Don't offend a left-handed blind black lesbian single mother on welfare!

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ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS
309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636
Phone 508.775.8008
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METAPHORICAL INTEGRITY, OR CONTEXT SHREDDING IN THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL

The press, secular & religious, is treating the inclusive-language NT & Psalms as a bad joke. A Wall St. Journal editorial said its aim is to avoid offending a "left-handed blind black woman," four categories of possible offense (to which, in the first line of this Thinksheet, I've added two). The panning of another publication in the same mold, under the same censorship rules, viz. THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL (Pilgrim/95), is beginning & already includes a former president of The Hymn Society of America....My critiquing has included Thinksheets #2702, #2703, #2709.

This Thinksheet has the narrow purpose of displaying some NCH instances of **violation** of (1) metaphorical integrity or (2) the con/text relationship:

(1) means that the hymnal frequently destroys a biblical or theological or liturgical figure without acknowledging the destruction (thus violating two senses of integrity: the wholeness of the figure's use in loco, & the morality of the destroyer).

(2) means that the violater cuts the vital cord between a text (word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, pericope) & its literary context, its life context, or both.

All, all this violation is in the interest of one or more strands of **PC**, the current dogmatic commitment (1) to avoid offending any of "the oppressed," who are defined as almost everybody except well-heeled white Christian males, & (2) to revise by elision/substitution, ie to bowdlerize, the Bible & the classic hymns (& some other traditional literature).

I'm not being picky. As biblical scholar & longtime worshiper, I'm reflecting how shocked I am when each day I read a number of the hymns in NCH, a practice I'll continue till completing my reading of the hymnal. Many of the violations are so heavy-handed, so wooden, so biblically/theologically/liturgically/historically ignorant, that I can only attribute them to the "contemporary poets" (p.x) to whom great hymns were turned over for emasculation & other purification from alleged pollutants.

1 Very prominent in scripture is the owner/slave, lord/servant metaphor. In Gk., the strongest dyad, the correlation bespeaking the greatest vertical authority, seldom occurs in the NT, but does so in the first line of the Nunc Dimittis (L.2.29). In groveling praise, slave Simeon addresses his Owner-Lord. (Not groveling? Then one can't grovel in Gk.--which is absurb.) The traditional Eng. "Lord,...servant" probably can't be improved on. But the NCH & i.-l. (inclusive-language) predecessors manages to come up with something worse: it destroys the metaphor along with its Sitz im Leben (life-situation, the owner/slave relationship). With no other purpose than to degender the addressee, it appropriates "Holy One" from the other Testament & another life-context. The original context? Shredded, as one puts paper through a shredder so its data-situation can't be read....This monstrosity occurs numerous times--eg 11,20,53. In addition, "Holy One" gets used far out of proportion to its biblical usage (which is rare)--eg 3,6,8 twice,21 thrice,28,29,53. Reminds me of 1929, when I learned to use a compositor's stick to assemble individual letters, numbers, & slugs: I got especially friendly with some pieces. My picture is of an inclusivistic recomposer who takes a fancy to the pieces in the "Holy One" slot....or of an ancient bard who rearranged stock phrases to fit the occasion.

The occasion? To find expressions for God that are (1) gender-neutral & (2) non-vertical. "Holy One" passes: unlike "Lord," it's neither masculine nor inherently vertical. For most PCers, hatred of the divine vertical is almost as intense as hatred of the divine masculine.

Excuse? The hymnal committee could offer, in defense of said monstrosity, the fact that it's used in many PC churches. But the hymnal was Synod-authorized for all churches, not just the PCers.

2 The Fr.-Eng. "Sovereign" is another dodge to get rid of masculine "Lord." Among other places, it's 8x on pp.55-59, though it's a novelty in Eng. religious language & therefore lacks devotional-liturgical resonance. (Ironically, it seems to come +

from a Lat. n. meaning a male designated only as being vertical, "over"!) The bowdlerizer's intention is bald clear: the wd. has no virtue other than being gender-neutral. In beauty, it suffers by comparison with "Lord," which has no non-liquid consonants. How does it grab you to begin the Magnificat with "My soul magnifies the Sovereign" (59)?

