

# Politics and Hymns

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The singing of hymns has been a part of Christian worship from the very beginning. The Gospels tell us that Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn at the Last Supper before departing for the Garden of Gethsemane, whilst Saint Paul in his letter to the Colossians writes: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.”<sup>1</sup> Hymns very quickly became an established part of Christian liturgies. Indeed, the writings of the Spanish nun Egeria, who visited the Holy Land towards the end of the fourth century, reveal that hymns were sung at every office.

Hymns were seen as a wonderful means by which human beings could praise God. Indeed, Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430) described hymns as “praise of God in song”<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, from earliest times hymns were also used for political and partisan purposes. During the Arian controversy of the fourth century, hymns enshrining particular doctrinal viewpoints, were sung in procession by enthusiastic supporters on all sides. The office hymn for Christmas Eve: “Come, thou Redeemer of the earth”, written by Saint Ambrose (339-397), the father of Latin Hymnody, leaves us in little doubt as to where he stands in this controversy:

*Forth from that chamber goeth he,  
That royal home of purity,  
A giant in twofold substance one,  
Rejoicing now his course to run.*

*From God the Father he proceeds,  
To God the Father back he speeds,  
Runs out his course to death and hell,  
Returns on God’s high throne to dwell.<sup>3</sup>*

Throughout the ages hymns have continued to play a part in Christian controversies. Martin Luther (1483-1546) wrote a number of hymns among them “O Lord, Look Down from Heaven, Behold”. Though a paraphrase of Psalm 12, this hymn, written in 1523, two years after his excommunication, can clearly be read as an attack upon Roman Catholicism:

*O Lord, look down from heaven, behold  
And let Thy pity waken:  
How few are we within Thy Fold,  
Thy saints by men forsaken!  
True faith seems quenched on every hand,  
Men suffer not Thy Word to stand;  
Dark times have us o’ertaken.*

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1 Colossians 3.16, “Holy Bible - New Revised Standard Version” [Oxford: OUP, 1989]

2 Quoted by Mary Berry, Paul Bradshaw (Editor) “The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship” [London: SCM, 2002] p239

3 St Ambrose, translated by J. M. Neale, “The New English Hymnal” [Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1986]

*With fraud which they themselves invent  
Thy truth they have confounded;  
Their hearts are not with one consent  
On Thy pure doctrine grounded.  
While they parade with outward show,  
They lead the people to and fro,  
In error's maze astounded.*<sup>4</sup>

Congregational singing, as we now experience it, had its origins in the Reformation, though many of the traditional hymns sung today were written during the reign of Queen Victoria. Whilst many consider this to be a golden age of hymn writing, hymns of this era were not without their political bias. A notable Victorian hymn writer was Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895). She was married to William Alexander, Bishop of Derry and Raphoe who became Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland. Mrs Alexander wrote over four hundred hymns including “There is a green hill far away” and “Once in royal David’s city”. Many of her hymns were written with children in mind, not least “All things bright and beautiful”. This famous hymn included a verse which appeared to suggest that social inequality was the will of God:

*The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate,  
God made them, high or lowly,  
And ordered their estate.*<sup>5</sup>

The first hymnbook to reprint this hymn without the offending third verse was “The English Hymnal” of 1906, which was edited, amongst others, by the Christian Socialist Percy Dearmer (1867-1936), and was firmly rooted in the Anglo-Catholic movement, which had established churches in some of Britain’s poorest neighbourhoods. Ironically, Mrs Alexander was a keen supporter of the Oxford Movement and a friend of the Tractarian, John Keble (1792-1866).

Although “All things bright and beautiful” remains a very popular hymn, its original third verse has become a potent symbol of all unpopular political or social ideologies within hymnody. People have continued to object to it long after hymn books have ceased to print it. Indeed the verse was positively banned by the Inner London Education Authority in 1982.

“All things bright and beautiful” was not, however, Mrs Alexander’s only controversial hymn. On New Year’s Day, 1871, the day that the Irish Church Disestablishment Act 1869 came into force, the congregation at her husband’s Cathedral rose to sing:

*Look down, Lord of heaven on our desolation,  
Fallen, fallen, fallen is now our Country’s crown,  
Dimly dawns the New year on a Churchless nation,  
Ammon and Amalek tread our borders down.*<sup>6</sup>

Patriotic hymns from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have also fallen out of favour in recent times. The poem by the British diplomat Cecil Spring-Rice (1859-1918) “I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above” is today a popular but controversial hymn. Though originally written in 1908, Spring-Rice rewrote the first verse during the First World War to reflect the wide scale loss

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4 Martin Luther, “The Lutheran Hymnal” [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941]

5 C. F. Alexander, “Hymns Ancient and Modern - Edition of 1889 Reset with the Second Supplement of 1916” [London: 1924]

6 C. F. Alexander quoted by David Stevens, ‘Religious Ireland (II)’, in Edna Longley, ed., “Culture in Ireland, Diversity or Division” [Proceedings of the Cultures of Ireland Group Conference] (Belfast: QUB/Inst. of Irish Studies 1991), p.145

of the lives of young British men:

*I vow to thee, my country, all earthly things above,  
Entire and whole and perfect, the service of my love:  
The love that asks no question, the love that stands the test,  
That lays upon the altar the dearest and the best;  
The love that never falters, the love that pays the price,  
The love that makes undaunted the final sacrifice.*<sup>7</sup>

