WHAT SHALL THEY SING?

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[This article, which we reprint by kind permission of the Editor of the Bulletin of the University of Leeds Institute of Education, appeared in that journal in November, 1961. With so much new interest in hymns as a means of education, and expecting the appearance within a year or two of the new experimental Cambridge Hymn Book, we felt that the judgments and research in this article would be of special interest to our members.]

Many are the considerations to be faced when a school decides to review its present hymn-book—but do we ever pause to consider the primary purpose of our hymn-singing, to realise that we are seeking the best in Christian praise and worship? Surely our first thought should be upon the theological worthiness of the words in the hymn-book, rather than upon the musical excellence of the settings.

With this in mind, I recently conducted a survey to secure details about hymn-books used in schools to-day, my intention being to use the collated material as a basis on which to enlarge on the study of the use of hymns in schools for the teaching of Christian doctrine. It was felt necessary to limit the inquiry to secondary schools, since infant and junior hymn-singing presents problems peculiar to that age-range. Although the inquiry was limited in extent, the findings are of interest to teachers of all age-groups and the observations upon them are of universal application.

One hundred and fifty secondary schools were approached, and these included secondary grammar schools (boys, girls and mixed), direct grant schools, secondary technical, secondary modern (single-sex and co-educational), comprehensive schools, schools for educationally sub-normal and physically handicapped children, and voluntary schools of Church of England, Methodist, Congregational and Moravian foundation. These schools were selected from the widest possible area, care being taken to include all counties of England. No Roman Catholic school received a copy of the questionnaire and nowhere in the analysis is further mention made specifically relevant to Roman Catholic schools.

Replies were received from 110 schools, but not all the material given was suitable for inclusion in a statistical review of the information. Several schools use a hymn-book of their own compilation and were therefore unable to help by sending numbers of popular hymns. Schools for physically handicapped and for educationally subnormal children often used a wall-chart type of hymn-sheet, again with individual choice of hymns.

Outstanding in the analysis of hymn-books used in schools were two most noticeable factors; the wide range of books in use,

and the overwhelming majority preference. At least twenty different books are in common use, and it is apparent, and significant, that many schools are still searching with real intent for the 'ideal school hymn-book', as they make the best of a temporary expedient. On what criteria is their search for a new book made? Do they seek for a set of words with a sounder basis for doctrinal teaching? Do they seek tunes which have a greater appeal to the modern generation? Or are they swayed by the cheapness of pocket editions of the words?

One wonders which of the above considerations influenced the 62% of schools who chose to use *Songs of Praise*. Compared with *Hymns Ancient and Modern* used in 8% of schools, or *The BBC Hymn-book* in 2%, this staggering popularity of *Songs of Praise* seems to demand further investigation. This hymn-book is used in almost half the grammar schools considered, in a quarter of the public and direct grant schools, in over 80% of the secondary modern and schools for educationally subnormal children, and in almost 90% of the secondary technical and art schools.

We may appreciate the influence which *Songs of Praise* is today exerting on the pattern of worship in schools, not only by the high percentage of schools using it, but by the fact that of those schools which sing more than one hymn at each assembly, the great majority use this hymn-book, thus magnifying its influence, whether for good or ill. Most schools seem to follow a fairly rigid pattern each morning: hymn, reading, prayers; 15% of schools sing two hymns at each assembly (three-quarters of these using *Songs of Praise*), while only two schools returned information that they sang three hymns every morning—from *Songs of Praise*.

From information collected it was possible to draw up a list of percentage popularity of hymns used in schools. The following may give some indication of the choice of schools today, apart from seasonal favourites (Christmas carols and hymns, etc.) which enjoyed 100% popularity—

100% All people that on earth do dwell
Let us with a gladsome mind
He who would valiant be
Praise, my soul, the King of Heaven
The King of love my Shepherd is
We plough the fields and scatter

92% Come, ye thankful people, come
There is a green hill
Dear Lord and Father of mankind

89— O worship the King
80% Ye holy angels bright
Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us
As with gladness

Blest are the pure in heart
Jesus Christ is risen today

79— Forth in Thy name, O Lord, I go
70% Fight the good fight
All glory, laud and honour
When I survey the wondrous cross
Breathe on me, breath of God
Now thank we all our God
Praise to the Lord, the Almighty
All creatures of our God and King
Immortal, invisible, God only wise
Jesus shall reign

At the other end of the list we find hymns whose tune does not have an immediate appeal to children, or whose words are outside a child's experience and therefore more difficult to understand.

Come Holy Ghost (*Veni Creator*)
God moves in a mysterious way
O come, O come, Emmanuel
Praise to the Holiest in the height
The Church's one foundation
Thou whose almighty word

In addition to these more or less popular hymns, there are a few which demand special mention. Among those which have a very small poll are favourite Easter hymns—the problem being felt in most schools whether to remember the Resurrection by singing 'Jesus lives! Thy terrors now . . .' on the last day of term, even though it may be Maundy Thursday; or to respect the last days of Holy Week, and omit Easter hymns from the school list, presuming that this major Christian festival will be celebrated at home and at Sunday worship.

