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A quick walk through

HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG?

An Assessment of "The New Century Hymnal" (ed. by Rich. L. Christensen [CONFESSING CHRIST/97, 335 L.Eliz.Dr., Centerville MA 02632--$12, $10 each for 5 or more copies])

Don't take my word for it! (I am adamantly opposed to this blasphemous production, of which anything good that might be said is only an instance of "the devil disguised as an angel of light.")....By "this production," I mean the hymnal: I strongly recommend that you read this **fair-minded** book on it.

1 The UCC General Synod 1993 commissioned a hymnal in which "every person can sing every hymn." Failure: I can't sing every hymn, certainly not the classics (which hymnologists call "propers"), which have been so bowdlerized as to be, in some instances, almost unrecognizable & in many, so theologically distorted as to amount to heresy (a "split" off from the UCC's doctrinal foundation as expressed in its originating documents & the Preface to its Constitution).

2 On p3, the most eminent living American hymnologist says that TNCH fails of inclusivity (as I said in §1): The hymns are "exclusively in a hymnic dialect formed from a feminist-inclusive hypothesis of justice vs. aesthetics, and realized in an unrelenting pursuit of consistency....the most ideological and doctrinaire hymnal....little regard for a hymnal's historic and useful role to hold old and new metaphors in creative tension, conflict, competition, and comfort."

3 Pp5-18, eminent UCC theologian Gabriel Fackre expounds "The UCC Theological Basics....based on texts foundational to the United Church of Christ." You won't find a better thumbnail, in our or any other denomination, of the Christian intellectual essentials.

4 Pp21-34, the editor compares/contrasts "The Language of Faith and THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL." "The near elimination of classical Christian language for the Trinity," despite the fact that Christianity raises the status of women....All the name-substitutes for Father, Son, & Holy Spirit lead into swamps of ancient heresies & undercut freedom & justice, an abysmal price TNCH seems willing to pay....It's "terribly naive" to assume a direct connection between language & oppression: some highly sexist cultures have languages without gender-pronouns....Neutering language for Jesus cuts the link with the OT & Judaism & paves the way for anti-Semitism & denies "the scandal of the particularity of the Incarnation" while making "Jesus less than fully human," turning "Jesus into a kind of universal principle instead of the concrete historical disclosure of the living God."....Revising language for God plays into the hands of atheists Feuerbach & Marx...."It was not in the job description of the hymnal editors to redesign the faith without our consent."...."four false premises" of TNCH language changes...."'If we lose our language, we lose our ways. And if we lose our ways, we lose our way.'"

5 Pp34-51, Dan. Johnson offers 21 affirmations of "Theological and Ecclesiological Strengths of THE NEW CENTURY HYMNAL." Defending TNCH's neutering of Jesus, D.J. asks "Does our salvation depend upon the atoning sacrifice of a male?" (I respond: What else? A female? An hermaphrodite?)...."Feminist critiques" force language changes, & "such reworking has becomes a [UCC] theological priority"--so "the hymnal committee...found it necessary to create theological and language guidelines." This last is patently false: Because the committee refused to conform to the bureaucratically-*imposed* guidelines, the committee was permitted to vote only once (because it voted wrong!--p143) & subsequently was dismissed, so the bureaucrats could finish the job without interference from the peons (ie, people in the churches).

6 Pp41-43, NEWSWEEK's Ken Woodward's 2.12.96 explosive attack on the hymnal: "Hymns, Hers, and Theirs: Is nothing sacred? A new hymnal keeps the music but changes the words to fit some modern sensibilities." His quoting me as saying that TNCH "celebrate[s] the advent of a new religion" led to my reluctant but willing submission to talk-show & other media questioning.

