



**Martina Viljoen** is an associate professor in musicology at the Odeion School of Music, University of the Free State. She graduated with an interdisciplinary doctorate that combined the fields of musicology, philosophy and studies on visual culture. She publishes locally and internationally on *Lied 513*, topics concerning hymnology, musicology and the aesthetics of music. She was guest editor of a special edition of *The International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, June 2005, and contributed to the first international publication on rap and religion, *Religion and Hip Hop*, Routledge, 2014. Viljoen was also editor of the book *Musics of the Free State: Reflections on a Musical Past, Present and Future*, published by Hrvatsko Muzikološko Društvo in 2015.

email: [viljoenM@ufs.ac.za](mailto:viljoenM@ufs.ac.za)

## THE SECULARISATION OF HYMNODY: A CRITICAL READING OF SELECTED TEXTS

MARTINA VILJOEN  
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, ODEION SCHOOL OF MUSIC,  
UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

### ABSTRACT

This article gives an overview of different models of postmodern worship, including those of blended, fusion or synthesis worship, as well as the alt., emerging and liquid models. Subsequently the entertainment models of megachurch services and multi-sensory worship are discussed. It was found that postmodern devotional practices are highly eclectic in nature, and that they vacillate between attempts towards a return to ancient traditions, and highly innovative, media-driven contemporary interpretations. Likewise, music takes on many different styles and genres in fulfilling its various roles; in some instances, serving not only as a medium for encounters with God, but also vigorously adapting to secular frames of reference.

It is argued that the secularisation of hymnody is no new phenomenon, as hymns and worship songs have, throughout the ages, often emphasised particular elements of Christian faith while simultaneously serving the interests of secular concerns. A discursive analysis of selected hymns and worship songs, representing different periods in the history of the Church, as well as divergent religious and denominational contexts, demonstrates how 'worldly' concerns pervade such texts. It is found that such secular allusion may be constructed either via 'text' or 'context'.

## KEY TERMS

Postmodern worship / Secularisation / Blended / Fusion / Synthesis / Alt. / Emerging / Liquid Worship / Megachurch / Multi-sensory / Discourse Analysis

## OPSOMMING

### Die sekularisering van himnodie: 'n kritiese lesing van geselekteerde tekste

Hierdie artikel bied 'n oorsig oor verskillende modelle van postmoderne aanbidding, insluitend dié van sogenaamde 'vermengde' ('blended'), 'versmelte' ('fusion') of 'sintese-' ('synthesis') aanbidding, asook die 'alt.', 'opkomende' en 'vloei-bare' modelle. Vervolgens word ook die vermaaklikheidsmodelle van mega-kerk en multi-sensoriese aanbidding bespreek. Die eklektiese aard van postmoderne aanbiddingspraktyke word uitgewys, asook die feit dat dit wissel tussen pogings om na antieke tradisies terug te keer, en hoogs vernuwendende, media-gedrewe kontemporêre interpretasies. Soortgelyk neem aanbiddingsmusiek baie verskillende style en genres aan ten opsigte van die vervulling van 'n verskeidenheid van rolle; hierby gaan dit nie alleenlik om musiek as medium vir ontmoetings met God nie, maar ook om 'n kragdadige aanpassing by sekulêre verwysingsraamwerke.

Daar word geredeneer dat die sekularisering van himnodie nie 'n nuwe verskynsel is nie, aangesien gewyde gesange en ander vorme van aanbiddingsmusiek deur die loop van die eeue dikwels bepaalde elemente van die Christelike geloof beklemtoon het, terwyl belange van 'n sekulêre aard terselfdertyd gedien is. 'n Diskursiewe ontleding van geselekteerde liedere, verteenwoordigend van verskillende periodes vanuit die Kerk se geskiedenis, asook van uiteenlopende godsdienstige en denominasionele kontekste, toon hoe 'wêreldse' oorwegings sulke tekste kan binnedring. Daar word vasgestel dat sodanige sekulêre toespeling deur beide 'teks' én 'konteks' daargestel kan word.

## SLEUTELTERME

Postmoderne aanbidding / Sekularisering / 'Vermengde' ('Blended'), 'Versmelte' ('Fusion') of 'Sintese-' ('Synthesis') Aanbidding / 'Alt.' / 'Opkomende' / 'Vloei-bare' Aanbidding / Megakerk / Multi-sensoriese Aanbidding / Diskoersanalise

### 1. A postmodern context of worship

The past decade important studies on contemporary worship styles and worship music have appeared, among which C. Randall Bradley's *From Memory to Imagination: Reforming the Church's Music* (2012) and Bryan Spinks's *The Worship Mall: Contemporary Responses to*

*Contemporary Culture* (2010). Similarly, the earlier *Praying Twice* by British hymn-poet Brian Wren, published in 2000, contributes substantially towards an in-depth understanding of the theological significance of contemporary worship music, and what meaning it has for believers. These authors, in different ways, underline the fact that the postmodernist sensibility has impacted in significant ways on contexts of worship worldwide, and on the role and function of worship music in its various applications. Of particular importance is the observation that we live in a time of overt search for spirituality, yet more traditionally oriented churches struggle to maintain relevance in a context where styles of worship music are often at the forefront of controversy (Spinks, 2010:xix).

