

An open letter to one of the authors of
THE BOOK OF DAILY PRAYER: Morning and Evening.
Kim Martin Sadler, editor, United Church Press/96
(for 1997)

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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A LINGUISTICALLY CHALLENGED PRAYERBOOK

Dear _____,

1 "Read and weep" said the note inside my copy, which arrived today as a gift from a prominent bookreviewer, who was both appalled (considering the seriousness of devotional literature) & not surprised (considering the source) to find that this prayerbook is linguistically "challenged" (euphemism for "**crippled**"). Since I've long known you, & know that you do not use feministically crippled religious language, I must presume that the text you sent in for your week's worth was bowdlerized to conform to (another euphemism) "the inclusive-language guidelines" now controlling all national United Church of Christ publishing.

Writers thinking to risk manuscripts to UCC presses should

BEWARE!

GENDER CENSOR AT WORK!

2 When asked to submit a week of devotionals, did you stipulate that your text was not to be bowdlerized? If you did so, the press is guilty of breaking contract. If you did not do so, you were foolish: the text as published misrepresents you.

3 I know that you frequently refer to "the Lord's Prayer." But you are represented as speaking, instead, of "the Prayer of Our Savior"! None of the other 51 authors says (one would judge from the printed text) "the Lord's Prayer" even though two are Pentecostals, one is a Baptist, one is an Episcopalian, and one a Roman Catholic--the rest being UCC, United Methodist, Disciples, Presbyterian, & Community. Obviously, the press/editor wants those who pray this prayerbook never to pray "the Lord's Prayer." A weird, off-brand Christian euchologion.

4 Consider the **crippling** in reducing "Lord" (who does something to us) to "Savior" (who only does something for us, as spiritual consumers). But such reductionism is symptomatic of this whole prayerbook's language for God. Following the practice of our Lord (Jesus), Christian prayer is widely, traditionally, ecumenically addressed to "Our Father" (wherefore the Roman Catholic popular practice of calling the Lord's Prayer "the Our Father")--but not in this prayerbook, which by my fairly thorough reading *never* addresses, or refers to, God as "Father" (though "Parent" is permitted). ...Curiosum: This, I have no doubt, is, in the history of devotional literature, the *only* Christian prayerbook *never* to address God the *only* way Jesus taught his disciples to address God, viz. as "Father." Irony: This prayerbook often asks Jesus' disciples to obey him, but itself disobeys him in de-"Father"ing the deity. The more one thinks about it, the more astonishing should this hypocrisy seem.

What will the children come to believe if they are taught to disobey, on prayer, the One whom otherwise they are taught to obey? Yes, they may learn "Father" in the Lord's Prayer (even though they are taught to call it something other than "the Lord's Prayer"); but how much weight will that have if everywhere else, in their elders' modeling of prayer & in the literature they are exposed to, they never encounter "Father"? Will not the radical revisionism seem normal, normative, to them?

NB: On p.360 is the single exception to the book's "Father"lessness. But even this single instance is in a bound context, viz. Is.9.6, whose divine titles are "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (NRSV). "Prince" is demasculinized to "Bringer," & "Father" is so-called balanced by "Mother."

5 CAUTION: My critical aim is not at the authors--for I don't know whether their manuscripts were linguistically challenged, i.e. pre-bowdlerized--but at UCC national presses' God-language style-sheet, which I'm well aware of. As for devotional authors, I'm sympathetic: for nine years I supervised all national UCC devotional publishing & helped many writers to improve their skills in this difficult genre. "Dispatches from the depths" (Annie Dillard) are tough so to compose as to reach the depths.

6 In prayer, you are the addresser & your deity is the **addressee**. An unaddressed prayer may be presumed to be directed, as it were, "To whom it may concern"--e.g., pp.210-5, which string out the Lord's Prayer but address it to no deity in particular (so great the hatred, or fear, of "Father"!--for surely this is not a case of ADDRESS UNKNOWN). (And, same pp., so great the hatred of "King" in "Kingdom" that "dominion" [ironic: from Latin "Lord"] twice replaces "Kingdom," the only Eng. wd. to incorporate [as the original languages do] the divine title "King.")

If you were asked to write prayers avoiding, as addressee, the Bible's main ways of doing so (viz., "Lord," "King," "Father"), & you agreed to do so, how would you begin the prayers? I don't know how the authors of this prayerbook did, but I do know that the main way this prayerbook begins prayers is with the **generic** divine title, as colorless as possible, viz. "God."

In addition to the hundreds of instances of this colorlessness, "God" is often colored by modifiers (as is true of biblical & classical prayers modifying often "Lord," "King," & "Father" & sometimes "God"). But most characteristic of this prayerbook is the dull repetition "God...God...God" (220).

My personal index of the addressees numbers 241 (with the possibility of a few less, from memory failure). "Creator" is a frequent replacement--as in the UCC BOOK OF WORSHIP and THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL--for the Bible's "Lord," "King," "Father," though often the subject is not specifically creation: the tight linkage of addressee/prayer, as in the great collects, can hardly be expected of a prayerbook that's self-crippled ("linguistically challenged") in addressing the deity. In this prayerbook, as not in great books of public & private prayer, you do not know, by the time you reach the first comma, a prayer's subject. One must conclude either that the author awkwardly composed address/subject separately or that the editor bowdlerized the addressee without regard to subject....The weak "Parent" sometimes occupies the biblical-classical location "Father."....Ditto, "Child" for "Son" (as though apologetic for the fact that the biblical deity has no Daughter [though of course daughters, as sons])...."Holy One" is frequent regardless of whether the following prayer is on holiness or some aspect thereof (again, in contrast to biblical practice)...."Christ Jesus" is standard, not the more frequent biblical "Jesus Christ." Why? In liberal circles, fashionable since Tillich. (More broadly, since Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science.)...."Lord" *never* occurs either as/in addressee or in the body of the prayer, though it does occur once in a 1998 week of which I've seen the galley (but will it survive into the book?). Sometimes, dishonestly, "Lord" is dropped from a quotation whose author is given (e.g., Watts is said to have written "Come we who love [not "the Lord" but] God's name"). And frequently, material is in quotes but without attribution (e.g., 79-82), sometimes even without quotation marks (e.g., 94)....Though only 17 addressee constructions state/imply nature, the prayers contain much nature mysticism, which is the base religious experience of many liberal Christians (e.g., Marcus Borg's own confession of faith). Nature mysticism, however, proves out to be a fairweather religion. It was Wordsworth's till his brother was lost at sea, whereupon he turned to revealed & institutional religion.

7 The editor, of whom I know nothing else, does not seem to be either biblically or liturgically literate. In the Introduction, s/he says "If we would be faithful to the mandate of Jesus, 'to pray without ceasing,'...." That mandate occurs only once in scripture (1Thes.5.17), & it's not from Jesus. As for liturgical familiarity, s/he does not follow the classical capitalization in addressee constructions--indeed, has no policy, capitalization being inconsistent. A prayerbook should be edited by someone of deeper & more thorough **spiritual formation**.

8 My index of authorities mentioned numbers 12, of whom only 1 (viz., Ruth Duck, darling of THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL) is living....My index of referrals includes instructions variously to pray, recite, or sing Ps.23, Mt.5.6, Ps.103, Ps.19.14, the Magnificat. P.198 has "I breathe in JE and breathe out SUS," the ancient still-useful hesychastic practice related to the Jesus Prayer, which begins (but never in this prayerbook!) "Lord Jesus Christ,...."

9 All the Gospels make pivotal use of Jesus as "Son" of God, but this prayerbook makes no use at all of this essential Christian divine title. Ditto for "Lord" & "King."