

Hymnody as Social Protest – A Hymn Writer Reflects

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This paper will explore how women have used the hymn as a medium for getting their concerns into the public domain and in so doing have challenged an institutional church that would restrict their influence within the public sphere. It will examine the author's own work (2006a) and also draw on interview data with other hymn writers (particularly Janet Wootton and Lisa Neufeld-Thomas) and collections by women (Bringle 2002, Murray, 1992 Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993, Unitarian Universalist 1993, Episcopal Committee 1997, Winter 1987, White 1977). It will examine the following issues

- The way the history of hymnody is constructed
- Inclusive language for human beings and God (Drinker 1948/1995, Boyce-Tillman 2001)
- Revisiting traditional theologies
- New subjects like ecology and the interconnectedness of creation and the priesthood of all believers
- Revisiting the women's songs in the tradition
- Creating material telling women's stories
- The place of the body in the worship and theology

It will touch on:

- The role of the hymn in liturgy (Berger 1999, 2001, Wootton 2000, Neu 2002)
- Hymn typology including the place of simple repetitive chants
- Musical style (Citron 1993)
- The hymn as communal agreement or a site for debate

These will be explored by a deconstruction of a musical phenomenon into four main areas (Boyce-Tillman 2006b).

- Materials - what is used to make the sound e.g. whether it uses voices and/or

instruments

- Expressive Character – the feelingful content
- Construction – the way the musical form is structured – what is repeated and what is not
- Values – the values embraced by a piece

Women's contribution to the tradition

It is, perhaps in the area of hymn writing that the contribution of women has been most scandalously treated. Throughout the history of hymnody in the English speaking traditions – that is, the last 300 years – there have been many and prolific women writers. (Wootton 2000 p48)

I searched Michael Wilson Dickson's *A History of Christian Music* (1992) – a popular text with those who wish to examine this area - to see how women are represented. In the pictures women feature as:

- Angelic figures,
- Children
- Nurturers of children
- Spouses of central figures.

In none of these positions do they have any real authority or have control of either the theological or musical traditions. As angels they mediate Divine patriarchy, on the one hand serving a male God and on the other acting as Muses to male composers. As children they are indoctrinated into the conventions they have little control over. As nurturers and teachers of children they are required to teach the conventions they have little control over. As spouses they are required to live out the conventions they have little control over. The only significant pictures including them are a Salvation Army women's orchestra (a tradition that was very early obliterated and only revived in times of war) and Ann Lee's Shaker women dancing in a group opposite the men.

Yet in the Victorian period there were a number of women hymn writers who found considerable acceptance for their theological ideas when expressed in the form of the

hymn: Fanny Crosby, Charlotte Elliott and Frances Alexander and are few of a considerable number who still find a place in contemporary hymn-books. Hymn writing is an area where Protestant women have contributed a great deal to the genre in terms of words. The Rev James King's *Anglican Hymnody, being an account of the 325 standard hymns of the highest merit according to the verdict of the whole Anglican Church* published in 1885 purports to give 'an account of the 325 standard hymns of the highest merit according to the verdict of the whole Anglican Church'. He based this on surveying the chief hymnals in use at the time and it is testimony to the Victorian women hymn writers referred in the introduction to this article that they are represented. However, the majority of writers are not only male but men who can boast a position of authority in the Church as clergy or in the Academy or both. The woman who came out with greatest number of well known hymns are Charlotte Elliott with 6 hymns including *Just as I Am, O holy Saviour, friend unseen* and *O thou the contrite sinners' friend*. Next in the list is Cecil Frances Alexander with 4 hymns including the *The roseate hues of early dawn, the brightness of the day* and *Jesus calls us o'er the tumult*. Sarah Flower finds a place in the first rank with *Nearer my God to thee*. Miss E. Cox features with her translation *Jesus lives!* and *Who are these like stars appearing is there* and there is one of Catherine Winkworth's translations. Harriet Auber is represented with *Our blest Redeemer e'er he breathed* and there is Emma Toke's hymn written for the SPCK:

Thou art gone up on high,
To mansions in the skies,
And round thy throne unceasingly
The songs of praise arise

There is Anne Steele's *Father of Mercies in Thy word* and *Father whate'er of earthly bliss* and Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *Praise to God immortal Praise*: we see here the strong tradition of women writing hymns for private devotion, epitomised by Charlotte Elliott. In this tradition is also the evangelical Frances Ridley Havergal (1836) famous for *Take my life and let it be* and Christina Rossetti with *Love came down at Christmas* and *In the Bleak Midwinter*, in which her verse about Mary breast feeding Jesus is still often changed or omitted!

The Sunday School is represented by Cecil Frances Alexander, the vicar's wife fulfilling her

accepted role and attempting to make the creeds accessible to children with such hymns as *All things bright and beautiful*, *There is a green hill* and *Once in Royal David's City*. In these texts we can see clear attempts to adapt the theology and shape the children to the prevailing values, reflecting the crucial role that women play in the enculturation of the young as mothers and teachers.

The advent of feminist theology gave women (and some men) hymn writers another impetus to get their voices heard in this form. The insights of feminist theologians have been disseminated in Britain since the 1980's through the medium of the hymn. They saw the foundation of a number of such groups as Women in Theology and Catholic Women's Network. Feminist theologians like Mary Grey in books like *Redeeming the Dream* (1989b) and *The Wisdom of Fools* (1993) have had a profound impact on work in this area. These are filtering slowly through into hymnbooks.