In 2004, the then Bishop of Hulme, Stephen Lowe, condemned this verse for extolling the virtues of blind, unquestioning loyalty to an earthly regime.<sup>8</sup>

Such condemnations of the hymns of previous generations have been accompanied by a wealth of new hymns that highlight issues of poverty and inequality and express a vision of a more just and peaceful world. “100 Hymns for Today” published in 1969 included a number of hymns encouraging Christians to work for a fairer society, among them a hymn inspired by the twenty-fifth Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, by the pacifist Sydney Carter (1915-2004):

*When I needed a neighbour, were you there, were you there?  
When I needed a neighbour, were you there?  
And the creed and the colour and the name won't matter, were you there?*<sup>9</sup>

In the same year the Church Pastoral Aid Society published the second volume of “Youth Praise” which included a number of politically motivated hymns, one of which begins:

*Sitting right there in your two-car home  
Watching the world go by;  
Watching the refugees still roam  
Seeing the hungry die.  
But there's nothing you can do  
You simply say:  
'I haven't got money to throw away!  
Send the collecting man from your gate.  
'But isn't the world in a dreadful state?'<sup>10</sup>*

Others in the collection tackle issues of racial justice and the use of the environment.

Hymns exhorting Christians to work for a better world have remained popular. “Common Ground” published in 1998 includes many such examples among them:

*Till all the jails are empty and all the bellies filled;  
Till no one hurts or steals or lies, and no more blood is spilled;  
Till age and race and gender no longer separate;  
Till pulpit, press, and politics are free of greed and hate:  
God has work for us to do.*<sup>11</sup>

and:

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7 C. Spring-Rice, “Hymns Ancient & Modern New Standard” [1983]

8 Jonathan Petre, Religion Correspondent and Jonathan Wynne-Jones “Ban this Racist Hymn, says Bishop” [London: The Daily Telegraph, 12 Aug 2004]

9 S. Carter, “Hymns Ancient & Modern New Standard” [1983]

10 G. H. Reid, “Youth Praise - Books 1 and 2” [London: Falcon Books, 1969]

11 C. P. Daw Jr., “Common Ground” [Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1998]

*Jesus Christ is waiting,  
Waiting in the streets;  
No one is his neighbour,  
All alone he eats.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I am lonely too.  
Make me, friend or stranger,  
Fit to wait on yxou .*

*Jesus Christ is raging,  
Raging in the streets,  
Where injustice spirals  
And real hope retreats.  
Listen, Lord Jesus,  
I am angry too.  
In the Kingdom's causes  
Let me rage with you.<sup>12</sup>*

Will hymns such as these stand the test of time? It is notable that many ideological hymns from the past have fallen out of favour. Though “Come, thou Redeemer of the earth” is still sung to this day the verses quoted above are often omitted. The offending verse of “All things bright and beautiful” has been positively banned in some circles, and it seems scarcely credible that anyone actually sang “Sitting right there in your two-car home”. It would, of course, be wrong to suggest that “Jesus Christ is waiting” is akin to “O Lord, look down from heaven, behold” or “I vow to thee, my country” but there are those who feel uneasy singing this hymn and others like it. Such unease arises, in part, from the descriptive reminder of all that is amiss in the world and from the declaration that it is our calling to right these wrongs. But people also feel uneasy because these songs are so very different to hymns as Christians have traditionally understood them.

In his introduction to “Common Ground” John Bell expresses the hope that the hymns contained within this collection will generate in our Churches “a new passion for the praise of our Maker” but also “a new fervour in our commitment to God’s world”.<sup>13</sup> Whilst few would disagree that Christian worship should inspire the believer to work for justice and for peace, is this the task of hymnody? Should acts of praise, which traditionally served to focus the attention of the gathered community upon God, direct our attention to the actions of those present in such a powerful manner?

From my own perspective as a former Mental-Healthcare Chaplain caring for extremely unwell people whose daily delusions could be contained by the medical profession but rarely transformed, I am particular uneasy about hymns that place the responsibility for redeeming our world upon the gathered community. The issues that these hymns highlight are so great and so complex that to affirm a willingness to resolve them in an act of worship seems somewhat dishonest. Though we undoubtedly have a divine imperative to work together for a better world, the truth remains, surely, that God alone can ultimately transform all the pain and anguish of this world?

“Hail, gladdening Light, of his pure glory poured”, dating from the 3rd century (or possibly even earlier), is one of the oldest Christian hymns. The coming of the night is neither forgotten nor ignored but all attention is focused upon a life-giving God whose light gladdens our heart when darkness threatens to engulf us. It is perhaps the perfect model for all our hymns political and otherwise.

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<sup>12</sup> J. Bell & G. Maule, “Common Ground” [Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1998]

<sup>13</sup> J. Bell, “Common Ground” [Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1998]

*Hail, gladdening Light, of his pure glory poured  
Who is the immortal Father, heavenly, blest,  
Holiest of holies, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*Now we are come to the sun's hour of rest,  
The lights of evening round us shine,  
We hymn the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit divine.*

*Worthiest art thou at all times to be sung  
With undefilèd tongue  
Son of our God, giver of life, alone:  
Therefore in all the world thy glories, Lord, they own. <sup>14</sup>*

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14 Greek, 3rd cent, translated by J. Keble, "Hymns Ancient & Modern New Standard" [1983]

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