, followed by the Latin Litany Corrected, though the test of the latter was probably completed first.

Luther's Litanies of 1529 have been the subject of a detailed study by P. Drews.¹⁷ By placing the texts in parallel, Drews illustrated that Luther used the Litany of Saints, drawing upon the version of his own order, the Augustine Hermits, and the version in general use in Magdeburg.¹⁸ The reforms he made may be summarized.

1. The omission of the invocations of the saints, and intercession for the Pope and the departed.
2. The Psalm was omitted.
3. Twenty-four suffrages were added.
4. A new series of collects, with versicles and responses drawn from the *preces* of the psalm were added.
5. The music was simplified.

The two Litanies are almost identical. The differences are as follows:

1. The Latin Litany Corrected has six more obscenities than the German.
2. The versicles and responses and collects are not in the same sequence, and whereas the German Litany had four collects, later editions of the Latin Litany Corrected had five; the Latin version also included the Lord's Prayer.
3. The music of the Latin Litany Corrected was adapted from the traditional chant; the music for the German Litany appears to be Luther's own composition.

Since in the process of revision a large part of the medieval Litany was omitted, it might appear that we have here another instance of the alleged 'pruning knife'. In fact the main omissions were the invocations of the saints, and intercession for the Pope and the departed. With regard to the invocation of the saints, Luther was quite adamant; in his work *On Translating: An Open Letter*, 1530, he wrote:

In the first place you know that under the papacy it is not only taught that the saints in heaven intercede for us – though we cannot know this, since the Scriptures tell us no such thing – but the saints have also been made gods, so that they have to be our patrons, on whom we are to call – some of whom never even existed.

. . . you know that there is not a single word of God commanding us to call on either angels or saints to intercede for us, and we have no example of it in the Scriptures. For we find that angels spoke with the fathers and the prophets, but none was ever asked to intercede for them. Even the patriarch Jacob did not ask the angel with whom he wrestled for any intercession, but merely took from him the blessing (Gen. 32:24-29). Actually we find in the Apocalypse the very opposite: the angel would not allow himself to be worshipped by John (Rev. 22:9). Thus the worship of saints shows itself to be nothing but human twaddle, man's own invention apart from the word of God and the Scriptures.

A very similar view is expressed in his Table Talk.¹⁹

The same argument applied regarding the Virgin Mary; although Luther would allow the use of the *Ave Maria* to 'Laud and love her simply as the one who, without merit, obtained such blessings from God, sheerly out of his mercy, as she herself testifies in the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)',²⁰ he would allow her no veneration.

The exclusion of the Pope needs little explanation:

he is the 'man of lawlessness and the son of perdition' (II Thess. 2:3), because he has imprisoned consciences and forced them to sanction his injustice, thus filling the world with sin and destruction.²¹

And petition for the dead could be of no more avail than masses for the dead.

Any omissions must be balanced by the additional suffrages, for deliverance from war and bloodshed, and for the Church, its ministers and its unity. If there has been a pruning knife at work, it was the sharp blade of the Gospel as Luther understood it; and some grafting has also taken place. There is no reason for dissenting from Reed's estimation of Luther's work on the Litany:

Both in criticism and new construction, he displayed a marvellous grasp of the spirit of this ancient church prayer. His version is not only evangelical but churchly and never sentimental.²²

NOTES

1. J. Mateos, 'L'Office divin chez les Chaldéens', in *La Prière des Heures*, ed. B. Botte and Mgr Cassien (Lex Orandi 35), Paris 1963, pp. 253-81; W. C. Bishop, 'The Breviary in Spain', in *The Mozarabic and Ambrosian Rites*, 1924, pp. 62-5.
2. C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office*, 1964 (Second Edition).
3. J. H. Walker, 'Terce, Sext and None; an Apostolic Custom?', in *Studia Pastristica V* (= Texte und Untersuchungen 80), Berlin, 1962, pp. 206-12.
4. *The Apostolic Tradition*, ed. G. Dix, 1937, p. 65 (xxxvi 7).
5. E. C. Ratcliff, 'The Choir Offices', in *Liturgy and Worship*, ed. W. K. Lowther Clarke and C. Harris, 1932, pp. 257-95.
6. The edition used here is the Everyman's Library edition, p. 4.
7. Unless otherwise stated, all works referred to are contained in Luther's Works (American edition), edited by J. Pelikan and H. T. Lehmann.
8. *Sermon on Soberness and Moderation*, 1539.
9. *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*.
10. *Sermon on Soberness and Moderation*, 1539.
11. *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, 1520, in *Luther's Primary Works*, ed. H. Wace and C. A. Buchheim, 1896.
12. *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*.
13. *Ibid.*
14. The same exposition is found in *Concerning the Order of Public Worship*.
15. E. C. Ratcliff, 'The Choir Offices', in op. cit., p. 283.
16. *The Letters of Martin Luther*, ed. M. A. Currie, 1908, p. 186.
17. P. Drews, *Studien zur Geschichte des Gottesdienstes und des gottesdienstlichen Lebens IV. Luthers lateinische und deutsche Litanei von 1529*, Tübingen 1910.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-32.
19. *Questions About Purgatory, Prayer, Free Will*, 10 January 1538.
20. *Personal Prayer Book*.
21. *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig - including some thoughts regarding his companion, the Fool Murner*, 1521.
22. L. D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy*, Philadelphia 1947, p. 628.

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