



Peace and War in Hymns

Treasure No 71: Peace and War in Hymns by David Wright: An article from Bulletin 245, October 2005

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This is the ‘Decade to overcome violence’, according to the World Council of Churches. It is also the ‘Decade for a culture of peace and nonviolence for the world’s children’, according to the UN. We are already halfway through the decade, and few people know about these themes. I only discovered them when I read the Editorial in ‘The Hymn’ (USA/ Canada, Winter 2004). In the light of these global themes, it is appropriate to ask what we are – and are not – singing, about peace and war on our planet.

I looked for these themes in several current hymn books with little success, except for the Methodist, *Hymns & Psalms* (HP), and URC, *Rejoice and Sing* (R&S), hymn books. Both these books have a section called ‘Justice and peace’, and both have several good hymns, old and new, on the biblical theme ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’. But most of these hymns are virtually unknown outside these two denominations.

There is a major contrast between these two hymn books and all the various versions of the best-selling hymnbook *Mission Praise* (MP). For example, MP (1990 music edition) has lists of hymns on over twenty themes for ‘Living the Christian life’, yet neither ‘peace’ nor ‘justice’ is listed. There is great emphasis on personal peace, but very little on building a better and more peaceful world. It is good to find the hymn ‘The kingdom of God is justice and joy’, but there appears to be very little else on this theme. If it is true that several Methodist and URC churches now use MP more than HP or R&S, have they also adopted MP’s narrower agenda?

Hymns about world peace are clearly welcome, and raise few issues. But hymns which use military analogies raise serious issues. In 2000 – a year before ‘9/11’ – I asked thirteen questions about military images in hymns (*Bulletin* 224). The article expressed the hope that we should try to ‘reduce the heat and increase the light’ in the arguments. It was not to be – at least, to judge by the correspondence in *Bulletin* 225. The normally placid letters page had these phrases: ‘politically correct’; ‘dilute Christian teaching’; ‘it is ludicrous’. Yet the article had only raised questions...

In the aftermath of 9/11, concern about violence and terror linked to religion has increased greatly. I suggest that we need to revisit the topic, and explore it from a different angle, the view of the outsider looking in. It is not easy: we bring deep feelings and deep beliefs to our thinking, and familiar tunes may dominate our reading of the words of hymns.

So, just for a few minutes, try to imagine that we do not know the original version of these words, do not know the tunes, and do not even know to which religion the words refer. To assist the process, yyy or zzz have replaced any references to one religion. Read the words as prose, not poetry.

Onward, yyy's soldiers, Marching as to war... zzz leads against the foe: forward into battle... On then, yyy's soldiers, On to VICTORY!

Stand up, stand up for zzz, Ye soldiers of yyy... Let courage rise with danger, and strength with STRENGTH oppose. From victory unto victory, his army he shall lead, till every foe is vanquished, and zzz is lord indeed.

'Under your standard, Strong in your strength, we will battle for zzz'

Charge for the zzz of battles, and put the foe to rout

With 'zzz' as the leader, the words may look ridiculous. But if they were sung by followers of a live religion other than one's own, there could be a different reaction. Would the words be acceptable if sung by a big group of Muslims or Hindus? Might some impressionable people understand the words literally rather than metaphorically? If the answer is 'yes', read on; if 'no', end here.

If Christians would find these words unacceptable from Muslims, can we expect Muslims to find such words acceptable when sung by Christians? Can we continue to sing such words with a clear conscience, if we would not like Muslims to say them? Can we at least re-examine the case for singing sentiments such as these? Are these themes vital to Christian worship, or not?

The great majority of Christians know that warlike words in hymns are meant to be taken allegorically rather than literally, just as most Muslims know that Jihad, their 'holy war', should be a war against sin and against evil, not against people. But there is no guarantee that everyone will realise this. If any group, Christian, Muslim or atheist, takes words such as these literally, we could have a jihad, a holy war, on our hands. In our post-9/11 world, would this be foolish? Yet the words are in our hymnbooks for all to see. The quotations are from *Mission Praise* 543, 617, and 711, except for one sentence which is discussed later.

A Bible text can illuminate our discussion: 1 Corinthians 6.12. St Paul is not writing about hymns, but the point he makes could apply to hymns as well: 'All things are *lawful* unto me, but not all things are *expedient*' (KJV) – or *helpful* (NKJV) or *beneficial* (NIV & NRSV) or *appropriate* (The Message). The Jerusalem Bible renders the verse 'For me there are no forbidden things; maybe, but not everything does good'.

Militaristic images in hymns are clearly lawful: they are not forbidden. But are they Expedient? Helpful? Beneficial? Appropriate? Do they 'do good'? It is hard to see how the answer could be 'yes' to any of these five questions.

To a very small number of people, the arguments below may be very familiar. But the vast majority of people – churchgoers and others – have not thought through the issues, so there is a real need to set them out. It would be so nice to believe that people are thinking about the issues. Several years ago, the (current) Archbishop of Canterbury said: 'the fate of 'Onward Christian soldiers' in the English-speaking world continues to be a hotly contested matter' (Address given to the Hymn Society 1997; published in the *Bulletin* Oct 1997).

