



The New Nazi Hymn Book

Treasure No 5: The New Nazi Hymn Book by Millar Patrick: An article from Bulletin No. 20, July 1942

There has recently been published in Germany, by the Press of the “German Christian” group, a new hymn book entitled *Grosser Gott wir loben Dich* (Schneider & Co., Weimar). A long review of it in the magazine *Theologische Blätter* gives some idea of its character.

Whereas previous books gave about 500 hymns, this one contains only 284. More than two-thirds of the old hymns are rejected, and those retained are greatly shortened and their text often radically altered. The changes made have in great measure been governed by the principle that all references to the Old Testament and the Holy Land must be excluded. This follows from the fact that the body responsible for the book was the Institute for the Investigation of Jewish Influence on German Church Life. The words “Hallelujah,” “Jehovah,” “Psalter,” “Psalm,” and “Temple,” disappear. The substitute for Hallelujah is “Gott sei gelobt.” The ancient hymn “Jerusalem du hochgebaute Stadt” becomes “O Ewigkeit du lichte Gottesstadt.” Luther’s “Ein’ feste Burg” has the words “Zion” and “Herr Zebaoth” withdrawn from it. The Covenant of God may no longer be mentioned, and any reference to God’s Promise is disallowed.

Nearly half of the book is taken up by 129 hymns and poems from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is a radical break with tradition. Among these pieces there are prayers of many great Germans such as Beethoven, Fichte, and Hebbel.

The poetic quality of the ninety-three modern poems included is very unequal. Many of them contain the most extraordinarily unpoetic expressions, such as “O Liebe du, wir warten sehnsuchterbanget” (O Love, we await thee, affrighted with longing); and, as the reviewer says, who could really sing such a line as this: “Wir preisen den Kampf und den letzten Schrei” (We praise the fight and the shriek of death)? Many of the songs in this section have beautiful words and rousing melodies, but none of them re-echo the Biblical language. They have many favourite ideas, such as the ploughman and ploughing, the sower and the seed. The contents are arranged, not under the four headings of previous usage (Church Year, Church and Means of Grace, Christian Life, Death, Judgment, and Eternity), but under these: Praise, Holy Fatherland, The Celebrating Community (*feiernde Gemeinde*), In the Course of the Year, and In the Quiet.

The first part contains a number of hymns to Nature, such as “Arise joyously to praise the sun.” The second sets the nation in place of the Church. There are no missionary hymns,—missions, in the minds of the compilers, being no longer a concern of the Church. In place of these, there are modern hymns in three sub-sections : The Nation before God, Preparedness, Dedication of Work. The third section contains morning and evening hymns of faith and trust, the faith being of a very general and indeterminate character. It includes hymns for baptism, confirmation, marriage, and Communion. Several baptismal hymns make no mention of our Lord. One of them begins: “Du Kindlein zart aus deutschen Blut” (O tender child of German blood), and contains the lines, “We baptize you to service and bravery for devotion and loyalty to the nation in the new age.” The Christian sacrament has been transformed into a kind of dedication to the nation. So it goes on. The only hymn of penitence left is Luther’s “Austiefer Not.” Luther’s Easter hymns have all been east out.

The reviewer, who throughout dissociates himself from the tendency of the new book, concludes: “We began by recording how much of what is in our old hymn book has been omitted in this one; now on the contrary we say: there are still too many of the old hymns! They break the unity of the book, because they contradict its spirit. Anybody whose aim is that of the editors of this book, should leave aside Luther, Gerhardt, Tersteegen, and our old hymnody, and set something real and completely new in the place of a book which is inwardly divided into two disparate halves.”

In a leading article on this subject, *The Times* of 12th May comments thus on the strange evidence the book described affords “of *Gründlichkeit*, of the painstaking thoroughness with which Germans carry abstract ideas to their logical conclusion. The idea of the superiority of the German race over the Jewish being once admitted, nothing will content the ‘German Christian’ or neo-pagan editor appointed or encouraged by the Party but the elimination of everything Jewish from an ancient and honoured hymnal, even though it involves the omission or the deformation of some of Luther’s finest hymns. Many Christian Germans will wonder how soon the same liberties will be taken with the Gospels.”

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