3 My teacher of Aramaic long ago said that that language, because of its extensive use of the flat "a," "sounds like the quaking of ducks." Sometimes I remember that when I encounter, in NCH & other i.-l. literature, inane repetition of "God" to avoid the masculine pronouns. Eg, in the Canticle of Zechariah (55-56), "God" occurs 11x! And in the Magnificat (59), 10x! We are treated sometimes to that same staccato effect in the case of "Jesus" (eg, 31,38) & "Christ" (45)....Another irony: Using "Christ" to avoid the masculine "Jesus" won't hunt: "Christ" is a strictly masculine word & idea ("anointing" in scripture being limited to males: no female "messiahs"). The hymnal committee, if aware of this about "Christ," could nevertheless argue that the people's ignorance makes "Christ" *feel* less masculine than "Jesus." That would not be the only smoke & mirrors in the committee's product.

All this "God"ing tempts one to get sick of "God," a colorless (&, ironically, masculine) word for the deity. The great hymn, "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation" pales out in NCH to 7x "God"s, though the original deeply meant "Lord" & "King": the whole hymn-text hangs on these two *particular* titles of deity, but the censorship guidelines replaced them with the *general* signifier of divinity. In the original, you know the hymn's theme after the first four words: in the bowdlerization, you must sense, after singing/reading the hymn, what was the intended content of the divine reference....Here I must repeat what I said in an earlier Thinksheet: the producers of the hymnal intended to deceive the public by having each pastor post a list so the people could see if their favorite hymn was to be included. That list included "Praise to the Lord...." But after purchasing the hymnal, a church would discover that that title refers to hymn no.22, the bowdlerized form: the original does not appear in the hymnal. By this trick, the publisher has secretly promoted a hymnological monstrosity for (sic) "the new century"! And of course if you don't know the original first line of hymn, this hymnal won't help you: indeed, it's interested in your not knowing.

4 Our congregation's hymn-singing these past two Sundays poignantly illustrates the two violations indicated in this Thinksheet's title. I should rather say, we would have sung those violations if we'd been using NCH. Thank God, we weren't....Two Sundays ago, we sang the great Irish political hymn, "Be thou my vision," a product of the 8th c., when Celtic civilization reached its zenith under the High King (at Tara), who loosely ruled over the four lesser kings. Toward century's end, clan warfare weakened the Irish capability of resisting invaders, & the Norsemen began a hegemony that continued till the English took over. Politics? In that chaotic time, the hymnist transcendentalized the weakening High King: his "High King of heaven" was worshiped as the eternal ruler over all the earth, its nations corresponding to the little kingdoms of Ireland (which, to the extent of the High King's success, functioned as intertwined provinces). The singer gives in his song the utter fealty to the High King of heaven that the fractious Irish people never quite gave to the High King at Tara. The hymn has **metaphorical integrity**, its control image sustained throughout. But in NCH, the neurotic need to avoid the four-letter dirty word "k-i-n-g" killed the High King of heaven. (In this Thinksheet, I won't even mention the other horrendous depredations.)

Last Sunday, we sang a great discipleship/education hymn to Rabbi (Teacher, Master [Lat. for teacher]) Jesus, "O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee." As in a collect, the addressee signals the content--eg, "Jesus, Savior, Pilot Me" is about salvation. "O Master ["a male teacher" is the dictionary's first meaning],..." tells you that what follows will be about learning, education, discipleship. But when I got home, I discovered--no surprise--that the new hymnal's anxiety to avoid the six-letter dirty word "Master" has set up a sad, stupid conflict between the addressee and the content. NCH begins (& ends) "O Savior...," falsely signing that the song is to be about salvation! And, to avoid the vertical, "lowly" (identification with the poor, a PC-&-liberationist must) is changed to "earthly"! This butchery illustrates the **context shredding** of this Thinksheet's title.