

*The Pratt Green Trust
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Hymns and Songs in Christian Worship: past, present - and future?

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You may recall how Maria in *The Sound of Music* urges the children to 'begin at the very beginning, a very good place to start.' We cannot do that this morning, you may be relieved to hear! Even though the limiting word 'Christian' in my title might excuse us from considering the Song of Moses or the worship of the synagogue, we would have to start with the disciples in the upper room and consider Pliny's letter to Trajan, and Joseph the Hymnographer... the list is endless.

So far as the past is concerned, I take it to mean the past quarter-century, the 25 years of the Pratt Green Trust which we are here to celebrate today. What have these years seen accomplished in the work of the Trust and the developments of our hymnody?

The work of the Trust is quickly dealt with. It has seen established the Pratt Green Collection - which goes well beyond Fred's own material - in the Heritage Collections of Durham University Library. Indeed, it played a major part in the recognition of Durham University as the UK library specializing in archive material concerned with hymnody. Its second most visible achievement must surely be the establishing of HymnQuest. This, as I am sure you know, is an electronic resource, annually updated, to which all hymnologists instinctively turn. I feel obliged in honesty to tell you that I possess neither the hardware nor the skill to use it, but I have those who consult it on my behalf. It is the road-map - one could say, the Sat. Nav. - for all who wish to travel the byways of hymnody, a little off the tourist trail or the beaten track. Had the Pratt Green Trustees done nothing else with Fred's benefaction, this would stand as a remarkable memorial.

But of course they have done much more. It is no secret that they assist such bodies as the Hymn Society or the denominational church music societies, and give grant aid to overseas hymn book compilers and to many individuals and projects. Thanks to Fred's generosity and foresight, it is a valuable resource.

When we look from the work of the Trust to the wider scene, what of hymns and songs for worship in the last 25 years here in the UK? First, these years have seen many books published. With the tercentenary of the birth of Charles Wesley we have had a welcome surge of interest in his life and work. I think, among other studies, of the three massive volumes of his hitherto unpublished poetry; the establishing of a learned Society devoted to 'Charles Wesley Studies', and a wide range of books on his life and writings for the 250th anniversary of his conversion, celebrated in 1988; and the 300th anniversary.

Indeed, there have been numerous biographies of hymn writers. For example (taking ladies first), studies of Mrs Alexander¹ and of Frances Ridley Havergal² have appeared, as have also at least two studies of Christina Rossetti³ not counting that by Georgina Battiscombe⁴ which lies just outside this period. Again, there have been at least two new accounts of Robert Bridges⁵ (despite his express wish to the contrary). New *lives* have been published of Percy Dearmer⁶; of John Newton⁷ (again, more than one, commemorating the bi-centenary of his death); of George Matheson⁸, John Cennick⁹ and Reginald Heber¹⁰ - together with memorial volumes to Erik Routley¹¹ and to Fred himself.¹² Indeed, in this company we cannot overlook the work of Bernard

Braley who served so valiantly the cause of hymnody and Christian music generally, and his three volumes entitled *Hymnwriters*¹³ culminating in a study of his friend Fred Pratt Green.

Erik Routley gave us, back in 1979, his *Panorama of Christian Hymnody*¹⁴, a pioneering study. Four years ago GIA of Chicago published an entirely new edition, edited and expanded by Paul Richardson. 'Expanded' is indeed accurate: it has 700 A4 pages against Routley's 250, and weighs well over 4lbs on my kitchen scales! This book alone would assure us that hymnody is alive and well in the United States, But we here can proudly show Ian Bradley's study of the world of Victorian hymns¹⁵, and J.R.Watson's definitive *The English Hymn*¹⁶ as well as smaller works by the same hand; while a year or two more should see completed under Professor Watson's editorship the *Dictionary of Hymnology*¹⁷ which is, even with many differences, the true and long-elusive successor to Julian's great work of a century ago.

We should note in passing that various commissions and committees have been at work in these 25 years - not only in the preparation of new hymnals, which I come to shortly, but, for example, in the work of the Joint Liturgical Group on the Use of Hymns in the Liturgy¹⁸. They produced a substantial volume in 1990, noting what they called 'an unprecedented flow of hymn writing, a great flowering of hymnody' – but again, more of that in a moment. The Roman Catholic members of that Group write of a 'musical revolution' in their church in the preceding 20 years. Two years later the Archbishops' Commission on Church Music gave their report¹⁹, based on an impressive gathering of evidence, but bland and indeed predictable in its conclusions, pointing to the 'generally unsatisfactory state of music in our churches'.

In terms of the pure church music tradition no doubt they were right, but when we look at the range of new hymn books published in the last 25 years it is clear that hymn singing is still very much with us. Just 25 years ago – that is, in 1984 – the *New Standard* edition of *Hymns Ancient & Modern* had just appeared, something of a stopgap until the future pattern of hymn singing could be seen more clearly. The same year saw *Hymns & Psalms*, aiming to be both Methodist and ecumenical, and certainly succeeding in the former. *Mission England Praise*, the forerunner of *Mission Praise* in all its numerous editions, was published in that same year. The following year, 1985, the BBC joined with the Oxford University Press for the first of their annual booklets, *New Songs of Praise*, a showcase for new words and tunes and an encouragement to creativity. A year later saw *The New English Hymnal*, no longer quite claiming (as did its predecessor) to be 'a collection of the best hymns in the English language', but distinctly disdainful of much of the post-war surge in hymn writing as 'poor in quality and ephemeral in expression'. Jumping ahead, we should note that only three years ago the *English Hymnal* celebrated its centenary with a supplement of 100 hymns, 15 per cent of the words by living authors, and a further ten items by writers born in the twentieth century, such as Sydney Carter and Fred Pratt Green.

