



The Criticisms of ‘*Songs of Praise*’

Treasure No 4: The Criticisms of ‘*Songs of Praise*’ by G.W.Briggs: An article from Bulletin No. 14, January 1941

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No Hymn Book of modern times has attracted greater attention than *Songs of Praise*; not least significant is the prominence given to it by the B.B.C. At the same time, no hymn book has been more severely criticized. The Bishop of Chelmsford, in particular, has laid himself out to ban it, as far as a bishop may, from his diocese. Notwithstanding this, the publishers state that the sale of the book continues to grow. It is quite plain that this hymn book, whatever its demerits, has an enthusiastic body of supporters. If the Bishop of Chelmsford deplors it, there are some of his brethren who take at least as strong a view on the other side.

The criticism is twofold: on doctrinal grounds, that it is a humanist book, deficient in its recognition of sin and atonement; and on literary grounds.

What are the facts? I am probably in a better position than most people to know the full story, for I have been for many years associated with the Editors—Dearmer, Vaughan Williams, and Martin Shaw, in compiling books for schools, closely associated with *Songs of Praise*. I was not one of the editors of *Songs of Praise* itself: but I was in the inner council of the editors, and generally at their meetings. I bore no responsibility for the final text of the words—that was Dearmer’s; but he constantly consulted me, even when he went his own way. Moreover, I am in the closest connection with the publishers and all concerned; and there is not much said or written about *Songs of Praise* which does not come my way. Nor am I without practical experience. *Songs of Praise* was used in the church of which I was for many years incumbent; and I know how it works out in a parish church. I am now at a Cathedral; and I know the detailed criticisms of my fellow-canons when it was suggested for adoption here. I mention all this only to show that I am not speaking without special knowledge.

On the whole, it is untrue that *Songs of Praise* sets out to dilute the Christian doctrines; indeed, the truth is exactly the opposite. It was strongly felt that the original *Songs of Praise* (1925) was deficient in the confession of sin; and in the Enlarged Edition this was made much more prominent. Moreover, no hymn book provides as fully for the seasons of the Church’s Year.

Some of the criticisms are due to a misunderstanding. For instance, a great deal has been said about the omission from the hymn ‘There is a green hill far away,’ of the verse

*'There was no other good enough
To pay the price of sin.'*

This omission was not made to weaken the doctrine of the Cross; for that doctrine is fully expressed in other lines of the hymn, 'Who died to save us all'; 'Saved by his precious blood.' The reason for the omission was that the verse is a quite unworthy description of the Atonement. 'There was no other good enough,' is surely inadequate; and there is no 'price of sin.' There is a penalty of sin, and a price of redemption; but 'the price of sin' would only fit the gentleman who went up and down Europe peddling indulgences. Dearmer had a righteous passion for truth, and a wholesome hatred both of false doctrine and mawkish sentiment. It is true that he had his own weaknesses, too much love for what is 'gay' and 'jolly'; but they were at least more wholesome.

It would not, however, be candid on my part to say that Dearmer made no changes with deliberate intention; and some of them are most irritating. The Bishop of Chelmsford is quite right when he complains of the alteration, for instance, of the verse in 'Bread of heaven' (*S.P.* 264),

*'Vine of heaven, thy blood supplies
This blest cup of sacrifice;'*

where Dearmer altered 'blood' to 'love.' Apart from doctrine, it is a stupid alteration, for it spoils the imagery. Dearmer had a strong conviction—probably not unjustified—that 'blood' theology has been very much overdone; but he carried it too far. It was almost an obsession with him. If he had lived to see the present war, he might have realized more deeply the inadequacy of humanism to meet the needs of men.

The Bishop of Chelmsford could equally have complained of the alteration of another line in that hymn. 'For thy flesh is meat indeed' which is entirely Scriptural, is changed to a much inferior line, 'For thou art our food indeed.'

As one of my friends points out, Dearmer, in his *Songs of Praise Discussed*, makes this statement: 'This hymn appeared in his (Josiah Conder's) *Star of the East* (1821) as "Bread of heaven, on thee I feed"; it has been much changed in some books, but here the text is as he printed it, except that the first person singular has been altered to the plural throughout.'

Even if that were true, the reversion to such inferior lines would be hard to justify; but my friend challenges even the truth of it. In Conder's edition of *Star of the East* (1824), the lines appear in the version familiar to us, with the exception of the singular instead of the plural; and my friend can find no evidence whatever of an earlier edition in 1821.

Taken altogether, it is not a very happy performance. For one thing, however, we must be thankful. *Songs of Praise*, like *The English Hymnal*, retains the fine lines of the original:

*'Thou our life! O let us be
Rooted, grafted, built on thee;'*

which were later altered to

*'Jesus, may we ever be
Grafted, rooted, built on thee.'*

A. and M. did not originate this feeble alteration, but was responsible for adopting it and making it familiar.

It can hardly be denied that Dearmer used *Songs of Praise* to express his own theological outlook. To a large extent that is inevitable with any hymn book; but the ideal hymn book should be wide enough to include all legitimate views, and certainly should not offend legitimate convictions. Dearmer's objection to 'blood-theology' has already been noted. Naturally, it comes out specially in Communion hymns. For instance:

*'Draw nigh and take the body of the Lord,
And drink the holy blood for you outpoured'*

is changed, not for the better, to

'And drink the life and grace for you outpoured.'

