THE CRESSET
A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs
Lent 2008

Holiness is God's Alone

The Heritage of Luther's Use of Hymns in the Western Rite

Amy C. Schifrin

It was not meant simply to be spoken, but sung: A holy refrain shaping the identity of a people. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ehad*. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." The commandment was sung before it was written, and even when it was written, God could not remain silent, and so it was sung again and again.

Since ancient days, the singing of the first commandment has shaped the piety, the faith, the spirituality of a people. They are not holy; God alone is holy. The one God and his holiness is to be sounded again and again. No golden calves to be seen here but voices to be heard. Blessed are you who have not seen and yet have come to believe. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Ehad*.

Have you ever asked yourselves why God's people are always singing? Not just in the synagogue but in cotton fields, in dictator's dungeons, in Gothic cathedrals, in the monastery's choir stalls, in sod-walled prairie churches, when a loved one's breathing is labored, when the water is poured and the bread broken? In the human voice, the divine voice sounds. *Finitum capax Infinitum*. Text, held in sacred suspension on a printed page, cannot be sung or even spoken without some evidence of life, without some type of intonation, be it exhilaration or resignation, victory or sorrow, coloratura or basso profundo. Not simply made in His image, but sung into His sounding, the community that simultaneously listens for His voice as it proclaims His voice experiences the holiness that belongs to God alone.

It is Luther's place in this eternal song to which we tune our ears today.

Luther, who understood the Psalter to be commentary on and exposition of the first commandment; Luther, who looked to Israel's hymnbook that numbered one hundred and fifty; Luther, whose hymns were catechetical and doxological, and whose ritual placement of such hymns within the Western Rite, the *ordo*, continually place all that we are and all that we do within the sacred canopy of the promise, "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me."

Luther—unlike Calvin, who confined the texts to be sung solely to the Psalter—uses the vernacular hymn in a more homiletic way, whereby the lived context of the people is woven into the sung proclamation. These hymns, in which the sounding of the Divine voice is manifest in the assembly's voice, become juxtaposed to Epistle, to Gospel, to Sermon, and to Creed, which after 1526 may itself be sung as "We All Believe in One True God" (*Wir Glauben All).* They surround the *Sanctus*, the *Agnus Dei*, and even the Benediction so that the holy conversation calls forth the people's voices, that in words new and old their fear, their love, and their trust in God is renewed for yet another day. The First Commandment, exegeted by Luther within a Trinitarian hermeneutic, is given voice in the congregation in the vernacular hymn. The ritual function of such a doxological expression opens up layers of potential meaning to all that is spoken, sung, and enacted with the ordinary and appointed propers of the Mass. This "thickness" of meaning that comes from the ritual placement of the vernacular hymn bears witness to the ever living voice of the holy One. Thus the assembly sings with His voice even as they joyously are possessed by it.

A Mutual Reading

Hymns are text and tune, but in their mode of performance as congregational song, the text and tune "lose their separate identities" (Harmon 267). Like a sung liturgy they are, at one and the same time, discursive and non-discursive language, and so, unlike the unison spoken responses of an assembly, or unlike a purely instrumental musical offering, in a hymn, the tune and text read each other as well as relate to all that is either spoken or sung surrounding them. There is a difference between understanding the relationship of tune and text as mutual reading and the more common manner of speaking in which we might say that a hymn text is given a "musical setting."[1] Setting implies that the meanings evoked by a hymn

come from its text. Reading implies a mutuality, in which each part is necessary for a fuller understanding. Like a parent's tense wait for a baby's first cry, sound reveals life. And when it comes to sound, often the words are barely necessary in order for us to comprehend what is ultimately being communicated.

It is as if you were to hear an argument between two people on the other side of a closed door. The walls and door create enough of a barrier that you cannot hear the words, only the sounds—the cadences of speech, the familiar patterns of accusation and denial, the rise and fall of pitch, the stops and starts, the silences punctuated by sobs that tell you what has occurred. The words give details, but you could have figured most of it out without the words. Think of that same argument, now written down as in a play. Flat words on a page. Try to read them aloud without any affect. Just one word after another, and they will be devoid of their intended meanings. Even reading them without speaking aloud, you will add affect internally in order to understand them, and so it is with hymnody, especially vernacular hymnody.