In his insightful book *The McDonaldization of the Church: Consumer Culture and the Church's Future* (2001), British theologian John Drane (2001:26) maintains that, as a result of the rational-materialist worldview handed down to us from earlier centuries, many churches have taken on what he observes to be stereotyped liturgical structures, 'offering uninventive formulaic worship to a dwindling minority'. Therefore Drane (2001:26) advocates that, within a postmodern environment, churches should open themselves up for possibilities of transformation that would address what he believes to be contexts of stagnation.

In applying similar ideas to the ministry of music, C. Randall Bradley (2012:9ff.) calls for a broader reformation in worship music. Arguing that church musicians and pastors should devise new forms of worship that respond to 'the postmodern cultural movement', Bradley (2012:110ff.) advises that music and preaching should move beyond a leader-centred approach, and rather explore the possibilities of collaborative planning processes. While underlining the fact that contemporary praise music has reached popularity worldwide as a kind of *lingua franca* for contemporary Christian worship, in accordance with the postmodern ethos, Bradley (2012:149-50) also advocates the advancement of worship music that reflects the local character of a community. At the same time, this author argues that older forms of liturgy and hymnody should be retained for continuing connections with the past (Bradley, 2012:103). Indeed, as will be evident in the ensuing discussion, the inclusion of ancient liturgical practices forms an important part of some postmodern contexts of devotion.

Bryan Spinks (2010:xix) represents a far more radical view when he describes the contemporary Church as 'a marketplace, selling not just the good (God-like) life, but also the good society, and the fulfilment of desire'. Indeed, Spinks (2010:xix) observes that the contemporary church also attempts 'to woo the consumer', and that 'the main commodity it offers is worship':

If people 'shop' for worship, the trends in contemporary worship can be described as a 'worship mall' on at least two accounts. First, religion is in competition with all the leisure and entertainment industries, and consumerism is both leisure and entertainment. [...] Consumerism

promises desire and satisfaction. Faith offers satisfaction through desire for the Other. And we only have to remind ourselves of the mall's liturgical calendar which is a parody of the Church's liturgical calendar (Spinks, 2010:xxiii).

Spinks (2010:1ff.) proceeds to describe different models of contemporary worship, which are briefly summarised here as they hold particular relevance for understanding current international trends regarding postmodernist devotional practices. First, he refers to those approaches that retain ties with traditional liturgical models, namely 'blended, fusion or synthesis worship' (Spinks, 2010:10). In drawing on the contributions of Robert Webber in particular, he defines blended worship as a thoughtful merging of the traditional Eucharistic liturgy with contemporary praise and worship music (Spinks, 2010:2). This model, Webber (2004:178-9) has found to be more appealing to postmodern congregations than the now dated 'Billy Graham model', stating that younger evangelicals, in particular, desire devotional styles that reconnect with traditional liturgy, and are more mystical in nature (cf. also Spinks, 2010:1).

In contrast with the blended model of worship, Sally Morgenthaler (2004:212) defines 'fusion' or 'synthesis worship' as incorporating 'more flexibility and much wider music resources than Webber envisaged' (cf. also The United Methodist Church:2016). In this regard, Spinks (2010:3) notes that a 'fusion' or 'synthesis' service 'might be one where music and prayer texts are carefully woven to appeal to the contemporary spiritual desire of openness, without surrendering the deep structures of the liturgical tradition'. That such services may, indeed, incorporate more radical contemporary music forms or genres, is evidenced by Spinks's (2010:14ff.) description of the so-called 'Hip-Hop Eucharist' forming part of the 'fusion' model. Here, the Episcopal Eucharist liturgy is 'translated' into hip-hop language and delivered by rappers in a music soundtrack. The introit, for instance, would be proclaimed by the MC<sup>1</sup> as follows:

Yo! Shout Out to all the Peeps of God!  
God is in the House  
(or, 'God is in the Hood').<sup>2</sup>

Spinks (2010:31ff.) subsequently outlines the so-called 'alt.', 'emerging' and 'liquid' models of worship. These consciously postmodern expressions of faith tend to blur boundaries and may therefore overlap in terms of approach. An academically and pastorally respectable manifestation of alt. worship is the model that has emerged at Trinity Church, Bristol, under the leadership of Paul Roberts (Spinks,

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<sup>1</sup> In rap or hip-hop music, the MC or 'master of ceremonies' chants verses that rhythmically flow from the music; similarities have been observed between the African American preacher and the secular MC (Spinks, 2010:15).