In sacramental teaching generally, it is well known that Dearmer had swung round entirely in his later years. He tended more and more to regard the Communion as the Agape; 'supper' comes very prominently in his hymns, sometimes as a substitute for 'sacrament.' It is probably felt by many people that he overdid it; for they do not regard the communal meal as the main aspect of the Eucharist. At the same time, it is only fair to Dearmer to admit that he emphasized an aspect which has been somewhat ignored in hymns; and *Songs of Praise* is not deficient in other hymns expressing other and fuller aspects.

A little side-light on Dearmer's views is given in a verbal change which he made in a hymn of my own (*S.P.* 266). It contains these lines:

*'Thyself at thine own board make manifest.
In thine own sacrament of bread and wine.'*

Dearmer altered to 'in this our sacrament,' for no possible reason except his view that the Sacrament was instituted by the Church, and not by the Lord Himself. I am ashamed to say that I weakly consented to the alteration, and I am glad that the hymn appears elsewhere in its original words. Whatever our view of the history of the Sacrament, it obviously originated with our Lord's own action. As the late Professor F. C. Burkitt, whose liberal views none will question, said to me with regard to this very phrase, 'If our Lord had not acted as He is reported to have acted, whatever His particular words, the Church would certainly never have had the Sacrament.'

There is an amusing instance of Dearmer's views, on another subject, in a hymn written by himself (*S.P.* 232).

*'Forth to the lands went Peter,
His faithful wife beside.'*

There is no question that St Peter was a married man; but really his wife plays no prominent part in the missionary story, and it seems unnecessary to drag her in.

It will be plain that there are things in *Songs of Praise* which many regret, and which some people find more than regrettable. Yet, frankly admitting all, I do honestly feel that it is not just to call the hymn book, in its general outlook, unsound in doctrine.

On the literary side, there has been some criticism because certain things are included, as from Shakespeare and Shelley, which are not hymns at all, or at any rate not hymns which any ordinary congregation would dream of singing. Dearmer's idea, as he told me, was that people would like to play them over at home. This is all very well, if space does not matter; but most people are very practical, and want a hymn book for use in church.

That is a comparatively small thing. A much more serious complaint is that certain familiar hymns have been altered, sometimes entirely garbled, sometimes by petty but irritating changes. It may not always be realized that changes may be back to the original version. For instance, in 'All people that on earth do dwell,' Kethe wrote the third line, 'Him serve with mirth,' which is in keeping with Psalm c. ('Serve the Lord with gladness'); but subsequent editors altered to 'Him serve with fear.' *Songs of Praise* quite rightly restored the original. On one occasion Dearmer was adamant, even against common sense. In the familiar version of 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer' there is a line 'Feed me now and evermore.' Dearmer insisted on putting 'Feed me till I want no more' as in *English Hymnal*. It would be difficult to prove that this is the original text; and as I. R. Darbyshire, now Archbishop of Cape Town, remarked at the time, it is capable of another interpretation! It was rare to find Dearmer without a keen sense of humour.

But it cannot be denied that in many cases *Songs of Praise* has taken great liberties with original versions.

It may be argued that words and music alike, especially by famous writers, ought to be taken as they stand; but Dearmer was quite right in his contention that such a position is not always tenable. Both hymns and tunes, even the greatest, have been constantly modified by succeeding generations. A notable instance is the hymn 'Let saints on earth in concert sing.' It departs very widely from Charles Wesley's original version, which has not only been shortened, but so much altered that not half is the original Wesley. Yet the new version is generally accepted as a classic.

Instances of other accepted changes could be multiplied. Charles Wesley did not write the opening line 'Hark, the herald angels sing'; but who would discard it for that reason? In 'Rock of Ages,' Toplady wrote the line 'When my eye-strings break in death'; but it has been altered by universal consent. Some great hymns, as for instance, 'Lo, he comes with clouds descending' have suffered amazing transformations.

That great man, John Wesley, insisted that his hymns should be taken 'just as they are, for better for worse.' On the whole, he was right; yet he himself altered Herbert, and slightly altered Watts; and other editors have been much more drastic. Dearmer's fault, if any, is not so much that he did it, but that he overdid it, and not always happily. It is a risky business, which only success can justify.

One outstanding example of re-writing is that of Bunyan's Pilgrim Song; though this did not originate with *Songs of Praise*, but with *The English Hymnal*. Since a famous critic like Mrs Meynell warmly approved the change, it may seem an impertinence for us lesser folk to criticize; but there are a good many people who resent the alteration of Bunyan.

*'Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
Can daunt his spirit'*

may be strong meat, but it is strong.

*'Since, Lord, thou dost defend
Us with thy Spirit,'*

can hardly be considered on the same level.

