

Shall We Demythologize Our Hymns?

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The renaissance in American church music seems to have found its prophet. Oddly enough, he is British and at least one historian says¹ that this spokesman knows little about what has really happened in America during the last twenty years. Nevertheless Erik Routley, minister of Augustine-Bristo Congregational Church in Edinburgh, has become the mouthpiece of theology and esthetics of church music in our day. His many books² have far outstripped the production of our own musicologists and hymnologists, and many American church music theoreticians feel that they must now make a pilgrimage to Scotland to complete their training.

The evangelical church musician has found much in Dr. Routley's work that is stimulating and helpful. He is trained in theology, in philosophy, in hymnology and in music, having earned at least three degrees at Oxford University. His brilliant mind and incisive style cuts to the heart of a problem, rejecting cliché-solutions in a way that is characteristically British. His knowledge of the Scriptures and his warm dedication to the Church are not customary accouterments of a man with so keen a knowledge of great music, both sacred and profane. From time to time it has been evident that he is no fundamentalist, but his preoccupation with the "gospel" sounds Barthian, at least. However, his latest volume (*Hymns Today and Tomorrow*, Abingdon Press, 1964) borrows much iconoclasm from Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich and is profoundly disappointing to many. Strangely enough, Bishop John Robinson is not mentioned, but one reviewer (Alfred B. Haas) describes the work as "a provocative essay on theological honesty in hymn texts, a sort of *Honest to God* approach via hymns. It will stir controversy." We can all hope that the last statement is true, but it remains to be seen whether American church musicians are discerning enough to challenge this new prophet.

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1. Leonard Ellinwood, in his review of *Twentieth Century Church Music*, in *Response*, January, 1965.
 2. Erik Routley, *The Church and Music* (1950), *Hymns and Human Life* (1953), *Hymns of the Faith* (1956), *Church Music and Theology* (1959), *The English Carol* (1959), and *Twentieth Century Church Music* (1964).

No doubt some will insist that it is not fair to lump Routley together with these extreme liberals. While challenging us all to re-think our phraseology in order to make hymn-singing understood by our science-oriented generation, Routley himself uses so much traditional biblical and confessional language that it is difficult to categorize him. But this sort of schizophrenia is a familiar characteristic of today's "theological liberal."

In point of fact, Dr. Routley seldom makes a categorical statement about his own position. Over and over again he reiterates his concern for the modern man who simply cannot accept the traditional mythology of fundamentalist hermeneutics. In *Hymns Today and Tomorrow* he introduces the chapter "The Images of Mythology," with a long quotation from Ian Henderson's comments on Bultmann's *Neues Testament und Mythologie* in which is recorded the theologian's flat rejection of the New Testament message of Christ's coming and work as untenable in our day. Routley then comments (pp. 49, 50):

. . . Whether this expositor of Bultmann's view of the gospel can or cannot get this summary of it from the Bible, without doubt he could have got it from any hymnbook. The great question is being asked, whether or not we must reframe our whole statement of faith so as to tie it less closely to the thought forms of a prescientific age and more closely to those of the age in which we and our hearers live.

A few sentences later he seems clearly to have joined the demythologizing camp when he says:

Bultmann, even if his methods are by now somewhat dated and his scientific assumption easily dismissed by modern scientists, sought a middle way between the liberal rejection (of any Kerygma) and the fundamentalist credulity. Not much thought is needed to bring anyone to the conclusion that the statement of the gospel in contemporary terms without distortion of its central truths is the church's whole preaching task today.

Whereupon he proceeds to urge us to demythologize the "demonic theology" found in our hymns of the ascension, the atonement, and the resurrection.

It is not the purpose of this study to offer a detailed refutation of Bultmannian methodology, philosophy or theology. We will only contend that, with all his erudition, Routley is most impotent when his polemic is negative. He simply does not prove his point in the basic theme of this volume. Notwithstanding, the argument makes a contribution to hymn-singing and to hymnal-building which is worthwhile. There may well be a healthy sort of demythologization of our ecclesiastical speech and song. We must insist, however, that Bultmann's solution is no solution at all. For he creates a new mythology, and it is our guess that both the average man and the

scientists will find it a less reasonable foundation for Christian faith than that which he seeks to demolish.

Some of the lesser tenets of scientist demythologizing seem to be "much ado about nothing." It remains to be proved that the vast majority of folk think in cosmic terms, even in this atomic age. Is it really confusing to say that the Lord "ascended" into heaven? Is it better to think that he "went out there" or that he simply "went away"? What remains unclear in the discussion of this issue is whether Routley is protecting the integrity of theology or of cosmic geography! We suspect it is the latter when he argues that the ascension "is a doctrine which has caused so much doubt and confusion in our time that many of those whose worship is not conditioned by a rigid adherence to the church's year have quietly discarded it" (p. 51). But it is also true that many of us who ignore the lesser festivals of the liturgical calendar still hold rigorously and joyously to the doctrine of the bodily ascension of Christ into heaven.