Celebrating Women (Ward, Wild and Morley 1995) based on a publication in 1986) included more hymns and songs but without the music. Single author publications like those by Miriam Therese Winter's *WomanPrayer*, *WomanSong*, (1987) and June Boyce-Tillman's *In Praise of All-encircling Love I and II* (1992 and 1995) also started to become available and authors like Kathy Galloway (1993) included hymns in their collections of poems. Publishers are now issuing collections by women writers. Books of alternative liturgies like Ward H and Wild J (1995), *Human Rites* and Catholic Women's Network *Making Liturgy: Creating Rituals for Life* (McEwan et al 2001) include some material by women but usually without music.

Reflecting Praise (1993), a hymnbook celebrating the work of women past and present as well as men who use 'softer', feminine or inclusive images for God, was the first collection concentrating on women's contribution to hymnody with both words and music. It was initiated by Women in Theology as a vision of the two editors Janet Wootton and June Boyce-Tillman. We trawled through an immense amount of material, grading and selecting until we had about a hundred hymns. We became aware how much excellent material had not found its way into mainstream collections, which selected more on the grounds of who held positions of power rather than any merit. The Introduction summarised the editorial policy:

There exists a great wealth of women's creativity as composers and poets from every generation. Much of this is only now being rediscovered, as women reclaim their own history ... Preference has been given to pieces that have women as author, translator, composer, or arranger, or which tell the stories of women ... All hymns use inclusive language for humans. A number use female or inclusive images when referring to God, many exploring new or newly reclaimed images... Most exciting of all, new writers continue to spring up in the field of inclusive language, broadening its scope, and introducing the idea to wider audiences. (Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p iv)

It included material from the past as well as material from a variety of Christian traditions and other faith traditions. It included black spirituals and a variety of idioms and accompaniments. In this we had resisted attempts to make us provide piano accompaniments and guitar chords for all pieces on the grounds that this would iron out cultural difference.

In the US, collections like *Canticles and Gathering Prayers* (Mossi and Toolan 1996) started to appear drawing on the themes of liberation and feminist theology, ecotheology, the ecumenism following Vatican II and lay leadership of worship. The mainstream churches in the US have been quicker to respond than those in the UK, except for collections like *Peculiar Honours* (Wootton, Watson et al). The American Episcopal Church produced a supplement in 1997 in response to a resolution that said:

The Standing Committee on Church Music be directed to continue preparing supplements to *The Hymnal 1982* which provide this Church with additional service music, inclusive language hymnody, additional texts in languages other than English.....(Episcopal Standing Committee on Church Music 1997 Preface)

This contains the promised variety with black spirituals, alongside Latin hymns and Shirley Erena Murray's *Give thanks for Life*. The embracing of inclusive language does not necessarily mean that more women writers are represented and women as composers are very poorly represented.

Published in the US in 2003 is *Voices Found* (Neufeld Thomas et al 2003), a collection

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hymns with similar aims to *Reflecting Praise*. Its origins, however, are very different. It originates in the Women's Liturgical Music Project run by Lisa Neufeld-Thomas. It grew from the Lady Chapel Singers founded in 1997 at St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Philadelphia, a group of women who wanted to worship with an inclusive language liturgy that had recently been approved by the Bishop. She began to look for materials, especially music and texts by women, finding almost nothing in the Hymnal 1982 of The Episcopal Church and so the vision of a Hymnal Supplement that would focus totally on the gifts of women was born. Lisa laid great stress on the fact that she tried to keep the committees representative of a variety of traditions including conservatives, charismatic Spanish Americans, African Americans, and a Native American woman bishop. The collection was to include texts and music that were by, for or about women, and could be accompanied by keyboard or with flexible accompaniment, indicating a sensitivity to the needs of small parishes that don't have large musical resources. They looked for a wide range of cultural and ethnic representation. The collection included a hymn from the notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach translated in the tradition of the Winkworth sisters. It includes historical material from the eighth century onwards. They made the same decision as Janet and I had done that anonymous pieces could be included on the ground that in the process of aural transmission women had played a part. The collection is designed to be very mainstream and as uncontroversial as possible, concentrating on subjects such as women saints, women in scripture, and creative imagery for God and avoiding areas like the debates on sexuality. Lisa is loath to identify herself with American feminism, an attitude shared by members of the singers:

I don't want to become identified with a really radical approach. I think that it puts women off - sort of mainstream women who really do need to have texts that celebrate women, and if we came across as a radical group, they would not pay any attention.¹

There is music composed by women and some associated with dance, including *The Song of Miriam*, which was written by Debbie Friedman, a Jewish composer. The book represents the dilemma of hymnody that the collection will not be radical enough for some groups and too radical for others. The result can be that such collections suit nobody's purpose. They are too radical for the mainstream and too orthodox for the women's groups

¹ Interview with Lisa Neufeld Thomas May 2003, Philadelphia. This raises the complexity of the issue of women's contribution

themselves, many of whom prefer simpler chants to the denser theological statements of the traditional hymn.

