

## Problematical Christian Hymns

### *Preamble*

One of the first calls in the ICCJ document *The Twelve Points of Berlin*, promulgated in July 2009, is to Christians and Christian Communities to:

*combat religious, racial and all other forms of antisemitism*

*Liturgically, by cleansing Christian liturgies of anti-Jewish perspectives, particularly in preaching, prayers and hymns.*<sup>1</sup>

Over the past decade the main Christian churches in Australia have taken steps to remove language in their worship that reflects or could be interpreted as supersessionist and theologically insensitive to Judaism. Deicide and supersessionism have been condemned by all mainline churches — Protestant, Catholic and Anglican. Despite this, elements of both still permeate our worship.

In this paper, the ACCJ particularly wishes to express concern that since the publication of the Berlin Document, there has been no concerted action among Christian congregations in Australia to effect change with regard to the use of the many problematical hymns contained in current hymnals. Attention is drawn to the continuing use of hymns which contain anti-Jewish perspectives. It is our hope that delegates will refer the issue back to their member organisations, and lead to responsible, decisive action being taken by church leaders worldwide, to encourage the removal of such problematical hymns and to educate their congregants about the reasons for such a recommendation.

While hymns are the specific focus here, it needs to be kept in mind that the scriptures themselves contain much that is antisemitic and supersessionist, and that some lyrics based on biblical quotations ought to be avoided. This is important in that while a preacher can and should explicate such scriptural passages appropriately, that opportunity does not exist if the problematical words are incorporated into hymns. The words that are sung by those who do not understand the implications, notably children, are simply believed and taken to heart, verbatim. The theological and liturgical principle, ‘*Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi*’, which holds that the language in which we pray reflects and forms what we believe, is significant here. It is applicable even if those praying, or in the case of hymns, singing, are not aware of the true implications of the words they use.

We are aware that there will be fierce resistance to the concept that some hymns — often favourites — should be expunged from repertoires. For some, the perceived tradition, even the linguistic beauty of a song, might appear to be important elements which they would want preserved. Unfortunately, many of the problematical hymns are set to catchy tunes, and congregations wish to sing them regardless of their unacceptable lyrics. Nevertheless, we would urge Church leaders to review the hymns that are in use, identify any element of antisemitism, no matter how subtle or implicit, and act accordingly.

### *Criteria*

The relevant criteria for identification of problematical hymns can be summarised:

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.iccj.org/A-Time-for-Recommitment-The-Twelve-Points-of-Berlin.184.0.html>, p. 15 (italics original). The spelling ‘antisemitism’ is explicated in the document **Appendix to the document on Religion and Violence (GEN PRO 07)**, p. 2, n. 1: ‘Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities. This definition was accepted by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (now the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights) in 2005 and has now been widely adopted. The word antisemitism was originally constructed (in a German form) in 1879 by William Marr to refer specifically to hostility towards Jews. It is therefore preferable for it to be spelt as antisemitism rather than anti-Semitism, as the latter spelling can lead to confusion and the mistaken assumption that the word may refer to all Semitic peoples.’

1. Antisemitism
  - 1.1 Blaming the Jews collectively for the death of Jesus.
  - 1.2 Disparagement of Jews in general; or Pharisees, scribes, etc. in particular.
2. Supersessionism
 

This is the position that holds that the Christian dispensation now governs and supersedes Judaism. Many hymns reflect this position, that discredits Judaism as now irrelevant in terms of salvation with the coming of Christ. This attitude is explored further below.
3. Caricature of Jews and/or Judaism
4. Insensitive use of scripture and/or of the tetragrammaton [YHWH] or variations of it.

A number of hymns can be categorised under more than one of these criteria, partly because the New Testament contains both anti-Jewish and supersessionist elements. The Gospel of John is particularly notorious for its antisemitic content, but its supersessionist tendencies are not as well-recognised. In fact, the Johannine Jesus systematically replaces, with *himself*, all of the Jewish feasts, one by one.<sup>2</sup>

In light of this, it is not surprising that some Christians still erroneously believe that their faith has superseded Judaism, even without knowing the ecclesiastical background to this concept — that from the earliest centuries some held that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus and hence had committed deicide (‘killed God’). The assumption was that for this reason, God punished the Jews and replaced their faith with Christianity. Unfortunately, this supersessionist myth still perdures to the point that it is not always easy to identify elements of it in hymns. The third factor — caricature — derives from either antisemitism or supersessionism, or a combination of both. The fourth type is easy to identify if it involves use of the tetragrammaton. However, insensitive use of scripture is more difficult to expose because it might be assumed that biblical quotations are acceptable, though that is not necessarily the case.