While in the earliest collections of Reformation hymns there were some variations on the pairing of tune and text, by the time these hymns reach twentieth and twenty-first century ears, they are firmly wedded: one tune, one text. But it is not always so for us with the stanzas of Isaac Watts. "When I survey the wondrous cross On which the prince of glory died." If you learned this hymn, this text, in the mid-twentieth century, it might have been paired with the tune *Hamburg*. The tune is a little bouncy, in a major key, with a short melodic range, and even if you want to get it out of your head, you can't. If you were introduced to this hymn in either an earlier or a later twentieth-century hymnal, you might have first heard it paired with a late eighteenth century tune, *Rockingham Old*. Its mood differs from *Hamburg*, yet it still carries a brightness to it, maybe a sense of victory already won. But if you are a little older, or came from a Lutheran congregation that was slow to change hymnals, you might have learned it from the first tune given to it in *The Common Service Book*, *Breslau*. In unaccompanied form, this tune carries a hint of a minor mode, which matches the movement of the text in its third stanza. In each case, the pairing of text and tune creates a new hymn. With the ritual strategy of the vernacular hymn and its potential juxtapositioning within the Mass, the evocations of

meaning are ever new. For as Walter Buzin once said of the complementarity of music and theology,

> Who is content to speak a doxology? If we accept… that a doxology is a song of praise to the Triune God, then will we find in the doxologies of Christendom another reason for insisting that theology and church music are of the same cloth, that both are twin bearers and interpreters of the *Verbum Dei*. And if the two are twins which share each other's qualities, then will we become more aware of why Christian people should sing their theology and theologize their music… We are not surprised to note… that Luther put theology and music aside of each other and that he did not subordinate music to theology. When he did subordinate, he subordinated both theology and music to the *Verbum Dei*… (1956)

Manner and Meaning

Our little exercise with Watts's text may help us to know the importance of a sung text, and not just with any tune. Consider *Erhalt Uns*, *Herr*, "Lord, Keep us Steadfast in Your Word." (*LBW* 230). This is one of Luther's catechetical hymns, used in connection with the teaching of the Lord's Prayer, which, like the sung Psalter itself may yet be a further performative exegesis of the First Commandment from the mouth of Jesus, where he teaches us to pray for what God has commanded so that we would receive what He has promised with thanksgiving.

Although *Erhalt Uns*, *Herr* has undergone textual revision from specific threats to the word (Pope and Turk) to more general ones, it is a multi-layered doxological expression that embeds Trinitarian structure (three verses for the three members of the Trinity), to a catechetical/theological reflection upon the Lord's Prayer.[2] Jesus who prayed the Psalter, and who, as proclaimed by the quartet of blessed evangelists quotes the Psalter ninety-three times, teaches his disciples to pray in this way, "Our Father, who art in heaven…" When sung within the Mass by the reformation assembly, this life of prayer within the covenant established by almighty God is now used to set the framework through which the assembly will hear the Gospel.

This is the point at which both the general use of music and the particular music that is used come into focus. It is an *evil* lie that Luther went to the bars to find his best tunes (an evil lie perpetuated by antinomian megachurch advocates who believe that humans rather than God alone are the source of our liturgical gatherings). "Secular" folk tunes that were well known and well sung in his day were just one of his sources as were more "religious" folk songs. Luther did provide new texts for such tunes, known as *contrafacta*. But Luther also adapted the tunes of Gregorian chant and of the lyric poets known as Meistersingers, and then he and others simply composed new ones. The tune by which we read this particular text, "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word," is believed to be one of Luther's musical compositions which was very, very loosely based on a fifteenth century adaptation of the twelfth century plainsong, "*Veni Redemptor Genitum*" (Stulken 309).

The congruency of text and tune is among the means by which theology is communicated. With hymnody, as with liturgy in general, "Manner… has everything to do with meaning" (Lathrop 119). The wedding of tune and text within a defined repertoire creates a habituated knowing, a sense of what is natural and right. This is how ritual works, through action, through sacred frame, through repetition. (Understanding and identity comes through repeated action until subsidiary gestures and words that participants attend to become implicit knowledge.) Evangelical Catholics receive not only the habituated knowing of a particular hymnal but the habituated knowing that hymns are an integral part of the liturgy, not an addendum.[3]

