



The Moravian Associations of Charles Wesley's Hymns

Treasure No 22: The Moravian Associations of Charles Wesley's Hymns, by A. S. Gregory: An article from Bulletin Spring 1958

Five hundred years ago the community which came to be known as *Unitas Fratrum* was founded at Kunwald in Bohemia. Two hundred and fifty years later was born the greatest of English hymn writers—'supreme' is Dr. Frere's Word¹—Charles Wesley. In this paper I shall in the first place draw attention to certain general affinities between Methodists and Moravians and recall the events which brought them together; secondly stress the personal nature of the association; and, thirdly, attempt some assessment of doctrinal similarities and contrasts as illustrated in the hymns. A few Moravian hymn-tunes appropriated by Wesley or his followers will be mentioned in conclusion.

I

It cannot escape the student of Church history that Methodists and Moravians, for all their different antecedents and, let us add, in spite of the brevity of their 18th century contacts and the acerbity of their dissensions, are alike in laying prime emphasis upon the Faith as consciously appropriated by the believing soul. This evangelical kinship appears in what we now know as meetings for 'fellowship'—the realization of *koinonia* not only through corporate liturgical action, but also in the intimate sharing of personal awareness of the presence of the Lord and the indwelling of His Spirit. Charles Wesley's hymns are full of this. He has a profound sense of the *corpus mysticum*, that 'blessed company of all faithful people' which transcends 'names, sects and Parties.'² And he derived it, high Churchman as he was, not only or indeed mainly from his Anglican inheritance, but also from the society meeting which has been aptly called the mother-cell of Methodism.

*All praise to our redeeming Lord
Who joins us by His grace,
And bids us, each to each restored
Together seek His face,³*

We know from their journals that both the Wesleys were deeply impressed by the Moravian Love-feasts in Georgia, in London, and here in Bristol. *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, published in 1740, contains a series of hymns on the Love-feast and the Communion of Saints, many of which lie very close to the Moravian ideal of 'Brotherhood.' Of one such meeting, held at Kingswood in 1740, he writes 'Never have I seen and felt such a congregation of faithful souls. I question whether Herrnhuth can now afford the like.'

But further, and more immediately to our purpose, the Moravians had inherited from their 15th-century beginnings a strong tradition of hymn-singing. John Hus himself had died singing in the flames, and the first hymn-book of the Brethren had been published as early as 1501. By the time the scattered and much

¹ *H. A. & M. Historical Edition*, p. lxxxvii.

² *M.H.B.* 720.

³ *M.H.B.* 745.

persecuted remnants of the fraternity had been welcomed into Saxony by Count Zinzendorf in 1722, the singing of hymns is already established as a devotional exercise hardly less indispensable than prayer itself. So it came about that the leaders of the Methodist revival found this instrument of corporate devotion ready to hand; and a greater ‘master of the quire’ than Zinzendorf used it in such sort as to put the universal Church in his debt. Dr. Towlson thinks it an exaggeration to claim that Wesley learned the importance of hymns from the Moravians.¹ But at least it must be said that the singing in Georgia, at Herrnhuth, and at Fetter Lane helped, under God, to stir that impulse to praise which Methodism has never lost.

In one other place too, namely mid-Atlantic in a storm, the Wesleys learned in a new way how to sing with grace in their hearts unto the Lord. The pages of our hymn-book *Companions* abound in anecdotes of varying degrees of improbability; but the story of David Nitschmann’s pilgrims’ unperturbed singing and its emotional effect on John Wesley has a ring of truth about it.

*Though waves and storms go o’er my head,
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,
Though joys be withered all and dead,
Though every comfort be withdrawn,
On this my steadfast soul relies—
Father, Thy mercy never dies!*²

This superb translation of the Moravian Rothe’s *Ich habe nun den Grund gefunden* is, of course, John’s and not Charles’s; but I offer no apology for mentioning it in a discussion of Moravian influences traceable in the latter’s hymns. It was Spangenberg, author of the original of one of John’s best-known versions, who together with Nitschmann and other Moravians was the means of sparking John’s genius for translation into activity. Charles was with him in Georgia; and although he did not begin to produce hymns until after their return to London, and although he seems at first to have been less attracted by the Moravians than his brother, the influence exercised on each of them was so largely a personal one, and their own intimacy so close, that it would be unreal to leave John out of account. To these personal contacts of 1735–1740 I now turn in more detail.