In speaking of the central miracle of our faith, Routley says: "It may be true that just now, when we happen to be so full of the discoveries of modern science, we must permit a certain agnosticism about the historical facts of the resurrection. . . . If there are doubts, these doubts must not be dismissed as unbelief in the central truth of the Christian faith. For the real truth of which the gospel stories may possibly be no more than the best images or symbols that human art can devise." This obsession with the "principle" rather than the "fact" of resurrection is hard on such a theologically-rich hymn as Charles Wesley's "Christ the Lord is Risen Today" or the medieval classics "O Sons and Daughters" and "Christians, to the Paschal Victim."

It is a little confusing to find that at the same time Routley recommends Easter hymns that speak of *victory* and *renewal of life*, including Gellert's "Jesus Lives, and so shall I." How are we to understand Jesus' promise "because I live, ye shall live also"? (John 14:19). Is this only a spiritual or a metaphysical resurrection? To what extent is God "the master of death" if he cannot raise Christ's physical body?

Superstition about the atonement seems to be Dr. Routley's greatest concern. That Christ was a "ransom" is "an excellent example of a mythology which we must manage without" (p. 61). Nor can we think of the atonement "as a price paid to God for man's sin—a price which man could not pay for himself." The familiar hymnic images "blood," "the lamb" and "sacrifice" can only be tolerated when they are "dead metaphors" he insists. "There is a fountain filled with blood' (Wm. Cooper) is in itself beyond the reach of any imagination now, except as a repulsive image" (p. 63).

What, then, constitutes an accepted song of atonement? To this Scottish divine, a song of the crucifixion must always speak of victory. As in the medieval carols, the singer should “rejoice in the passion.” Hymns such as “Sing, my Tongue, the Glorious Battle” and “Ride on! Ride on in Majesty!” are ideal.

In this, as in other volumes, he is particularly hard on Stainer’s “Crucifixion” and its long, plaintive development of “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?” Probably few musicians today will defend the “Crucifixion” as great cantata architecture, and it may well be that the passage from Lamentations 1:12 is not exegetically relevant. But many will want to object to Routley’s claim that this text speaks nothing more than sentimental pity of the Crucified. One wonders (because he doesn’t mention it) how he feels about Isaac Watts’ great expression of sorrow and incredulity, “When I survey the wondrous cross.” The “offence” of the cross (I Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11) that leads to godly sorrow and repentance gets proper recognition here! We would have to argue that the Isaiah 53 view of Christ’s suffering—far from producing only a “barren” and “helpless” guilt—is what leads us to the commitment of Watts’ final stanza.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

At the same time, many of Dr. Routley’s suggestions are pertinent to a consideration of “hymns today and tomorrow.” He is right when he judges that our strongest hymns are those which are bathed in scripture truth, not those which simply copy Bible phrases; this is particularly true in a day of multiple versions and translations. However, we cannot agree that this is a logical concession to people who simply do not read the Bible nowadays. If they do not, no worthy hymn is going to be completely meaningful.

We are all in agreement that children’s hymns have well left the “fear psychosis” of the eighteenth century and the “pedagogical preoccupation” of the nineteenth. “Children are human beings and should be treated as such...with hymns embodying images and characters agreeable to the child’s outlook...” (p. 79). We cannot accept Routley’s statement that forward-looking children’s hymns have had more opportunity in Britain than in America. Our Christian education departments have taken the lead in this field, and particularly so in judicious use of artwork in hymn and anthem printing.

We can even join in some of Routley’s debunking. In a universal Christian church, there is no excuse for hymns that speak of “snow” in connection with Christ’s birth. We can rejoice that many theologians have finally recognized the senseless optimism (if not the lack

of biblical foundation) in the eschatology of "It came upon the midnight clear" with its anticipation of "peace...over all the earth" and an "age of gold." And, although we see no reason to discard the images of "dove" and "breath of God," we would welcome some hymns that speak of the Holy Spirit as a "rushing mighty wind" or "tongues of fire."

