

Hymns in the Public Space: Towards a Digital Wilderness?

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'If vivacious twenty-year old Anne Boleyn had not snared with her dark eyes the heart of forty-one year old Henry VIII there might not have been any English language hymnody'

With this startling and baseless theory the American minister, Albert Bailey, launched his 1950 history of hymnody 'The Gospel in Hymns'. The comprehensive guide was written to encourage ministers in the USA to broaden their use of hymns in worship. In his introduction, Bailey writes that he wishes 'to enlighten our young people who have been singing hymns without thinking about them'.

One that he especially admired to deliver this object was Bishop Walsham How's 'O Jesus, thou art standing', a hymn inspired by William Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World'. Written in the same year 1854 as Hunt painted the first copy of 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock', it expressed the writer's aim that 'A good hymn should be like a good prayer — simple, real, earnest and reverent'.

It also told a vivid story, which made the image Hunt painted one of the first to be acceptable to Protestant word-based culture. Today, that hymn is hardly known. What factors influence the life and choice of hymns in our fast-changing digital culture, especially in the public space of broadcasting and beyond?

Any bibliophile who collects the pre-1940 Ward Lock Red Guides will know that these guides to holiday resorts listed not only the places of worship but also the hymn books in use to aid the anxious tourist. This custom began when hymn books were not provided for visitors, taking what one church magazine described as the 'hotel habit', who had to sit in un-rented pews. These were also the days when local papers advertised the hymns for the following Sunday or Rectors displayed the hymn numbers (but not the titles) on the church door.

These listings were sometimes even analysed in correspondence to the local papers, in the days when the BBC was able to announce as on Good Friday 1930, 'there is no news'. The exercise, as much with the fascination of numerology as of evidence of revolutionaries like the Vicar of Thaxted, later extended to detailed analysis, comparing hymns sung in 1914 with post-war British hymnody as broadcast on the BBC. The results were hardly evidence of revolution, with a decline in 'Sun of my Soul', the rise of Walford Davies's 'God be in my Head' and a steady vote throughout for 'Praise, my soul the King of Heaven'. This hymn revived, like metrical Psalm 23 to Crimond, by the wedding of Her Majesty the Queen, has ensured that it is still sung every time the Monarch attends worship in England.

A straw poll of the main denominations today and the hymnbooks in use reveals that most churches have not only stuck to the same books for the last three decades at least, but often to a narrow choice. This may reflect the use of the 'suggested hymns' in prayer books, covering every week of the church's year, or it may reflect the priest or minister's theology. Another influence is a tepid response from an incumbent to avoid exclusive language, and hymnbooks in which such failings are evident can even be subject to alteration, evidently with a savage biro. To some who take services little that is acceptable survives. Finally, compiling the music list almost anywhere from a noble cathedral to a wayside chapel can be the foundation for years of bitter conflict between pulpit and organ stool.

Yet it is unlikely that today's visitors to St Agatha's-in-the-Ditch will be asked to sing hymns that are

1 *Hymns and human life*, Erik Routley (John Murray 1952)

unfamiliar back home in Holy Trinity-without-the-Despond. This aids the holiday pilgrims who are also among the several million fans of BBC One's Songs of Praise which reveals whenever a poll of viewers' favourites is taken that change is viewed with caution.

The historian will find little in popular literature to trace the influence of hymns.

George A. Birmingham's —aka James Hannay, a Church of Ireland Minister — *The Hymn Tune Mystery* 1930² was avidly reserved at Boots Booklovers Library for lovers of murder mystery. To give the game away for readers who have forgotten the dénouement, the clue to the murderer of the organist was found in v7 of 'Jerusalem, my happy home' (English Hymnal 638).

But a novel published in 1978 by Graham Greene uses a well-known hymn to give a recognisable glimpse of secular England. Greene's hero, Maurice Castle, minor member of MI5, takes a Sunday morning walk through his home town of Berkhamsted as he waits for news of his sick son, Sam.

'...he felt a sudden desire to give a kind of thanks, if it was only to a myth, that Sam was safe, so he took himself in, for a few minutes, to the back of the parish church. The service was nearly at an end and the congregation of the well-dressed, the middle-aged and the old were standing at attention, as they sang with a kind of defiance as though they inwardly doubted the facts, 'There is a green hill far away, without a city wall'.

Castle muses that there is indeed a city wall — the ruined wall of Berkhamsted Castle, and a green hill on the nearby Common where a tall battered post may well have been once used for a hanging.