I cannot list a fraction of the books published in this period for congregational use. Stainer & Bell, Kingsway and Kevin Mayhew were very active. The Jubilate Group gave us, for example, *Psalms for Today* and *Carol Praise*, the latter updated and reissued less than three years ago. Their flagship publication of these years was *Sing Glory*, to mark the millennium, including some hundred texts written by members of the group.

Many others have been at work. Penguin, Puffin, the *Daily Telegraph* and Christian Aid²⁰ all produced their own books of hymns, as did two of the three Lambeth Conferences²¹ that fell within this period. It also saw the production of a very substantial Welsh-language hymnal, *Caneuon Ffydd*²², by an interdenominational group. The Keswick Convention, to mark their 125th

anniversary in 2006, added the *Keswick Songbook*²³ to their hymnal *Keswick Praise*, while Spring Harvest continue to issue new collections almost year by year. *Irish Church Praise*, an excellent supplement, appeared in 1990, paving the way for the splendid *Irish Church Hymnal*, fifth edition, complete with a massive and invaluable *Companion*²⁴, and a 300-page book²⁵ to tie it to the Revised Common Lectionary.

In 1991 the URC gave us *Rejoice & Sing*, a book I value even while I regret the omission of a verse from 'There is a green hill far away'; and *Baptist Praise & Worship* followed a year later. There had been an interdenominational Scottish book, *Common Ground*²⁶, in 1998; but we had to wait patiently for the new edition of the *Scottish Church Hymnary* until it arrived at last as CH4, with 825 items, in 2005. It reappeared with a new title for the general market only last year as *Hymns of Glory, Songs of Praise*. Meanwhile *Common Praise*, the latest edition of *Hymns Ancient & Modern*, was published in June 2000, bearing (as I believe) the marks of the late Professor Henry Chadwick's distinguished chairmanship. A year before, with a Roman Catholic constituency in mind, Decani brought out their two-volume *Laudate* – a far cry, with its 999 items, from the 230 English hymns in the old pre-war *Westminster Hymnal*. From the reformed independent tradition we were given in 2000 the ground-breaking hymnal *Praise!* with its two massive companion volumes²⁷, full of original research into the contemporary hymn scene by Christopher Idle.

Altogether in this period of 25 years my records show something like 200 publications or compilations of hymns. Some were single-author collections of a kind hardly seen for decades until Fred Pratt Green's *26 Hymns* from Epworth in 1971, some were for specialist groups, but many simply for congregational worship. Such a figure, though far from complete, makes an average of a new UK hymnal or hymn collection about every six weeks for the past 25 years. That is not a sign of an activity in decline.

These 25 years have also seen some developments which I cannot wholly welcome. Of the rise of the worship-song I shall say something in my third section when I come to hymns and the future. Here I note in passing the introduction of the TV monitor in place of the hymn book, a practice with serious deficiencies, to my mind, in its inability to show the text as a whole, or even what we are about to sing next, and its lack of any written record, perhaps to take away, as with a weekly Service sheet. But my regrets are tempered by two things: first, as I have shown, the healthy state of hymn book publishing; and second the flourishing nature of so many congregations who worship with their eyes upon a screen.

The language of hymns has suffered change – there is a *double-entendre* in that expression – over these 25 years. Books²⁸ have been written on the vexed question of inclusive language: I have had my say on this and cannot repeat the arguments here. The alteration of texts by editors is not, of course, new; but what perhaps is new, at least for a century or two, is the doctrinaire approach to anything the modern editor regards as old fashioned. I think the trend was started, or at least accelerated, by the *New Catholic Hymnal* of 1971. Invisible mending, to use Donald Coggan's phrase, is one thing; but the idiosyncratic tampering with a received text is quite another. It becomes no longer safe to sing from memory, and does damage to the integrity of the text, to our heritage of older hymns, to ecumenical occasions, and to the flow of worship. These 25 years do not, for me, have a happy record in these fields.

Lastly, in this whistle-stop survey of a quarter-century, and as we move from the past to the present-day, we find ourselves still very much part of the 'hymn explosion' of the post-war years. Doctoral theses will be written – may already have been written – on this phenomenon, and we should take a brief look at it. The description 'Hymn Explosion' has been criticized: some people have thought it more in the nature of a firework display. To talk of a fresh flowering of hymnody is perhaps more accurate and certainly more elegant! Much, of course, has been written and published about what I hope I can call this gift of God to his church in the last fifty years. Chapters and articles have appeared in many books and journals, including the *Bulletin* of the Hymn Society, tracing what seem to be the origins²⁹. Different writers point in different directions to suggest where it began. The facts seem to me to be as follows.

In 1933 when *Songs of Praise* was published, Jan Struther was writing for that book in a twentieth century style, and in 'you' rather than 'thee and thou' idiom. But one swallow does not make a summer. In 1950 Fred Pratt Green saw his first texts published in a hymnal, the *Methodist School Hymnbook*; but he would be the first to say that his was thereafter a slow start, and his real debut was in 1969, with the A & M supplement, *100 Hymns for Today*, and the Methodist supplement, *Hymns & Songs*.

