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# Let justice sing: hymnody and justice

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with some challenge to change and how his model overcame that challenge. Seldom does he give us that privilege.

Interestingly, he draws from his childhood of growing up Lutheran (!) to illustrate his own spiritual journey which led him into the Presbyterian church. In his adult life he was the executive presbyter of the Des Moines, Iowa Presbytery (PUSA), and is presently director of Project 21, a program which strives to develop and promote new paradigms of church life. No doubt, he comes to this task with a great deal of experience and wisdom. Yet, with so many other books on the market about paradigm shift in the church, one might want to look carefully before investing in *Service is the Point*. In this reviewer opinion, it could have been more pointed.

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### **Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice**

Paul Westermeyer

Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998

118 pages, \$15.95 Softcover

Hymnody and justice? A strange combination of themes for a book!...yet one which will attract the attention of many who see the lack of justice themes in our hymns! This monograph in the Liturgical Press' "American Essays in Liturgy" series, began as a lecture series at Montreal in 1995. Paul Westermeyer, teacher of liturgy and church music at Luther-Northwestern Seminary in Minneapolis, gives his purpose in writing the book as to draw in "...the church and others who wish to join the moral deliberation it presumes in the form of an open-ended and ongoing discussion, with the hope that it helps us know something more about our past that can be applied with wisdom to our present" (9).

Westermeyer asks the question, "Can justice sing?" and answers yes. Our hymnody, he observes, often avoids justice issues—most often by domesticating the church's song. This is more evident at Christmas! While acknowledging the difficulty of challenging injustice through poetry and song, he recognizes that the issues invoking the

theme of justice today are many: God-language, black-white contrasts, up-down polarities, militaristic language, respect for the handicapped, the poor, and the marginalized.

He begins with the hymnody of the twentieth century, and works back historically through the Christian era, finally returning once again to the present. He first presents hymnwriters of the current "hymn explosion," observing that their hymn texts are saturated with justice themes, viz. Bayly, Routley, Wren, Kaan, Troeger, Franzmann, Green, and Bell. In addition, he observes, texts from Third World cultures, what we call "world music," are often justice-oriented.

From the present, he quickly moves to the Old Testament Book of Psalms. These too are saturated with justice images. The canticles of the New Testament, he observes, are also rich in justice metaphors, especially the Magnificat, Gloria in Excelsis, Nunc Dimittis, and Benedictus. Other canticles of the liturgical *ordo* also bear this theme. We find justice themes also throughout the Greek and Latin hymnody of the early church, but to a lesser degree.

Justice plays a less significant role in the hymns of the Reformation. It is not strong in the hymns of Luther: it is more implied than explicit, more personal than corporate. Yet Luther in his poetry offers a revolutionary eschatological *telos*. There is, Westermeyer notes, a stronger emphasis on justice in the hymns of Isaac Watts. He then looks at the hymns used by Muhlenberg in eighteenth century Pennsylvania, and finds, not surprisingly, that the theme of justice is weak but not absent, being reflected in the theme of God's judgment on evil. But there is no call, as we hear today, to engage in the struggle against systemic evil.

John Wesley's hymns receive a more positive reception, being much more focused on the poor. Yet apparently most of these were rarely if ever actually sung! And, he points out, most of these hymns have an overriding theme: "They are about coming, not going" (58). The desired result, then is NOT doing justice, but *witnessing*. So here too, justice is not an activity but an attitude. There is a brief but good excursus here on hymnody as emotional indulgence and violent enthusiasm, about the experience of experience and turning away from the world, which is the curse of revival and evangelical hymnody in ours and previous generations.

Hymnody of the nineteenth century, he observes, moves even



further away from biblical themes of justice and further into self-indulgence on the one hand and imperial triumphalism on the other. He finds exceptions to this in the translations of Catherine Winkworth and John Mason Neale: but for the latter, justice is once again God's justice, of which we are passive recipients. In discussing nineteenth century Gospel hymnody, he observes that once again *coming* is stronger than *sending*.

His treatment of Afro-American spirituals is extremely helpful. He advises us that their texts function on several levels: spiritual, political, and as underground signals. Here, in this hymnody from "below," the world is a place of horror...but someday God will bring about a reversal. This body of song was the first Judaeo-Christian hymnody to give the biblical idea of freedom a literal spin since the time of Moses and the Exile.

Having brought his readers back to the present, Westermeyer ends with random musings on the role of hymnody, from the perspective of justice, in the church today. His theology here, although poorly organized, is very useful and insightful. Here are a few selections.

Context can shape the meaning of hymns. Blacks can sing the same hymns as whites, while hearing and singing a different message. So not only music, but community and worship context are important. There is an interesting discussion of beauty, money, and justice (86), which contrasts gaudy opulence with simple beauty. He discusses how the Protestant fear of the visual and tactile will often overburden hymnody beyond what it can bear.

He offers some helpful comments on emotion in hymnody. We, in our declining culture, often over-stress the emotional and subjective side of faith. He espouses a musical esthetic of *form* over expression, following Igor Stravinsky and Eduard Hanslick. He relates this perspective to responsibility, the relationship value of good music, and its counter-cultural, anti-self centeredness. He makes a good case that the church's social message can emerge through the most general, universal, "catholic" message it proclaims, in hymn as well as in sermon.

Finally, in a refrain often heard today, Westermeyer reiterates what so many of us have discovered; that the church is the only place left where people still sing. *Our culture has silenced us everywhere else.* In church, we can still sing together: this alone is a significant justice

issue today. But then, *who chooses what we sing*? Will what we sing reflect the culture around us, or a counter-cultural attitude closer to the Gospel?

Westermeyer seems to conclude that, for hymnody to be identified as pro-justice, it is sufficient for there to be a general assault on injustice. If the attack is too specific, hymnody loses its universal application and becomes too localized. This reminds us that "justice" does not simply mean "social ministry," but just as importantly, God's ongoing judgment on sin.

Not all will accept this argument. Is it too generous to say that the presence of themes of peace, holiness, and God's judgment in a hymn is enough that it is considered a "justice" theme? His most useful "category" for evaluating hymnody may well be the contrast between *coming* and *sending*. One cannot help but notice how little there is in our hymnody of justice as an activity to change the world, that is, of *sending* the faithful out into the struggle, and how much there is of *coming* to God and Christ for protection and solace. Few hymns of any age can match the psalms and the Magnificat for their revolutionary expression of God's judgment and call to turn.

This is a good book, which would be useful as a study guide for a mature group of Christians who wish to explore the interface between justice and this one aspect of worship. An eight-page bibliography of other sources is included. Westermeyer ends with a typically powerful proverb. "Justice sings because the gospel sings. If we don't sing it, the rocks will cry out" (110).

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### **Blessing and Glory and Thanksgiving: the Growth of a Canadian Liturgy**

William R. Blott

Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1998

149 pages, \$14.95 Softcover

Life is full of ironies. One of the first things we learn from Blott's book on the growth of Canadian Anglican liturgy is that the first