<sup>2</sup> From Timothy Holder, *The Hip Hop Prayer Book* (2006:5). Holden's prayer book comprises daily prayers, Psalms, a variety of services (including the Eucharist referred to above), as well as a selection of Bible stories.

2010:37; cf. also Bolger, 2012). Within this format services embrace a full range of technological or multimedia applications, including various forms of electronic music (mostly based on simple chants) and the use of multiple voices, as well as striking visual effects (cf. Collins, 2001). As Roberts (2003) explains, in contrast with traditional church-going, services are free-flowing, and the emphasis is on allowing people to liberate and encourage their worship rather than on the organisation of a large-scale event. In Britain, these post-charismatic and post-evangelical worship environments either function without any denominational affiliation or as congregations 'within a congregation' (Spinks, 2010:42).

Another model of postmodern worship is the 'emerging' model of worship, described by Tony Jones (2008:40) as 'pluriform' and 'multivocal'. As Jones (2008:40) explains, within this worship model, 'emergent Christians do not have membership or doctrine to hold them together. The glue is the relationship' (Jones, 2008:40). Dan Kimball (2003:95) differentiates between the emerging church movement and today's 'consumer church' in emphasising the emergent movement's missional character. Kimball (2004:76) summarises the most important elements of emerging fellowship as follows: it constitutes a departure from 'a spectator type of gathering' to 'community participation'; 'it has an organic design'; 'it is highly visual', yet makes use of 'older' rituals, such as candles and incense. Simultaneously, technological interventions such as projection screens and contemporary music production techniques are used (Kimball, 2004:76). In some instances, music is composed specifically for a particular service, forming part of a carefully assembled multimedia interactive experience (Pagitt, 2003:49). Furthermore, as this worship community acknowledges the importance of the body, as well as the soul, during the gatherings anointing and even massage are practised as meditation and prayer (Pagitt, 2003:97-81).

'Liquid worship' Spinks (2010:59) describes as a worship experience 'where there are worship zones in one building or location, and people move from zone to zone as they wish'. In Pete Ward's study *Liquid Church* (2002:2), he explains that, within this context, a church is no longer seen as 'a gathering of people meeting in one place at one time – that is, a congregation'; rather, a notion of church as 'a series of dynamic relationships and communications' is advocated. Ward's (2002:2ff.) postmodernist view is therefore that the church must be 'like water' – 'flexible, fluid, and changeable'. Lomax and Moynagh (2004:3) name 'liquid' devotional responses, which may include prayer; meditation; a ritual response, which may involve chanted music, often in the style of Taizé; writing one's own affirmation of faith; writing a poem; painting a picture, or writing one's own communion preface, all of which could manifest as parallel, open-ended activities.

Finally, Spinks (2010:63ff.) describes the 'entertainment' models of megachurch services and multi-sensory worship. In the case of megachurch worship, strong ties with consumerism and media are evidenced by the fact that these churches often function as family businesses with a hereditary succession. Thus, as Wilmer MacNair (2009:7) explains, they exist as churches 'belonging to' a certain pastor, the personality and charisma of whom determine the church's 'success'. These churches tend to de-emphasise certain parts of orthodox theology (Busenitz, 2003), with self-help and positive thinking techniques often replacing biblical principles (Spinks, 2010:70). By their very nature, they focus on marketing and church-growth techniques, in which music plays a major role, as well as appearances of

celebrity guests, such as movie stars or music personalities, sports heroes, or business entrepreneurs (Schuller, 2001:291). Spinks (2010:70) notes that this model indeed points to an entertainment-based church, 'complete with commercial breaks advertising the latest gift for those who send in donations'. Background music or worship songs, however, tend to be more conservative, sometimes sentimental in nature, including, for instance, songs such as 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain', 'At the Cross', and 'Saved by Grace'.

Multi-sensory worship, Spinks (2010:83) states is a form of worship relevant to a 'post-literate age'. In this regard he notes the work of Dr Mike Slaughter at Ginghamburg (Spinks, 2010:83); the pastor's web page identifies him as 'chief dreamer of Ginghamburg and the spiritual entrepreneur of ministry marketplace innovations'.<sup>3</sup> In this worship context, services draw on the use of the full spectrum of electronic media in an interactive form with music (secular as well as religious; Spinks [2010:84] cites the example of 'Somewhere over the Rainbow' being used as opening music for a service), literature, painting, drama, dance, writing, film-making, poetry and movie clips. It is noted by Spinks (2010:86) that this style of fellowship does not conceal its ties with entertainment TV as a model and as inspiration.

