

## Hymns Ancient and Modern, English and American

Like the rest of American literature, the body of hymnody used by American churches has its roots in England. Of course, many would deny that hymns are literature—though what else one would call a substantial body of poetry is hard to say, especially since the canon of American literature has recently been expanded to include everything from cookbooks to rap lyrics. And others do not realize that many hymns that seem characteristically American are in fact entirely English: some people believe, for instance, that “Amazing Grace” is an American text set to an African-American tune, while it is in fact the work of an English ex-slaver set to a traditional English tune. Today the influence often flows the other way—I have heard American songs like “One Bread, One Body” sung in British churches—but the basis of American hymnody remains English.

American hymnals, however, have altered the material they have taken from their British heritage in many significant ways, as well as creating musical genres unknown, until very recently, to English Church musicians. American hymnals are much freer in their alteration of the texts of traditional hymns than are English hymnals. I take as my prime example a hymn by an important writer, G.K. Chesterton, “O God of Earth and Altar,” which is matched with the tune “King’s Lynn” as arranged by Vaughan Williams in the *New English Hymnal*.

O GOD of earth and altar,  
Bow down and hear our cry,  
Our earthly rulers falter,  
Our people drift and die;  
The walls of gold entomb us,  
The swords of scorn divide,  
Take not thy thunder from us,  
But take away our pride.

From all that terror teaches,  
From lies of tongue and pen,

From all the easy speeches  
That comfort cruel men,  
From sale and profanation  
Of honour and the sword,  
From sleep and from damnation,  
Deliver us, good Lord!

Tie in a living tether  
The prince and priest and thrall,  
Bind all our lives together,  
Smite us and save us all;  
In ire and exultation  
Aflame with faith, and free,  
Lift us a living nation,  
A single sword to thee.

Aside from some changes in typography—*The New English Hymnal* likes to capitalize every letter in the word GOD—the text is just as Chesterton wrote it, and it has appeared in that form in American hymnals for decades, and still does in the Episcopal *Hymnal 1982*. (Oddly, it does *not* appear in any of the American Catholic hymnals I have consulted.) The 1989 *Presbyterian Hymnal*—the hymnal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the denomination that resulted from the recent merger of several American Presbyterian churches—presents the hymn with a different tune from the *English Hymnal* (Llangloffan) and a text that does not sound much like Chesterton. Stanzas 2 and 3 go like this:

From all that terror teaches,  
From lies of pen and voice,  
From all the easy speeches  
That make our hearts rejoice,  
From sale and profanation  
Of honor and the sword,  
From sleep and from damnation,  
Deliver us, good Lord!

Awaken us to action  
And forge us into one,  
Defying sect and faction;  
O God, Your will be done!  
Oppressive systems snare us;  
Our apathies increase.

Great God, in mercy spare us  
For justice and for peace!

One need not point out that the perpetrator of this revision—Jane Parker Huber—does not have Chesterton’s way with words. But it is worth considering why her banalities would seem preferable to Chesterton’s vivid language, at least to the editors of this hymnal (one of whom, of course, was Ms. Huber herself).

First, the new stanzas use inclusive—that is, genderless—language. Although I realize that the movement for inclusive language is active on both sides of the Atlantic, it has been much more influential in America than in England, and especially in American churches. (The recent decision of Oxford University Press not to publish an inclusive language lectionary in Britain, but to go ahead with the American publication is a case in point.) Certain words are now forbidden in some American hymnals: “man” and “men,” when they mean all people, will not do, so Chesterton’s “cruel men” must go. (Whether texts make sense is less important to some revisers than that they avoid sexist language: we know just what “the easy speeches that comfort cruel men” are: we hear them regularly from politicians and sometimes may find them being uttered by our own lips. “The easy speeches that make our hearts rejoice” could be almost anything, good or bad—Ms. Huber’s bland verbiage itself might come under that rubric—but avoiding “men” matters more than conveying a clear meaning.) Other words that suggest people of one sex or the other are also suspect: Chesterton’s non-inclusive “prince” will not do either. (One might think that the Presbyterians want to avoid the prelatist term “priest,” but that is not the case: the 1933 *Hymnal* of the Presbyterian Church in the United States—a forerunner of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—prints Chesterton’s words without any alteration.) The urgency with which various hymnals seek inclusive language even at the expense of all tradition and fluency in diction varies a great deal. The Episcopalian *Hymnal 1982* hardly ever revises *solely* to avoid one of the “M”-words. The Catholic hymnal *Worship*, on the other hand, eliminates the forbidden words almost