Again, in 1950, Albert Bayly was a key figure, who published privately his first collection that year, and had texts in the *BBC Hymn Book* and in *Congregational Praise* a year later. In 1957 Patrick Appleford was helping to found the 20th Century Church Light Music Group, and his work featured in its publications – interestingly, from the largely secular music publishers, Josef Weinberger. *Christian Praise*, also in 1957, introduced hymns by Margaret Clarkson of Canada (already established as a hymn writer known in her own country), by George Caird, and by Bishop Frank Houghton who had been writing Christian verse since 1908. With the 1960s we come to the seminal Dunblane gatherings from which flowed hymns still in use; written, for example, by Brian Wren (though, as is his habit, altered in the intervening years), or Eric Reid ('Trotting, trotting through Jerusalem'), while other names, to become household words among hymn lovers, also contributed: Alan Luff, Alan Gaunt, Ian Fraser and, among musicians, Erik Routley and Peter Cutts³⁰.

That same decade of the 1960s saw Fred Kaan and his congregation singing much of his *Pilgrim Praise* in his church in Plymouth, though Galliard was not to publish it as a collection until the 1970s³¹. The 1960s also introduced Michael Baughen's *Youth Praise* which, like *100 Hymns for Today*, went on to sell a million copies, and which was the seed from which the Jubilate Group came to be formed³². In the same year, 1965, the *Anglican Hymn Book* also served to introduce new writers and composers.

What does this tell us about the origins of this new 'flowering' of hymnody? For myself, as I have said elsewhere, I sum it up in two words: **variety** and **continuity**. Its variety is one of the reasons why I see this as a gift of the Spirit. It all happened in different places, with different participants, both groups and individuals, largely independent of one another – and not just in one country. The hymn explosion, fireworks or flowering had not just one beginning but several – a **variety**. As for my second word, **continuity**, one can easily show that though something new was happening, it was not discontinuous with the past, nor independent of it. Take a contemporary name, Martin Leckebusch for example; he was writing hymns in the 1980s at a time when Fred Pratt Green was still at work. Fred in turn overlaps with C.A. Alington; Alington with Sabine Baring-Gould; Baring-Gould with Frances Alexander, Jane Leeson and Caroline Noel, and they with John Keble

and J.M. Neale. When Keble was writing, so was James Montgomery, who overlaps with Newton and Cowper. When they were at work, Charles Wesley was still writing; and he overlaps with Isaac Watts – and so on, in a quite unbroken succession. We see, historically, a pattern of English hymn writing which is **continuous**. Our heritage of hymnody may be a plant of unpredictable blossom, now flowering abundantly, now lying more fallow; but it is all one growth, one continuous gift of the Spirit, who is the divine Wind of inspiration – if we may use that word – blowing where he will. Hence my twofold description: **variety and continuity**.

My second main section, 'The Hymn Today', can be briefer, since our glance at the past has brought us up to date. Accordingly, I want only to touch on three positive aspects of hymns today, and one which is very negative.

The first positive aspect is that we today are the immediate heirs of that 'flowering' just referred to – and not by any means over – of the last 50 years. Hymns, some classical in form, some more innovative, are being written by men and women in our own day. You have only to look round this gathering to see numbers of them represented here. Their best work, I believe, compares very favourably with what has gone before. Indeed, if some older – perhaps Victorian – texts were offered now as the work of a living hymn writer, they would hardly gain a second glance from any editorial committee. Hymns are not only being written, but new hymnals are in preparation. The Methodist Church has given notice of a new publication, still in a comparatively early stage; Andrew Pratt reminded us in his study of the 1933 *Methodist Hymn Book*³³ that it was 'a book near to the heart of a singing people'. The Royal School of Church Music, in support of congregational singing, have a hymnal Supplement on the stocks. Kevin Mayhew has a number of hymn-based publications due out this year, and adds 'As far as we are concerned, hymns are alive and well!' – and of course there are many other publishers. In America, I am told, the next decade is likely to see a further round of hymn book publishing among their many denominations: various committees are gearing themselves up for this even now. While in the UK the next months will see the publication of *Come Celebrate* a collection of nearly 300 contemporary hymns, not a congregational but a resource book, featuring the less familiar texts of 20 writers currently at work.

The second positive aspect in which we can rejoice is that hymns continue to be recognized by the media. I mentioned *The Daily Telegraph Book of Hymns* – a surprising patron of this particular art – but of course I have chiefly in mind the BBC with its regular broadcasting of hymns to a mass audience. We find them in the Daily Service, in Radio Four's 'Sunday Worship', in Radio Three's 'Choral Evensong', in 'Sunday Half-Hour', in the flagship 'Songs of Praise' and in their marking of the great Christian festivals – 'Carols from King's' for example. Colin Morris, sometime Head of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, spoke in Westminster Abbey on the 50th anniversary of 'Songs of Praise'³⁴. On the theme, 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?' he offered five major reasons why 'the Lord's song' had survived in the strange land of the mass-media.

1. because people can often sing what they might not say: singing goes beyond conscious belief, being less about what we think than what we feel.
2. because hymns contain the essence of ordinary people's religion: he called them, echoing *Star Wars*, the place where 'The Congregation Strikes Back'.
3. because hymnody is a potent combination of the old and the new. Through singing, the old faith becomes ever fresh.

4. because 'hymns plant spiritual time-bombs in the mind', jewels safe from rust and thieves.
5. because we are exiles, and hymns are the songs of home; homesickness is the basic condition of fallen humanity.

