

When sung with spiritual engagement, hymns produce an emotional transformation. But our hymns are inevitably full of ambiguities: “Do what is right, let the consequence follow.” Sure, but don’t forget that “angels above us are silent notes taking.” What to make of these textual conflicts?

DO WHAT IS RIGHT, LET THE CONSEQUENCE FOLLOW: CONTRASTING MESSAGES IN MORMON HYMNS¹

By Wayne Booth

AS I SAT DOWN TO BEGIN WORKING ON THIS talk, I suddenly panicked—as in fact I almost always do when tackling a complex topic. The reasons for panic here were unusually powerful. First, my ignorance. A voice kept intruding on my efforts to construct an outline: “Do you think that just because many Mormon hymns are echoing in *your* head you are qualified to talk about them to Church members who almost certainly know more hymns and their history than you do?” Another voice kept nagging about all of the scientific, philosophical, psychological, and theological issues that hover over the effects of hymn-singing on our behavior. “For all you know, there is a huge literature out there on your subject, requiring research, not sheer speculation.”² In short, I felt that either it had all been said before or there was so much to be said that the subject would require a lifetime of research.

I phoned Sunstone editor Elbert Peck, confessed my ignorance and panic, and said that I’d like to back out. But he talked me into it again and sent me a copy of Michael Hicks’s fine book, *Mormonism and Music*,³ and copies of two earlier hymnals I had long ago used but no longer owned: the “green

book” of 1927 and the “blue book” of 1948.⁴ Reading Hicks, I found myself a bit reassured: I couldn’t find much, either in the book or its bibliography, on my chosen topic: namely, what virtues—and perhaps even vices called virtues—do our hymns powerfully teach? After probing through the three hymnals, flagging significant changes and conflicts in the virtues they hailed,⁵ I became convinced, not that I’d have a good talk, but that the subject is even more important than I’d originally thought. I suspected—I still think rightly—that the role of hymns in our spiritual education is too often under-treated by scholars and historians. On the other hand, obviously our Church leaders have from the beginning understood the unique spiritual power of hymn singing: their endless efforts at good revision prove that. They have always known that hymns, when sung with spiritual engagement, produce a kind of emotional transformation that I call the “hymnhigh”—one key form of those times in life when time is transcended and we are “out of this world”—for good or ill.

Thus the history of hymnhighs, with their immense teaching power, deserves intense attention not just from historians and musicologists but especially from psychologists, ethical critics and philosophers, and what we Mormons don’t call theologians, though we have plenty of them. For now, I can only hint at most of that immense range of topics, asking: What are the likely ethical or moral effects on us, the effects on the psyche, the soul, from the First Presidency on down, of our standard hymnhighs and the conflicts among their messages?

An essential part of any such ambiguous quest is a close look at the ethical lessons that the words of the hymns embody.⁶

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HYMNHIGHS

The singing of hymns is meant to change our character.

HYMNHIGHS resemble many other forms of communal emotional escape from the quotidian world, such as folk dancing, rock concerts, various patriotic or pioneer ceremonies, chanting for victory for the Utah Jazz or the Chicago Bulls, watching an exciting movie, reading a gripping murder mystery.⁷ Such highs rescue us from the miseries of the everyday world; they transport us into a different time-realm, whether higher or lower.⁸ But unlike most other highs—for example, just listening to rather than singing one's favorite music—singing a hymn is explicitly intended to have an effect on our behavior after we return to that everyday world. Hymnhighs at their best are thus not just an escape in the moment: they change our character, over time, as recent studies of the “addictive effect” of all highs have shown. At their best, they are transformative, salvational.

But can they also be *anti*-salvational? Can they harm? I don't have to remind you that when devotional singing is employed in a bad cause, it can have bad effects. Many atrocities are committed daily throughout the world by pious fanatics in one cult or another, often after experiencing highs, musical or not, highs that they would call religious or spiritual. The emotional experience surely must often resemble the elevation we may feel when singing “Abide with Me; Tis Eventide” (hymn 165, 1985 hymnal), say, or “Come, Come, Ye Saints” (30), but the words sung piously authorize the terrorist's next bombing.