II

A hymn—a great hymn at least—is a personal document. ‘Hymns,’ writes Sydney Moore in the Preface to his recent study of some German hymn-writers, ‘are a link between those who use them and those who wrote them.’³ It is well worth our while to look behind the hymn . . . and so discern a human face behind the mask of words.’ The fact is that John and Charles opened their hearts to their Moravian friends. ‘I loved them,’ John writes, ‘more than either Luther or Calvin’; and classed them among his teachers with Law and Whitefield. The later misunderstanding, suspicions, and (in the case of Zinzendorf) conflict of strong personalities never erased this personal influence. Of Peter Boehler in particular—perhaps the most likeable of all the Moravian leaders with whom the Wesleys came in contact—it can hardly be questioned that he, more than any other individual, prepared the heart and mind of both the brothers for their transforming experience at Whitsuntide, 1738. Through him, as the journals disclose, Charles, no less than John, was led step by step into that assurance of peace and pardon, and that overflowing charity, which he was to pour into his hymns. Who shall put his finger on the final stimulus which fires the inspiration of artist or poet? At least we can say that the same spiritual forces which found outlet in the hymn sung by Wesley and his friends on May 24th, 1739—

‘Where shall my wonderful soul begin?’⁴ also fed the amazing stream of verse which ended only with his parting *In manus tuas*:

¹ *Moravian and Methodist*, 1937, p. 195.

² *M.H.B.*

³ *Sursum Corda*, 1956, p. 9.

⁴ *M.H.B.* 559.

*In age and feebleness extreme,
Who shall a helpless worm redeem?
Jesus; my only hope thou art,
Strength of my failing flesh and heart;
O could I catch one smile from Thee
And drop into eternity!*¹

In the words of the Moravian Benjamin La Trobe, 'it was at the brilliant flame of German psalmody that these distinguished hymnologists (*sic*) appear to have kindled their own poetic touch.' It was, I submit, kindled even more truly at the 'flame of sacred love' which they found in fellowship at Fetter Lane, and in heart to heart conversation with their Moravian friends.

Here and there the hymns seem to be evoking some particular memory of the writer.

*With Thee conversing, (he sings) we forget
All time, and toil, and care:*²

The hymn is headed '*On a Journey*,' and it was published in 1740. One likes to associate it, whether Charles himself did or not, with that journey to Oxford with Peter Boehler a few months earlier, from which so much followed in his own spiritual pilgrimage. 'If I had a thousand tongues,' said Peter on another occasion, 'I would praise Christ with them all.' It seems plausible to suggest that Wesley recalled the phrase when, a year later, he wrote the hymn which has secured it a place in every hymn-book in the English tongue.

III

Turning to doctrine, we find that (if I do not over-simplify) the Moravians laid stress on three things: *first*, the Lutheran view of justification by faith 'alone'; *second*, the possibility of total conversion or change from self-centredness to God; *third*, the doctrine of 'assurance'—meaning (in words of one syllable) that we not only are saved by our faith but know that we are so saved. All three emphases could and did lead to much controversy in exact interpretation. But nothing could be clearer to any thoughtful reader, or indeed any intelligent singer, of Charles Wesley's hymns than that all three are of the essence of their teaching too. Moreover they appear without the puzzling inconsistencies and nice verbal distinctions which are all too characteristic of much of the theology of John. Illustrations abound: here are one or two.

(i) In the volume '*On God's everlasting Love*,' published here in Bristol in 1741, we find

*We all are forgiven for Jesus' sake;
Our title to heaven His merits we take.*³

And in a hymn of 1749, headed '*After Preaching*':

*His only righteousness I show.*⁴

(ii) The idea of instantaneous conversion had at first shocked Charles as 'worse than unedifying.' Yet more than twenty years later we find him writing

¹ *M.H.B.* Appendix.

² *M.H.B.* 460.

³ *M.H.B.* 377.

⁴ *M.H.B.* 92.

*'Tis done! Thou dost this moment save,
With full salvation bless;
Redemption through Thy blood I have
And spotless love and peace.*¹

His prejudice had, indeed, been overcome on the felons' scaffold at Newgate. But there can be no doubt at all that the Moravians had not a little to do with the change of outlook which, in Dr. Routley's words, has associated the very word 'conversion' with the name of Wesley.²

(iii) Of the third characteristic note of Moravian teaching, 'assurance,' Philip Molther had given an unbalanced account which became one of the chief points of controversy. The classical Methodist interpretation of the doctrine is contained in many of the hymns: in the conversion hymn already quoted; most clearly of all, perhaps in a hymn of 1749 headed 'The marks of faith' which asks, and answers, the direct question—