without exception. Some have wished to go even farther: The hymnal revision committee of the United Church of Christ—the successor of the Congregationalists—voted to stop using the word “Lord” when referring to God—“Lord” is a sexist term in their minds. (Lectionaries have been produced in which that term is replaced with “Sovereign One,” just as Jesus is made to call himself, not the “Son of Man,” but the “Human One.”) The committee’s decision was overturned by the General Assembly of the church, but not without a struggle.

Along with the avoidance of language that might be considered sexist, many American hymnals seek to avoid language that might seem archaic. And the fear of archaism is undoubtedly another reason Huber chose to discard Chesterton’s “Tie in a living tether/ The prince and priest and thrall.” “Thrall” is probably assumed not to be part of the vocabularies of many modern worshippers—though I would guess that a fair number of them have in fact learned it by watching *Star Trek* reruns. The same distaste for any language that might seem difficult or “old-fashioned” explains many of the revisions in American hymnals. “Thee,” “Thy,” and “Thou,” which no one in fact has trouble understanding, are universally eliminated from some hymnals. The “dumbing down” that has turned the textbooks in American schools into pabulum, is also at work in church.

Some sorts of imagery are now often avoided entirely, most notably any imagery that might be considered violent or militaristic. Several denominations have battled over hymns like “Onward, Christian Soldiers.” (There was an especially loud outcry among United Methodists when their hymnal revision committee seemed ready to omit that song.) Whether the imagery is metaphorical does not seem to matter: that “Christian soldiers” are to march “*as* to war” not “*off* to war” did not save that hymn from being purged from the new *Presbyterian Hymnal*. In Huber’s revision of Chesterton, swords are allowed to remain only so long as they are negative symbols. “The swords of scorn” can still divide us, and the sword can still be sold and profaned, but we cannot think of a

converted people as a single blade in the Lord's hand—that might make it sound as if swords were good things. Of course, Jesus advised his disciples to get swords—he in fact said he came to bring, not peace, but a sword—and St. Paul was unafraid to invoke the image when he talked about the “sword of the spirit,” but our modern revisers are more enlightened than the Savior and his apostle were. (Of course, the hymns that really *are* about soldiers are gone entirely: while *Hymns Ancient and Modern* still keeps John Arkwright's splendid Armistice Day hymn, “O valiant hearts, who to your glory came / Through dust of conflict and through battle flame, / Tranquil you lie, your knightly virtue proved, / Your memory hallowed in the land you loved,” which was in the *Episcopalian Hymnal 1940*, it appears in no modern American hymnal, even though Americans have felt an ever greater need to mourn and honor the nation's soldiers in the years since the end of the Vietnam War.)

Imagery that suggests any sort of hierarchy and class division is also removed from many hymns. When hymns really *do* try to present class divisions as part of God's plan, no one could lament those revisions: No one misses the verse from “All Things Bright and Beautiful” that declared “The rich man in his Castle, / The poor man at the gate, / God made them high and lowly / And ordered their estate.” But do even ardent democrats really want to see every metaphorical king or prince toppled from his throne, every servant turned into an independent contractor? Some revisers seem to want to take it that far: The final stanza of Chesterton's hymn may have been unacceptable to Ms. Huber in part because “prince” and “thrall” suggest class division. While Chesterton asks that the prince and slave be joined together, Huber prefers not to mention the unpleasant subject of human inequality at all. And such staples of biblical language as “King” and “Servant” are as classist as “Prince” and “Thrall”: one of the arguments that has been presented for eliminating “Lord” from the lectionary is that the only lord most Americans know is their landlord. To avoid such “classist” terms, other hymnals remove the word “servant” whenever possible. In *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, one stanza of “Christ is