But in the everyday world, it is a hot debate among very few. Hymns are a democratic element of worship: unpopular hymns will fade; popular hymns will grow. To make a change, we need to engage the grassroots. There is substantial evidence that neither the grassroots nor many eminent editors and publishers have tackled the issue of militaristic imagery in hymns. Here are a few examples:

1. Mission Praise has been a best-selling series of hymnbooks for over 20 years. ‘Onward Christian soldiers’ (OCS) was not included in Mission Praise 1 or 2 in the 1980’s. In 1990, a very few hymns were added to create ‘Combined Mission Praise’. OCS was *added* at that time – and it is still there.
2. Votes for favourite hymns for the BBC ‘Songs of Praise’ programme placed OCS as the 26th most popular hymn in the language in 2002 – a year AFTER 9/11.
3. In the linked book, ‘The nation’s favourite hymns’ by Andrew Barr (Lion, 2002) there are detailed comments on each hymn. In the commentary, ‘there is no hint that OCS could be misunderstood, and might now cause offence in a multicultural world’. (quote from review in the *Bulletin* of, 2002).
4. ‘Charge for the God of Battles, and put the foe to rout’, is in a verse of the hymn ‘Stand up, stand up for Jesus’. Most hymnbooks, including Mission Praise, omit the verse. This verse was marked with an asterisk (meaning ‘may be omitted if so desired’) in ‘Hymns Ancient and Modern’ in their 1950 and 1983 editions. One might guess that it was fading away, and 50 years after 1950 might be quietly dropped. Quite the opposite – it was republished WITHOUT the asterisk in 2000 in Common Praise, the successor-book to Hymns Ancient & Modern. This is a respected Anglican hymnbook – and I see no sign of the phrase being a ‘hotly contested matter’.
5. The Church of Scotland’s long-awaited ‘Church Hymnary 4th edition’ was the subject of a lecture at the 2004 Hymn Society conference. We were told about their weekly meetings to revise hymn texts. They revised this hymn: ‘Glory to you, O God, for all your saints in light/ who nobly strove and conquered in the well-fought fight’.
6. Clearly, this is a hymn where deletion or revision could be appropriate. It was not deleted, but it was revised. Incredibly, instead of changing the militaristic language, the revisers *strengthened* it: the fight has now become FIERCE as well as well-fought: ‘Who nobly waged and won the fierce and well-fought fight’.
7. The revision was explained purely as an attempt to make the words fit the rhythm better: there was no suggestion that the sentiments are inappropriate. This is a very important hymnbook: it is the nearest any part of the UK gets to ‘the’ hymnbook for ‘the’ established church.
8. In the MP (1990 ed.) Subject Index, there are 36 hymns listed for ‘Spiritual WARFARE’ and no hymns listed about peace: an indication, perhaps, of the scale of the problem.

Other examples could be given, but enough has been said to show that concerns over militaristic hymns have not reached many of the experts and the trend-setters: the hymn writers, hymn revisers, hymn book editors, hymn commentators, and the publishers. I hope that this article will at least help to raise awareness of the issue, not just among the trend-setters, but also among the hymn choosers in thousands of churches.

In 2000, I raised questions – and caused some angry responses. Several years after 9/11, I offer these suggestions:

Ten reasons for ceasing to use Military Analogies in hymns:

1. Any analogy is ONLY an analogy: it is not a vital part of Christian doctrine or theology. There is no need for any one type of analogy to be used in hymns.
2. There are many other analogies, biblical and ‘everyday’, which can be used instead of military analogies.
3. Military analogies are almost totally absent from the teaching of Jesus, and from the Gospels as a whole, so there is no requirement to use them.

4. When the apostles use military analogies, most of them are in a defensive context, rather than in an attacking context, yet several hymns focus on attack.
5. The many military analogies in the Old Testament need to be compared with how few there are in the New Testament: in this context, the New Testament should be the model for Christians to follow.
6. War has changed out of all recognition since Bible times. Therefore the use of biblical military analogies is likely to be very misleading.
7. The concept of ‘spiritual warfare’, prominent in many modern worship songs, is largely a new interpretation of Christian doctrine, and needs to be subject to serious scrutiny.
8. The viewpoint of Christians in countries where they are in the minority, especially Christians in the Islamic world, needs to be heard, respected and applied. They may find military metaphors very unhelpful.
9. The multi-faith context of the UK and of many other countries needs to be taken into account: militaristic expressions of the Christian faith are much more inappropriate now than when most of the hymns were written.
10. There are many hundreds of good hymns which do not use military analogies. We could ‘choose to choose’ some of these hymns in place of militaristic hymns. None of the military-hymns are indispensable.

So I return to the starting point: instead of war hymns, can we encourage the writing and singing of hymns on the theme of world peace? It may in some cases be possible to sing different words to established hymns, another ‘hot’ topic, but a sensitive reworking of a much loved hymn may be acceptable. For example:

*Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
In faith and hope be strong:
Stand firm for right and justice,
Opposed to sin and wrong...
(Jean Holloway, in ‘100 Favourite hymns in large print’ (APU 2000))*

Conclusion

So – voluntarily – can we agree we will ‘choose not to sing militaristic hymns, in our post 9/11 world? The words of these hymns were not intended to be taken literally, but some people – Christian, Muslim, agnostic – may interpret them literally. Instead let’s pray for peace, perhaps singing the hymn by Alan Gaunt in which every verse starts with these words: ‘We pray for peace’.

St Paul can have (almost) the last words (Philippians 4. 8-9): ‘Whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure, lovely, of good report, think on these things... and the God of peace shall be with you’. I would suggest that hymns with military images are not pure or lovely in the 21st century.

Shalom – salaam – peace – be with you all.

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