*How can a sinner know
His sins on earth forgiven?*³

If Charles Wesley owes much, however, to Moravian teaching, the hymns reflect no less clearly the issue which divided them and defeated repeated attempts at rapprochement. 'Stillness,' as it came to be called—a doctrine which John Wesley had denounced in 1739 in the Preface to *Hymns and Spiritual Poems*—laid so much stress upon the action of God's grace as to disparage, and indeed deny, the need for any kind of responsive action by the believing soul. The dangers of subjectivism, of spiritual self-indulgence, of antinomianism even, are exposed and strongly countered in the hymns of Charles Wesley and in particular in two classes of hymns, namely in those on the great Festivals of the Church, and in the *Hymns on the Lord's Supper* of 1745. There is no question that these hymns, more than anything else, helped to confirm the people called Methodists in their catholic inheritance, and in the obedient use of 'the outward means of grace.' Charles Wesley's ideal of holiness, while always personal, is anchored to the objective and the corporate: in John Wesley's words, it is the 'catholic, that is universal, Church' that is 'holy in all its members.'⁴

Charles Wesley is, moreover, free from the aberrations which marred the Moravian hymnody of the mid-18th century. The strongest of his lines about the sufferings of Christ—some, indeed, too strong for our use today—are theological and mystical rather than imaginative or pictorial. This for instance, from *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1742:

*Five bleeding wounds He bears,
Received on Calvary;
They pour effectual prayers,
They strongly speak for me:
Forgive him, O forgive! they cry,
Nor let that ransomed sinner die!*⁵

is good catholic doctrine. To conclude: the hymns of Charles Wesley on faith and salvation and holiness, no less than the sermons, of John, were soundly based, as Dr. Rattenbury and others have shown, not only upon Luther and his Moravian interpreters but also upon Anglican and ante-Nicene doctrine and practice, borne out at every point by his own personal experience⁶. He is at once mystic and evangelist, offering to

¹ *M.H.B.* 559.

² *Hymns and the Faith*, 1955, p. 128.

³ *M.H.B.* 377.

⁴ *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, 1749.

⁵ *M.H.B.* 368.

⁶ *Conversion of the Wesleys*, 1938, pp. 180 ff.

all the world what he himself has heard and seen. He writes much in the first person, but his concern is always with ‘every soul of man.’ His greatest hymns, of which too many remain generally unused if not unknown¹, check our appraisals and comparisons: their provenance, Moravian or other, is after all of small moment. They are not so much didactic as effectual: their own passionate insights kindle in the devout singer—as John Wesley said they would²—an answering flame of devotion, faith, hope and love.

IV

The Moravian association is recalled in the present Methodist Hymn-book by a number of tunes, including some from the *Foundery Tune-book* or *Sacred Melody*, 1761, which came to Wesley from Freylinghausen through the Moravians. The name HERRNHUTH is preserved in a 4-line 7’s tune from the Foundery book (*M.H.B.* 87; *EH* 135). Two tunes, ATONEMENT (181) and MIT FREUDEN ZART (415) come from the Brethren’s Kirchengesänge of 1566. TYTHERTON (385) is by a Moravian pastor, a younger contemporary of the Wesleys. FULNECK (440) and FAIRFIELD (39), called by the names of the Moravian settlements near Manchester and Leeds, were composed respectively by the elder and the younger La Trobe, both Moravian leaders. Finally IRENE (233), a tune of some musical distinction, from Freylinghausen, deserves attention as probably the best surviving specimen of its extraordinary metre. Charles Wesley’s metres are, of course, a study in themselves. This stanza of two iambic sixes followed by four, trochaic sevens is described by the late Bernard Manning as ‘perverse and almost ludicrous’³; but Wesley uses it with great effect and its virtual disappearance from our worship is much to be regretted, if only because it carries verses like the following, with which this sketch may well close:

*Arise, my soul, arise,
Thy Saviour’s sacrifice!
All the names that love could find,
All the forms that love could take,
Jesus in Himself has join’d,
Thee, my soul, His own to make.*⁴

and this:

*Our anchor sure and fast
Within the veil is cast;
Stands our never-failing hope
Grounded in the holy place;
We shall after God mount up,
See the Godhead face to face.*⁵

¹ Most English compilers are still content to base their selection on that of Sir H. W. Baker in 1861. *Congregational Praise* 1950, among non-Methodist publications, breaks new ground; followed in one instance (‘Away with our fears,’) by the B.B.C. Hymn Book, 147.

² Preface to *A Collection of Hymns*, 1779.

³ *Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, p. 55.

⁴ *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739.

⁵ *M.H.B.* 233.