The role of the hymn in liturgy

Singing has always been an important way of building community and is at the heart of liturgy. So are we always to sing what we agree with or what the dominant culture thinks we should believe? If the hymn a statement of universal agreement or a place for debate and challenge? But has the Church ever been truly inclusive? Matilda Joslyn Gage in *Woman, Church and State* wrote in her remarkable analysis in 1893:

The difference in civilization between Christian Europe and pagan Malabar at the time of its discovery was indeed great. While Europe, with its new art of printing, was struggling against the church for permission to use type – its institutions of learning few; its opportunities for education meager; its terrible inquisition crushing free thought and sending thousands each year to a most painful death; the uncleanness of its cities and the country such as to bring frequent visits of plague; its armies, its navies, with but one exception, imperfect; its women forbidden the right of inheritance, religious, political or household authority; the feminine principle entirely eliminated from divinity; a purely masculine God, the universal object of worship – all was directly opposite in Malabar. Cleanliness, peace, the arts, a just form of government, the recognition of the feminine – were found in Malabar.....under the missionaries sent by England to introduce her own barbaric ideas of God and man, this beautiful matriarchal civilization soon retrograded and was lost. (Gage 1893/1998 p7)

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, wrote of her experience in 1869 of hymnody:

For it came to seem to me, as I pondered these things in my own heart, that even the best and kindest forms of our prevailing beliefs had nothing to say to an afflicted woman that could help her much. Creeds and commentaries and sermons were made by men. What tenderest of men knows how to comfort his own daughter when her heart is broken. What can the doctrines do for the desolated by death? They were chains of rusty iron, eating into raw hearts. The prayer of the preacher was not much better; it sounded like the

language of an unknown race to a despairing girl. Listen to the hymn. It falls like icicles on snow. Or, if it happen to be one of the old genuine outcries of the church, sprung from real human anguish or hope, it maddens the listener, and she flees from it, too sore a thing to bear the touch of holy music. Ward 1896 pp. 97-8.

Writers like Teresa Berger (1999, 2001) sets out the gendered nature of liturgy and like Dianne Neu (2002), looks at how women create liturgy (2001). Janet Wootton analyses women's liturgies comparing them with mainstream Church liturgy (2000). So have hymns both past present been sites of contention for women and how far can hymns by women challenge the dominant patriarchal Church structures?

Values – Inclusive Language

So what values are set out in traditional hymnody? Were and are they truly inclusive? The issue of inclusive community involves the somewhat contentious issue of inclusive language. Denise Dijk sees these developments as arising from:

The changed self-awareness of women.... [It] also originates from a change in our experience of language. ... In the field of women, language and liturgy, many women nowadays appear to experience words like “man”, "brother", “son”, and “him” exactly and not inclusively. They experience these words as referring to male persons only, while they can be experienced inclusively. If our experience of language has become more exact, words like “seed”, “brotherhood” and “he” will be experienced differently in comparison with former days...This has implications for the ways in which women as well as men experience the liturgy, and particularly for the encounter with God. (Dijk 1997 p1)

She sees this as having two results:

- God is seen as masculine
- ‘The naming of God with masculine words limits and restricts God more than it did in the past’ (Dijk 1998 p1)

Marjorie Procter-Smith identifies how words are capable of suggesting and

legitimizing sexual violence. She problematises the Lord's Prayer in this respect in its asking for forgiveness in relation to our own capacity to forgive, which does not leave space for righteous anger. Here she is joined by the hymn writer, Ruth Duck (1993) who sees the virtual impossibility of a uniform liturgical language about guilt in situations involving sexual abuse (which may well be most worshipping situations). Procter-Smith helpfully suggests four strategies of resistance and survival:

- Praying between the lines – struggling to include certain voices in liturgy like those of Lesbians
- Appropriation and reinterpretation – which involves ridiculing the androcentrism of the text
- Juxtaposition – subverting the text by inserting references to women like Sarah alongside Abraham in the Magnificat
- Refusing to say certain prayers [In this context, certain hymns] – so remaining silent (Procter-Smith 1995 pp31-54)

She helpfully defines a number of linguistic possibilities:

- Non-sexist language – employing gender-neutrality with such terms as God of compassion rather than Father (here she identifies the problem of denying gender as an important element of identity in what becomes a genderless world.)
- Inclusive language in which both genders are named equally and gender naming of God uses male and female images like 'Mother, father God'
- Emancipatory language - a language encouraging resistance to existing power-relations (Procter-Smith 1995 pp63-71)

Some hymns address violence against women directly like Shirley Erena Murray's

God weeps:

At love withheld,
At strength misused,
At children's innocence abused,
God weeps

God bleeds

At anger's fist,
At trust betrayed,
At women battered and afraid

God bleeds. ²

This raises the complexity of the issue of women's musical contribution to liturgy. It is not only a question of texts but also of the style of the tune, although this paper will concentrate mainly on texts. Theorists like Lacan (1992) saw the maleness of the phenomenon of language and nowhere has this been more true than the language of hymnody, where the language has been assertively male. As Janet Wootton writes:

For all of my childhood and early adult years, I sang hymns and said prayers that made no reference to my own identity. The only reference to my gender was in the introduction to the children's address, which was to 'boys and girls' and the occasional hymn which used the non-gender-specific 'children'. Once again, pre-pubescent females were all right, but mature women were hidden, excluded by the language. (Wootton 2000 p30)

Brian Wren expresses this clearly in his seminal text *What Language can I borrow?* (1989).

As we can see the issues are very complex. The least contentious aspect of it concerns inclusive language for human beings. The third person pronoun 'he' has traditionally been used as an inclusive pronoun, as has the generic term 'man'. Organisations like *The Association for Inclusive Language* have shown that the use of these terms was confused and that women were disadvantaged by the use of these terms which were sometimes used as inclusive and at other times as exclusive of women. Feminist writers have therefore, pushed hard for inclusive descriptors of people. This involves

- Finding non-male descriptors for people - like human rather than man.
- Avoiding the third person singular pronoun 'he' and using the third person plural 'they'.

