



Hymns and Youth

Treasure No 19: Hymns and Youth by Erik Routley: An article from Bulletin 71, Spring 1955

I must begin these observations by asking my reader's pardon for a very offensive title. If there be any to whom the generic use of the word 'youth' brings occasion for a sigh or a snort, I assure him that it brings it equally to me. Let us agree—it is an abominable word, fit only for those people who think of their fellow men as undifferentiated units in large chunks of humanity, here a chunk called 'Youth', there a chunk called 'Adolescents', yonder a chunk called 'adult's and elsewhere, I daresay, a chunk called 'the upper income bracket'. I place it at the head of these inconsiderable musings not to approve it but to pillory it, to heave a large half- brick at it, to treat it and all the shabby thinking it stands for with the contempt they deserve.

It was nine years ago that we read in this *Bulletin* an able article by the Reverend Eric Shave (then of Streatham, now of Bromley) on 'The Problem of the Children's Hymn'. It may be recalled that this was a discussion of the conclusions which had at that time been reached by the majority of those who had children, and particularly children's hymn singing, to handle and direct. Three things, said Mr. Shave, are disappearing: the element of fear attitude of patronage, and bad words and music. For this we may be thankful, and we may hope that the process has continued in the same direction during the decade that has gone since he wrote those words. I am prepared to accept all that Mr. Shave wrote for his is a mind uncontaminated by the stigma of 'Youth Work' which his fellow-Congregationalists, as I happen to know, at one time caused him to bear.

But I am led to offer a few further reflections about this by the accident of my having had in my hands recently a young people's hymn book, now a generation old, on which I was asked to offer some comments with a view to its possible revision, and which I was bound to judge to be still, so long after its publication, in the very front rank of young people's hymn books. I do not want to discuss, or even to name, that book here; but there is something which, with respect to the learned in the theory of education I feel constrained to say on the whole issue of young people's hymns.

I react violently to the notion of 'Youth' in this and in other fields of thought because, as I believe, it is a sign of a false notion in the minds of the grown-ups who use the word. In our own field, the segregation of hymns 'for youth' into a section of their own, or even the compilation of an index of hymns suitable for 'youth' indicates that, in the view of some editor, all hymns are suitable for grown-ups, but not all hymns are suitable for 'youth' I believe that is accepted almost universally as a self-evident proposition that neither demands nor is capable of proof. It is that very proposition which I impugn. I submit that the reverse is the truth: that not all hymns are suitable for public use by older Christians, but that all hymns whatsoever are suitable for young Christians.

We must at once anticipate an objection. It will be said, 'If all hymns are suitable for young people, will you also contend that all books are suitable for young people?' Not at all. The difference between hymns and literature is a difference between species and genus. Hymns, considered (as we are here considering them) as sacred verse, are not merely a species of literature, but a remote sub-species of a species. And in the process of diversification which leads us from the genus literature to the sub-species 'hymn' that quality in virtue of which we endeavour to separate harmful literature from wholesome literature has disappeared; for it is part of the definition of a hymn that it shall handle a sacred subject, and that excludes the possibility of its handling a pernicious subject. To be sure, a hymn can be misleading; it may, and still purport to be a hymn, contain false doctrine. But in that case it is no more suitable for the older people than for the younger. We endeavour to place the horror comic and the obscene book out of reach of the young people wishing that we could also place them out of reach of the older, but relying on the convention that we can in such extreme instances circumscribe the freedom of the 'minor' in a manner which, if it were applied no matter how benevolently to those of mature years, would be in principle intolerable. In hymns, there is no question of our having to guard against what may be harmful to the younger mind, now that, *ex hypothesi* the lurid and pathologically gruesome has disappeared from the hymn-singer's vocabulary. (The only hymn I can at present think of which remains in common use and which contains sentiments that a mature mind can assimilate with the Gospel but that might mislead a younger mind is 'Lo, he comes in the version which survives still in one or two books: here I hold that *Songs of Praise* has produced a workable version and is to be commended).