It is easy to take broadcasting for granted and to grumble when familiar programmes change in ways which do not suit our taste. But we owe a debt to those who fight for air-time and finance in a secular climate and an era of serious cut-backs. ITV has lost its Sunday religious slot; very little local radio now offers broadcast worship; Channel 4, I read, has reduced its religious output (never to me very obtrusive) for financial reasons; religion on the BBC World Service is now reduced to just half-an-hour. But Michael Wakelin, until recently Head of Religion and Ethics at the BBC, assured me last October that hymn singing is still popular with their Christian audience. He confirms that while viewing figures are falling across the board, the audience for 'Songs of Praise' holds up generally at about the three million mark (rather more than the entire population of Wales) and that 'Sunday Half-Hour' attracts a regular quarter of a million listeners. These are significant figures.

I doubt very much if they would be sustained without the framework of public service broadcasting: and there are many voices, not least in the commercial and so-called independent sector, calling for an urgent review and new legislation. This goes well beyond our present field of hymnody, but we should be doing what we can to strengthen the hands of those who work – I was going to say, fight – to maintain a Christian presence, let alone Christian standards, in broadcasting and the media.

We should note, too, largely on the positive side, the wealth of audio-recordings, DVDs and the like, offering hymn singing in the commercial market-place.

My third positive aspect of the present scene is a reminder of just how much hymn singing, in terms of sheer quantity, is part of the worship of the Christian community today. I invite you to bring your imagination to bear, with the help of a little rudimentary mathematics. I know what they say about statistics; and what I offer now is simply 'ball-park' figures, an attempt to realize imaginatively the **order of magnitude** of the hymn singing most of us share in week by week.

Give-or-take (and that applies to all the figures I now quote) there are some 45,000 places of Christian worship, or worshipping congregations or fellowships, in the UK. Let us say that on average (another key phrase in this exercise) they each sing three hymns at their main Service each Sunday. What they choose will vary enormously, but a good many will be from our familiar classic heritage. Next, suppose that two-thirds of these congregations have a second Sunday Service at which on average two hymns are sung; and that half of them also have a mid-week meeting of some kind with at least one hymn (note that in all this guess work, I am striving to underestimate). Add to these figures our school assemblies. I have not done the sums for any but Church of England schools as I have the figures to hand. There are some 5,000 of them, either Church Schools, or with a specific Christian foundation. Let us guess that - again, on average - they sing two hymns a week: in primary schools, by far the biggest proportion of that 5,000, it may well be more. Put all this together and we have 237,000 hymns sung each week in the UK; and we can all think of ways to add to that ball-park figure. But to illustrate what that figure stands for, suppose each of those hymns is taken from, say, the *New English Hymnal*, words and music edition. That book actually contains 540 hymns if we include the liturgical section, so that we would need 438 copies to supply these 237,000 hymns. Take 438 copies and make an

increasingly unsteady pile, one upon another. How high would it be? According to my calculations, it would be 73 feet high - while those massive windows (here in Coventry Cathedral) are just 70 feet. And this vast pile of hymns contained in these 438 books represents only the occasions on which a hymn is sung by a congregation in the UK **every week**.

To represent a year, our pile of books would be three times higher than the Empire State Building in New York!

But alongside this vast popular commitment, we must add the work of many specialist bodies. The Hymn Society is an obvious example (if you are not a member, do think of joining us). Membership has increased by some 10% over these last 25 years and almost doubled in the last 50. Then there is the Pratt Green Trust, the Music in Worship Trust; the Royal School of Church Music; the various denominational church music societies – to name simply the most obvious. They all have a concern in the hymnody which has brought us here today. Hymns matter to far more people than we might at first suppose.

Sadly, in our present scene, I must now turn to one very negative aspect, serious indeed for our generation, potentially disastrous as we look to the future. This is the loss of so much hymn singing, and therefore hymn knowledge, by children. I could multiply instances of how early Christian impressions are so often linked with a hymn. Think of Ronnie Knox with 'There is a green hill far away' or Libby Purves with 'Hills of the North, rejoice!', or Betty Boothroyd with 'Morning has broken'. Ten years ago a book was compiled for charity in which a hundred of the great and good – in today's newspeak, 'celebrities' – chose their favourite hymn³⁵. I counted up that about a third of them were chosen because of resonances with school or childhood. By contrast a friend told me last Christmas of a primary school where very few of the children had even heard of 'Away in a manger'. Where was the school? Not in a multi-cultural inner-city, but in a village in Devonshire.

Nor is this all, as we well know. Fifteen years ago Brian Castle, now Bishop of Tonbridge and then Vice-Principal of Cuddesdon, was writing about the loss of hymn singing in schools. He added:

Although today hymns are rarely sung in secondary schools, they are alive and well in many, though not all, primary schools. The hymns that are sung do not tend to be those used in churches... because traditional Scriptural images do not embrace a multi-faith perspective... If the hymns to be sung in Church in thirty years' time are those currently being sung in school, then there will be a repertoire of hymns upon which the sacred story does not impinge.³⁶

I am sure in this company I need not labour this point, hugely hugely significant though it is. But here are two little glimpses about hymns in childhood before we move on to think about the future in my third and final section. The first I owe to John Ellerton, who ends one of his papers³⁷ about hymns with this reflection: that Jesus on the cross 'sustained his spirit, not with any new utterances, but with the familiar words of his Church's Psalmody, the broken fragments of the hymnal of his childhood.' In 50, 60, 70 years' time, how many youngsters of today will be able to turn in memory and be sustained by the hymnal of their childhood, perhaps when they need it most?