² Murray, (1992) Accessed by CD rom *Hymnquest*, Stainer and Bell in September 2003

Feminist writers are writing materials for women's gatherings addressed only to women. Marsie Silvestro has produced many examples like:

Refrain: We are weaving a revolution, many women, many threads
And through our cultures and with our spirit
A healing power will rise from earth.³

As we shall see later with the area of gender images for God, these are not strictly speaking inclusive; they simply replace male with female. Inclusive descriptors are gender-neutral. But we have had such a long period in which hymns like *Rise up O men of God!* have held their place, that maybe there is a case for a similar period when female descriptors are used to rebalance this.

The Problem of the past

Most hymnbooks in common use in churches are museums of past glories and as such may not speak to a new context. What do we do with a past (as we have seen from accounts above) which was not inclusive either in language or in other ways. How can we sing 'Onward Christian soldiers' when if a group sang 'Onward Muslim soldiers' they would be arrested?

The hymns of the past clearly reflect the value systems of the past. Changing the past is difficult because of the metrical constraints of hymnody. It is well illustrated by lines from Cardinal Newman's hymn *Praise to the holiest in the height*:

The double agony in man
For man should undergo.

The metre will clearly not take a version that might run:

The double agony for human beings
For human beings should undergo.

³ Silvestro, Marsie (1993b) *On the other side: Songs that celebrate Many Ways of Knowing*, Cassette Gloucester, Massachusetts Moonsong productions

What is interesting here is that it is not only an issue of language but also an issue of the underlying theology. It is a theology of sacrifice and substitution which has been challenged by many feminist theologians. This theology itself was a male construct.

Luther's hymn – *A safe stronghold our God is still* presents a different problem. Here the wife is clearly regarded as a chattel to the man:

And though they take our life,
Goods, honour, children, wife
Yet is their profit small.

This has been changed in *Hymns and Songs*, to -

And though before our eyes
All that we dearly prize
They seize beyond recall,
Yet is their profit small.

Other hymns are still presented in many collections in their original form. *Who would true valour see/Let him come hither* is a case in point. It could easily be changed to, 'Let them come hither.' Or people could be given the option of what pronoun they use.⁴

The Unitarian/Universalist hymnbook (1993) contains many fine examples of how the past can be reworked. The fine prophetic hymn *Turn back, O Man* becomes *Turn back, turn back*. The final verse of *Now Thank we all our God* is simply omitted. In *O Little town of Bethlehem*, "the blessings of his love" becomes "the gift that is our own". (No 247). However, the changing of more familiar material can cause much more uproar in a traditional congregation than the writing of new material with inclusive language.

Latin and Greek hymns can benefit from retranslation. *Reflecting Praise* includes a number of retranslations of Greek and Latin hymns, like Janet Wootton's retranslation of *Veni Creator* which also includes the wonderful description of the Spirit as 'kaleidoscope of

⁴ Service sheet of St James', Piccadilly, Jan 16th 2005

seven-fold light' (Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p33). In this role Janet is in a strong tradition of women translators like Elizabeth Lee Smith and Catherine Winkworth. Catherine and her sister were significant figures in the development of women's education particularly in Bristol where she founded Clifton High School for Girls, in the nineteenth century. It is through Catherine's translations that we had the hymns of the early protestant reformers in English, like this translation of Johann Scheffler:

O Love who formedst me to wear
The image of thy godhead here;
Who soughtest me with tender care
Through all my wand'rings wild and drear,
O Love, I give myself to thee,
Thine ever, only thine to be.

(Winkworth in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p25)

She believed passionately in congregational singing. In her preface to *Lyra Germanica* she wrote:

The singing of hymns forms a much larger and more important part of public worship in the German reformed Churches than in our own services. It is the mode by which the whole congregation is enabled to bear its part in the worship of God. (Winkworth, Catherine (1855), *Lyra Germanica* 1st ser. Quoted in Wootton 2003 p127)

New Themes

Some themes have not found a place in traditional hymnody. In extending the notion of an inclusive community there is clearly a need for a reconnection with the natural world especially the image of the earth traditionally marginalized by the Church. This has led to the rediscovery of the Celtic traditions. This is the opening stanza of one adapted from one intended for the anointing of the dying:

Give thou to me, O God,
The healing power of oil.

Give thou to me, O God,
A place beside the healer of my soul... (Boyce-Tillman 2006a p85)

Betty Wendelborn draws on a favourite image of the ancestry of the earth:

Grandmother earth,
Holy be your name. (Wendelborn in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p 56)

Carolyn McDade from North America has produced many songs concerned with ecotheology, some of them part of a large project involving women's choirs in the US and Canada:

Spirit of Earth and Wind
Spirit of life within
May we be true in passing

We are the land we sing
We are the prayer we bring
To these wide miles of morning.⁵

In Doug Constable's hymn written for the 25th anniversary of the World Wildlife Fund, God is addressed as

Warm God of seeds, all nature's source,
Womb of earth maker, and love's stirring pulse.
(Constable in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p66)

Shirley Erena Murray's hymn hears the earth crying out:

I am your mother: do not neglect me!
Children protect me – I need your trust:

⁵ Sleeve notes of *We are the Land we sing* (1999) WRA8-1313, Canada: Carolyn McDade

My breath is your breath

My death is your death,

Ashes to ashes, dust into dust. (Murray 1996 No16)

Other texts embrace less hierarchical views of the Church including reworking the notion of the priesthood of all believers. Non-hierarchical approaches to structures require lay people to claim their authority, in particular their corporate authority as the body of Christ. Many of my hymns see the possibility of this like the last verse of my hymn *The Wounds are human wounds*

In sharing grief and pain

And joyful laughing love

We are a priesthood here on earth

Reflecting God above. (Boyce-Tillman 2006a p53)

There is a well-established theology of God as male reflected throughout the hymnody of the Church. Some contemporary women⁶ do not find it a problem and contemporary writers in the evangelical tradition like Graham Kendrick who writes that the characteristics of true Christian worship falls under the headings

- Worship the Father
- In Spirit
- In truth

(Kendrick 2003 p92)

There is a tradition of Marian hymns where Mary is very close to Divine and these can make her more use to contemporary women than the plaster images of traditional Roman Catholicism:

1. Mary, our mother,

⁶ Whereas some men do

Working and planning
Making a home for
Family and friends,
Be with our working
Be with our resting..... (Boyce-Tillman 2006a p36)

Another possibility is to use non-gendered words like friend, companion, and healer is one solution - the truly inclusive one. We find this in material from that past such as Margaret Cropper's (1886-1980):

O Christ, whom we may know and love
And follow to the end,
We who are friends together come
To thee our heavenly friend.
(Cropper in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p76)

Dora Greenwell (1821-82), one of the Victorian hymn writers referred to earlier in this chapter presents a deeply compassionate God in her wonderful hymn *And art thou come with us to dwell*:

4. Each heart's deep instinct unconfessed;
Each lowly wish, each daring claim,
All, all that life has long repressed
Unfolds undreading blight or blame.
(Greenwell in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p10)

Dorothy Gurney's (1858-1932) wedding hymn addresses God as:

O perfect love, all human thought transcending
(Gurney in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p75)

Sydney Carter frames a wonderful hymn about creativity around the image:

The bell of creation is swinging for ever

In all of the things that are coming to be....

(Carter in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p65)

The use of feminine images for God is not, strictly speaking, inclusive but it does serve to balance the 2,000-year-old tradition of male names. Opinion is very divided here. Feminists see the use of the feminine images for God essential while others see it as potentially as divisive as the older male language.

Janet Wootton's hymn *Dear Mother God* includes many nurturing images:

1. Dear Mother God, your wings are warm around us,
We are enfolded in your love and care;
Safe in the dark, your heartbeat's pulse surrounds us,
You call on us, for you are always there.

2. You call to us, for we are in your image,
We wait on you, the nest is cold and bare –
High overhead your wing beats call us onward,
Filled with your power, we ride the empty air.

3. Let not our freedom scorn the needs of others –
We climb the clouds until the strong heart sings –
May we enfold our sisters and our brothers,
Till all are strong, till all have eagles' wings.

(Janet Wootton in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p1).

Janet describes how it has raised a storm when she has used it in some circles but how it is completely scriptural, based on the Eagle image from Deuteronomy. She comments on people's response to feminine images:

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But there is something visceral in people's response, which even reference to Scripture and tradition will not allay. (Wootton 2003 p134)

There is also in *Reflecting Praise* Judith Driver's fine hymn *My God is woman*:

4. My God is woman:

She is around me and in me;

She is darkness and light;

She creates and heals....

(Driver in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton p4)

I tried to establish a charismatic female figure like Dylan's Mr Tambourine Man in *The Tambourine Woman*, with its dancing Irish style tune and the chorus:

We'll follow the tambourine woman

And join in her tambourine song.

We're riding a rainbow to heaven

And dancing our journey along.

(Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 pp62-3)

Brian Wren's hymn moves to a genderless deity from a feminine pronoun:

Who is She?

Neither male or female,

Maker of all things,

Only glimpsed or hinted,

Source of life and gender?

(Wren in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p8)

If hymns *by* women are difficult to find, hymns *about* women are almost as difficult. Here we can look back to the hymns of the Syrian Orthodox women in the early church. They dealt with the women of the Bible and contemporary writers mix these with the story of more recent women who have entered the struggle for justice. Elisabeth Cosnett commemorates the social reformer, Josephine Butler in

1. For God's sake let us dare

To pray with Josephine.....

3. She forced her age to face

What most it feared to see

The double standard at the base

Of its prosperity.

(Cosnett in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p 42)

Mel Bringle draws on our foremothers:

Sisters in God's house,

Bold to sing new songs,

Marguerite, Umilta, Agnes,

Julian, Clare, Macrina, Catherine;

Mothers from our past.

Daughters in one faith....

(Bringle 2002 p116)

I have written about Julian of Norwich ending:

All shall be well in love enclosed

The ring of fire will meet the rose

In One who all our suffering knows,

Sweet Mother Jesus, our repose.

(Boyce-Tillman in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p 66)

The stories of Sarah, Miriam and Deborah have been overshadowed by the men in their stories and other figures like Hagar are hidden behind these women in hymnody as in the Lectionary. Mary the mother of Jesus has few hymns in Protestant traditions except for Christmas carols and the women who are central to the resurrection narrative are curiously hidden. It does not help that many of these women in Scripture have no name. Brian Wren redresses some of the balance with his impressive hymn *Woman in the night* with its verses on woman at the well and woman in the house which continues:

Nurtured to be meek

Leave your second place

Listen, think and speak.

