

AN EXCLUSIVE-LANGUAGE HYMNAL?

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In recent sideline, ex-mainline Protestant hymnals, I've been noticing, the biblical God, who is robustly & com-passionately masculine, has been gradually fading-phasing into an androgyne ("one who wears unisex clothing," according to a new dictionary). The United Church of Christ hymnal committee is in danger of pushing this tendency to its ludicrous extreme, producing an exclusive-language hymnal (excluding the primary biblical referencing of God as he-his-him/Father/Son/King/Lord) as a reflex of the anxiety to produce an inclusive-language hymnal (compulsively always-&-everywhere including the girls along with the boys, including in divine reference).

The worry that the committee will go through with this ideological project (& so come out with a hymnal few churches will buy) has irritated me into this further foray into a field where my readers have often found me, & I can only plead that I'm bringing something new along with much old.

1 Can one hymnal satisfy the needs of so multicultural, multiviewpointed a church as the UCC? Courage to the committee! Their work is, indirectly, a test as to whether the UCC is one church. I for one believe it is, & pray that it will be. That's the passive side. The active side is that a **truly inclusive** hymnal could be an instrument, even a sacrament, of unity. And the unity of a church so inclusive of diversity would be a paradigm & promise of wider Christian unity, the ecumene without end.

2 As I indicated at a recent hymnal-hearing of the committee, "A truly inclusive hymnal will offend everybody." For two hours on PBS last night, five Demo presidential candidates struggled to offend nobody (except, mildly, each other) while trying to sound convictioned. Proteus + Procrustes! Here they're outmastered by Bush, who is living the unprincipled principle he announced to the world via David Frost: "I'll do anything necessary to get elected."

A hymnal offending everybody, I went on to say, "would be truly fresh, truly innovative, truly ecumenical." Yes, something for everybody (& therefore political), but therefore necessarily something to offend everybody (distributive sense) (& therefore antipolitical [partisan sense]).

3 Can a hymnal that will be useful tomorrow be useful, be used, today? That's two unknowns in one question. The committee's chair says that some new hymnals are "already dated," from not being "inclusive" (gender sense) enough; & he predicts that "seminarians of the present & future will teach their churches to use our [in-process] hymnal." But, I ask, will the churches want those seminarians? Not a few of our churches are inclining toward graduates of evangelical seminaries. Such men & women abhor the radical inclusive language that excludes the biblical primary masculine referencing of God, & would abhor a hymnal exhibiting this radicality.

4 For a quarter century I've been (1) for **gender-inclusive horizontal** language, resisting verbal sexism, & (2) for biblical primary **masculine vertical** language, resisting both the antimasculine bias of radical feminism (which excludes any masculine referencing of God) & hermeneutical efforts to produce sexual balance in God by shrinking the masculine & inflating the feminine (using, as basic loci, the OT's Gn.1.27 & the NT's Gal.3.28). Besides the dishonesty in thus misrepresenting the biblical God, such practices, if pervasive, will further alienate present & future generations from the Bible, our literary tether to the Holy.

5 Responding to pressure from students, Roger Shinn rewrote his UCC Statement of Faith (of which he was the basic author) into a doxological version, thus violating the dominical stricture against praying "to be seen of men" (Mt.6.5 KJV). Prayer is to God, the Statement of Faith is a testimony to "men." Such confusion on the part of a great theologian shows how insidious is the pressure to distort.

6 Since Jesus' resurrection body did not have baby-making potential, should Christus Resurrectus be called "he"? Bathetic-silly question!....If the masculine in God is metaphoric, why not also the personal in God? Then good-bye theism!

Does someone say, If God as he-his-him is only metaphoric, why sweat to defend it? I reply, Because it's our metaphor, our biblical metaphor, for the personal experiencing of the personal God. The objection to the masculine divine in Scripture, liturgy, devotion, & witness is of a piece with my nontheistic & antitheistic teachers' objection to God as personal: "It's only a metaphor." In both cases, I respond (1) What here is the function of "only"? and (2) Of the spiritual realm, what hast thou that thou hast not received by "metaphor"? and (3) In this context, "sacrament" is a better term than "metaphor," for the combined masculine-personal analogy is a defining symbolic characteristic of our religion, & the elimination of one aspect (viz, the masculine) of the characteristic destroys the sacred unity (& thus the religion) as surely as the elimination of the other aspect (viz, the personal). Numerous instances in history of religions come to mind; to survive, a religion needs a vital balance of continuity (to continue as itself, in its own boundaried identity) & discontinuity (making necessary & enriching adjustments to its changing environments). Continuous attention to this balance is a continuing task of the theologian, warning against both rigidity (the excessive emphasis on continuity which is well called "fundamentalism," which leads on to some form of violence*) & relativism (such infatuation with change as to disparage continuity & stability). An instance of this balance is my medial position on the gender-&-language debate....*Thus Ainslie Embree's summer '92 Craigville Conference Center course, "Fundamentalism & Violence." (He's in the AAAS's Fundamentalism Project, whose U. of Chicago volumes are now appearing.)

7 A **truly inclusive** hymnal will (1) treasure "new and old things" (Mt.13.52), (2) will let nobody's taste dominate (though I abominate "In the garden"), (3) will exploit the biblical feminine aspect of God without the ideological struggle to grant it equal time with the masculine, & (4) will eagerly print great hymns that do not refer in any way to gender in God except "God," which now in English is more generic than masculine. It will have the courage to offend everybody--eg, pacifists, by including "Onward, Christian Soldiers" (war being a prominent source of biblical metaphors). It will not tilt toward hymns new (faddism) or hymns old (archaism), for greatness in hymnody transcends time. (Thank God, many great hymns are being written in our time.) And it will prefer "hymns" proper (ie, "songs or odes in praise or honor of God" [see RHD²]) to other sacred songs.

8 A biblically-theologically faithful hymnal will be (as in my last point in §7) **theocentric**. In our Breakfast for the Hungry Hearted in NY last Saturday, Mel Hartzler, a lay graduate of NYTS, presented a paper titled "Presenting Yourself to God Through Hymns," a paper he was to try on his church the next day. The title comes close to saying it all, saying what a hymnal, when it's a good one, is all about. Authentic hymnsinging is a paradigm of the church's being & doing, its nature & its service to God & neighbor, in corporate harmonious action.

9 How important are Scripture, tradition, living church, & personal-collective experience in evaluating/choosing hymns? Radical feminism says "women's experience" is the baseline; womanism says "black [or Third World] women's experience" is the baseline. As social-revolutionary consciousness, "experience" in this sense is the experience of oppression, from which one needs liberation. Compare & contrast the experience of one's own sin (self-oppression, let's call it), from which one needs forgiveness; & the experience of ignorance, from which (as the Enlightenment continues to teach) one needs learning. All three dimensions should be represented in an inclusive hymnal, but a self-consciously inclusive-language hymnal is in danger of overvaluing the first, touching the third, & slighting the second, which is the NT & Reformation & traditional "mainline" baseline. Sniffed Luther at the Swiss thinkers of his time, "They define the Word not in terms of the God who speaks it but in terms of the man who receives it." And this from Barth when at the U. of Chicago in 1962: "The theme of the Church cannot be man's religion, man's morals, man's feelings, but man's encounter with God or, rather, God's encounter with man. That's the theme--the Biblical theme and the Reformation theme....it means to look at God who is for man, at God with man--in this sequence."