'...For a moment he came near to sharing their incredible belief — it would do no harm to mutter a prayer of thanks to the God of his childhood, the God of the Common and the Castle, that no ill had yet come to Sam. Then a sonic boom scattered the words of the hymn and shook the old glass of the west window and rattled the crusader's helmet which hung on a pillar, and he was reminded again of the grown-up world. He went quickly out and bought the Sunday papers. The Sunday Express had a headline on the front page — 'Child's Body found in wood.'

While, "Jerusalem, my happy home", accessory to the facts in the 'Hymn Tune mystery', and at 25 verses almost the longest hymn in English has vanished from popular hymnody, Mrs Alexander's 'There is a green hill' is known to many even those who are not churchgoers. It was included in an edition of Songs of Praise recorded in 1978 in the same parish church in Berkhamstead. And few casual viewers would resist Greene's reaction when asked to describe their feelings about the series which is approaching its 50th anniversary.

The late Erik Routley was moved to analyse the popularity of hymns by the publication in 1951 of the 'BBC Hymn Book'. Preparation for this volume stimulated by the popularity of the 'Daily Service' began in 1937. Walford Davies proposed that the new book should distinguish between the 'good popular' and the 'bad popular'. After John Reith launched the enterprise, years of squabbling followed. Even Vaughan Williams became embroiled in the process of separating good from bad. The failure of a 20-year endeavour to produce a book with universal appeal, perhaps explains why the Anglican Church has never had an 'official' hymnbook.

For half a century, the religious broadcasting department clung to the belief that the 'BBC Hymn Book' was in regular use. It was in older listener's homes, who insisted that the hymns should be sourced and listed in 'Radio Times'. Producers of Radio 2's Sunday Half Hour were required to choose hymns from this book. In churches, by contrast, the BBC Hymn Book was hardly used at all, except in St Martin-in-the-Fields, the first home of BBC religious broadcasting. During the ministry of Prebendary

2 The Hymn Tune Mystery' George A Birmingham (Methuen 1930)

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Austen Williams, all broadcast hymns were announced by the hymn-number only, on the assumption that listeners were poised and ready to join in.

Thirty years later, BBC Television succumbed to another pressure, that hymn-words should be displayed on the screen. 'Karaoke' TV was born, and was only slightly ahead of the introduction of the Overhead Projector in churches. The revolution in technology seems unstoppable, but the experience of singing only the words displayed, has changed the experience. The congregation can no longer reflect on the unfolding theology, nor know their eventual destination (until the final copyright owner appears). Singing all too-easily becomes performance, master-minded by a worship-leader.

So how has the change in technology, and the enduring popularity of Songs of Praise influenced the place of hymnody in Britain's churches?

The technology has provided the largest opportunity for new hymns and choruses to be used in worship. In the main, the choice seems influenced by narrow music-styles and conservative theology, being dependent on the editorial aims and commercial success of those who provide much of the computer software.

Cultural change ensured that such hymns as 'Trumpet of God, sound high' with its politically-incorrect second line 'till the hearts of the heathen shake' have not been chosen for Songs of Praise after 1971. Charles Wood's fine tune 'Rangoon' written in 1904 remains sunk by the words written by the Scottish Episcopalian, Arnold Brooks.

Cultural change which encouraged contemporary idioms has fared even less well. Richard Jones's 'God of concrete, god of steel' and its associated tune 'Minterne' by Cyril Taylor was last chosen on Songs of Praise for a church near a new bypass in 1979. Its permanence was short-lived. In spite of inclusion in a new wave of 'local' hymn books published on a Roneo duplicator as at number 30 in the 'Yellow' book of St James's, Crosby. The 'relevant (nearby M6) imagery' of 'Lord of motorway and mail, Lord of rocket, Lord of Flight' was no match for the fine words of the last verse beginning 'God of glory fills the earth, gave the universe its birth', but all was soon swept away.

'I will sing with the spirit and with the understanding also', (1 Cor. 14v15) perhaps the USP 'unique selling proposition' of the Royal School of Church Music, has not been the only yardstick for fine hymns that have survived from the second half of the last century. Some simply go out of fashion.

The hymn words written for the Church Urban Fund in 1987 sung to 'Ein Feste burg' is forgotten. 'Lord, keep Elizabeth our Queen', revived by Elizabeth Poston for the Queen's Silver Jubilee has been dropped. John Arlott's 'God whose farm is all creation' has faded too even in spite of 'green theology'. Sydney Carter's 'Lord of the Dance', Patrick Appleford's 'Lord Jesus Christ' and Graham Kendrick's 'Shine, Jesus, shine' no longer have the appeal which helped them to cross over from Fellowships in to Cathedrals in the 1980's.