But we must continue to be disturbed by a fear of the completely scriptural images of God as a *Rock* ("The question. . . is whether it is wise often, or ever, to sing of God as somebody to whom one flies for refuge in life's dangers" p. 31); as a *Shepherd* ("Hymns which represent the shepherd as an ethereal creature who treats the lambs like babies had better be put aside" p. 30) and even as *Father* ("for the earthly father is at best a fallible creature" p. 27). We are not unaware of the psychological problems fostered by the failure of modern fathers, and the resulting breakdown of the family unit. Nor would we coddle the immature Christian who may be guilty of spiritual infantilism. But we cannot agree that a lifelong sense of dependence upon God is in any real sense unchristian. This sounds too much like Bultmann's rejection of the idea of God's supernatural intervention in the affairs of men.

Notwithstanding, in answer to the question "shall we demythologize our hymns?" we say a resounding "yes." Dr. Routley's emphasis is long overdue—a hymn contains ideas as well as words and should be the product of activist minds as well as vocal participation and sentimental enjoyment. For both liberals and evangelicals, it is true that "there is no single influence in public worship that can so surely condition a congregation to self-deception, to fugitive follies, to religious perversities, as thoughtlessly chosen hymns" (p. 22).

We cannot agree to the type of demythologization which takes familiar biblical phrases and by semantic sleight-of-hand makes of them something unbiblical. Although it is well-nigh impossible to express infinite truth about a transcendent God in finite verbiage, this is our task; and Scripture (with all its images) is our best guide. Is it not more honest to revise our liturgy and our creeds, if necessary, to conform to our theology? The liberal should feel more comfortable if he dropped the hymns which no longer support his preaching. Or would this create a revolution in the pew which he could not control?

The evangelical too should do his own demythologizing, by insisting that hymn-singing be the product of his rational mind, and by refusing to sing that which is spiritually unhealthy, or with which he cannot agree intellectually.

It is interesting to note that Erik Routley is one of the very few hymnologists who recognizes Wesley's "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" as a treatise on the Arminian doctrine of Christian

perfection. For to many worshipers and ministers it is no more than a familiar "opening hymn" or a series of poetic phrases about the "love of God." This is typical of the sort of nonsense that we practice in hymn singing.

In our day, if we are not tempted to deny God's concern with mortal affairs, we may be guilty of the idolatry of anthropomorphism. At least some of our modern gospel hymns indicate this, with their attempts to cajole and manipulate the God of eternity, to reduce Him to our own small stature.

Even some of our more respectable gospel songs come close to presenting a humanistic salvation-experience which is no more supernatural new birth than that which is the result of Bultmann's *kerygma*. The historic favorite "It's Real" talks about an authentic spiritual experience for four extended stanzas and a refrain, and scarcely mentions the basis of our faith or the name of Jesus Christ. A more modern ballad by Stuart Hamblen proclaims "It is no secret what God can do," but nowhere in the song is the secret revealed.

We can also do without the hypochondriac songs of comfort that are cherished by some of our fellowships. It would not hurt us at all to exchange "Does Jesus Care?" or "God Will Take Care of You" for the healthy faith expressed in "Be Still, My Soul" or "Give to the Wind Thy Fears." There is a current favorite that wails "It will be worth it all when we see Jesus"—in a day when our standard of living is at its highest, and when it is quite respectable to be known as a fundamentalist! It is at this point that Routley's barbs (like those of Dietrich Bonhoeffer) come close to their mark. Even today, Christians should act and sing like true disciples!

And what about the hymns of tomorrow? Some of us have wondered whether hymn singing might well disappear in the modern church. We attend divine services so seldom (compared with our grandparents) and we are so addicted to spectatorism, that we may well lose acquaintance with the few hymns we now know. During the past thirty years congregations have shown great resistance to new hymns, and few modern poets have given us anything to try.

Of course, we must have new hymns and they should reflect a developing poetic art, perhaps even to a reconsideration of the necessity of rhyme and regular meter. We like Routley's suggestion that some of our new hymns (particularly if planned for evangelism) should borrow the secular flavor of *carols*. Why not use the folk song medium to present gospel truth? At any rate, we join the plea for realistic songs of salvation, in which we temper the ecstatic declaration "And now I am happy all the day" with the honest admission that Christian faith doesn't eliminate all your problems but does help you know where to find their resolution.

For the evangelical believer, the hymnbook will not need to be emasculated by massive excision or reinterpretation. For him, both

the Bible and the hymnal are timeless and still completely relevant. Though he will welcome a "new song" for a new day, Bernard of Clairvaux, Paul Gerhardt, John Newton, James Montgomery and P. P. Bliss will continue to provide him with "songs of Zion." All the techniques of unbelieving demythologization will never remove the "foolishness" or limit the "power of God" which accompanies the preaching and singing of the historic cross.

Let those refuse to sing
Who never knew our God,
But children of the heavenly King
May speak their joys abroad.

(Watts, "Come We that Love the Lord.")