But we can go further: the obscene book and the horror comic do not appeal, *qua* obscene, to the adult mind. They are not in virtue of their obscenity mature literature. The *Decameron* appeals to the mature mind on quite other grounds. It is the stunted mind, the infantile mind (to use that adjective in its strict psychological sense), that delights in Cruelty and dirt. Our removal of this kind of literature from the field which young people may explore is therefore not undertaken because this literature is grown-up but precisely in as much as it is *infantile*; it helps young people not to grow up but to grow down. The removal of literature from young people's reach on any other grounds is, we must agree, indefensible. That frontier-area which includes great literature that *might* do harm if irresponsibly read is small area: I suppose it bears about the same quantitative relation to the whole of literature as 'Lo he comes' does to the total contents of an average hymn book. I feel, then, that it is safe to dismiss this analogy as false and, so far these considerations are concerned, to make young people free of the hymn book.

We now come to another conscientious objection, which is to be met in the form 'But they won't *understand* what they are singing'. Now I am assuming my 'young person' is any person who can read and whose imagination has begun to function, but who is still properly to be regarded as under tutelage. This person is still in the condition of being educated, of being 'brought up'. It is still legitimate for the older people to give thought to the manner in which he is to be brought up. I take it that this person is not yet of an age wholly to shoulder the responsibilities of church membership; and I suppose I must own that I come from a religious tradition which puts confirmation late—at about eighteen—and holds that it implies responsible judgement in Church Meeting as well as admission to the Lord's Table. I do not wish to be controversial on that point now; but it must be clear that a young person should be deemed to be religiously *in statu pupillari* during the natural evolutions of childhood and adolescence. To the objector, then, I reply, 'No, perhaps he cannot understand: but he can imagine, and he can remember, and he can learn'.

What teacher is content to offer his pupils only those parts of knowledge which they can at once, and without effort, fully grasp. Is not the good teacher the teacher who can judge just what his pupils' arm's reach, demand that they exert themselves to full extent of that reach. And be satisfied with nothing less? Is it not a hideous solecism to talk down to children? Is it not the way of social errors to

talk to a ten-year-old as though he were a five-year-old, and to a sixteen-year-old as though he were a twelve-year-old? May we not hazard the judgement that of the two errors ‘talking down’ and ‘talking over their heads’, the former is more grievous and scandalous? It may well be said that in the eighteenth century, before the days of Ann and Jane Taylor, they committed the second error, and expected children, to sing the greatest, and occasionally the grossest, hymns along with everybody else. Has the modern fashion of confining children to what is consciously and essentially childish resulted in greater strength for the church, in stopping the leakage from the Sunday schools, in more conversions?

The notion that it does harm to sing what is not fully understood is a partial and inadequate basis for the judgment of what is proper for public worship. It is not unlike, in the texture of mind it betrays, the contention that to recite the Apostles’ Creed without wholly understanding it or agreeing with it is hypocrisy. It comes from the intellectual renaissance of what we please to call universal education. (The Puritans who inveighed against ‘vain repetitions’ and all manner of congregational speech in worship were the most advanced intellectuals of their age: in that was their strength. But they were not strong in poetry and imagination). Provided that what is sung be in fact true, and clearly seen by a mature judge to be true, it does no harm whatever that its appeal to a young mind will be imaginative rather than, reasonable. Of course its appeal will be imaginative; for one thing, the music will ensure that. Shall I ever forget the day when, at the age of eight, after being brought up at church on some of the seamier material in the *Sunday School Hymn Books* I heard and sang ‘Praise to the Holiest’? And can I dare to underestimate what a large part Dykes’s tune played in adding to the imaginative effect of those astonishing words? Finally, dare I claim that even now I have so fully understood the words of that hymn that I shall find nothing new in it when I sing it tomorrow? By the same token, I came to ‘Come O thou Traveller’ in my early adolescence. Here again it was associated, where I learnt it, with a wonderfully romantic tune,¹ and that word, ‘Traveller’ the very essence of what the literary men call ‘romance’, found its way into my heart at once. It was years before I read Genesis with any intelligence but what matter? I had Wesley almost by heart by then. I have elsewhere ventured to refer to the first time I became conscious of the word ‘amazing’ in ‘When I survey’—not on the first occasion on which I sang the hymn by a long way. But do I yet ‘understand’ what ‘When I survey’ is saying?