(Wren in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p 21)

This for many women rebalances the traditionally submissive position of Victorian writers like Charlotte Elliott. Many feminist groups find her *Just as I am* unacceptable because of its association with traditional positions allotted to women. Fred Pratt Green highlights the women at the tomb with his: *What tale is this the women bring* with its chorus:

Hurry, hurry brothers, do not more delay

Maybe it is true what the women say.

(Pratt Green in Tillman and Percival 1980 p199)

Madeline Sue Martin brings together Mary the Mother of Jesus with the woman who anointed Jesus with the jar of nard in *A Prophet Woman Broke a jar*. (Martin 1998 p ix). Ruth Thomas retells the story of Miriam starting with the jangling of her bangles and ending with the enigmatic verse:

2. What was Aaron thinking, tell me,

As Miriam danced

He as thinking if his people, O yes,

As Miriam danced.

(Thomas in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p79)

The rediscovery of voices from the past has produced Kassia's (ca 810-ca867) 50 hymns about thirty of which are still used in the Eastern orthodox tradition (Harvey 2001). She was a Byzantine abbess whose hymns continued the Orthodox tradition of giving biblical women voices. Most famous is her Song of Mary Magdalene in which Mary says:

Take my spring of tears
You who draw water from the clouds,
Bend to me, to the sighing of my heart.⁷

Here are Mary's words from a hymn for the feast of the presentation of Jesus in the temple:

"How can I hold you as a child,
you who hold everything together?"

"How do I bring you to the temple, who is beyond goodness?"⁸

Values - justice seeking songs

Many contemporary writers are concerned to balance justice and nurturing. Songs dealing with social justice rose to prominence in the UK with writers like Sydney Carter and publications like *Faith Folk and Clarity* (Smith 1967) coming from the vision of Bernard Braley at Stainer and Bell. These included some women writers but paid no attention to language with songs like *The Family of Man*. The performers were also often men with notable exceptions like Estelle White.

These developments followed the development of the secular protest song. This was often in the hands of singer song writers and there was a rise of this phenomenon in religious circles. Carolyn McDade is one of these with a considerable impact in the US in particular. Much of her work is concerned with justice for women and the earth:

⁷ <http://muisc.acu.edu/www/iawm/pages/kassia.html>. January 31st 2003. It is recorded on Women as composers and performers of mediaeval chant. (1998) JARO 4210-2

⁸ <http://www.roanoke.infi.net/~ddisse/kassia.html>, 31st January 2003

A people are not hurt by strong women
When women are strong their people are not hurt...

Dissenting towards justice.

(McDade 1986 p43)

I attempted to embrace justice themes in my hymns. One was written for my friend and worker for justice, Hugh Boulter:

4. Within our hearts may justice reign
And burn with fiery Spirit-flames,
Creating systems that in strength
Embody Christ's outrageous claims.

5. And so the God of joy and hope,
Can be revealed in humankind,
Where politics reflect shared wealth
And nature's growth as intertwined.
(Boyce-Tillman 2006a p69)

Here I drew on the radical writer Sydney Carter with songs like *When I needed a neighbour* and *No use knocking at the window*.

Justice is a passionate concern for Janet Wootton,⁹ my co-editor of *Reflecting Praise*. A number of themes challenging prevailing practice run through her thinking

- The hiddenness of women hymn writers, who are often tacked on to the end of writings on hymnody.

[But] women have played an enormous part in writing hymns, and they haven't just written ditties for children. They've written really good, radical and poetic material.....

- The life of Jesus....

If you look in any hymnbook, you see loads of hymns about Christmas and

⁹ Interview July 2003 at Union Chapel Islington.

the birth of Jesus, and loads of hymns about Good Friday onwards, and almost nothing about the actual life and teaching of Jesus. Where is all the radical teaching and life of Jesus? The explosion of his actual life? ...

- The challenge of the Gospel

I don't want to write ... worship hymns....I find that a lot of it is selfish - self-centred. *I want to know Jesus. This is what Jesus has done for me....Jesus has washed away **my** sins, and **I** have the victory.* [In some hymnbooks] the section beginning with the word *I* is enormous....So I've written a hymn for Homelessness Sunday, for example, which challenges the whole community to respond in a just way.....I'm really looking back a long way to people like Anna Lætitia Barbauld,....she wrote a lot of really good, satirical political writing, always under pseudonyms..... Anna wrote prose hymns for children, and they've got some very good radical ideas. For example, she writes against the slave trade, so she writes hymns about the poor Negro woman seeing her children go off into slavery, and why should she have to suffer that when other women don't. So that's quite a strong idea to put in the 18th century.....and she also talks of God as 'Mother'...she was working in a school, her husband's school, andshe really - she bought into the moralising work ethic.....But in the background she was writing the satirical material ...against the established Church - against Britain's war effort.... *We are now about - Almighty God, we are about to go out and slaughter our brothers, and we (you know) we pray for your blessing upon this effort to kill the people that you have made...* Amazing writing. I wonder if the hymn writing [reflected] a desire to be acceptable.

Janet edits a publication with material for worship entitled *Worship Live*, which is published three times a year by Stainer and Bell and critiques the material she receives:

- Too challenging and not enough nurturing,
- Too densely written and difficult to penetrate.
- Too naively optimistic.