Luther and the early reformers set up an annual cycle of sequential hymns that enabled the assembly to voice the life of Christ through the seasons of the church year. Such a pattern of suggestions, with a wider variety of hymns, is still present in current Lutheran hymnals, suggesting, in particular, that the *de tempore* hymn always needs to be tied to the proclaimed scripture, especially the gospel appointed for that liturgical day. Such hymns are intended to draw the assembly into the sacramental action of preached word and holy meal that is rooted in the ongoing prayer of Christ, our great High Priest, celebrated now through the anamnetic liturgical year. Just as in preaching,[4] this sacrifice of praise that ushers forth from the assembly's lips as performative doxological exegesis of God's eternal

promise and command assists the assembly to take part prayerfully in the totality of the Mass. Within the preacher's meager and even inadequate words, the divine word is yet revealed. Now in the assembly's voices, God reveals the doxological reason why he gave humanity a voice. Indeed, in the assembly's song, God proleptically reveals the final destination of the human voice in a sound that continues far beyond human perception and that can only be understood in faith. Now, in the Mass, the sound of this assembly is joined to the great choir to come, where angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, sing their praise around the Lamb's throne: *Holy*, *Holy*, *Holy.*

While many would not speak of Luther as a great liturgical reformer, his use of the ancient form of the strophic hymn, a hymn with multiple stanzas, in the sung and spoken language of the people opens new dimensions of the Western Rite. The strophic hymn has become, for many, the filter though which the assembly comprehends the church year and through which it appropriates those rites which define the life transitions of birth, baptism, marriage, and burial.[5] Because the word does not come to us in unmediated form but in the form of a strophic hymn, the strophic hymn used to define such rites carries the power of the living tradition.

Surrounding the proclaimed word with singing is an ancient practice. We know of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs from the Holy Scriptures. We even hear canticles from the lips of handmaidens and old men. We believe they were sung before they were written and written so that they would continue to be sung. We might even say that such songs were the living canon before their sound was flattened into a readable text. Following such a ritual pattern, the liturgical inclusion of vernacular hymns creates a new juxtapositioning of canonical and indexical elements. When Jesus unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4), the assembly experienced a canonical act. When he proclaimed that God's word was fulfilled in their hearing, it was an indexical act, for preaching is indexical, i.e., it takes that which is canonical and juxtaposes it to this present time so that what is canonical reads these present people. Just as the earliest hymns become part of the canonical scriptural witness, so the use of hymns in the liturgy becomes an extension of the pattern of that witness. Vernacular hymns within the *ordo* contain both canonical and indexical elements. That is part of their beauty as well as their polysemous nature. They are in a form that is repeatable

and movable within the *ordo*, and that becomes part of the ongoing living witness of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

Within the *ordo*, the holiness of God is voiced as the preacher sounds the biblical text and subsequently preaches, but preaching is not merely to be understood as the interpretation of the text. The sounding of the Biblical text and sermon is also to interpret the people's lives (*Fulfilled in Your Hearing*, 20), and as the movement of God's holy breath is given sound in the people's voices through the hymns, they are shaped into a holy people, a royal priesthood whose identity is continually defined by the sung proclamation of God's holiness, as their very bodies have become the vehicle for God's activity in the world. They, as the church, are sacramental material, God's holiness en-voiced and en-fleshed for the sake of the world.

Hymnody and Identity

As Reformation chorale and hymn express in form the "we-ness" of the royal priesthood to which the baptized are called, the assembly's voices are the sacramental material in which God's glory/holiness is sounded. Tied to one another through the production of a common sound, a common identity emerges. We are baptized as individuals into the body, we receive from the table with that same particularity within a greater wholeness, but now all of our voices are needed together, at the same time to create this one sound where God's holiness sings. When we sing together in the Eucharistic liturgy, we experience a dimension of our true identity in sound, in a manner which is more than the sum of our parts, in a manner in which our neighbor is as important as we are, and in a manner that we could not produce as individuals, for as boldly and as confidently as one Pavarotti-esque tenor could sing, he cannot mimic the sound of a two-hundred member congregation whose voices are raised in Christ's victory song. If we agree that in singing hymns within the liturgical *ordo* the true nature and destiny of the human is revealed, and that in singing hymns together the true nature of the body of Christ is revealed, then I would assert that as those voices are joined as one in praise of God and the church comes to be what it is called to be, a doxological identity—an identity rooted in God's holiness—is created in the lives of believers through the very sound that issues forth from their mouths. That sound in the Reformation assembly, especially since the advent of Luther's *Deutsche Messe*, is shaped by the chosen hymnody,

simply by what was sung in that ritual setting, and such sound becomes the vehicle that identifies an assembly's spirituality.