Consider a much less threatening example of the universal quest for the escapes I'm calling “highs.” Recently, my wife and I were talked into going to a rock concert, the third one of my life, performed by the resurrected Grateful Dead. We found ourselves surrounded by many thousands of fans who were experiencing musical highs surely as high as you and I experience when singing “Come, Come, Ye Saints.” And they were being taught, or so I infer, to smoke another bit of grass, or to whirl like a dervish. Some were passing out. In one of the highs, with everyone standing and dancing and most of them singing, some of them looked like ecstatic Pentecostals about to pass out; they sang what sounded to me like an exhortation to worship the devil.⁹

HYMNSTORIES

Hymns shape our lives more powerfully than do sermons.

BEFORE looking at explicit teachings sung in our hymns, and at the challenging conflicts I find among some of those teachings, I should perhaps explain how I landed in this complicated topic. I've been increasingly struck over the years by the way in which the hymns I sang from childhood on survive in me now. They flood into my head and heart whenever I face moral decisions or spiritual crises, major or minor. Lifelong Mormons will have had similar experiences. (I'm afraid many converts may not yet have had exactly the same experience. It doesn't come until one has sung this or that hymn a hundred times or more, some of

those times experiencing a tearful hymnhigh. I feel pretty sure, for example, that the number of times “Come, Come, Ye Saints” has brought me to tears must approach three score and ten, and the number of times I sang it as a child might be ten times that figure.)¹⁰

Throughout my life, including now, when facing moral conflicts, whether consciously praying for guidance or not, I find one or another hymn glimmering from the dark to advise me.

First hymnstory. In Chicago we're plagued, as some would put it, with homeless people on the streets, begging for assistance. We who are not homeless know, or think we know, that some of them, maybe many, maybe most, are conning us with their tales of woe. We also know, however, that some of them, maybe many, maybe most, are genuinely desperate. And if we believe, as we should, in Christ's mission—“I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat . . . I was a stranger, and ye took me in . . . I was in prison, and ye came unto me” (Matt. 25:35-36)—if we believe in those hymns that reinforce this message, that every needy and desperate person is as important in the eyes of the Lord as any other of us, then our problem is to decide which ones to give to and how.

In the Great Depression, my family had a flood of hoboes knocking on our back door in American Fork,¹¹ asking for work or a handout. Memory says that my mother, a devout Mormon believing that faith without good works is dead, never turned one away without giving something, if only a sandwich. In contrast, now, though I often give a bit, when I'm really rushed, I may just pass a pleading, weeping woman by, even feeling annoyed at her probable fakery. And then, ten steps down the sidewalk, my head will be ringing with—can you guess with what?

(As I was presenting this talk, I paused and two voices immediately rang out, “Have I done any good in the world today?”)

Let's now sing one verse of it (223).

(I thank Ardean Watts for his vigorous piano accompaniment to our singing in Salt Lake.)

Have I done any good in the world today?
Have I helped anyone in need?
Have I cheered up the sad
and made someone feel glad?
If not, I have failed, indeed.
Has anyone's burden been lighter today
Because I was willing to share?
Have the sick and the weary
been helped on their way?
When they needed my help was I there?
Then wake up, and do something more
Than dream of your mansion above.
Doing good is a pleasure,
A joy beyond measure,
A blessing of duty and love.

So then, with those words ringing in my ears, I often retrace

those ten steps, as if commanded by one of the twelve apostles, and try to start a conversation with that homeless person, hoping to decide whether she is a fake or not, and then, as her tears flow, finally giving something.