I do decry the 'happy ending'the hope should be interwovenand not tacked on at the end, as it so often is....There's a particular hymn of mine –

God is our Father, what does it mean when parents abuse and damage their children? ...When Christ is the Bridegroom, what does it mean when marriages end in false - in sharp disillusion? ...the last line of each verse is Help us make sense of the dream...And an editor sent it back and said they couldn't use it in its present form because they wanted a happy ending. They wanted a versewhich says Now we make sense of the dream, and I tried ever so hard to write that verse, and in the end I couldn't do it because the reality is that parents do abuse and damage their children.

Shirley Erena Murray also sees her role as challenging. In *Here to the house of God we come*, she calls for an inclusive community, including the refugee, which reminds the singers that the image of God is in everyone:

Here to the house of God we come,
Home of the people of the Way,
Here to give thanks for all we have,
Naming our needs for everyday,
We who have roof and rent and bread,
Sure of a place to rest our head.

There is a knocking at the door,
Sound of the homeless of the world.....

(Murray in New Zealand Hymnbook Trust 1993 No 55)

She sees her role as challenging conventional wisdom:

Church of the living Christ, people of Easter faith

No use old wineskins now – new wine is here to stay:

No patching up old schemes – new patches tear way.

Old gear, old concepts have no place

Where Christ's own presence sets the pace.

(Murray in New Zealand Hymnbook Trust 1993 No 19)

So women can be inspired to challenged the established order and deal with justice issues

in their writing. There is also a desire to use more nurturing images for God. There is a real sense that women themselves need a great deal of nurturing particularly in the area of music to realise their potential. They fear negative criticism being given too early in their development.

Construction

The music of women's worshipping groups is often orate in nature and there is a preference for material that can be taught and learned orally. This challenges the dense theological statement that characterises the hymn. Women have traditionally not had access to musical tuition and even now that we have women are often unconfident in their abilities even when they have been affirmed by the examination system. There are few role models for them musically and not enough nurture to give them the necessary confidence. There are far less women composers of tunes than there are in writers of texts and this is still true. Women have been no more affirmed by musical traditions than by the Church. The story of women and girls in church choirs is the substance of another paper but because they have been excluded from these they have not had the richness of musical experience that was open to men.

In some of these collections there is material from more oral traditions and material that can be used as the basis for improvisation like Taize chants. Many women have had a dilemma with this often because of their lack of music education and much material produced by the alternative worshipping groups. The simple chant is therefore extremely popular. The repetitive chants accompanied by drums generate more excitement in their emotional feel. The Taize chanting tradition initiated by Jacques Berthier has achieved great popularity but women like Margaret Rizza (2004) are writing beautiful repetitive chants of a very nurturing character due to their almost complete lack of discord. Talking about her music, Margaret sees them as coming as part of her meditative practice and being part of people's practice:

My prayer is that this new collection leads us all to new awakenings of the eternal Spirit of Love deep within our being.¹⁰

The chorus song is also very popular with the women folk style writers like Estelle White (1977).

¹⁰ http://www.kevinmayhew.com/Product_16985 Contacted Feb 12th 2005

Expressive Character

So Margaret Rizza draws on her own experience and these personal songs are popular with women. Feminist theology has reclaimed personal experience as a source of theology. This means connecting with the more difficult part of life and darkness is then reclaimed. I have written a number of hymns connecting darkness and light like the chorus of a new version of the triumphalist Easter hymn, *Thine be the glory*:

Christ our companion gloriously alive,
We can share your darkness, we can share your light.
(Boyce-Tillman 2006a p11)

Written for the tune BENSON by Millicent D. Kingham (1866-1927), my hymn *Harvest of Darkness* links creativity with darkness:

1. It was dark in the dawn of time....
2. It is dark in sheltering womb,
Where the baby for three months lies,
Curved like a moon near a warm woman's heart
Till the waters roll aside
3. It is dark in the heart's deep cells
Where the Spirit of Wisdom lies
Firm are the strong rooms and bars of the mind
Till the barriers are rolled aside...
(Boyce-Tillman 2006a p31)

And each verse ends with:

As the Spirit works out her plan.

The desire of women's worshipping groups to be distinctive has often resulted musically in an embracing of tunes with a more relaxing calming feel rather than what is perceived as

the more militaristic, triumphalist, exciting sounds of large scale public worship. Some women's hymn texts (especially those from former periods) in established metres are strong like Priscilla Owens's (1829-99) *Will you anchor hold in the storms of life* set to the tune of the same name with its rousing chorus:

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure why the billows roll;
Fastened to the rock that cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the saviour's love.

(Owens in Boyce-Tillman and Wootton 1993 p 56)

The most famous example is Julia Ward Howe's (1819-1910) *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord* set to the tune of John Brown's Body but it is often forgotten that later the author disowned this hymn with its militaristic overtones. Frances Jane Van Alstyne (1820-1915), writing under her maiden name of Fanny Crosby has contributed powerful rousing hymns that many will associate with the excitement of the Billy Graham Crusades of the 60s, like *Blessed Assurance* and *To God be the glory*. There is an attempt to use softer more gentle images of God with tunes of that character. Very popular is the hymn from the Iona community concerning *A Touching Place*. Hymns relating to the events of 9/11 often balance the violence with gentleness:

When terror strikes through morning skies
And fear-dazed minds grow numb,
With interceding, prayerful sighs,
O Healing Spirit, come
(Bringle 2002 p 148)