The second glimpse is from Patricia St John, who in the 1950s was a pioneer missionary, alone in a small Moroccan mountain town. Little by little she gathered a group of village children who met

regularly in her home, and to whom she taught the stories of Jesus. Forty years later, this is what she wrote:

Sometimes even now, when I return for a few weeks each year to Morocco, I find one of them again. They nearly always remember just one thing from those old days - the little hymn that we sang almost daily in Arabic:

There is a beautiful country.
The gates are closed.
No sin can go in.
O Lord my God, give me a clean heart.
Take away my sin in the blood of my Saviour.
Lead me on the road to your house, O God.
Then receive me with joy.

They repeat the words with laughter and enjoyment, for those old days were happy ones. How much they understand I do not know. But I remember that the thief on the cross knew much less theology than what is contained in that little hymn³⁸.

Hymns are indeed, very often, the poor man's poetry, the poor man's theology. It is part of the reason why we of today's generation must prize and defend them.

We have glanced at the past, in terms of heritage and trusteeship; and at the present, where of course time, and the mind of the church, have yet to do their winnowing work. So to the future: has the hymn as we know it had its day?

Any talk of the future must begin by reminding ourselves that we do not know how long what we call 'our future' may be. There is a story of Robert Murray McCheyne, himself a hymn writer, sitting round the fire one evening with a group of friends. He asked one of them during a lull in their conversation, 'Do you think Christ will return tonight?'. The friend, perhaps a little startled, replied 'I think not.' McCheyne went round the group asking each the same question, receiving the same reply: 'I think not.' Then, solemnly and quietly, he reminded them, 'At an hour you think not, the Son of Man cometh.' What we call our future may be shorter than we think.

But assuming there is a future, is there a future for hymnody? I have no crystal ball, but among the possibilities consider these. First, some do not think there is. When in 1984 David Edwards published the last of his trilogy on *Christian England*, he ended his story in November 1918, because he found there 'an England which was no longer Christian in any substantial sense'³⁹. In a similarly bleak vein, I expect we have all met people who confidently predict – sadly or gleefully according to their standpoint – the tradition of hymn singing in the religious culture of countries such as ours will soon be a thing of the past. What if they are right? As we see Christian faith and Christian values ignored, trivialized or marginalized by so much of our press and political life will the singing of the hymns we have known and loved remain a credible expression of faith?

Were we to lose hymn-singing from our worship, it would (to me, at least) be an unimaginable change; but it would be by no means unprecedented. In my lifetime, how many robed choirs have vanished from the chancels of our smaller – and sometimes, our larger – churches? Frank Field, interviewed by the *Church Times* last year in his role as Chairman of the Cathedrals Fabric

Commission, predicted that their choral tradition was not going to last another 30 years, given the cost to Cathedrals⁴⁰. He may be right; but the future has a way of surprising us.

To take another example, the psalms have formed part of the worship of God for three thousand years. Even in translation, I am told, their nature has produced remarkably consistent patterns of musical settings. Plainsong, Anglican chant, even the Gelineau settings, are all said to echo the pattern of the original Hebrew. Yet I feel sure that the village church where I worship is not the only one from which the singing of the psalms (save only in such metrical versions as 'The King of love my Shepherd is') has entirely vanished. If this can happen to psalms, it can happen to hymns.

A second possibility is that the hymn will develop in ways which we do not yet see. In spite of their consistency, it is possible to trace development in the hymns we sing now. Addison's polished phrases are very different from Tate and Brady, even from 'All people that on earth do dwell', while Jan Struther, for example, is different again; and of course much contemporary hymn writing reflects the century we live in. As a possible illustration of what I mean when I suggest that hymnody may develop in ways we cannot foresee, consider the style of writing which characterizes Thomas Troeger.⁴¹ He was formerly a Presbyterian minister, and is now an Episcopalian. He has degrees in both literature and theology and is an accomplished musician. He brings these gifts to a style which has for many years now been pushing the boundaries of hymn writing, and in his imagery, vocabulary and structure, turning the hymn into something new. He is doing this with great acceptance in the United States, but is at the moment less published here; though you will find two of his texts in *Common Praise*, one with the wonderful opening line, which could only have been written in our generation, 'Above the moon, earth rises'. He has a couple more in the *Church Hymnary* of 2005. But these are among the more traditional of his texts. Others seem to me so innovative as to present at times a discontinuity with the hymns of the past. It may well be that the future lies with those who do this, extending the frontiers of hymn writing by successfully introducing the unfamiliar in form and expression. Perhaps, as we say, Troeger⁴¹ – as far as this country is concerned – is simply ahead of his time. But I must not go on attempting to foresee a future which I have already suggested may hold changes which are unforeseen!

A third possibility is that the hymn as we know it will be entirely replaced by the modern worship-song: indeed, we all know places where this is already true. My own lack of musical understanding makes this a field in which I am ill-equipped to trespass; but I believe that the worship-song, a genre we all recognize even if we cannot easily define, often carries some of the seeds of its own decay. My local church had until recently as one of its two hymn books an early edition of *Songs of Fellowship*, Certainly among our village congregation the passing of time, even these last few years, has winnowed out a great many items which no one now wishes to sing. And is not this part of the very nature of the worship-song, that it is existential, ephemeral, disposable almost, written for the hour, so that, like the rose, it blooms and dies? Am I mistaken to think that such performance-orientated music, by its very nature, reflects the culture of the popular secular music of its day? And I remember that he who marries the spirit of the age will be a widower tomorrow.

