



Hymns in School Worship

Treasure No 31: Hymns in School Worship by Donald Hughes, Head Master of Rydal School: An article from Bulletin 104, September 1965

In the nature of things, a schoolmaster spends most of his time addressing people who know less about what he is talking about than he does. He has chosen his career with this principle in mind. By the time that his audience's knowledge is in any danger of approaching his own not necessarily very exalted level, he arranges that they shall be taught by someone else. When unavoidably he finds amongst his pupils the occasional precocious specimen whose level of knowledge is a potential source of embarrassment, he has a number of devices, born of discipline out of experience for silencing or circumventing them. This accounts for the air of complacency and even of omniscience which people find so unendearing a characteristic of my profession. So you will understand that when I sat down to try to prepare this paper, the question which loomed largest in my mind was how on earth I had managed to put myself—and you—in this predicament. For you are all experts on the subject of hymns and my credentials are those of the merest amateur, as I shall shortly show.

My first instinct, of course, was to crib wholesale from the brilliant outline of the history of hymnology with which Dr Erik Routley has adorned the new hymn book, *Hymns for Church and School*. And then, with a sinking feeling, I realized that the distinguished author is not only the high office in your Society, but might easily be presiding over this gathering this morning. And I felt as some modest enthusiast about our railway system might feel if, having promised to give a talk to a Railway Society, he discovered that the name of the chairman was Bradshaw, and that a vote of thanks would be proposed afterwards by Dr Beeching. (When I found that Dr Routley wouldn't be here after all, it was too late.)

In the presence of experts, subterfuge is futile. I can only put my cards on the table—it is a pretty thin hand—and ask for your indulgence. My one really high trump is that I am a Methodist, a son of the Manse, indeed, who from his earliest days attended two services every Sunday as a matter of course (and, I may say, without complaint), and whose native air from infancy was the magnificent legacy of song which is the Methodists' true liturgy. So I cannot help having some knowledge of hymns, though my love of them is mixed with nostalgia, and associations which have nothing to do with theology or poetic merit, and my criticism is, for that reason, almost entirely unreliable. As for school worship, I have a certain experience of that—about thirty years of it in two Methodist boarding schools; and that experience, I suppose, if I can interpret it intelligently, must be of some relevance to the theme of this paper. But I am conscious that it is a limited experience, and I am cautious of erecting any general conclusions on it.

It is true, as you know and as I therefore must admit, that I have made several attempts to write hymns. All that I have proved by these attempts is that it is extraordinarily difficult to solve the problem—which someone has got to solve—of writing hymns in this age. There seems to be something about contemporary methods of expression in verse which is incompatible with the regular shape and rhymes which traditionally (though not invariably) a hymn demands. The only successful—that is to say, widely-read—poet who appears to me to have the equipment for writing hymns is Mr John Betjeman, and I wish that he would do it. I can only assume that he is the angel who fears to tread where fools like myself, however tentatively, rush

in. As a matter of fact, the only successful hymn that I have written, in my opinion, was composed for a service which I drew up in an effort to meet liturgically the challenge of the thought-forms employed by the Bishop of Woolwich in *Honest to God*. The first hymn in that service is designed to cater for the Bishop's statement that we must stop thinking about God vertically, and look for him, not up, but down. This is its first verse:

*O worship the Tiling
Mysterious below,
In what terms to sing
We don't really know.
The image of Father
Has now been destroyed,
So we will preach rather
The Gospel of Freud.*

I give you that example in all honesty so that you may recognize in me an incurable frivolity which prevents me from appearing among you in the pretentious guise of a twentieth-century inheritor of the mantle of Charles Wesley.

There is one advantage that I have in talking about this subject, and that is that I work in a school where the congregational singing is exceptionally good. I make claim without hesitation because I cannot possibly be held to qualify for any credit in the matter. It is a simple fact of experience that visiting preachers, especially those who come from other schools, hardly ever fail to comment on the quality of the schools' singing.

I believe there are three reasons for their singing well. First: about fifty per cent are Methodists, and possibly half of these come from good Methodist homes, so they have been brought up in a tradition of good, hearty singing. Secondly, the shape and acoustical properties of the Chapel are such as to make congregational singing easy. Thirdly, and most important, there is the Director of Music, whose own qualities and views are largely responsible for the whole thing. He believes in quantity and not only in quality. He has a large choir, consisting of about a quarter of the school. Many of these are peripheral, of course, and are recognized as such. I must make it plain in fairness to him that high standards are not sacrificed for them. The quality of the *select* choir within the choir is indicated by the fact that they have won five choral scholarships to Cambridge in the last three years. But a large choir means that a large proportion of the school attends regular choir practices. Add to that the *concert* choir, which combines once a year for oratorio with a girls' school, and which attracts a large number of volunteers (some for the sake of the oratorios and others for the sake of the girls' school), and you will see how many there are, besides those who might be called the professional singers, who have learned that there is a lot of fun to be got from singing as well.

