

Occasional Reflections 12

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The Church's Music as Counter-Cultural

I have recently sensed a renewed vigor in the singing of some congregations. The reason for this became clear to me in a course I taught at Brite Divinity School this past summer. The students were Disciples, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and UCC pastors and musicians. Some of them reported that their churches sing hymns like protest songs. Since then a conversation with a pastor pointed in a similar counter-cultural direction. He said that his wife did not like the militaristic overtones of the hymn, "Lead On, O King Eternal!" He agreed, but noted that they are undercut by the lines,

for not with swords loud clashing,
nor roll of stirring drums,
but deeds of love and mercy
the heavenly kingdom comes.

That counter-cultural motif is driven by an earlier line that undercuts our trust in our own capacities: God's "grace makes us strong" to do deeds of love and mercy.

The counter-cultural nature of hymns characterizes the church's music more generally. Consider the text of this well-known anthem by Richard Farrant (c. 1525-1580).

Lord, for Thy tender mercies' sake,
lay not our sins to our charge,
but forgive that is past,
and give us grace to amend our sinful lives,
to decline from sin
and incline to virtue,
that we may walk with a perfect heart
before Thee now and evermore.

What is here? Our sins, amending our sinful ways, virtue, walking with a perfect heart before God who in tender mercies forgives us—with the obvious connection to Micah

6:8 that this walk includes justice and kindness for the good of the neighbor. This is not a set of cultural assumptions. It is profoundly counter-cultural.

The book of Revelation makes this still more apparent. It is about a huge hymn festival (not a secret code) around the Eucharistic feast. Lynn Hough, in his discussion of the “Anthem of Redemption” at Revelation 7:10, says that, “All those from every nation and language” are invited to the feast around the throne of God. “So they sing the glorious song of the redeemed. . . The music of eternity sends its triumphant joy back into the life of time.”¹ The cultural life of time is countered by the music of eternity which is for people of every nation and language, no exceptions.

The church sings this in many ways. The Psalms continually link the praise of God with justice for all. The Ordinary of the weekly service of Word and Table begins with “peace to God’s people on earth” in the *Gloria in Excelsis* of the gathering rite and at communion asks God to “grant us peace” in the *Agnus Dei*, just before we are sent to carry that peace into the world of our vocations. Even where there are no words, these counter-cultural texts are present. They lie behind the whole repertoire of the church’s organ music. And the many styles the church uses—unison chant, metrical tunes, polyphony, and homophony from many cultures—check one another as they are broken to Word and Sacraments and stand against any single cultural idol.

This counter-cultural quality of the church’s music, though always present, at some moments becomes more obvious. Our moment is one of these, characterized as it is by the absence of moral codes with decisions made on the basis of power, the denial of truth in the obliteration of differences between fact and fiction, human beings

¹ Hough, Lynn Howard Hough, “Exposition, The Revelation of St. John the Divine,” *Interpreter’s Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1957), 12, p. 420.

“viewed through the lens of nationality and socio-economic status” rather than “intrinsic dignity and value,”² and a market-as-God economy that says winning is everything, Beating up on your neighbor becomes life’s goal. Against this the church sings a message that forever announces that the market is not God, that human beings are made in the image of God, and that God and the neighbor are to be loved.

Since the church is always tempted by the culture, music like everything else can be misused. Whether clergy and musicians entertain silent spectators in the ninth century or in the twenty-first century, the controlling cultural temptation is the same. To exercise the participatory birthright of the church by singing its message opposes cultural norms. At times like ours, that may yield the constructively subversive vigor and power of hymns and liturgy sung like protest songs. Paradoxically this protest in liturgical singing is itself countered by the cross that drives it so that, when faithful, it includes lament. It utilizes the least evil necessity of power blocs and their sound that seek the common good as best they can, but it never identifies with any cultural sense of ultimacy as it confesses and laments its sinful complicity in our broken world.

² See Joshua Feigelson, “Reading Arendt, Connecting the Dots,” *Sightings*, 9/16/18 (divsightings@gmail.com).