But I would like to think that what we are seeing at present is the worship-song beginning to grow up. Even its most loyal adherents no longer believe, I understand, that the raw beat like the drum in the jungle has more than an exceptional place in Christian worship. Roger Scruton in a recent book was very negative in his definition: 'Beat is not rhythm, but the last skeleton of rhythm,

stripped bare of human life.⁴² John Leach – surely one of those loyal adherents I spoke of – believes that rhythm is the key. But when the drum kit and the amplifier have had their way, rhythm often becomes indistinguishable from mere beat. Here is John Leach in his Grove Booklet on the subject:

...in renewal songs it is rhythm which is paramount. The tunes may be fatuous and the harmony may consist of one chord change per line up to a maximum of about three, but the rhythm drives the song and makes it a memorable and exciting experience for the worshippers⁴³.

This reminds me of the little girl whose aunt took her to the circus. On her return, her mother asked her if she had enjoyed it. 'Oh yes, mother', she replied, 'You must go. If you once went, you'd never be satisfied with church again.' Back in 1934 Constant Lambert, then still in his twenties and an *avant-garde* composer, was saying of the folk-song then in vogue what I hear many musicians say today about the worship-song: 'to put it vulgarly,' he wrote, 'the whole trouble with a folk-song is that once you have played it through there is nothing much you can do except play it over again and play it rather louder'⁴⁴. Many long-suffering congregations, I guess, would sympathize.

Other critics of the worship-song look more closely at the words. Pete Ward in his book *Selling Worship*⁴⁵ challenges the claim that such songs are 'all about you, Jesus'. 'This is a crucial insight,' he writes, 'but it could be observed that very few of the songs are really about Jesus ... rather they are all about the worshipper and their experience in worship...the songs lay themselves open to the criticism that they have replaced the content of the Christian gospel with human experience. Instead of worshipping Jesus, they give the impression that we are worshipping worship.' This is of course a very sweeping generalization and I expect even now you are all thinking of notable exceptions which are the other side of the coin. What about 'In Christ alone' for example – a Scriptural text full of theology which may in future days bring the same comfort to many on their last journey as 'Abide with me' has done for an earlier generation. But is not that fine text an instance of the general truth, that as the worship-song grows up, matures, it approaches ever more nearly to what we think of as a hymn?

But I am so unqualified to enter into discussion on this subject (and, I guess, prejudiced) that I must leave it there. Graham Kendrick is due to lead a workshop later today and will more than redress the balance. But I would like to add two things. First, I heard Christopher Idle say in a recent talk how people often tell him, with some complacency, that of course they believe in a 'mixed economy' and that in their church they are careful to include a mixture of both traditional hymns and contemporary worship-songs. In reply, he pertinently reminds them that there is one element missing – the contemporary **hymn**. Such hymns – and here I declare a personal interest – traditional in form but modern in content and language are, I believe, the 21st century heirs of the cherished hymns of the past. Few of them will last long, of course. They are all subject to what T.S.Eliot called 'The only tribunal which can decide – time'.⁴⁶ But I reflect that we have the hymns we treasure from the past only because earlier congregations were willing to try them, not just once or twice but enough to secure an easy familiarity, when they were new and unknown.

I have spent a little time on worship-songs because if these are to form a large part of our future, we need to be aware of what we stand to lose. But the last words before I move on must be first with C.S.Lewis, that notorious disliker of hymns, and then with B.L.Manning, a devotee. Lewis wrote to a correspondent that if hymn-singing and organ-playing in church 'have been helpful and

edified anyone, then the fact that they set my teeth on edge is infinitely unimportant.⁴⁷ Bernard Lord Manning said much the same (and if you do not know his small book on *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts*, sell your shirt and buy a copy). This is his salutary reminder, which applies as much to songs as to hymns:

Reverence is due to hymns as to any sacred object. The hymn that revolts me, if it has been a means of grace to Christian men, I must respect as I should respect a communion cup, however scratched its surface, however vulgar its decoration⁴⁸.

Of possible futures, we have now considered these: that the hymn as we know it has had its day and will pass into oblivion; that hymns will develop and change in ways we cannot foresee; that hymns will be replaced by worship-songs or their successors. But there is a fourth possibility, that the traditional hymn will be with us, and our grandchildren, for a long time to come. This is my own view, and I offer five reasons for advancing it.

First, the traditional hymn offers continuity with our Christian past; both the past of Christ's church from its earliest days, and for many of us our own personal past and early remembrances. Is it not true that as we grow older the past is ever more valuable to us? It not only enshrines our personal identity and pilgrimage, but to be able to sing what has been written, sung and valued in almost every Christian century is not something thoughtful worshippers will lightly surrender.

Secondly, though a hymn must be a happy marriage of form and content, text and tune, the nature of a hymn is determined by meaning above melody. Hymns have been treasured by Christian people because they express the motions of the heart. I do not see a generation willing to part with, for example,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling...

or perhaps,

My days of praise shall ne'er be past
While life and thought and being last,
Or immortality endures.

Or again, when eternity is very near,

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies:
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!

