

**The  
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**When and Why did English-speaking Christians change the language of prayer?**

**In 1900 in the English-speaking world all the Protestant Churches used a traditional form of English in their worship and prayers. Their approach and address to God in formal prayer, ex tempore prayer and hymnody used the second person singular (Thee/Thou) and all this seemed natural to them even though it was archaic because “You” had replaced “Thee/Thou” as the normal second person singular in everyday speech. Further, though the Roman Catholic Church services were virtually totally in Latin their private books of devotion and unofficial translations of the Mass were in traditional English, the English of the King James Version of the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer.**

**In 2000 all the major Protestant Churches in the English-speaking world used what is usually termed “contemporary English” to distinguish it from the “traditional English” used in worship for many previous centuries. Further, the Roman Catholic used the same type of modern English for the Mass and other forms of service. Only here and there did the tradition of the use of the inherited language persist (e.g., where the traditional Book of Common Prayer and the King James Version were used or where there were strict Presbyterians using classic 17th century forms). However, where the “contemporary English” was used there were exceptions made for using the Lord's Prayer in the traditional form and singing hymns that used “Thee/Thou.”**

**Why did this revolution occur in the twentieth century rather than the nineteenth or the eighteenth centuries? This is a good question for, in those times, the use of “you” as the usual form of the second person singular was common and so it would not have been illogical or irrational to begin to use it when addressing God in worship. Yet this did not happen. Obviously the form of address using “Thee/Thou” was deeply embedded in religious expression and feeling for it was maintained without dissent.**

**Further, why did this revolution occur in the 1960s (using this expression to cover the late 1950s, the 1960s and the early 1970s) and not in the 1930s or the 1980s? Looking back we see clearly that it was in the 1960s that the new Bible translations, the new Liturgies and the new Hymnody using “contemporary language” began to appear and were adopted - often after much heart-searching - by the membership of the major Churches.**

**We must recognize that the answer to the question about timing must be in terms other than linguistic reasons for change. Languages do evolve naturally but this change was not a natural evolution. Thus the rapid move from the so-called traditional to the so-called contemporary is more likely to be explained in terms of religious, social and cultural factors and reasons.**

**Further, the answer will be more than the reasons given by those clergy and leaders who set the ball rolling in terms of the adoption of “contemporary” language in the 1960s. For example, the cry of evangelical Christians in America and Britain was for relevance. They wanted to have a relevant message with a relevant Bible using a relevant service in order to evangelise their fellow citizens. They stated that the “traditional language” did not and would not be effective to this end. In short, God and Christ would only become accessible to the majority if they were addressed as “You.”**

**Reasons offered for new translations of the Bible (such as the New International Version), to replace the King James Version (as well as the Revised Version and the Revised Standard Version), were in terms of the availability of better manuscripts of the Greek New Testament, the archaic words of the old versions, and that no distinction was made in the original Hebrew or Greek between the addressing of a human being and offering prayer to God, in terms of the pronouns and verb forms used.**

**Young Protestant Ministers were taught that they could not trust the KJV for it was not an accurate translation of the originals; they needed a modern accurate version from which to preach to a generation young people who were rejecting the old ways. Further, young Anglican/Episcopal clergy were taught that the Book of Common Prayer was not based upon the best texts of the Bible in the original languages or the best understanding of the worship and doctrine of the Early Church. They needed not only an accurate version but also a modern version for leading the people in prayer.**

**At the same time, thousands of Roman Catholic parishes were using “contemporary” English for their Masses and the Roman Church was being shaken from top to bottom as it embraced *aggiornamento* (updating) and *reaccentrimento* (recentering).**

**But underneath the call for relevance and the claims that better scholarship was being used for Bible translation and liturgical revision were other reasons, the underground springs that supplied the streams and lakes. There were the ideas and ideologies that made the 1960s into a period of major discontent, change and revolution in the western world and in America in particular. All who lived in this period breathed into their souls some of this new air and ferment. Even those who rebelled against the innovations and changes of the time were affected by them!**

**In short, the revolutionary decade, which most remember in terms of campus unrest, of protests against the Viet Nam war, of loud music, of communes and of rapid social changes especially in civil rights, was based on (a) relativism in morals**

**(“All you need is love”) - thus situation ethics, (b) commitment to the New (thus ditching old ideas and ways), (c) religion as social activism (thus marches and picket lines), (d) pluralism and egalitarianism (thus variety taken as the norm and encouraged), (e) the irrelevancy of the Church as an institution (thus the emphasis on community [koinonia]), (f) theology expressed as psychology, anthropology and sociology and (g) a turn to the self (self-help, self-affirmation, self-discovery and self realization). To say all this is not to say that it was all bad. Rather, it is to say that the stage was set for changes in religion, churches, families, institutions, education, politics and so on. And changes did occur and few escaped them.**

**So we can say with confidence that the change in the way that English-speaking people addressed God was caused primarily by the revolution of the 1960s. Here a very long standing, profound, deep tradition, wherein were the treasures of English religious devotion of many centuries, was rapidly set aside in favour of the New (embracing the New was of course one of the themes of the 1960s).**

**Much that is holy and even unique was lost to the English-speaking peoples by this tremendous change in the way in which we stand before and address God. And also much that belonged to the revolutionary ideas of the 1960s was within the “contemporary” language as it was adapted for the public worship of God.**

**To this day English-speaking Christianity has not settled upon what exactly is the right form of “contemporary English” to be used in Christian worship. The abundance of Bible translations and liturgical styles and types of hymns & choruses testify still to the pluralism and subjectivism of the 1960s.**

**Thus, those who believe that they ought to continue to use the inherited, classical English form of prayer should be treated courteously and sympathetically by the majority in the Churches. Adequate space and time should be given to them so that they can worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness and preserve for generations to come the live tradition of classical and traditional worship of the Lord in English.**

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