Other hymns have had a brief and high profile, such as 'The Pollen of Peace' which together with 'Bridge over troubled waters' were top choices in Northern Ireland during its darkest days. 'Seed, scattered and sown', a favourite harvest communion of the late Cardinal Winning is hardly known outside Scotland. Timothy Dudley-Smith's 'Lord for the Years' might well not have flourished if it had been set to the tune 'Finlandia' as originally commissioned.

As fast as hymns which project a 'contemporary' feel, date and die, so new hymns with a more timeless resonance have replaced them. Bernadette Farrell's 'Christ be our light' and Keith Getty's 'In Christ Alone' are hymns with immediate appeal, quickly learnt and revive a Celtic theme.

Traditionally, it is said that hymns are inspired to be written down in a moment or two. Janet Wootton has described how the three verses of 'Dear Mother God' inspired by three verses of Isaiah Chapter

40 came to her as she rose up the escalator from the Victoria line at Kings Cross. Writing them down, she found no need to make further refinements. Janet Wootton also has a skill in 'cross-over hymns'. For a friend's funeral at the time of the movie blockbuster 'Titanic'. She adapted the last line of the song 'My heart goes on' by substituting the word God for the last line 'God will never let go'.

Jean Holloway, wife of the former Bishop of Edinburgh, has become a respected hymn-writer. Her hymns are often triggered by national or international events. 'O Father, on your love we call' was written as a prayer following the 9/11 tragedy in New York.

Ruth Duck, an academic from Illinois, has written many hymns which aim to address a universal God. She aims to combine reverence with relevance in her writing, which is both theologically assured and builds on much pastoral experience. However none of these writers have achieved the impact of a Wesley, and in the public space, their work is unknown.

An exception to the short-lived popularity of new hymns can be made to the huge library of music from around the world gathered or composed by John Bell and Graham Maule of the Iona Community which will last. John Bell conducts Songs of Praise recordings and his work has become known to the wider non-church person.

What are the factors that influence the place of hymns in the public space? Society has travelled a long way since the BBC devised a new programme in 1940 to outwit the popularity of German propaganda broadcasts by William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw). The new weapon for the benefit of the 'other ranks' in barrack rooms was 'Sunday Half Hour', community hymn singing. In its 70th year, it is still broadcast weekly on BBC Radio Two. One less public place where new and less well-known hymns are sung every night at Evensong is St Paul's Cathedral. Using familiar tunes to new words, this gives a casual tourist congregation a chance to hear the best of new hymnody.

In the last few years, since a new Series Producer of Songs of Praise was appointed, the breadth and seasonal relevance of the hymnody has markedly improved. Ironically, that producer is a Sikh, but after a public school education, he has a real interest in traditional hymns rather than choruses.

What defines a new hymn? After a lifetime involved with hymns as a television religious producer, I remember the afternoon 30 years ago when I was startled to be telephoned by the normally very aloof producer of the British Legion Festival of Remembrance. He had an urgent question. 'We understand that a new hymn is to be included in our service this year. It is called 'The Day you gave us'; is it alright?' Almost a century since the 'Day thou gavest' was provided for Queen Victoria's Jubilee, it seemed that a 'new' hymn took as long to reach the BBC's 'Public Space' as it did to penetrate the Establishment.

Today aristocratic eyebrows are still raised at the inclusion of Taizé chants when old soldiers gather. It was only in the mid-1990's that the General Assembly of the national Church of Scotland agreed to allow an un-accompanied hymn rather than a psalm or paraphrase to be included at their annual meeting.

Hymns in the public space are in the same league as the Anglican communion, described as moving with the unstoppable force of an ancient glacier. Especially, we know what tunes we like, or rather what we don't like. 'Love Divine' sung to 'Love Divine' is out, whilst the same hymn to 'Blaenwern' or 'Hyfrodol' is in. At the name of Jesus 'Camberwell' has again become 'At the name of Jesus' 'Evelyns'. Mainly, the choice will be the 'old tune', which will vary. And not even 'commodification' of hymnody, the consumer equivalent of global warming on the glacier, will bring about change. Hymns have an eternal hold on us, they are our private possessions, even if we rarely enter a church and 'Fresh Expressions' and other initiatives will make no more impact than did Henry the Eighth, composer and King five centuries ago.