7 Pp45-51, Andy Lang's "Letter to Kenneth Woodward" is the national-UCC-office's

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counterattack, in which six times he mentions me by name, once snidely as "your friend," implying that friendship has warped the professional judgment of America's most eminent religion journalist....He calls TNCH "our church's hymnal," whereas officially it is only one of four such, & indeed is only superficially (as accepted by General Synod) "our church's" (for it's the product of a few bureaucrats applying their own arcane censorship laws)....A.L. excoriates K.W., time & again, for not writing a "balanced" article--as though the piece were a review instead of what it is, viz, a news article dealing which what's "news" in TNCH....As for being fair, he never touches on why I see TNCH as celebrating "a new religion," a claim he only brushes off as "outrageous." Besides, he falsely accuses me of arguing "that Christians may not use any feminine images of God." But I consider his abuse of K.W. far more serious than his abuse of me.

8 Pp53-60, Kenneth L. Woodward's "Reply to Andrew Lang," rebukes A.L. for unfairly rebuking him for not writing a (balanced) review instead of a news piece: as a news magazine, NEWSWEEK would not have printed a review (such as Carlton Young's in the Apr/97 THE HYMN--a balanced review, but on balance no less scathing than the NEWSWEEK artlcle). "The news here is what was changed, to what effect and why." "Change the symbols and you change the meaning." "Nothing in the Christian tradition favors an abstract asexuality." A hymnal that has hymns with "inclusive language, androgynous images and a neutered Jesus" will (he implies) come to be seen as "an historical oddity, like a flawed coin from the U.S. mint."

9 Pp61-65, my "A New Religion?," is Thinksheet #2770. TNCH pushes "the first pronominally neutral yet allegedly personal god/dess in the history of the world's religions." That is only my entering criticsm of TNCH, but it is severe--so severe that it considerably cuts "us" (who use the Bible's & the Church's [masculine] pronouns for God) off from "them" (who are so severely prejudiced against those divine pronominals as never to use them).

10 Pp69-106, Gabriel Fackre's "Hymn Texts and Key Christian Teaching," asks "What is the faith our hymns pass on to the new century?" "Where issues of inclusive language, as defined by the editors, are at stake, the decision is made to depart from the theological purposes of the hymn-writer and from classical Christian teaching." This major UCC theologian is, in his chapter, esp. concerned about TNCH's abuse of Jesus Christ and the Trinity. TNCH manages to promote, passim, all the heresies that grew up like weeds in the early Christian garden. Frequently the bowdlerized classical hymns sag from God-centered to humanity-centered or even "I"-centered. This longest chapter in the book is, while fair to improvements, a devastating condemnation of the theological ignorance/perversion of TNCH.

11 Pp109-117, Leslie D. Callahan's "Vocabulary Lessons," came to me from a member of the church in which this UCC black woman preached it, & thus eventually got into the book as an example of TNCH's insensitivity to the African-American mind. TNCH, she says, exhibits "a fundamental disrespect for history and for the integrity of the people who generated the [black spirituals] music." It is "not justice" to "mutilate" & "mangle" the Spirit-touched poetry of the Church's great hymns, whose beauty is "reflective of the image of God." (Against Lang, Woodward complained that L. didn't even mention W.'s central complaint, viz. the abuse of great hymns as works of art.)

12 Pp119-128, James R. Gorman's "Jesus, The Very Thought of Thee," objects to the relentless "recklessness" of "removing almost all references to--or titles of--Jesus which could allow the possible construal that Jesus Christ was a male being." Further, "the hymnal editors held to the position that the resurrected Jesus was without gender," raising the question of when he lost his gender....Paul Westermeyer studies THCH's slippery use of "alt." (altered)....Kathryn Greene-McCreight says TNCH Psalms "obscure our theological and doxological roots"--eg, never using "LORD," the standard Eng. tr. of the divine Name, though the Name appears (by my count) 823 times in the Hebrew!....David B. Bowman (of the original TNCH committee) compares the Disciples of Christ's CHALICE HYMNAL with TNCH, to the latter's disfavor....Our son Willis III has 9pp of PILGRIM HYMNAL hymns "not found in TNCH" even though some of the dropped (esp. because too difficult to inclusivize) are among the churches' great favorites....K. G.-McC. has compiled a "Bibliography of Hymnals and Music Aids."