Thirdly, we have in our heritage of hymns a resource for worship which expresses not what is top of the Christian pops at the moment, but the considered mind of the church, the worshipping family, creating, sifting, winnowing, welcoming, discarding, right up to the present day. Successive hymn books quietly drop the worn-out or the less worthy, the too archaic or perhaps the too prosaic, and add a little from our own day. In that sense our hymns are the property of the whole church of God, not performance-orientated, but firmly congregational. They are the valued heritage, I believe, not of the ministry, not even of the musicians, but of the people of God.

Fourthly, when we regain, as we surely must, the sense that our worship should be the best that human resources and gifts can offer, we shall find in our hymn books the work of acknowledged masters, both men and women. Worship is not, for most of us, such a natural and easy business that we can afford to neglect these riches. In the Index of your hymn book you will find such names as Catherine Winkworth and Ralph Vaughan Williams, as Milton and Mendelssohn, Herbert and Handel, Samuel and Charles Wesley, Robert Bridges and J.S.Bach. Such names may of course suffer a temporary eclipse – it is a mad, mad world – but I cannot think such work will be for ever in abeyance.

Fifthly, I believe that hymnody will retain its place because of the range and scope it offers, as I suggested just now, to express the manifold motions of the believer's heart. Erik Routley famously declared that 'Singing goes with what means most to people'⁴⁹; and here of course he was only echoing Scripture – think of Paul's famous exhortations to the Ephesians and the Colossians – in a tradition exemplified most clearly in the Psalter. The Psalmist surely speaks for all of us when he declares:

I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to God while I have being.⁵⁰

Nor is this only felt by worshippers. It is part of humanity. Lord Clark in his famous TV series *Civilization* pondered on the popularity of what he called the 'irrational entertainment' which is opera, with the implied question that perhaps 'What is too silly to be said may be sung.' 'Yes', he said, 'but what is too subtle to be said, or too deeply felt, or too revealing, or too mysterious – these things can also be sung, and only be sung'⁵¹. Too deeply felt? Too mysterious? – these are thoughts and emotions which in our worship we best express congregationally in song. From their hymn book congregations can sing texts of immense variety:

- celebratory – rejoicing in the saving acts of God;
- declaratory – rehearsing together some aspect of faith;
- didactic – opening new insights of Scriptural truth;
- hortatory – stirring each other up, as Paul urged Timothy;
- narrative – telling again part of 'the old, old story';
- meditative – where the music helps us to reflect;
- petitionary – where we offer to God united prayer in song.

You could add other categories. My point is the sheer **usefulness** – I would say the indispensable usefulness – in worship, devotion, and the search for Christian maturity of the hymns we have inherited. And beside that earlier quote from Erik Routley, let me put this from the Old Testament scholar Derek Kidner, who died last December and whose memory I honour:

To come singing into God's presence is not the only way – compare the 'silence' of Psalms 62 and 65; or the tears of Psalm 56 – but it is the way that best expresses love.⁵²

Perhaps that is the litmus test of singing in worship, fulfilled at the deepest levels of commitment and obedience by the old hymns of faith.

Fred Pratt Green, whom we remember today, is on record as saying 'I think we have been singing the Charles Wesley hymns in the Methodist Church now for many years without the experience that created them.'⁵³ I know, I think, what he was getting at, though I am not sure that one can generalize about a whole denomination. Certainly if there is truth in this as regards Methodism, it is a truth none of our churches can evade. But, strangely, I find Fred's verdict a hopeful one. The fact is that however feeble our faith or cold our hearts compared to the great days of revival, we **are** still singing these hymns. They do resonate, even with our limited experience; and they offer us something beyond our present immaturity to which we can aspire.

So I conclude this exploration of the future of the hymn by pointing you to two very different sources. First, from across the Atlantic here is Richard Mouw, President and Professor of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary:

I do think the trend away from more traditional music will be reversed sooner rather than later. The older hymns, I predict, will make a comeback. Maybe we will sing them to a different beat, accompanied by different instruments than in the past. Chances are we will not hold hymnbooks in our hands as often as we once did. But I am convinced that hymn singing will eventually loom large again in evangelical worship. I hope I am right in my optimism, because if we do abandon the older hymns we will have lost a precious treasure in the life of the believing community.⁵⁴

And lastly I remind you of Paul's address to the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, where he spoke of how David 'served his own generation by the will of God'⁵⁵. Perhaps it is a reminder that our real business lies with the present; that the future is in better hands than ours; and that we should bend our best efforts, hymn-lovers that we are, to see that our own generation continues to enter fully into the treasures of their inheritance, to the glory and praise of God.

March 2009

Endnotes

Date and place of publication for standard hymnals are not included in these notes