### *Examples*

#### **Antisemitism**

A classic example of a hymn that blames the Jewish people as a whole for Jesus’ death (1.1), is ‘We have a gospel to proclaim,’ by Edward Joseph Burns (*Together in Song*,<sup>3</sup> 245). The song ostensibly provides a six-verse summary of the gospel, telling successively of Jesus’ birth, death, resurrection, glorification, sending of the Spirit, and his kingship. The problematic lines are in verse 3:

Tell of his death at Calvary  
hated by those he came to save

It is well known that both Matthew (15:24) and John (1:11) present Jesus as coming specifically for the salvation of the Jews, so the close connection made between his death, and the Jews’ alleged hatred of him, is unacceptable. The lyrics also seem to imply that Jesus himself was not a Jew.

<sup>2</sup> In John 2:13–22, the temple sanctuary is replaced by Jesus; and according to 3:1–21, Israelites no longer have privileged status as God’s children and are replaced by those who believe in Jesus. Jewish feasts are replaced in turn: in 5:1–47, Jesus claims authority over Sabbath law; in 6:1–4 Passover is shown to be superseded in that many come to Jesus rather than going to Jerusalem to observe the feast; the two themes of Tabernacles, water and light, are superseded in 7:37–39 and 8:12–59 respectively; in 10:22–42, the feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah, is symbolically replaced by Jesus’ claim that he is the one consecrated and sent by the Father. In 15:1–17 the OT image of Israel as God’s cherished vine or vineyard is superseded by Jesus as the new vine of Israel. Finally, in 14:6, John’s Jesus claims to be the only way in which one may have access to the Father.

<sup>3</sup> *Together in Song: Australian Hymn Book II* (East Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1999).

A gross example of the disparagement of Jews in general (1.2) is Graham Kendrick's 'He walked where I walk' (*Mission Praise*,<sup>4</sup> 221). Although the lyrics do not refer to Jesus by name, the hymn describes in verse 1 how he 'walked where I walk, stood where I stand, felt what I feel,' etc. Then in verse 2 he is termed 'One of a hated race,' before references to how he was 'stung by the prejudice, suffering injustice,' etc. The appalling reference to the Jews as 'a hated race' is accentuated by the fact that each line of the verses is sung first by a Leader, and then repeated by All. As well as the repetition from the echo structure, the tune of the hymn is very repetitive, and hence all the more likely to imprint the awful lyrics in the memory.

The popular hymn 'Lord of the dance' by Sydney Carter (*Together in Song*, 242, and many other hymnals), distinguishes itself by fitting into both 1.1 and 1.2, as well as two other categories. Like 'We have a gospel to proclaim,' it sets out an account of Jesus' earthly life, death, resurrection, and ongoing heavenly life, loosely based on the gospels, but here expressed in the first person and in terms of his life as the leader of a dance. Some aspects — Jesus' origin in heaven, and the concept of mutual indwelling — show a superficial resemblance to the Gospel of John. Verse 2 disparages scribes and Pharisees (criterion 1.2) by using the symbolism of their refusal to dance with Jesus or to follow him, and distinguishes them from the fishermen, James and John, who do dance with him. In verse 3, 'the holy people' (who presumably represent either the Jews en masse or their religious leaders), whip, strip, and crucify Jesus and leave him to die (criterion 1.1). Some would argue in defence of the hymn that the pronoun 'they' here refers to all humankind, and not to the Jews, but according to rules of grammar, it must refer to 'the holy people'.<sup>5</sup> If there were any doubt about the interpretation, it would still be better to avoid this song, and to teach the truth that Jesus was crucified by the Romans.

### Supersessionism

'Lord of the dance' certainly gives the impression that those who 'dance' with Jesus (i.e. Christians) are favoured by God, and the 'scribe and Pharisee' who would not (typifying Jews) are outcast, so this hymn qualifies as supersessionist as well as antisemitic. A more precise example is 'We are a chosen people' by David J. Hadden (*Mission Praise*, 716), which has as its Refrain:

*We are a chosen people,  
a royal priesthood,  
a holy nation belonging to God.*

and the first lines of verse 2 then read

You have placed us into Zion,  
in the new Jerusalem.