## 2. Methodological point of departure

From the perspective of the various postmodernist contexts of worship described above, it is clear that postmodern congregants seek real and authentic experiences over clichéd or artificial encounters; they want to experience these through the facilitation of various forms of technological media and want to experience religious truth through feeling and emotion rather than mere reason. Furthermore, they are also praxis rather than doctrine oriented. Yet, apart from nurturing the building-out of relationships through the sharing of personal experiences and stories, at a more abstract level there is a deep-felt need for experiencing the figurative world of symbol and metaphor (Woodbridge, n.d.:188-190). What emerges from the literature is that contemporary devotional practices are highly eclectic in nature, thus vacillating between attempts towards a return to ancient traditions and highly innovative, media-driven contemporary interpretations. Likewise, the music used as part of worship services takes on many different styles and genres in fulfilling its various roles, from providing 'timeless', 'mystical' settings for religious dedication, to offering thoroughly commercialised 'soundtracks' for large-scale multimedia presentations.

Therefore, within these differing contexts, worship music not only 'does theology', as Brian Wren (2000:3) puts it; in other words, acts as a medium for encounters with God, but also vigorously adapts to various sociocultural settings in constructing specific frames of 'worldly' reference. Within the context of this article it is important to note that the secularisation of hymnody is no new phenomenon, though it is nowadays sometimes assumed that the much-debated introduction of contemporary and commercialised praise styles into formalised contexts of worship is simply a symptom of our materialistic times (Heetderks, 2013), as is also the watering-down of scriptural and liturgical content. Hymns and worship songs have, throughout the ages, emphasised particular elements of the Christian faith, while simultaneously they have served the interests of secular concerns.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. <http://ginghamsburg.org/bring/our-pastors/mike-slaughter>

Departing from this view, it is the aim of the present article to examine a selection of hymn and worship music texts with the purpose of uncovering 'earthly' underpinnings that ultimately culminate in what Lionel Adey (1986:x) describes as 'the cutting loose from their liturgical moorings to become independent expressions of mass emotion or sources of musical entertainment'.

The method that will be used is discourse analysis. As Noel Heather (2002:29) points out, discursive analysis addresses issues, such as power relations, socio-cognitive structures (which, in the current context, may serve as a church's 'invisible noticeboard') and genre, as well as hybridity and intertextuality. Similar to other texts, hymns or worship songs may be 'sites of struggle', some texts highlighting (or hiding) a substantial ideological 'load' (Heather, 2002:30).

In the context of this article, apart from reading the religious content, I shall focus on identifying specific social formations that represent an exercise of earthly power. First, the selected texts will be framed by context (cf. Terre Blanche et al, 2007:338). Subsequently, I shall identify and interpret the core religious figurative construct around which each text is centred. Then my reading will show how simultaneously the secular 'subtext' structures its meaning. As Peter Jackson (2006:215) observes, metaphor is not only a rhetorical figure occurring in poetical language and other types of symbolic discourse; rather, it has the potential imaginatively to transform our human experience both of transcendental realities and those forming part of commonly shared mundane realities. From this, it follows that metaphor forms part of the historical sediment of our existence as laid down through cultural transmission, and, in this sense, is integral to religious discourse (cf. Viljoen, 2014:69). In fact, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1995) has argued that metaphor is the only conceptually founded means by which believers can express and make sense of their thoughts about God and the Divine (cf. also Van Burkalow, 1987:14).

Metaphor thus enables deep self-knowledge through its figurative 'picturing' of our relationship to the world and our life among others in that world. Accordingly, it implies that divinity may be interpreted in figurative terms that are culturally grounded. However, British ideology theorist John Thompson (1990:59ff.) links the role of tropes such as metaphor, metonymy, and irony with ideological modes of operation, pointing out that these may act in texts to maintain power relations that structure society covertly. From such point of departure, metaphor indeed demands interpretation in Thompson's (1990:59) terms: *meaning in the service of power*.

The question addressed in this article is how hymns or worship songs enact theological wisdom, whilst simultaneously advancing the interests of secular 'worlds' and realities through an interaction of text and context.

### **3. A critical reading of selected hymn texts**

#### **3.1 'All things bright and beautiful'**

The immensely popular nineteenth-century Anglican children's hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful', still often sung in congregations worldwide, was written by Mrs Cecil Frances Alexander (1823-1895). It was first published in 1848 in her collection *Hymns for little Children* (Byrd, n.d.). Flawless in its orthodox

celebration of divine creation, the words relate to Genesis 1:31 and Ecclesiastes 3:11, the text being based on the Apostles' Creed section, 'Maker of Heaven and Earth' (Byrd, n.d.). Its seemingly innocent words venerate God's creation in the idiom of nineteenth-century 'nature' hymns that inclined toward the sentiments of the Romantic Movement, which, as Lionel Adey (1986:12) observes, 'itself tended to substitute an immanent for a transcendent deity'. The core image on which the hymn draws is that of light, beautifully and gracefully encapsulating all wonders of God's creation – except for its notorious third verse, which Adey (1988:89) observes to have done 'incalculable harm to the Anglican church':

## All Things Bright and Beautiful

Refrain-

The first system of musical notation is for the first four measures of the piece. It is written in 4/4 time with a treble and bass clef. The melody in the treble clef begins with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The bass line consists of a steady accompaniment of quarter notes: G2, B1, D2, and E2.