I am most anxious not to be misunderstood at this point. I am not claiming any merit for our boys other than that they sing well as a congregation. I don't mean to say that our services are any better, or our worship any more effective, than those in any other school. I certainly don't mean that the congregation is any more virtuous. There is no necessary correlation between fervour in singing and depth of religious feeling. I never feel that 'Abide with me' at Wembley is a very significant indication of the religious condition of the nation, and anyone who has listened to the Welsh crowd at Cardiff Arms Park before a Rugby Match should know the difference between soulful singing and spiritual quality. I remember a friend of mine, a Methodist minister and a keen follower of Rugby Football, who found himself at Twickenham once in a pocket of Welsh invaders. He was moved and thrilled by the rendering of devotional hymns before the match, and he picked out one tenor in particular as being a man of considerably saintly character. He was sadly disillusioned when the game began, and his sensitive ears were assailed by a stream of language, emanating from the same tenor voice, consisting of what Chesterton once called 'theological expressions which hold no doctrinal significance'. 'Angel voices ever singing' is the first line of one of the hymns that our boys sing best. It is very far from a description of the singers.

But I would make the point that they sing well because they enjoy it, and they enjoy it because they do it well; quality and enjoyment are interdependent and both are needed if the singing of hymns is going to contribute to worship. Indeed, I would go further. I believe that when a number of boys, met together in the context of the school chapel, feel themselves at one with each other and lose themselves in communal singing, even apart from their consciousness (or lack of it) of the meaning of the words they sing, they partake—though not necessarily at a deep level—of that mystery which we call the numinous: this may lie one of the tasks, however simple, that set the soul who does them free. I think of one member of our sixth form who calls himself an agnostic and who ostentatiously refrains from any devotional act when he comes into chapel, but who sings every word of every hymn with manifest enjoyment. I firmly believe that in doing so he is being more really religious than he knows, or would care to admit, or than anyone ought to tell him!

I think that I ought now to face the question of compulsory school services—for it is in the setting of such services that I am considering the singing of hymns. I will tell you why I think that they are not just defensible, but positively right. I don't mean, of course, that there is no room for voluntary services, which have their own very precious atmosphere; but we are a religious foundation, and on Sundays we have two services which the whole school attends, and I am not disposed to be at all defensive about it—though I don't think that there is any magic about the number *two*.

In the first place I should argue that a school is a place in which most important things are compulsory—unless, indeed, it is one of these temples of permissiveness where the Ego is supreme and nobody is made to do anything. We are more traditional than that. We compel people to attend classes, to play games, to be present at all meals, and to be in bed (we hope, asleep) for an appropriate period every night. This compulsion, on the whole, is taken for granted and not resented. In such a community there is an obvious correlation, implicitly, between importance and compulsion. I mean, the boys feel that you expect them to do the things that you consider important, and you leave them free to please themselves in affairs that don't matter so much. If you make them do French and Rugby Football and insist that they turn up to lunch, and then tell them that they needn't go to chapel unless they want to, they conclude, not that religion is too sacred and personal to be made compulsory, but that you believe that French, football and food matter very much, but that religion matters less. If you make them do them all, as a matter of course, they accept the whole thing as, at worst, part of the inscrutable adult pattern of values.

Of course, there is no such thing as compulsory worship: but then we don't go in for forcible feeding. What there is is a compulsory opportunity for worship, like the opportunity for eating. We accept the undoubted fact that the school in chapel will operate, as it were, at different levels. Some will experience real devotion; others will enjoy only a good sing. But we are thankful for what we get. We recognize that it is our duty to make the whole thing as painless as possible, to keep the services short and try to make them interesting; and I honestly think that the congregation has very little to complain of. Sunday is a day which is full of freedom for them. The only demand that we make is that they meet together twice in the day, for about 40 minutes on each occasion, and experience, as a community and as individuals, some contact with the mystery which surrounds all life. Pascal said, 'There are two types of men who can be called reasonable: those who serve God with all their hearts because they know Him, and those who seek for God with all their hearts because they don't know Him'. That is what we should like to be a description of our school congregation: why should we encourage those who have prematurely abandoned the quest?