With many other hymns Dearmer took many more liberties. He had a curiously childlike faith that if people got something more or less like that to which they were accustomed, they would never notice the difference. The degree of his success was naturally variable; and criticism must inevitably fall on his failures.

*'Crown him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon his throne'*

may not be a great hymn, but it is a live hymn. Dearmer's substitute;—

*'Crown him upon the throne
Of justice and of right'—*

is not far from journalese. Nor was he justified in mutilating the rhythm of Blackie's 'Angels holy' to fit a special tune. These are only a few examples of many drastic changes.

A very interesting situation arose with Keble's hymn, 'When God of old came down from heaven.' It is a popular hymn with considerable merits; but it has the very grave fault that Keble's contrast between the thunder and lightning of Sinai and the gentle fire of Pentecost has no justification in Acts ii. Dearmer, with his intense passion for truthfulness, could not tolerate this. But the fact remained that the hymn filled a gap. What was to be done? On his usual principle that something of the same sort could be substituted, Dearmer first suggested writing a hymn 'When men of old looked up to Heaven' I do not know to this day how far he was serious, and how far it was his freakish sense of humour; but I remember protesting that it would raise a storm of indignation. The final effort I did not see until it was in print. The first verse runs:

*'When Christ had shown God's dawning Reign,
His Spirit came to lead,
That unto truth we might attain,
And all the world be freed'*

I make no comment on that. The verses following are better; but it shows the difficulties into which Dearmer's method was bound at times to land him.

There is no space to comment at length on the other original features of *Songs of Praise*. Dearmer was essentially original; and originality is a virtue, but a virtue which entails risks. There is an amazingly long hymn (*S.P.* 306), a strange medley of verses, about which a correspondent has just written to me. It refers to most things, from calves and lions to beans and potatoes. It has a section on conduct, with verses like the following:

*'From cruelty, slander, and keeping things back,
From white lies and grey lies and lies that are black,
And every temptation to draw the long bow.'*

My correspondent writes: 'It surely takes First Prize for the world's worst hymn.' I am not so sure of that. There is a good deal of competition for that First Prize in every hymn book. I think I know worse, even in *Songs of Praise*, and certainly outside it. This 'hymn' is quite healthy of its kind ; its real fault is that it is out of place. In a School Song Book, a little jollity and slang, with verses not too bad, would pass muster ; but it comes strangely in a first-class hymn book. Nor is it improved by the fact that it directly follows that great hymn 'Jerusalem, my happy home.'

I hope that I have not dealt too unkindly with an old friend, to whom, like many others, I owe so much. No man of our generation has done more to raise the standard of English hymnody; and *Songs of Praise* is his most notable achievement. Dr Millar Patrick wrote to me, 'Shorn of its Dearmerisms the book would easily be the best in the language.' I believe it is easily the best, in spite of its Dearmerisms.

Naturally, in an article like this, I am compelled to deal mainly with the criticisms of the book; and I have tried to be perfectly honest. It would be a much more congenial task to describe the merits of the book. I have already said that no other hymn book affords such a selection for the seasons of the Church's Year; and that can be said with equal truth of the general hymns. That a pair of scissors would be useful, as Dr Millar Patrick suggests, may not be denied; but the residue is larger, and of a higher standard, than in any other hymn book. It is not surprising that *Songs of Praise* has won its place; it has won it on its merits.

Every hymn book is faced by one of two dangers. If it is the work of a single autocrat, it bears the mark of his personal mistakes, which a committee might check. If it is the work of a committee, especially a representative committee, it is full of compromises, to suit all tastes. There are not a few hymn books of repute which, for that very reason, are a combination of Worth and Woolworth. Whatever the faults of *Songs of Praise*, it has its standards. It does not descend to sentimental songs, as even *The English Hymnal* does, when it includes 'Hark, hark my soul.' Nor can one imagine *Songs of Praise* admitting, as *The English Hymnal* does, such a hymn as 'Hold the fort, for I am coming.' The inclusion of things like these can only be due to a desire to please everybody; and in pleasing everybody you are bound to lower your standard.

Of the tunes there is little that I need say. People whose taste is for 'sugar and spice and all that's nice,' will certainly not care for them; at any rate, not until their taste improves; but competent musicians everywhere will agree that they have set a new standard. There is only one criticism to be made. It does not always occur to musical editors that the suitability of a tune depends not only on its intrinsic merits, but on the number of verses to which it is to be sung. For instance, 'Brightest and best' is set, as in *The English Hymnal*, to that very great tune, LIEBSTER IMMANUEL, to be sung in slow time. It is a gorgeous tune, which one can sing at that slow pace once or twice with great enjoyment. It may even run to a third verse; but in the fourth and fifth such a tune is apt to become rather heavy going. But this is a small criticism of a very fine collection. There are doubtless omitted some stirring tunes, even though not great classics, like LYDIA to 'O for a thousand tongues' and CWM RHONDDA to 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer' which we should like to have seen included. But no book, however complete, can contain everything that is good; and no other book has such a collection of great tunes.

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