5 Fine

The second system covers measures 5 through 8. The melody continues with quarter notes D5, E5, F5, and G5. The bass line remains consistent with the first system. The system concludes with a double bar line and the word 'Fine'.

9

The third system covers measures 9 through 12. The melody features eighth notes: G5, A5, B5, and C5. The bass line continues with quarter notes G2, B1, D2, and E2.

13 D.C. Refrain

The fourth system covers measures 13 through 16. The melody returns to the first system's pattern: G4, A4, B4, C5. The bass line continues with quarter notes G2, B1, D2, and E2. The system ends with a double bar line and the instruction 'D.C. Refrain'.



Refrain:

*All things bright and beautiful,  
All creatures great and small,  
All things wise and wonderful:  
The Lord God made them all.<sup>4</sup>*

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Each little flow'r that opens,<br>Each little bird that sings,<br>He made their glowing colours,<br>He made their tiny wings. | 4. The cold wind in the winter,<br>The pleasant summer sun,<br>The ripe fruits in the garden,<br>He made them every one.      |
| 2. The purple-headed mountains,<br>The river running by,<br>The sunset and the morning<br>That brightens up the sky.             | 5. The tall trees in the greenwood,<br>The meadows where we play,<br>The rushes by the water,<br>To gather every day.         |
| 3. The rich man in his castle,<br>The poor man at his gate,<br>God made them high and lowly,<br>And ordered their estate.        | 6. He gave us eyes to see them,<br>And lips that we might tell<br>How great is God Almighty,<br>Who has made all things well. |

The version reproduced above was already an adaptation of a rendering published two years earlier in 1846 for the collection *Verses for Holy Season*, which was even more damaging in its forthright allusion to the Victorian class system, depicting 'the poor man in his straw-roofed cottage' and 'the rich man in his lordly hall' (Byrd, n.d.). During the second half of the twentieth century verse three, forming part of a hymn described by Adey (1988:124) as 'the archetypally complacent account of nature and society', became so offensive to believers that the verse has been eliminated altogether from hymn books worldwide due to its controversial metaphorical reference to class inequality, and to God's supposed sanctioning of nineteenth-century British feudal hierarchy.

### 3.2 Onward Christian Soldiers<sup>5</sup>

In stark contrast with the metaphor of light portrayed in 'All things bright and beautiful', the well-known hymn 'Onward Christian Soldiers', written by Rev'd. Sabine Baring-Gould (1834-1924) in 1865 for a Whitmonday school's celebration, unambiguously draws on images of war. Its militaristic theme may easily be placed within the unstable context of the 1860s, marked by numerous cultural, social and political upheavals in Europe and America, and in particular the building-out of global empires behind

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<sup>4</sup> [http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/All\\_Things\\_Bright\\_and\\_Beautiful/](http://library.timelesstruths.org/music/All_Things_Bright_and_Beautiful/)

<sup>5</sup> [http://hymnary.org/text/onward\\_christian\\_soldiers\\_marching\\_as](http://hymnary.org/text/onward_christian_soldiers_marching_as)

the banner of the Cross; this said, it may also be interpreted in terms of the age-old justification of crusades within the history of Christianity (Wren, 1987:14). Never intended for publication, the

## Onward, Christian Soldiers

Measures 1-4 of the piece. The music is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The melody in the right hand begins with a quarter note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The bass line consists of quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3.

Measures 5-8. The melody continues with quarter notes D5, E5, and F#5. The bass line has quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3. Measure 8 ends with a double bar line.

Measures 9-12. The melody features a half note G4 in measure 9, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The bass line has quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3. Measure 12 ends with a double bar line.

Measures 13-16. The melody has quarter notes D5, E5, and F#5. The bass line has quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3. Measure 16 ends with a double bar line.

Measures 17-20. The melody has quarter notes G4, A4, and B4. The bass line has quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3. Measure 20 ends with a double bar line.

Measures 21-24. The melody has quarter notes C5, B4, and A4. The bass line has quarter notes G2, A2, B2, and C3. Measure 24 ends with a double bar line.

hymn became exceedingly popular worldwide after Arthur Sullivan in 1871 wrote for it the tune 'St. Gertrude', which has since been its standard melody (Hymn Stories, n.d.). Owing to its militaristic theme and martial musical character, some church denominations have removed the hymn from their hymn books entirely:<sup>6</sup>

Onward, Christian soldiers,  
marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus  
going on before!  
Christ, the royal Master,  
leads against the foe;  
Forward into battle,  
see his banner go!