Second hymnstory. The same thing can happen at our front door. One evening late, the doorbell rang. I peered out the window and saw that it was a familiar figure, a guy named Joe whom I had helped in the past but whom I had caught in lies and hoaxes several times. At one point, he had actually stolen my checkbook. So I simply ignored the continued doorbell ringing. Then I woke about three o'clock in the morning, hearing that hymn again, along with the scriptural passage, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40). I felt guilty, wishing I had a phone number to call Joe, to talk with him once again about how to salvage his life, and perhaps as usual to cave in and give him something.¹²

Third hymnstory. When I was chairing the English department at a small college, the scandal broke about how Charles Van Doren had been dishonestly handling the "\$64,000 Question" program on TV.¹³ Our college president phoned me suggesting that we should hire Van Doren, since after the notorious scandal he should come cheap, and he would bring us a lot of good national attention. I thought the suggestion itself scandalous, and I said so. But when he insisted, and became angry with me, and implied that he would punish me one way or another if I didn't accept his suggestion, I caved in, and we made the offer to Charles Van Doren—who, praise God, turned us down. I can remember, thirty years later, that for quite a while afterward I was plagued with intrusions from a hymn that musically is not at all one of my favorites: "Do what is right; let the consequence follow."¹⁴ I rank "Do What Is Right" (237), for sheer musical quality, about a low two on a scale of one to ten. Yet there it was, nagging one part of my mind against another, with the crummy music sung as if it were Handel.

Fourth hymnstory (which I warn you is not quite so affirmative about hymnhighs). It may surprise you to learn that there is a contemptible side to my soul, unlike yours, that wants rewards, credit, open signs of accomplishment and achievement. And I hope it won't shock you for me to say that my silly competitiveness was at least partly taught by those hymns that preach about some reward for going good. Even the first hymn we sang tonight, "Have I Done Any Good?" with its urging to do something more than "dream of your mansion above," does conclude the second verse with "To God each good work will be known"—it implies, that is, that we do the good to get the reward. "Do What Is Right" teaches us that the "consequence" that will "follow" depends on the fact that "Angels above us are silent notes taking." Now I wonder: did they write down in their book these past weeks just how hard I've been working on various revisions of this talk? I do hope

Throughout
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they overlooked what I did yesterday when I was tempted to say something obscene about the task . . . But I won't go into that.

In short, credit is earned by doing good and avoiding evil, *but don't forget* that you should think consciously about getting that credit. I bought that message wholeheartedly, and it is still in my soul, at least on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

Most people I know reveal some signs of that eagerness for reward that implies triumph over others. I can remember scores of episodes throughout my life when failure to be number one devastated me: placed below #1 in the clarinet section of the high school band, with Phil Jensen's name as winner imprinted on my soul; not winning the competition at Boy Scout camp for neatest campsite—I sobbed and sobbed about that; voted down in the high school graduation competition to be named Representative Boy, having worked hard to make sure I would have the longest biographical entry in our yearbook. I remember thinking, Why, if I have the longest list of club memberships and have been president of the Beethoven Club, why, oh, why have they voted Keith Miller as Representative Boy rather than me?! At graduation, I had a hard time even speaking with Keith in a friendly way.

Now I can hear some asking, "Do you, Professor Booth, still have any problem about wanting to be considered #1?" Absolutely not: in my view, I am the humblest person in the world.



BRIAN BEAN

Some of the Mormon hymns I admire most combat the temptation toward false pride and excessive worry about reward. For example, “Nay, Speak No Ill” (233) has not a hint of avoiding hate-speech for the sake of reward. (That one didn’t get into the hymn books until 1948.) Whenever I have one of those petty, proud moments, a moment later a reproachful hymn will rise up within, perhaps:

Then wake up, and do something more
Than dream of your mansion above.

Or

Today, while the sun shines, work with a will
.....
Call life a good gift, call the world fair. . . .
Today, today, work while you may
There is no tomorrow but only today. (229)

Now then, we have one clear message combating the notion that the point of life is to achieve rewards in some future time. I’ll return later to a recent, abominable revision of that second hymn and to more about how some hymns risk reinforcing that competitive streak—the sort of thing that in extreme led Cain to slay his rival, Abel, and led Saul to try to get rid of his young, successful rival, David.