The hymns given to a congregation to sing shape an assembly's self-understanding through both the structure of the hymn and its cultural and ecclesiastical associations. As such hymns are then bound as a corpus, as a hymnal they create a "model of" and a "model for" reality in which the assembly's members come to understand the self, the world, and the divine (Geertz, 112). For although we are capable of knowing a philosophical assertion or theological proposition without saying it is our own, the ritual of hymn singing—of breath, pitch, rhythm, and even words issuing forth from our bodies—particularly in the sacramental context of the *ordo*—engages our humanity in a way that take on personal significance as it joins us to God and neighbor. Sound is a "vast connective tissue" carried in the living memory of the human voice (Harmon 270). Rather than being told about who they are as the saints of God, through the act of singing as one voice, they experience who they are as God's holy ones.

Paradoxically, the music need not be ever newly-composed to communicate a newness of life, and therein lies some of the beauty of a standard hymnic repertoire. Each doxological "performance" is ever new, not only depending upon who is in the assembly on a given day but also upon the appointed texts, the homily, the liturgical season. Unlike sermons, which we hope will voice God's holiness in ever-new ways hymns work through the gift of tacit knowledge, a knowledge gained in the body, a knowledge that comes from being able to close the hymnal and still sing boldly, a knowledge that begins when a small child sleeps in her mother's lap while she sings the hymn tune which her own mother sang to her when she was a babe in arms. In such a case, one grows with a knowledge of the hymn in their bones, for in conscious memory, there was never a time when one did not *know* the tune.

This knowing that creates identity occurs in the singing body, in the repeated action of such hymn singing, and in the community that is continually born through this action. Drawn beyond ourselves, we are sung into our sacred identity, one in which the individual's identity is tied up with the whole, with the saints who surround us, the saints who have sung this sacred repository into our hearts, and with the saints who we pray are yet to come. This identity is reinforced through the portability and memorability

of the hymnic form, which through its use of one tune for many stanzas is ever self-rehearsing (besides its often internal repetitions). Even when we forget all the words, we do not as easily forget the tune, which will carry us through until the words are given to us again. (This is also why hymns survive with immigrant communities until they are eventually translated into new vernacular.) It is not just Luther's hymns that have multiple reinforcing functions. All hymns that can either be remembered or reproduced in an accessible form, such as a hymnal, can grow in depth of meaning. Might one make a connection between the table of the Lord and the evening dinner table, when the hymn that was sung in the former is now sung at the latter? Might not hymns be the connective tissue that opens the eyes of a child of God to know that all life is intended to be Eucharistic… one of thanksgiving and praise, and that all of life is a window to God's holiness?

Dust, Breath, and the Confession of Faith

God reached into the dust and breathed life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living being. The risen Jesus came to the ever-fearful disciples speaking peace and breathing the power of the Holy Spirit into them, and Thomas cried out, "My Lord and my God." The *ordo* is that pattern in which God gives us breath so that we would breathe and we would proclaim where all breath comes from and to where it is headed, *alpha* and *omega*, source and destination, Genesis and Revelation. Hymns are one way within the *ordo* that God's intention in giving us breath, of God's intentions giving us life, is patterned.

Ancient texts, newly preached Word, meal of mercy, and voices of the assembly joined in praise… the assembly sings… it breathes together in a performative doxological exegesis, "All Glory be to God of High." It sounds the holiness of God in the confidence of the First Commandment, in the confidence of the One who breathed life into the universe, who breathed life into the first man, who breathed life into the darkest tomb, who breathed life into me and to every one of my neighbors. Give such words and music to a child, in and out of the sanctuary, in a catechetical and doxological form, that they might learn something of the holiness of God and their relationship to such a gracious God. Give such words and music to a child in hymnic form and you will shape their spirituality. Give such words and music to a child, to an adolescent, to an adult over and

over again, so that when the false gods of this world are enshrined in anything from a golden calf to a golden Grammy for "Christian Pop," they will recognize their falsehood and turn to the One Holy God, who showers his mercy upon his saints forever and whose love will never cease to sound. ✠