Another question which arouses much controversy is that of the suitability of certain hymns to the spiritual experience of the child. *The BBC Hymn Book* says in the preface that it provides no special section 'For the Young', since it advocates a full, though discriminating, use of the hymns sung by adults. This treats the older children as they would wish to be treated, and it makes them familiar with the hymns which they will find in use when they become regular members of the adult congregation. But the questionnaire evoked contrary comment from those who think that 'many hymns which are relevant for the Church congregation are alien to a modern pupil, since they contain too many allusions to scriptural images and religious experiences quite beyond his ken.'

Is it for this reason that so many hundreds of teen-age children

are asked to worship God through the words of the following song?

> Glad that I live am I, that the sky is blue;
> Glad for the country lanes, and the fall of dew;
> After the sun the rain, after the rain the sun;
> This is the way of life, till the work be done.
> All that we need to do, be we low or high,
> Is to see that we grow nearer the sky. (*SP* 499)

Why is such a religious song so popular? Surely not for any depth of meaning in the words, for one can scarcely recognise any Christian teaching in them. Perhaps in the lilt of the tune lies the secret of the hymn's popularity; and this I suspect is the case in many of the hymns in *Songs of Praise.*

Assuredly, this hymn-book especially rejoices in a wealth of musical jewels under the joint musical editorship of Dr R. Vaughan Williams and Dr Martin Shaw. Since it seems to be universally accepted that the chief criterion for judging a good hymn is the excellence of the tune, we can now see why over 60% of schools prefer *Songs of Praise,* with its treasure of melodic and harmonic gems including music by Arnold Bax, Armstrong Gibbs, Gustav Holst, Herbert Howells, John Ireland and Geoffrey Shaw, not to mention the two music editors. What a store-house we have in *Songs of Praise* from which to select hymns that will appeal to the child's subconscious appreciation of harmonic adventure, chromatic colouring, irregular rhythms, and 'long lines of melody'! But as teachers we must resist the temptation to give our children only what they enjoy singing, without any regard to the suitability of the words. Many books are available today which suggest outlines for morning assembly, with selected readings, prayers and recommended hymns. So many of these, however, presuppose that in giving a hymn title together with its number in several of the more popular hymn-books, they are referring to the same work; for example, it may be suggested that one morning the children sing 'At the name of Jesus'—*EH* 368, *SP* 392, *A & M* 225. On closer scrutiny, we find that in one school, children will be singing:—

> Brothers, this Lord Jesus
> Shall return again,
> With his Father's glory
> With his Angel train . . .

and the theme of the Second Coming may well be taken up in the reading *e.g.* Matthew 16, 27, or Luke 21, 27, or in the daily RI period. But in the school which uses *Songs of Praise*—and their

number is legion—all such reference to this scriptural truth is by-passed, as they sing

Brothers, this Lord Jesus
Dwells with us again,
In his Father's wisdom
O'er the earth to reign.

Or again we may compare the words as found in the majority of hymn-books (*A & M* 91)

Christian, up and smite them,
Counting gain but loss;
Smite them by the merit
Of the holy Cross . . .

where the power in Christ crucified is shown to the full, with the version in *Songs of Praise* (466):

Christian, up and follow;
His the perfect school,
Learn to make men happy
By the Golden Rule.

Why does this hymn-book, with such amazing popularity, attempt to take the Christian message out of Christianity? Why does a hymn-book with such a pantheistic and even humanist outlook have such a popularity in schools to-day? Is it not a mirror of the modern trend towards a non-committal, eviscerated religion under the guise of Christianity? Little wonder that *Songs of Praise* has been criticised as a 'wayward successor' to the *English Hymnal*, a book compiled by the same editor; or referred to as a 'drastic bowdlerisation of Christian texts'; or characterised by Erik Routley as 'that theologically eccentric hymn book'. (1)

These examples are but few of countless subtle changes in the words of *Songs of Praise*. Study them, and you will find that *Songs of Praise* offers us an adulterated Christian doctrine.

(1) The Editor, observing that he is here quoted, would express his pleasure that the author of the article thought him worth quoting, but would also, to preserve honesty, remind readers that he has not infrequently said more lately that *Songs of Praise* shows an understanding far beyond that of other books of its time (or any other time) of what in the Christian language appears strange or unintelligible to the uncommitted; and that its respect for good literature is a quality which one can admire even when one dissents from its persistent suppression of certain kinds of Christian imagery. The very large question whether the uncommitted can sing hymns at all appears at its acutest in School Assembly.