Secondly, the voluntary principle creates all sorts of avoidable tensions. In a close community like a boarding school, few activities are as voluntary as they may seem to be. A boy is subject to all sorts of social pressures; he may refrain from going to chapel because he belongs to a tough gang and lacks the courage to be non-conformist; he may attend in a self-conscious, pious pose, because he is proud being a non-conformist. In this realm the community may save the young from unnecessary friction and harmful tension by taking the decision for them, and I think we ought to do it. I speak, of course, for schools that are religious foundations, so that people know what they are in for when they attend them. The problem of compulsory services in the state schools of a secular society is rather different, though I should still defend them, I think, provided that they can be conducted by people who are convinced and sincere and who will (if you see what I mean) not try to make them too religious.

I must get back to hymns. I want to say a little about the principle of ‘having a good sing’, by which I mean the notorious tendency of congregations to sing tunes, not words, and indeed to have a very vague idea, if any, or the statements to which they are committing themselves, often *fortissimo*.

This is something to which the modern generation is very accustomed. In the world of popular music the words often hardly bear examination. The host of them spring from a folklore which is quite remote from contemporary life. The obvious example is the mythology of negro spirituals. A few years ago the Black and White Minstrels made very popular a song which repeated this line—‘Michael, row the boat ashore—Hallelujah!’ I once asked a sixth form who Michael was, and what he was doing in a boat. None of them knew and none of them thought it mattered. I asked them whether it would do equally well if they sang. ‘Michael, show the goat the door: it’s peculiar’. They thought that it would. Thousands of people in a football stadium every Saturday throughout the season express vocally their desire to be of that number when the saints go marching in. I believe that in Liverpool there is a superstition to the effect that the Fourth Gospel was written by a centre-forward.

One of the inept things that Adam Faith said in his television discussion with the Archbishop of York was that the church was at fault in its hymns, because the lyrics were incomprehensible. My point is that a great many popular songs are rooted in a mythology which people no longer understand, but that this doesn’t stop them singing them.

Since this is part of the current pattern, one ought not to be surprised that it is practised also in chapel. Boys love the Welsh tune CWM RHONDDA, and they love to sing the last verse at the top of their voices—the one that says ‘When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside’. When you tell them that it is about death, they don’t doubt it, but they don’t see the relevance because they are accustomed to singing tunes and not words.

I think, of course, that we have to resist this tendency as far as we can. Sometimes we have an evening service without a sermon, which consists largely of expounding hymns and then singing them (the sort of thing we did last night, only shorter). I like to explain to the school, about every three years, George Herbert’s magnificent poem. ‘Teach me, my God and King’, so that they may understand the striking imagery of a verse that none of them understands at first sight:

*A man that looks on glass
On it may stay his eye,
Or if he pleases, through it pass
And then the heaven espy.*

They are glad, I think, to know what it means, although it is extraordinary how quickly they forget.

I believe, in spite of all that I have said about this habit of singing meaningless words in the pop-world, that we ought to pay more attention to the words of the hymns that we ask the young to sing, and to make sure that they are dignified, good theology, and appropriate to the congregation. There is some appalling phraseology in some hymns which slips by unnoticed because of the tune with which it is linked. I will limit myself to a few examples.

We have in the Methodist book a splendid hymn about the Emmaus road:

*Lord Jesus, in the days of old
Two walked with thee in waning light:*

The third verse begins, regrettably—

*Perchance we have not always wist
Who has been with us by the way.*

‘Perchance’ and ‘wist’—no one ought to be asked to sing such archaisms, which were already archaic and self-conscious when the hymn was written.

Among my aversions are hymns which employ a kind of sentimental Victorian version of Arthurian chivalry as their mythology (some written, I ought to say, by public-school headmasters in the last century) and hymns which call on the young to rescue the Eternal Truth from the collapse into which it will fall if they don’t rescue it:

*Rise up, O men of God,
The Church for you doth wait:
Her strength unequal to her task,
Rise up and make her great.*

You recognize the pampered youth taking his hands out of his pockets and having half a mind, in a renewal of transient idealism, to devote a little of his spare time to the task. I can’t hope to command much agreement with my next example, but I cannot share the enthusiasm with which many sentimental, middle-aged people listen to boys in a public school chapel singing Bunyan’s ‘pilgrim-hymn’—

*He who would valiant be,
Take a good look at me ...*

or words to that effect. I believe that the Christian way is to be entered on more humbly than that; I much prefer Bunyan when he is writing prose.