These examples are intended to indicate that a youngster will positively *like* what is ‘big’ and demanding in hymnody. But that is not the whole story. Not only am I grateful for the experience of meeting the hymns I have always loved: I am grateful also for having been made to sing and learn hymns which I have come to love but which at the time I disliked intensely. When I was at school (and I must ask the reader’s pardon for all this autobiography), I used to amuse myself by keeping a retrospective lectionary of all the hymns we sang in Chapel; we sang on an average twenty hymns a week out of the *English Hymnal*. I recall that I was moved to do this by a dark suspicion that the School Chaplain (one of the saints of our time) was giving us certain hymns with oppressive frequency (and in the main I was wrong). I used to underline in red ink the numbers of those which seemed to my fourteen-year-old mind ‘good’, and in purple those I thought ‘bad’. I have long since lost these records, but I can vividly remember how many of the ‘bad’ tunes I have since come to value. That is of no interest whatever except in these two respects: that it has helped me to realise what kind of music young people may find difficult, and that it indicates that positive harm will be done if hymns are judged suitable for young people merely on the ground that they will at first hearing *like* them. What a person *likes* and *dislikes* tells us a good deal about the person and about the thing liked or disliked; but it tells us nothing about the question whether that thing should be kept out of that person’s reach. This is no facile latter-day puritanism. On the contrary, ‘I don’t like it’ means, as often as not, ‘That disturbs me’ or ‘That impresses me’, and may be a fair indication that that is what I shall profit by wrestling with.

¹ COTSWOLD, C.P. 496 ii.

I trust I have sufficiently shown the ground on which I hold that all hymns suitable for mature Christians are *a fortiori* suitable for young Christians. I would modify this, under pressure, only so far as to admit that I really mean ‘all *great* hymns’ ‘all *universal* hymns’. I believe that if it could be shown that a given hymn was really more suitable for older folk than for younger, and should positively not be chosen for younger people, then it could be shown to be a hymn defective to the extent of requiring an indulgence or an historical sympathy that only an older person could be expected to furnish. A hymn cannot go far in this direction and retain its claim to be described as great, or as universal. But now I must turn to the other half of my proposition, namely, that not all hymns are suitable for older people. By this I mean that it is possible for a hymn to be of a kind that may set a younger person on the way of faith, but that may encourage in the older, if they cling to it, the breeding of the germs of a virulent religious disease. To this disease I have already referred—it may be called *infantilism*.

We are required to grow up, but growing up is not always an agreeable business. All of us are tempted to try to recapture the security, the care-freedom of the child’s condition. Who can be blamed for yielding to this temptation in days as dangerous as the present? But then it is the very ominousness of the times that makes it more than usually necessary to sound a warning against the pernicious effects of this spiritual disorder. There is, to keep this argument within our special terms of reference, a kind of hymn that corresponds to the ‘milk’ of Hebrews v. 12, as compared with the ‘strong meat’ of v. 14, which is appropriate to men of mature years. I contend that it is not merely wasteful but sinful for men of mature years to go back to milk. But except he be disciplined in his faith or well directed by his fathers in God, he will go back to it.

I say there is a kind of hymn that corresponds to ‘milk’; but perhaps there are three forms in which this kind is to be found. First, there is the childish hymn, the hymn which is content to say too little, or to express the eternal Verities in too affable; too familiar, too sweet language. This is the great fault in popular Roman Catholic hymnody. Then, there is the romantic hymn, which expresses the Christian Way in a fashion which assimilates it too closely with the virtues of the public school, or of the adventure story, or of the manual of popular science. Then there is the ‘Sankey’ type of Gospel song. Now all these have their place either in teaching young Christians their first steps in the faith, or in making the faith friendly to them in difficult times like adolescence, or in rescuing them from an unnatural divorce from the faith of their fathers. Milk is right for babies and right for invalids: but healthy men need strong meat as well. Along with the hymns goes the appropriate music: there is the treacly and over-amiably tune like so many of those that come from 19th century Catholic song books (STELLA, ST. LUKE, REQUIEM, SAWSTON, ST. CATHARINE); there is the typical ‘Public School’ tune of which the late W. H. Ferguson was the most celebrated exponent; and there is the ‘Sankey’ tune and its latter-day counterpart in modern religious revival meetings.

But it comes to this: that it is right for a boy of ten to be mentally aged ten, but horrifying to find a man of forty who is mentally aged ten. In most secular and public matters no man of forty would want to be taken for anything less than forty. But in intimate matters he often seeks, except he be helped and encouraged by the example and temper of his fellow Christians, to be ten again. There, perhaps, is the real indictment of the indiscriminate use of sentimental, over-hearty, and revivalistic words and music. We have not yet encountered anybody who deliberately sets out to ‘soften up’ a congregation, to reduce them to a low mental age in *1984* style by the calculated use of infantile words and music. Or have we ?

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