Final hymnstory. Now it’s true that, as kids, some of us developed ways of escaping the influences of hymns; since the messages are often a bit repetitive and can come to seem banal and boring, especially to youngsters who feel overburdened with too much preaching, a hymn can seem something to escape rather than embrace.

I remember how we deacons, in the American Fork Second Ward, would secretly play a game of actually corrupting hymns by adding the phrase, “between the sheets.” We would do that even while the service was going on, scribbling “between the sheets” back and forth to one another when the song titles were announced and even while they were being sung. My wife remembers that she and her girlfriends down in their Long Beach, California, ward did the same thing.

Count your blessings—between the sheets.

Did any of you play that wicked game?

The most vulgar, least-defensible corruption I can remember was of what has always been one of my favorites, “Come, Come, Ye Saints”—between the sheets.

So we should admit, while celebrating the educational power of hymns, that no hymn is immune from corruption. We smarties were poisoning the message. The

interesting point to me now, though, is that the very hymns we spoiled then return to me today in unsoiled form; the hymns’ power soon overwhelmed the adolescent tinkering.

HOW MUSIC FORTIFIES WORDS

The words we sing wholeheartedly enter our souls.

MY personal anecdotes prove nothing except the obvious fact that when we sing ethical language, it gets into our souls, much more deeply than when someone preaches it at us. I’m sure all of us could offer other examples—especially striking for me are those moments when I am feeling depressed and some hymn of spiritual comfort enters: “Abide with me; tis eventide” (165) or “God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform” (285).

One hymn I wish I had had as a child, to use now when I get depressed—but it wasn’t written then—is “That Easter Morn” (198) by Elder Marion Duff Hanks and Tabernacle organist Robert Cundick, with its three concluding refrains—

. . . And conquered pain.
. . . And conquered death.
. . . And conquer fear.

Let’s sing it now, to protect us from the negatives that are coming here.

That Easter morn, a grave that burst
 Proclaimed to man that "Last and First"
 Had ris'n again
 And conquered pain.

This morn renews for us that day
 When Jesus cast the bonds away,
 Took living breath
 And conquered death.

Thus we in gratitude recall
 And give our love and pledge our all,
 Shed grateful tear
 And conquer fear.

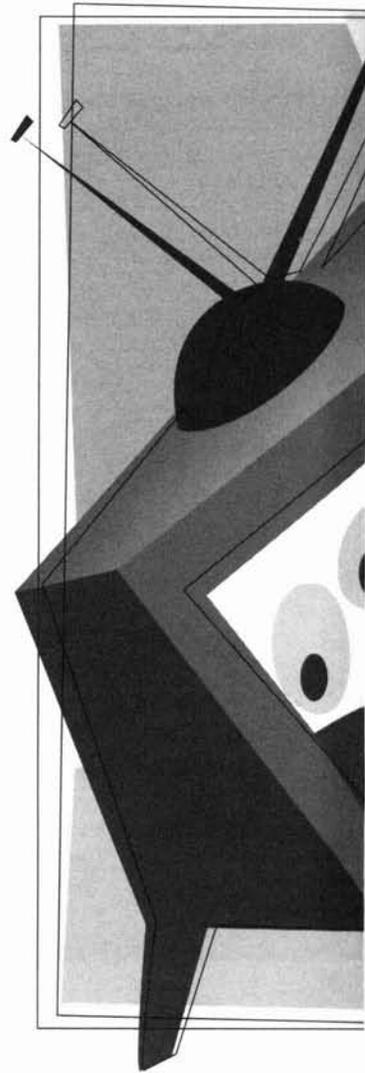
We could speculate about why it is that the hymn words we sing dig messages into our bones more deeply than mere language does. (Poetry is the closest rival.) Even music without words implants notions of just what kind of behavior should be celebrated. The most advanced physiologists find it hard to explain fully why music has such transformative power. Marches, funeral dirges, wedding tunes—all implant what people these days often call *attitudes* but what used to be called *virtues*, expanding the meaning from Sunday School lists to include what the classical philosophers meant by it: not just a list of literal behavior commandments but the entire range of commitments and habits of mind and heart that contribute to excellence or worthiness of life. The music that gets into our souls, whether with words or not, shapes us spiritually. And when there are words, the music with its mysterious power underlines the verbal message, leaving us singers with the conviction that we have sung divine truth. I doubt even parental supervision and advice have as much long-lasting power as any single genuine hymnhigh, especially when experienced in childhood.