There are some hymns that are inappropriate for boys for different reasons; hymns which call for dedication in terms which are either irrelevant, or make too great a demand on the sincerity of a whole congregation. I feel like this when I hear a crowd of young North Country materialists singing

*Take my silver and my gold:
Not a mite would I withhold.*

There are sentiments which are too deeply devotional to be sung lightly or sung often. I don’t know how many other hymn books besides the Methodist include that beautiful Indian hymn which begins

*One who is all unfit to count
As scholar in thy school.*

If you know it, you will know that it contains sentiments of self-abasement. expressions of the humility of holiness, which few congregations ought to be called—or allowed—to sing except in very special circumstances.

I have already said that I don’t believe that we ought, in school, to sing ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’ very often, but I do think that there are occasions when it can be sung without impropriety. I remember one of them vividly. It was a Sunday evening service which we had, of an experimental nature, as near to Easter as we came in term time last year. After an orthodox opening to the service the choir sang, as an anthem, the moving Spiritual ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ Then, instead of a sermon, two boys and a master spoke for five minutes each, the first giving, in a loose kind of verse, the point of view of Pontius Pilate, the second speaking as Judas, and the third (from the pulpit) as Simon Peter, in the events which led up to the Crucifixion. Before each speaker, one or two relevant verses from the Gospel were read. The atmosphere which had been created by this quite unexpected approach was memorably emphasized when

the whole congregation then sang 'When I survey'. I can remember no more impressive example of the contribution of a hymn to school worship.

Another example which comes to my mind is the singing of 'God be with you till we meet again', which has become the traditional way of ending the last service of the school year. I know that it may be mixed up with nostalgia and sentimentality and all sorts of things at which it is easy to laugh, but there may be true religion in these things and I believe that there is, for many of us, a valid spiritual experience as we unite in that corporate expression of our membership of one another, in the context of the school Chapel.

I have said that I believe that good theology ought to be one of the elements of a hymn. Anyone brought up on the hymns of Charles Wesley would have to say that. I cannot resist reading to you what I believe to be one of the most perfect examples of the hymn-writer's art. It is Wesley's superb hymn on the Church Militant and Triumphant. In some hymnals it begins 'Let saints on earth in concert sing', but I shall read it to you in the version in our Methodist hymn book (824):

*Come, let us join our friends above
That have obtained the prize,
And on the eagle wings of love
To joys celestial rise:
Let all the saints terrestrial sing.
With those to glory gone;
For all the servants of our King,
In earth and heaven, are one.*

*One family we dwell in Him,
One Church, above, beneath,
Though now divided by the stream,
The narrow stream of death:
One army of the living God,
To His command we bow;
Part of His host have crossed the flood,
And part are crossing now.*

*Ten thousand to their endless home
This solemn moment fly;
And we are to the margin come,
And we expect to die;
Ev'n now by faith we join our hands
With those that went before.
And greet the blood-besprinkled bands
On the eternal shore.*

*Our spirits too shall quickly join,
Like theirs with glory crowned.
And shout to see our Captain's sign,
To hear His trumpet sound.
O that we now might grasp our Guide!
O that the word were given!
Come, Lord of hosts, the waves divide,
And land us all in heaven.*

I know of no better hymn than that. I agree with Bernard Manning that even the deservedly popular 'For all the saints', on the same theme, must take second place to Wesley's poem.

*But lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of glory passes on his way—*

there is something thrilling in that verse, but it is the thrill of Tennyson's *Mort D'Arthur*. Wesley is all Biblical.

I have strayed a little from my theme, I know, because this is not a hymn for schools to sing very often (if at all). But I wanted to make my point about a great orthodox doctrine of Christianity being greatly expressed in religious verse. Having said that, I want to say something quite different.

I know a fine Christian preacher who is so wedded to orthodoxy that he will hardly choose a hymn unless it is either by Charles Wesley, or translated from the German by John Wesley. I once said in public, in his presence, that I thought highly of the hymns of Whittier; I thought that he was going to have to be helped out of the room. But I do indeed think highly of those hymns, 'Immortal Love', 'O Lord and Master of us all', 'Who fathoms the eternal thought?', 'Dear Lord and Father of mankind'. Think of that fine verse—

*In joy of inward peace, and sense
Or sorrow over sin,
He is his own best evidence,
His witness is within.*

Everyone—of any theological school—could sing that, from Wesley to Woolwich.