Like a mighty army  
moves the church of God;  
Brothers, we are treading  
where the saints have trod;  
We are not divided;  
all one body we,  
One in hope and doctrine,  
one in charity. [Refrain]

Refrain:  
*Onward, Christian soldiers,  
marching as to war,  
With the cross of Jesus  
going on before!*

Onward, then, ye people,  
join our happy throng,  
Blend with ours your voices  
in the triumph song;  
Glory, laud, and honour,  
unto Christ the King;  
This thro' countless ages  
men and angels sing. [Refrain]

At the sign of triumph  
Satan's host doth flee;  
On, then, Christian soldiers,  
on to victory!  
Hell's foundations quiver  
at the shout of praise;  
Brothers, lift your voices,  
loud your anthems raise! [Refrain]

Particularly problematic is the direct association of 'warmongering' with Christ's cross, a figure of suffering and redemption, depicted in this hymn as a 'banner of war'. Commanding 'brothers' to join 'saints' and 'angels' as part of the 'happy throng', the divine sanctification of warfare is strongly underlined.

In terms of an interpretation of the figurative content of this hymn, Anastasia Van Burkalow (1987:14) advocates that 'Onward Christian Soldiers' and other battle hymns should not be understood literally, but symbolic of spiritual warfare and the war against social evil. Contrary to this view, and illustrative of the way in which a contemporaneous intellectual climate may influence a hymn's reception, British

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<sup>6</sup> But, as I can testify from personal experience, in some Anglican and Roman Catholic settings, the hymn is still much loved, and sung unchanged.

hymn-writer Brian Wren (1987:13), in an article titled 'Onward Christian Rambos? The Case Against Battle Symbolism in Hymns', maintains that we draw on human experience to describe the Christian life. According to him modern-day warfare can portray nothing other than the organised large-scale killing of human beings, using lethal force in pursuit of political ambitions.

A more recent response was put forth by American emergent Christian, Brian McLaren (cited in Tooley, 2006) who has rewritten *Onward Christian Soldiers* to remove from this hymn text all suggestions of 'Islamophobia', 'xenophobia', as well as 'overt and covert racism' (to this one could also add gender bias). As McLaren, a pacifist who is concerned about militarism, explains, he was prompted to write this alternative text by recent Republican presidential debates in which candidates 'spoke of Jesus and carpet bombing in the same breath' (in Tooley, 2006). His alternative lyrics highlight Christian peace-making for a text that he feels 'consciously or subconsciously plays into hostility and fear and imperial or warlike sentiments' (in Tooley, 2006). The alternative first verse, which could perhaps no longer be served by Sullivan's belligerent musical setting, reads as follows:

Onward, all disciples, in the path of peace,  
Just as Jesus taught us, love your enemies  
Walk on in the Spirit, seek God's kingdom first,  
Let God's peace and justice be your hunger and your thirst!  
Onward, all disciples, in humility  
Walk with God, do justice, love wholeheartedly.

### 3.3 O'er those gloomy hills of darkness<sup>7</sup>

A more covert political 'warfare' is alluded to in 'O'er those gloomy hills of darkness, Hymn 76 from *The Huntingdonian Hymnbook*, used by African Americans who resettled in Sierra Leone during the 1790s (Saillant, 1997:8). This Welsh Christian hymn by William Williams Pantycelyn (1717-1791) written in 1772, was intended as a missionary hymn, first censored and altered in the United States, and since the 1960s omitted from hymn books altogether ('O'er those gloomy hills of darkness, n.d.). The Methodist minister, John Marrant, America's first black preacher, who did missionary work in Sierra Leone during the 1790s, renounced all secular music, and, in pursuance of the Christian faith, embraced only sacred hymns (Black History Review, n.d.). Hymn 76 from the Huntingdonian hymn book, in particular, underlines Marrant's Calvinist-based doctrine that 'the new birth was the way in which sinful creatures become reconciled to God's grand design' (Saillant, 1997:13&17). However, from the text reproduced below, the redemptive 'light' of this 'new day' would, from an unmistakably Colonialist point of view, be brought to the evidently sinful, 'dark' barbarian nations. In 1789 while on a visit to Boston, Marrant preached on the equality and dignity of all people before God. This infuriated some, and Marrant afterwards lived amidst death threats and mob intimidation (Black History Review, n.d.). It is therefore ironic that he formed part of a missionary system that so clearly practised racial discrimination under the banner of Christianity:

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<sup>7</sup> Cited from Saillant (1997:17).

