

IF THE CHRISTMAS CAROLS LIFT YOU LIKE A WIND,  
YOUR WINGS WERE SPREAD

1 Well, they did me last night (before we came home & saw/heard The Speeches, Al's concession & W's acceptance). Our church ("The Village Church" on Centerville's Main St.) was full of a cross-section of our village folk (faithful Christians, nonpracticing "Christians," & I would guess also spiritual-but-not-religious & just plain nonreligious). The door's open, & each year on the evening of the village's Christmas Stroll people drift off the Norman-Rockwell-decorated street (free-food stands, free rides in horse-drawn wagons) into the village's Christmas Carols sing. "Joy to the world" indeed!

Yes, I can never do the Stroll without thinking of where joy is not in the world, & praying for all the miserable & all who under whatever name occasion the miseries' agreeing with Jesus' beatitude "Blessed are the merciful." But the biblical commands of mercy are in the same canon as, & not of superior force to, "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Phil.4.4; CEV: "Always be glad because of the Lord!"). Always, but on special occasions also, supremely in the festivities of the Incarnation (Christmas) & the Resurrection (Easter).

2 But this morning I witnessed the Christmas gospel to a man whose wings are not spread: the Christmas carols, instead of lifting him, remind him more of the hate side than the love side of his engagement with Christianity, though he holds Jesus, his particular self-mirroring version of Jesus, highest among the names of religions' founders. The general fact that "God comes to humanity in many ways" denies, in his mind, the special Christian truth that (as the UCC Statement of Faith has it) "in Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Lord, he [himself] has come to us" *once for all time & for all*. Without this narrow-minded, large-hearted conviction, the Christmas carols cannot lift the soul, the mind, the life, the world.

3 For esthetes who enjoy the beauties & even the goodness of the Christmas carols, Ernest Cadman Colwell (dean of the University of Chicago Divinity, soon to be the university's president), concluded the U. of C. Roundtable (at that time, radio's most intellectual weekly program) with these to-me unforgettable words: "...and best of all, the Christmas carols are **true**." (For my longtime, longmemoried readers, I apologize for repeating this story.) That was 59 Christmasses ago, our family eating Christmas dinner as we listened. (The fact that I'd begun to write a PhD dissertation with Colwell as my advisor added a personal breeze to lift our hearts.)

4 The sharpmemoried among you readers will recall also that this Thinksheet's title is a trope on a chapter in my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT: "If a hymn lifts you like a wind, your wings were spread." There I tell of a nonChristian who, depressed & not knowing his wings were spread, wandered into a church & was lifted by the first line of a Christmas hymn (not on the usual list of Christmas "carols"): "Love divine, *all loves excelling*." Period: The lift came from the thought that there was, is, such a Love. But he rejected the second line (& all the rest of that great hymn): "Joy of heaven, to earth come down." I asked him (1) how could we know that this Love is "all loves excelling" except on its own initiative, coming down to us? & (2) had he not, in the moment of being lifted by the first line, experienced something of the last line "Lost in wonder, love, and praise"? Until we who are lost are found by this Love, we cannot know the ecstasy of being thus "lost."

5 In the above §, I distinguished, in Christmas music, between hymns & carols. A carol is a "simple, traditional, essentially rhythmic song, particularly one whose words concern the nativity [of Jesus]." Some with refrains were "originally intended for dancing,....joining hands in a ring-dance." The "folk-carol" rose up among the people, some composed by "semi-literate minstrels": the "art-carol" was equally rhythmic but more formal & intended for (1) processional use & (2) "a group of singers in two or three contrapuntal parts." Both types are

Elliott  
△  
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309 Lake Elizabeth Drive  
Craigville, MA 02632  
Phone/Fax 508.775.8008 \$20 per year  
e-mail: vanhoel@elliotthinksheets.net

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characterized by "simplicity, strength and honesty," though from time to time the genre has degenerated into "spurious carols...sickly, sentimental and inappropriate." (Quotations from "Carol," The New Westminster DICTIONARY OF LITURGY AND WORSHIP [SCM/W./86].)

And the Christmas hymn? Less bouncy, more stately-sedate, more conformable to Augustine's definition of a hymn as "the praise of God in song." In putting Christmas singing in two columns, I came upon this parallel:

HYMN: "Angels, from the realms of glory, / Wing your flight o'er all the earth; / Ye who sang creation's story, / Now proclaims Messiah's birth: / [refrain] Come and worship, come and worship, / Worship Christ, the new-born King. // Shepherds.... // Sages.... // Saints."

CAROL: "Angels we have heard on high / Sweetly singing o'er the plains, / And the mountains in reply / Echo back their joyous strains. / [refrain of long glissandos] Gloria in excelsis Deo [repeated]." (Mixing Eng. & Lat. is a characteristic of the art-carol.)

Also, the note of **joy** is more prominent in the carol than in the hymn. Praise (hymns' essence) is action toward God: joy (carols' essence) is the reaction of the human heart in response to God's action....

6 ....but some Christmas songs fall, in my chart, on the line between "hymns" & "carols." Or to put it another way, they challenge the distinction. EXERCISE: In a hymnal's "Christmas" section, you classify the songs in the two columns, & see what you conclude.

For me, the on-the-line (or in-between) songs include, among many, (1) Christina Rossetti's "In the bleak mid-winter" (sung legato, it is reminiscent of plainsong chant, from whose solemnity the Christmas songs diverged); & (2) Luther's "From heaven above to earth I come."

7 ....and speaking of Luther, he's remembered as saying that the people's songbook is also their theology text: they believe what they sing, so be careful what they sing! Those of us who are care-ful for biblical-classical Christian theology are distressed at the nonchalant heresies in the UCC's THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL (heresies detailed in HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG? An Assessment of TNCH). My #2752 ("Christmas Carols **Ashamed** of Jesus") displays that "trendy, ephemeral" hymnal's frantic effort to desex Jesus (parallel with ancient docetism's effort to deflesh him). In "Brightest and best," note the contortions to remove Jesus from the category "sons" & to elide all nine masculine pronouns referring to him! The bowdlerization of "Angels, from the realms of glory" drops Jesus as "King" even though in the original every stanza ends with that title! In "In the bleak mid-winter," not even the Wise Men are permitted to be male, & Jesus is not "Lord" even though that was the only dominical title in the earliest Christian confession, "Jesus is Lord."....But enough, I'm getting depressed; ask for #2752 if you want further details. Butchering the Christmas carols in the interest of gender feminism is devils' work.

8 Any new carols? Of course! Of the making of many carols there is no end. I'll limit myself to these, which I've put in chronological order, in THE UNITED METHODIST HYMNAL (1989):

1969 182 "Word of God, come down to earth"

192 "There's a Spirit in the air"

241 "That boy-child of Mary"

1973 252 "When Jesus came to Jordan"

1987 235 "Rock-a-bye, my dear little boy"\*

\*This is one of a number of carols not Englished (this, from Czech; some, from Spanish) till recently.

A few words from these new hymns: 182 "Word of God, come down to earth,...touch our hearts and bring to birth faith and hope and love unending."

192 "Lose your shyness, find your tongue; tell the world what God has done. God in Christ has come to stay. Live tomorrow's life today!" 241 "That boy-child of Mary was born in a stable...in Bethlehem....Gladly we praise him, love and adore him, give ourselves to him of Bethlehem." 252 "the hidden years had ended, the age of grace began." 235 "wonder of wonders, my blessing and joy."