Many of the singer songwriters writing their own material use guitar accompaniments or the voices available on an electronic keyboard. Many have developed a distinctive feel which is quite gently powerful. Carolyn McDade's material is very distinctive in this way seen in the feel of this text written from working with the women in Nicaragua:

Come with a love that loves so long
Come live with a love
Walk naked with open arms
Among the people who leave the master's house.
(McDade 1990)

In her introductions she distinguishes between songs that rally us and songs that call us to personal and communal reflection...songs which allow the landscape of our love and loyalty to shift and reform by contemplating it before the mists rise, before our minds become girdled in the knowledge the holders of knowledge have impressed upon us.' (McDade 1990 p7). She talks about the feel of her songs:

Give me the quiet song, slow and sustained, give me a sensual song that lets me derobe and runs its lover's hands across my body, its breath across my soul.
(McDade 1990 p7)

Materials

Many women have moved towards guitars and keyboards as accompanying instruments, often because they work aurally and Roman Catholic women like Marsie Silvestro and Estelle White came through the system as the Roman Catholic Church replaced their plainchant and organs with folk guitars. But some women still embrace the organ. Janet Wootton¹¹, when she was Minister of Union Chapel comments:

I like the organ as an accompanying instrument, and being at Union Chapel has shown me what an organ, as opposed to a harmonium, can do.... and what a magnificent instrument can do, and so an organ is no longer one instrument, but a whole variety. [I have a good, imaginative organist]... who will pull out all the stops on the last verse, and will go out of his way to find appropriate settings and for particular verses...and will, therefore, use the instrument to carry the ideas. On the other hand...an unimaginative person who's been pressed into playing the organ and has never really liked it, and is a piano player -reluctant organist, is the term, who plays extremely slowly, and with no idea of the words... it can be terrible - terribly damaging - but

¹¹ Interview July 2003 at Union Chapel Islington.

that's true of any instrument, I think.

On the other hand, .. many of the tunes I select are not organ tunes, but guitar tunes or piano tunes, and I've heard some beautiful, lovely accompaniments and.. other instruments –

I love unaccompanied singing. I was brought up singing campfire singing as a Girl Guide, ..- I think is easily accessible, immediately enjoyable music.... I've written hymns to rounds. *By your shaping, by your wisdom and delight, we are crafted in your image*, which goes down well everywhere, because it's a very, very simple round tune

So there is a preference amongst women in their group liturgies for more relaxed, meditative music although the drum is beginning to find some acceptance. In mainstream worship women are producing stronger hymns of more energy generating kind.

Reclaiming the body

Images of dancing appear and images dealing with the body (particularly women's bodies) in a way that regards it as sacred rather than evil.

The play of the Godhead,
The Trinity's dance
Embraces the earth in a sacred romance...
(Bringle 2002 p128)

In a hymn about Mary Magdalene, I use the images of women's hair and clothing as icons of women's entrapment in the gaze of a male culture:

CHORUS:

*Mary, Mary, let down your hair,
Let loose the love of God for all to share.*

1. Come, dancing Mary, draw near to your lover,
Fear has no place in the meeting of hearts;
Let loose your feelings and let them flow freely
For deep in this loving a new world could start.

CHORUS

4. See how your lover advances in springtime;
Throw your arms widely in passion's embrace;
Look in the eyes that are longing to meet you,
And hold up your head; you can meet face to face.
(Boyce-Tillman 2006a p104)

The notion of reuniting body and spirit has resulted in the restoration of dance into liturgy. Sometimes this is liturgical dance by skilled dancers and sometimes it is involving the entire congregation. Some songs are written with the intention of being used for dance like my text to the tune *Slane*:

1. Peace flowing outward and peace flowing in,
Draw peace from the centre in which we begin;
Find peace in the ending, the close of the day;
Let peace in the heart wipe the evil away.
2. Strength flowing outward and strength flowing in....
(Boyce-Tillman 2006a pp43)

Dancing is used regularly in images in hymns and songs by women. Kathy Sherman's cassette *Dance in the Dawn* concludes with the song that starts:

Refrain: Women go forth to proclaim your stories
Go with your visions and go with your dreams.
Women go quickly the night is waiting
For us to dance in the new day.

3. We gather around Holy Wisdom
Trusting her warmth and her flame.
In her we are tender, fierce, loving and strong
As one we go forth in her name.
(Sherman 1987 sleeve notes)

Summary

Hymn writing has been a place where women, particularly Protestant Victorian women have found a way of getting their voices heard in worship in the past. However, their works have not always held their place in hymn collections. The work of contemporary women and those writers interested in the Wisdom tradition show the trends evident attempt to rebalance the dominant patriarchal tradition through the medium of the hymn. However, there are a number of issues that make this problematic. Those raised in this article are:

- Inclusive language for human beings
- Inclusive language for God
- The problems of traditional hymnody
- New subjects like ecology and the interconnectedness of creation and the priesthood of all believers
- Revisiting the women's songs in the tradition
- Creating material telling women's stories
- The place of the body

All of these themes call for a radical rethinking of traditional theology in the light of contemporary developments. The hymn has always been a medium for dissemination of theological ideas and a woman's strategy of resistance (Foucault/Gordon 1980). What is clear is that women are still using the hymn as means for making their voice, their concerns, and their experience known; but it is still difficult to get their contribution recorded or honoured because of the challenge they potentially pose to the dominant orthodoxy.

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