## O'er The Gloomy Hills of Darkness

The image shows a piano accompaniment for the hymn 'O'er The Gloomy Hills of Darkness'. The score is written in treble and bass clefs, with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 3/4 time signature. The music consists of three systems of staves. The first system has five measures, the second system has four measures starting with a measure rest labeled '5', and the third system has four measures starting with a measure rest labeled '9'. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

O'er those gloomy hills of darkness,  
 Look, my soul, be still and gaze;  
 All the promises do travail  
 On a glorious day of grace,  
 Blessed jub'lee  
 Let thy glorious morning dawn.  
 Let the Indian, the Negro,  
 Let the rude Barbarian see,  
 That divine and glorious conquest,  
 Once obtain'd on Calvary;  
 Let the gospel  
 Word resound from pole to pole.

May the glorious day approaching,  
 From the darkness quickly dawn,  
 And the everlasting gospel  
 Spread abroad thy holy name;  
 To the borders  
 Of the great Immanuel's land.

Kingdoms wide that sit in darkness,  
 Let them have their glorious light,  
 And from eastern coast to western,  
 May the morning chase the night,  
 And redemption,  
 Freely purchas'd, win the day.

Fly abroad, thou might gospel,  
 Win and conquer, never cease;  
 May thy lasting wide dominions  
 Multiply and still increase;  
 May thy sceptre  
 Sway th'enlightened world around.

### 3.4 Sing we a song of high revolt<sup>8</sup>

'Sing we a song of high revolt' is a twentieth-century hymn written in 1968 by United Reformed Minister, Fred Kaan (1929-), who contributed to contemporary hymns in which he sought to address questions of peace and justice (Sing we a song of high revolt, n.d.). This particular hymn text again centres on the image of war; however, here the framing context is that of liberation theology where God becomes a 'freedom fighter' who lifts up the poor and leaves the oppressor with empty hands. Though the call to fight for righteousness is based on well-known scriptural passages (Psalm 9:9; Isaiah 1:17; Psalm 72:4; Proverbs 22:16, among others), Kaan contextualises his text within a contemporary setting conjuring up well-known urban sights of human deprivation: the 'poor' and 'hungry' fighting for survival in the 'crowded street' and 'council flat':

## Sing we a song of high revolt



Sing we a song of high revolt;  
Make great the Lord, his name exalt:  
Sing we the song that Mary sang  
Of God at war with human wrong.  
Sing we of high who deeply cares  
And still with us our burden bears;  
He, who with strength the proud disowns,  
Brings down the mighty from their thrones.

By him the poor are lifted up;  
He satisfies with bread and cup  
The hungry men of many lands;  
The rich are left with empty hands.  
He calls us to revolt and fight  
With him for what is just and right,  
To sing and live Magnificat  
In crowded street and council flat.

<sup>8</sup> From Hymns Ancient and Modern New Standard, No. 419 as reproduced in Castle (1990:266).

### 3.5 Some trends in recent hymn and worship song texts

In the hymns discussed above, secular concerns of a political nature were highlighted to demonstrate how these texts, apart from conveying religious content, become sites of ideological struggle. In this section of the article, some trends in recent hymn texts will be elucidated, thus reflecting a broader array of secular concerns, in particular those that are typical of the postmodern condition.

A prime example is the hymns of Patrick Michaels, minister of music at St. James's Episcopal Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that focus on common emotional experiences of the postmodern experience – grief, pain, joy, anger and danger (Rogal, 1997:32). While many of his hymns centre on concepts of healing, as derived from the Gospel of St. John, Michaels's contemporary hymn 'Lifetime Partner, Loving Friend' encapsulates the scriptural truth that all human beings are created in the divine image. Picturing God as a dark female (see the first verse of the hymn reproduced below), Michaels attempts to overcome notions of racism and sexism that still underlie contemporary society: 'When we include images of God that are black-positive and dark-positive and when we include images of God that affirm night-time as a time of God's own creation and mystery, we affirm our understanding that all humans are created in the image of God' (Changing Church, n.d.). The figurative allusion to God's supremacy as stated in the antiphon is countered by its (secular) allusion to the idea of a 'life partner', a prevailing condition of contemporary life. The directness of the hymn also includes a referral to an intermingling of all kinds of different 'worlds', while the biblical image of the parting waters (the Red Sea; the waters of the Jordan river) and of the liberated slave, point to the salvation and healing of the individual, rather than to any covert political meaning:

Antiphon: Lifetime Partner, Loving Friend,  
*Fount of Wisdom, Source and End,*  
*She is God, Holy One: Glory!*

Look! Behold her dark gracefulness,  
moving between worlds with ease—  
anywhere she is, her home is!  
In her wake the waters roll and part  
and slaves are made a people.

Contemporary images of God as expressed in recent hymnody indeed show a spectrum of present-day interpretations; a particularly gripping portrayal presented in Julia Morgan's 'God is for us', where God is pictured as 'the ultimate spiritual support group, available in times of sorrow, languish, confusion, and temptation' (Rogal, 1997:32).