1. Valerie Wallace, *Mrs Alexander* (Dublin, 1995)
2. Pamela D. Bugden, *Ever, only, all for Thee* (Washington, 2000)
3. Kathleen Jones, *Learning not to be first: the life of Christina Rossetti* (Oxford, 1991); Jan Marsh, *Christina Rossetti: a literary biography* (London, 1994).
4. Georgina Battiscombe, *Christina Rossetti: a divided life* (London, 1981).
5. In the lecture I said 'two new accounts', thinking of the *Life* by Edward Thompson (Oxford, 1944) and perhaps the volume edited by John Sparrow of appreciations and notes (Oxford, 1955) both of which fall outside the period. The most recent and fullest biography known to me is Catherine Phillips, *Robert Bridges: a biography* (Oxford, 1992).
6. Donald Gray, *Percy Dearmer: a parson's pilgrimage* (Norwich, 2000).
7. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *John Newton and the English Evangelical Tradition* (Cambridge, 1996); Marylynn Rouse, ed., *The Searcher of Hearts* (Fearn, 1997) among others. Marylynn Rouse, as the Director of the John Newton Project, is doing much to share his life, work and message with today's generation. See, e.g., her *365 Days with John Newton* (Leominster, 2006).
8. Ian C. Bradley, ed., *O Love that wilt not let me go* (London, 1990).
9. J.R. Broome, ed., *Life and Hymns of John Cennick* (Harpending, 1988).
10. Derrick Hughes, *Brother Sahib: a life of Reginald Heber* (Worthing, 1986).
11. Robin A. Leaver & James H. Litton, eds., *Duty and Delight: Erik Routley Remembered* (Norwich, 1985).
12. Bernard Braley, ed., *Serving God and God's Creatures* (London, 2001).
13. Bernard Braley, *Hymnwriters*, vols. 1, 2, & 3 (London, 1987, 1989, 1991).
14. Erik Routley, op.cit., (Collegetown, Minnesota, 1979); edited and expanded by Paul A. Richardson (Chicago, 2005).
15. Ian Bradley, *Abide with Me: the world of Victorian hymns* (London, 1997).
16. J.R. Watson, *The English Hymn: a critical and historical study* (Oxford, 1997).
17. John Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (London, 1907).
18. Charles Robertson, ed., *Singing the Faith: essays by members of the Joint Liturgical Group on the use of hymns in the Liturgy* (Norwich, 1990)

19. *In Tune with Heaven: the Report of the Archbishops' Commission on Church Music* (London, 1992).
20. Ian Bradley, ed., *The Penguin Book of Hymns* (London, 1989).
Chris Meade, ed., *The Puffin Book of Hymns* (London, 1992).
Ian Bradley, ed., *The Daily Telegraph Book of Hymns*
Martin J. Nicholls, ed., *Hunger for Justice: hymns and songs to change the world* (Stowmarket, 2004).
21. Geoff Weaver, ed., *Lambeth Praise* (Harrisburg PA, 1998 and Norwich, 2008).
22. op.cit. (Caernarfon, 2001).
23. Geoff Baker, ed., *The Keswick Songbook* (Stowmarket, 2000).
24. Edward Darling and Donald Davison, *Companion to Church Hymnal* (Dublin, 2004).
25. Edward Darling, *Sing to the Word* (Oxford, 2000).
26. *Common Ground: a song book for all the churches* (Edinburgh, 1998)
27. Christopher Idle, *Exploring Praise!* (Darlington, 2006, 2007).
28. e.g. Brian Wren, *What Language shall I Borrow?* (London, 1989); or, on the opposing side, P.D.James, *Bad Language in Church* (London, 1988), a reprint by the Prayer Book Society from the *Sunday Telegraph*, 14 February 1988.
29. See, for example, J.R.Watson (note 16 above); Donald Webster, *The Hymn Explosion and its Aftermath* (Leeds & London, n.d.) – an address given 6 June 1992; *Duty & Delight* (note 11 above). The *Bulletin* of the Hymn Society carries references to this from time to time, including as recently as the issue of April 2008; where the contribution from Richard Wilkinson should be read alongside the letter from Gordon Knights in the following issue.
30. *Dunblane Praises No 1* (Dunblane, 1964); *No 2* (1967). There was at least one Dunblane collection for schools (n.d.).
31. Privately published by the Pilgrim Church, Plymouth, 1968; and by Galliard, Great Yarmouth, 1972.
32. See Michael Saward, *Jubilate Everybody: the story of Jubilate hymns* (Torquay, 2003).
33. Andrew Pratt, *O for a Thousand Tongues: the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book in context* (Peterborough, 2004) p.178.
34. 30 September, 1991, published in the *Bulletin* of the Hymn Society, January 1902.
35. Graham Lacey, ed., *My Favourite Hymn* (London, 1999).
36. Brian Castle, *Sing a New Song to the Lord* (London, 1994) p.169.
37. Henry Housman, ed., *John Ellerton: his life and writings on hymnology* (London, 1896) p.259.

38. *Patricia St John tells her own Story* (Carlisle, 1993) p.99.
39. op. cit., Vol III, p.366
40. 'Back page Interview', 21 November 2008.
41. See, e.g., his *New Hymns for the Lectionary* (New York, 1986)
42. Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford, 1997) p.502.
43. John Leach, *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Nottingham, 1995) p.7.
44. I have this from *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Quotations* citing chapter 3 of Constant Lambert, *Music Ho!*, 1934.
45. op. cit. (Milton Keynes, 2005) p.209.
46. T.S.Eliot, 'What is minor poetry?' in *On Poetry and Poets* (London, 1957) P.51.
47. Walter Hooper, ed., *C.S.Lewis: collected letters, volume III* (London, 2006) in a letter of March 1956.
48. op. cit., (London, 1942) p.109.
49. Erik Routley, *Christian Hymns Observed* (Princeton NJ, 1982) p.107.
50. Psalm 104.33.
51. Kenneth Clark, *Civilization* (London, 1969) p.243.
52. F.D.Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (London, 1975) adapted, p.344.
53. as Note 11 above, p.223.
54. Richard J. Mouw & Mark A. Noll, eds., *Wonderful words of Life* (Cambridge 2004) p.xiii.
55. Acts 13.36.