Pastor Amy Schifrin, STS, *recently completed her doctoral work on preaching and hymnody at Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. She has published and lectured widely on theology, music, worship, and homiletics. This piece was originally presented as the 2006 Luther Aquinas Lecture at Lenoir-Rhyne College in Hickory, North Carolina.*

Notes

1. Hull stresses the importance of the concept of mutual reading. His thesis is that "text and music interact with one another to produce meaning, the music by creating a *reading* (not just a setting) of the text, and the text by specifying a 'hearing' of the music. Text and music each do this by providing a context within which the other is perceived and understood." This framework, which Hull relied upon, comes from Cone and from Hull (14). See also Kroeker and Oyer. "The music does illumine the text, but its role goes beyond that of being a vehicle for the words. The reverse may be true as well: The text may enable the tune to 'speak' as the door example, the varied musical settings of the *Kyrie Elison* will elicit quite a different response to the text. The intensity of the lamenting or pleading quality could cover a wide range of emotions and place emphasis on the music" (165).

2. "How is [God's will] done?" Luther asks in his *Small Catechism's* explanation to the Third Petition of The Lord's Prayer. He answers, "When God curbs and destroys every evil counsel and purpose of the devil, of the world, and of our flesh which would hinder us from hallowing his name and prevent the coming of his kingdom, and when he strengthens us and *keeps us steadfast in his Word* and in faith even to the end. This is his good and gracious will" (*The Book of Concord*, 347; italics added).

3. A distinction is to be made here between Evangelical Catholics and Protestants who, even within a liturgical/ritual setting, use hymns without

any regard to the *ordo* or the liturgical calendar but merely to advance some thematic agenda.

4. "As Luther put it in a fine passage, popular sermons ought to be nothing else than expositions of the Mass, since the Mass is the very substance and sum of the gospel… For… the spoken word mediated the presence of God as did the Supper" (Gerrish 26).

5. Sequential hymns vary in their function in the deep formation of a community depending upon their cyclic and repetitive use within the church year. When they are sung repeatedly according to their association with festivals and seasons, their iconic function binds the larger community as one. For example, no matter which North American Lutheran assembly with northern European roots one is worshipping in on All Saints' Sunday or Christmas Eve, Palm Sunday or Good Friday, they will sing, respectively, "For All the Saints" (*Sine Nomine*), "Silent Night" (*Stille Nacht*), "All Glory Laud and Honor" (*Valet Will Ich Dir Geben*), and "Oh, Sacred Head Now Wounded" (*Herzlich Tut Mich Verlangen*). In the assembly's performance, the sequential hymns with their narrative texts have created the way in which the festival, liturgical season, or yearly cycle may be understood. The lectionary texts and propers are given before hymns are chosen, yet, in practice, the ambiance of the festival will not be as integrally en-fleshed in the people without their voices making the day what it is, so that even the biblical text is filtered through the hymns.

Bibliography

Buzin, Walter E. "Theology and Church Music—Twin Bearers and Interpreters of the *Verbum Dei*." A paper read at the Valparaiso University Church Music Seminar, 1956. Valparaiso, Indiana.

Cone, Edward T. *The Composer's Voice.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Fulfilled in Your Hearing: The Homily in the Sunday Assembly. Washington, DC: US Catholic Conference of Bishops, Bishops Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, 1982.

Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Culture*. New York: Basic, 1973.

Gerrish, B.A. "The Reformer's Theology of Worship." *McCormick Quarterly* (May 1961).

Harmon, Kathleen. "Liturgical Music as Prayer." In *Liturgy and Music: Lifetime Learning*, Robin A. Leaver and Joyce Ann Zimmerman, eds. Collegeville: Liturgical, 1998.

Hull, Kenneth R. "Text, Music, and meaning in Congregational Song" In *The Hymn*, vol. 53, no. 1 (January 2002).

Kroeker, Charlotte with Mary K. Oyer. "Using Music from Other Cultures in Worship: Conversation with Mary K. Oyer." In *Music in Christian Worship: At the Service of the Liturgy*, Charlotte Kroeker, ed. Collegeville: Liturgical, 2005.

Lathrop, Gordon W. *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993.

Stulken, Mary K. *Hymnal Companion to the Lutheran Book of Worship*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981.

The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Theodore G. Tappert, trans. and ed. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959.

Copyright © 2007 Valparaiso University Press