Rogal (1997:32) also discusses the work of Carl P. Daw, who, in his contemporary hymn 'God not female, God not male' (1990) resists any traditional figurative representation, yet precisely for that fact underlines God's transcendence of all creeds, and of all socially constructed boundaries, including those of gender (New Songs of Rejoicing, 2017). While in itself an 'intellectual' text, verse one of this hymn implicitly critiques postmodernism's 'language games' and denial of truth:

God not female, God not male,  
God for whom all labels fail,  
Truth beyond our verbal games,  
Life too vast to bound with names.

These contemporary 'art' hymns all strongly portray postmodernist sentiments; however, they stand in stark contrast to worship songs that form part of current practices of the entertainment model of worship. As stated in the introductory section of this article, within this last-named devotional model the music is often quite conservative, sometimes sentimental in nature. A well-known example is 'I believe in miracles':

### **I believe in miracles<sup>9</sup>**

Creation shows the power of God  
There's glory all around,  
And those who see must stand in awe,  
For miracles abound.

#### *Refrain.*

I believe in miracles  
I've seen a soul set free,  
Miraculous the change in one  
Redeemed through Calvary;  
I've seen the lily push its way  
Up through the stubborn sod  
I believe in miracles  
For I believe in God!

The Love of God! Oh power divine!  
'Tis wonderful to see  
The miracles that He has wrought  
Should lead to Calvary.

#### *Refrain*

Reminiscent of white gospel hymnody in its unassuming statement of doctrine and sentimental melody, 'I believe in miracles' conjures up the atmosphere of much-loved worship songs, such as 'The Old Rugged Cross' and 'Sweet Hour of Prayer'. Nevertheless, in terms of its figurative allusion it may

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajhjtUQEyVA>



be likened to 'grand' traditional hymns, in particular 'How shall I sing that majesty',<sup>10</sup> glorifying God's creation and the miracle of salvation through the cross. Despite its purity of creed, however, within its current contexts of use the song is not without commercialised ties. It originated during the early 1990s as a 'crusade song' and is nowadays often associated with so-called 'healing services' that, in themselves, may be linked to the idea of a 'prosperity gospel' (Jones, 2015).

#### 4. Closing thoughts

In the introduction to his *Christian Hymns Observed*, Eric Routley (1982:1) writes that 'Hymns are delightful and dangerous things'. He continues to state that they are the most easily memorised of all Christian proclamations, and may be remembered throughout their lifetime, even by those who break off all ties with organised faith (Routley, 1982:1). In a similar vein Lionel Adey (1986:1) cites the famous words of R.W. Dale, introducing his hymnal for a vast congregation in Birmingham: 'Let me write the hymns and I care not who writes the theology'.

These statements make it clear that hymns, and, more recently, worship songs, are immensely powerful assertions of faith; however, as was argued in this article, they may in some instances also proclaim interests of an unambiguously secular nature. Such secularisation of hymnody, Brian Wren (2000:153ff.) calls 'inculturation', pointing to an ongoing, productive dialogue between faith and culture. Lionel Adey (1986:11) is more critical when he observes that, more than any other poem, hymns can change their meaning according to how they are edited by hymnal committees, or by whom and in what context they are sung. As such, his intensive study of traditional English hymnody (Adey, 1988 a& 1986) shows how hymns, over the centuries, have served the cults of nature, family and nation, and why such covert or overt 'worldly' allusions have been removed from hymn books, especially since the second half of the twentieth century as increasingly issues of 'political correctness' were observed.

Returning to the question posed in this article, literature on the topic confirms that hymns and worship songs are always socially and culturally embedded, and therefore respond to social and cultural changes and challenges, so that also in their delivery and contexts of application they adapt to the needs of a specific congregation. Indeed, Harry Eskew and Hugh McElrath (1995:220) observe that 'Each hymn originates within a particular cultural setting: a human environment shaped by numerous factors, such as geography, race, language, economic status, religion, family life, and social customs'. However, in the discursive analysis offered, the selected hymn texts in each case demonstrated, apart from such cultural rootedness, also ideologically slanted interrelations of meaning and power – interrelations that John Thompson (1990:7) would define as 'relations of domination'.

Finally, as was observed in the discussion of contemporary 'art' hymns, in these texts postmodernist assumptions were found to filter through religious content. As Wren (2000:284) suggests, more radical examples of postmodern hymnody might, in themselves, be found to reflect a society devoid of religious certainty, portraying the self as a consumer whose identity is vested primarily in material health and wealth, or as partaking of a life devoid of structured, reliable order and meaning.

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<sup>10</sup> [http://hymnary.org/text/how\\_shall\\_i\\_sing\\_that\\_majesty](http://hymnary.org/text/how_shall_i_sing_that_majesty)

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