Here Christians are depicted as having completely replaced Jews as the chosen people.<sup>6</sup>

### Caricature

'Lord of the dance' is a prime example of this category, disparaging Judaism and Pharisaism in the erroneous conviction that Jesus was against the people of his own day and that Pharisaism was equivalent to legalism. This illustrates a lack of understanding that the Pharisaic movement was a lay movement in

<sup>4</sup> *Mission Praise* (compiled by Peter Horrobin and Greg Leavers; London: Marshall Pickering, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> A similarly ambiguous 'they' occurs in 'When his time was over,' by Robin Mann (*Together in Song*, 357). According to the rules of grammar, it refers to his (Jewish!) friends, but is probably intended to draw the singer to identify with those who orchestrated the betrayal. It also states specifically that 'Priests and elders tried him' (clearly Jews!) without reference to Pilate, and that 'Soldiers crowned him king' without mentioning that they were *Roman* soldiers.

<sup>6</sup> Similarly, 'Rejoice, the Lord is risen,' by Moira Austin (*Mission Praise*, 576) has in v. 1: 'He has made us His own,' and in v. 2: 'We are His holy nation, ransomed, forgiven,' with Christian singers thus claiming to have replaced the Jewish people.

Jesus' day that sought to renew the Torah and its commandments. Moreover, Jesus is depicted as a sort of magical figure, or superhero, with lyrics that trivialise the passion and resurrection and appear to make God the Father redundant.

### **Insensitive use of terms or scripture**

Employment of the tetragrammaton [YHWH], the unpronounceable Hebrew name for God, is unfortunately still common in some current hymnals. A pertinent instance is 'Jehovah Jireh' by Merla Watson (*Mission Praise*, 354), because it also exemplifies inappropriate use of scripture, since the title derives from Genesis 22:14, and refers to the placename given by Abraham, meaning 'The LORD will provide'. The song, however, uses the words as a title for God:

Jehovah Jireh, my provider, His grace is sufficient for me.  
My God will supply all my needs according to his riches in glory;  
He will give His angels charge over me.  
Jehovah Jireh cares for me, for me.

*Mission Praise* also still features 'Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,' (201) whereas other hymnals such as *Together in Song* (569) have altered the lyrics to 'Guide me, O thou great Redeemer.'<sup>7</sup> There are many other such examples,<sup>8</sup> but a simple solution would be for Church leaders to provide suitable substitutions for the divine name or any inappropriate lyrics.

Another particularly troubling example is 'Hévénu shalom' (*Mission Praise*, 231). The hymn comprises a chorus, *Hévénu shalom aléchem*, (a traditional Israeli song which translates literally as 'We have brought peace'), together with verses by Michael Baughen. Verse 1 proclaims:

Because He has died and is risen  
we now have peace with God  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Verse 2 continues in the same vein:

His peace destroys walls between us  
for only He can reconcile  
us both to God.

Such use of an *Israeli* song to promote the idea that God's peace is attainable only through Jesus is highly inappropriate, as well as typifying supersessionism.

### **Conclusion**

In light of the above, the following questions might be helpful in discerning the suitability of songs chosen for Christian worship:

Do our hymns:

- raise up the Christian message at the expense of putting down the Jewish people or their liturgy?
- speak in a derogatory manner about the Pharisees, branding them as a hypocritical group in contest with Jesus?
- use Scripture literally, especially those passages of the gospel that are negative about the Pharisees or 'the Jews' without critical reflection on the later historical context in which these descriptions were cast?
- communicate a sense that the faith of the Jewish people is no longer important or valid?
- put the blame for the death of Jesus on to the Jewish people as a whole without critical historical reflection or sensitivity?

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<sup>7</sup> Note, however, that *Together in Song* includes Isaac Watts' 'The Lord Jehovah reigns' (117).

<sup>8</sup> In *Mission Praise*, numbers 421, 645, and in *New Mission Praise*, 40 and 85.

- caricature the Jewish people in any manner?

Behind each of the above questions lies a whole essay in interreligious dialogue. Space prevents such elaboration. However, these questions might serve as a checklist in deciding hymns for worship services that seek to honour our heritage and Jewish roots authentically.

Rev Dr Michael Trainor

**Chair, Australian Council of Christians and Jews**

and

Dr Mary J. Marshall

**Committee Member, ACCJ**