It is important to remember, I think, that we ought not to look for the whole Gospel in every hymn, and many not very pretentious offerings have their use. I have heard a chapel full of boys singing, with great enjoyment and some fervour 'All things bright and beautiful' after someone had said to them, in announcing it, 'This is really a hymn appropriate for young children—and none the worse for that'. In theory nothing could be more offensive to boys of 17 than to ask them to sing that sort of thing, but it didn't work out like that. It is strangely moving, in the opening moments of a carol service, to hear sophisticated (not to say hard-boiled) adolescents singing without any apparent embarrassment

*For he is our childhood's pattern,
Day by day like us he grew;
He was little, weak and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us he knew.*

In the mysterious realms of schools and of religious expression there are hardly any rules that do not know any exceptions. This is true at least of singing hymns, but preachers ignore at their peril the self-conscious sophistication of the young. The most terrible words that I have ever heard in a school chapel were uttered by a well-meaning visiting preacher who had forgotten his own youth. He had chosen some sickly illustration, of heroism in a house-match, which was bad enough. He proceeded to pile Pelion on Ossa by describing his hero in these spine-chilling terms: 'He was only a little boy' he said: 'He was only seventeen'. The waves of resentment from his indignant congregation could be felt.

Before I conclude I want to say something about the future of hymns. We have got somehow to solve the problem of writing new hymns. The preoccupation with setting familiar words to popular tunes is, I believe, wrongly conceived. Who really wants to sing 'Love divine' to the Z-car tune, or 'Abide with me' to two electric guitars and a vacuum-cleaner? In our school chapels, at any rate, most boys have a sense of what is fitting, and they know the difference between the Judgment of God and Juke Box Jury. If they fall for the blandishments of pop-experiments, it is not for long. Anyhow, they like the familiar hymn tunes and they love singing them—sometimes too much. I don't mean that we ought nor to have good contemporary hymn tunes: but if we could also fittingly set new words to the tunes which they already respect, we might help them to understand what they are all about. We need neither iconoclasm nor die-hard-ism, but a judicious

blend of the contemporary and the traditional, for we have to do with something which is the same, yesterday, today and for ever.

I have already mentioned one grave obstacle in the way of writing new hymns—that the contemporary idiom in serious verse is unfriendly to the regular metre and rhymes which we generally find needful in hymns. I find another and even greater obstacle in the fashionable current idiom of theology. It is one thing to sing about the panoply of God; it is another and a very different thing to make a joyful noise about the armoury of Woolwich Arsenal. If God, as we have just been told, is intellectually superfluous, how can we sing

*Thou art the Truth, Thy word alone
True wisdom can impart?*

If He is emotionally dispensable, it is no good crying to Him for those in peril on the sea: if He is morally intolerable, we shall find no comfort in the Rock of Ages, cleft for us, and when the darkness deepens, He will not be there to abide with us in the shadows. Would you join with much enthusiasm in a hymn which began

*Eternal God of everything,
To whom we tentatively sing,
O image that has got to go,
Since Dr Bultmann tells us so ...?*

Hymn singing cannot really be indulged in unless faith is stronger than doubt; if the old simplicities are believed to have lost their validity: if in an age which is more scientific than poetic we no longer understand, as our fathers understood, that mystery can be conveyed only in metaphor: then hymn-singing is bound to flag. It is clearly unthinkable that we should allow the modern age to believe that the only appropriate language in which we can praise God and pray to Him is that of the 18th century—even though that was when they did it best: but when the new Watts and Wesley appear—as they must and will if we are to be faithful to the contemporary guidance of the Spirit—they will write in some other terms than the woolly and worldly scepticism which does duty today as the accent of faith. All this is very reactionary, I know, and it is probably true that I am trying to put too much weight on the unfashionable end of the see-saw. I certainly have very slender qualifications for a technical theological contest, but I believe with all my heart that there is a balance to be redressed

I said at the start that I was conscious of the difficulty of the task that you set me; I am even more conscious of it at the end. I have stretched my terms of reference beyond breaking point, and I have trespassed in fields in which I have not been invited to walk and where I have no right to be found. Let me try to make amends by at least finishing on a relevant note. I believe that hymns make a very important contribution to that mysterious thing, school worship. Not all the things we invite boys to sing can be appropriate to all their needs, or represent the experience of more than a fraction of the congregation. Of course much of the joyful noise that they make owes more to a sort of corporate youthful euphoria than to any more specifically religious emotion. But all education is experiment and exploration, and so is this aspect of it. What I have called corporate youthful euphoria is a kind of praising of God, who has made us to be dependent on one another and who likes his children to be happy and to say so. Sentimentality and nostalgia may be—even though shallow and fleeting—an apprehension of what I referred to earlier as that mystery which we call the numinous; they may lead boys to associate with the chapel some alternative to that self-centred materialism which is the besetting evil of our affluent society. This, at any rate, is something which I believe that I have experienced, not seldom, in school chapels.

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