Made the Sure Foundation” (Americans sing part of that hymn as “Blessed City, Heavenly Salem”) begins, “Here vouchsafe to all thy servants / Gifts of grace of thee to gain.” In the *Worship* hymnal, that becomes “Grant, we pray, to all your people, / All the grace they ask to gain.” Some American revisers evidently do not wish to be servants, even if the master is God Himself. (And we evidently cannot be expected to know what “vouchsafe” means, either.)

The result of all these revisions is to put vague and abstract language in the place of vivid and concrete language. Instead of *seeing* the prince, priest and slave tied together and beaten, instead of *seeing* a sword lifted up, we *hear* the request “awaken us to action,” because “oppressive systems snare us” and “our apathies increase.” Are these words that can move anyone? (And can “apathy” be plural?)

The removal of the plea to “smite us” as well as to “save us” reveals another common pattern in hymn revision. To a greater or lesser extent, any real expression of penitence is removed from the texts in modern American hymnals. Where it cannot be avoided, it is watered down as much as possible. This movement has not been carried nearly so far in English hymnals. A good example is “Rock of Ages.” Many consider this hymn to be not only quintessentially American, but even a product of “that old-time religion,” although it is in fact the work of an English clergyman. It appears in *Hymns Ancient and Modern* with all its verses, including the lines, “Foul, I to the Fountain Fly, / Wash me Saviour or I die.” Those lines were in the 1933 *Presbyterian Hymnal* and are still in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. But the new *Presbyterian Hymnal* omits the song entirely, and the *Episcopalian Hymnal 1982* leaves out the verse that would asks the parishioners to call themselves “foul.” I have seen English Catholic hymnals that include the entire text, but the only American Catholic hymnal I have found it in—*Lead Me, Guide Me: The African-American Catholic Hymnal*—truncates the hymn just as the *Episcopalian hymnal* does.

While sin is almost always *personal* in older hymns, in the new revisions it is often *corporate*. Huber's revision of Chesterton blames "oppressive systems"; it does not admit that we all deserve whipping. The same impulse to make sin something we do in groups, not something we do individually, has led other revisers to change "Who saved a wretch like me" in "Amazing Grace" to "Who saved and set us free" and "Awake my soul and sing / Of Him who died for thee" in "Crown Him with Many Crowns" to "Awake my soul and sing / Of Him who set us free." The new hymns that fill recent American hymnals follow the same pattern. The new hymns sung by American Catholics and mainline Protestants are *never* about repentance. They are not even often about God's great mercy. Instead, they often take as their subject the community itself.

The revisions of traditional hymns in recent American hymnals reveal a troubling attitude toward the members of the congregation: they are evidently imagined to be not very bright, not able to deal with any sort of difficulty, and more interested in feeling good about themselves than in the doctrines of Christianity. They cannot deal with vivid imagery, with archaic words—even Thou. They cannot even sing settings as complex as those their parents and grandparents sang with joy. And evidently they cannot pay attention to anything longer than the average TV commercial, for hymns are getting shorter and shorter. In *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, "The God of Abraham Praise" contains 10 stanzas. In American hymnals it sometimes has as few as three, and never more than five. In fact, if the progression we see from English hymnals to older American hymnals to newer American hymnals continues, it seems clear that eventually no hymn will be more than two stanzas long. Perhaps this development is just another proof of the diminishing attention span of the average American. Then again, since there is so much we must avoid saying, perhaps it is simply impossible to find more than two consecutive stanzas that do not say something offensive, like "man," "men," "he," "thee," "thy," "thou," "solider," "sword," "prince," "Lord," "servant," or "sinner."

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