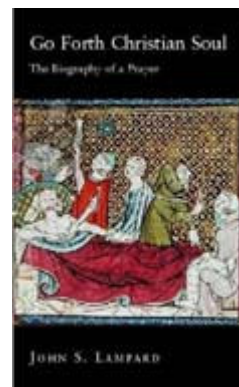


Go Forth Christian Soul: The Biography of a Prayer

John S. Lampard, Epworth Press, 2005 (ISBN 0-7162-0598-X), xxvi + 208 pp., pb
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It is said that PhD theses rarely make for good books. What is written for one audience is difficult to translate for another. This book is an exception. For Lampard this subject is clearly a labor of love and his interest, passion, and sheer curiosity all express themselves through the quality of his research and reflection. The prayer, 'Go forth, Christian Soul, on your journey from this world', has supported generations of Christians in the moment of their death. This book traces the biography of the prayer from its origins in eighth century France to the present day. Lampard sets out to show how historical, liturgical, and pastoral theology can be brought together and illuminate one another as distinct but interconnected disciplines within theology. The particular questions that undergird this book are, 'What do you want to hear said when you are in the final moments of your life?' and 'What words of prayer would help you have a good death?'

The Introduction focuses on four of events in the life of the prayer and suggests why it is worthy of a biographical treatment. Part One charts the liturgical origins of the prayer to a monastery in either northern France or Germany toward the end of the eighth century. The rituals that surround the death of a monk, including the prayers that might have been said, are described and the prayer is interpreted in the light of this particular period in history. Lampard goes on to describe how death has been interpreted in such different ways in Christian history, reflecting changing beliefs about God, the soul, and the afterlife, notably the development of belief in purgatory. These significant changes of belief shape the liturgical tradition and the specific content of prayers, including 'Go forth'.

A further snapshot is offered when we are taken to Birmingham Town Hall on the third of October 1900 when the English public heard for the first time a performance of Edward Elgar's oratorio version of John Henry Newman's *The Dream of Gerontius*. While the piece was not well received at the time, this music has introduced many people to the words of the prayer. Finally, Lampard picks up the significant use of the prayer by the Dean of Westminster when it was said at the Princess of Wales's funeral. These snapshots shape the schema of the book as the stages of the life of the prayer are examined. The text is to be understood as a commentary on a particular worldview and perspective on death. The Reformation and subsequent developments in the Victorian era are also examined. Lampard demonstrates how social factors and social change have shaped liturgical practice and Christian thinking. The book ends with a stimulating assessment of the pastoral significance and effectiveness of this prayer. Lampard argues that the prayer is particularly helpful in enabling expression of Christian hope. The evaluation of the success of any piece of theology lies, in part, in the text's ability to stimulate further thought and reflection in the reader. In this respect, three areas of thought deserve further attention.

First, how does religious belief shape human experience? Is prayer capable of engaging the way an individual inhabits an experience or responds to an anxiety or fear? This question is especially interesting in relation to attitudes toward death and dying for the Christian believer. It is paradoxical to note that despite death being a key feature of Christian worship, believers continue to be significantly ambivalent about addressing their fundamental fears and anxieties about this area of human life. Indeed, some researchers have suggested that some Christians find it especially difficult to cope with death because it challenges their need for certainty and security. Pastoral experience indicates that Christians feel especially resistant to, for example, spending any time making arrangements for their funerals. In the light of this, how can Christian worship and belief enable individuals and communities to befriend death, to engage with concerns and anxieties, and to accept the inevitable losses and changes that make up any life? It is important, surely to continue to explore how far Christian believing enables us to embrace the richness and complexity of both life and death.

Second, this book emphasizes the importance of the tradition which asks us to make time to prepare for our deaths. This may be denied to those who experience death unexpectedly or suddenly, but many have ample opportunity to put their affairs in reasonable order. The cultural and religious rituals that surround this process are of fundamental importance. This time of preparation is charged with both feeling and meaning

and how individuals are accompanied and pastored through the experience can involve broadening the imagination of all who share these precious moments. Ability in pastoral care becomes a key element in ministry. There is ever a need to bring all of these elements together in the creative task of writing prayer that has the power to express solidarity and to help those involved to embrace the richness and mystery of the experience.

Third, Lampard appears not to give any voice to the sheer complexity of beliefs that surround what happens after death. His biography of this commendation prayer presupposes a schema of belief that is less widely shared than he supposes. There are Christians who simply do not hold to any coherent conviction of eternal life and manage to do so without any contradiction or compromise. Diversity of belief surely bears upon the meaning and significance of this particular prayer.

James Woodward