Church leaders, recognizing that power, have from the beginning put immense energy into perfecting the hymnals, always tacitly underlining my thesis here, though I've found no explicit statement of it: namely, that music has the strongest teaching power of all our resources. If you read Hicks's chapters on the history of our hymnals, you'll be impressed by just how important most of our leaders have judged hymns to be. As they have quarreled about choices, sometimes their judgments seem trivial or uninformed or just plain dogmatic. As Hicks records, Church leaders have almost always valued familiarity and doctrinal soundness more than musical quality. President Heber J. Grant, for example, who could never sing in tune though he ardently took singing lessons, expressed highly idiosyncratic preferences and condemnations, and many other authorities have endorsed, Hicks says, a "trend toward populism and parochialism."¹⁵ Hicks laments that the 1985 hymnal has fewer first-class hymns, judged "aesthetically"—that is, musically—than does the 1948 hymnal.

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Obviously, the actual changes in the message we emphasize, as distinct from our choices of tunes, can always be interpreted in many different ways. Some see the changes as signs of hypocrisy, attempts to disguise past doctrinal error. Though I regret some of the changes, I argue that the passion for improving the hymnal is not just an acknowledgment that what a hymn says will be taken as confirmed doctrine; it is an affirmation of a key spiritual point: whatever we sing wholeheartedly enters our souls with either healing and transforming power or with potentially destructive effect.

Church attitudes about the power of hymns can be dramatized by the fact that in 1985 the First Presidency for the first time provided an official hymnal preface, in effect validating every hymn in the book. All of the hymns have been selected, they say, "to meet the varied needs of today's worldwide Church membership." Hymns "move us to repentance and good works, build testimony and faith, comfort the weary, console the mourning, and inspire us to endure to the end." That's an impressive summary of what religion itself can do for us: move us to repentance and good works, build testimony and faith, comfort the weary, console the mourning, and inspire us to endure to the end.





CONFLICTS AMONG HYMN MESSAGES
An unavoidable reflection of the human condition.

THIS validation of the importance of hymns lands us in some problems I've already hinted at. The First Presidency's preface quite appropriately refused to address such problems: most significantly, the plain fact that the diverse hymns embrace explicit messages that are not in total harmony, and they never have been. Indeed, I am convinced that the explicit and implicit ethical messages of the hymns we love will never be totally consistent or coherent or harmonizable as expressed doctrine. Our beliefs about our world and God are inevitably in ambiguous tension, which is reflected in messages that are at least potentially contradictory. And that textual tension requires what some current critics would call a bit of deconstruction, or hermeneutical juggling, or casuistry—all of these terms in the non-pejorative sense.¹⁶ I'll approach that dangerous enterprise toward the end of this paper.

When the committee charged with revising Church hymns for the 1927 hymnal met, they decided to eliminate three things: "hymns rarely sung, doctrinally unsound texts, and bad music."¹⁷ But they went further than that. They reduced

the number of solemn or gloomy hymns—including a large number dealing with the death of children and loved ones. They increased the cheerful, hopeful hymns, and they greatly reduced, as Hicks puts it, "the millennialism and communitarianism" of the early hymns.¹⁸

A tracing of hymnal revisions edition by edition would reveal changes in deepest commitments from generation to generation. But that's not my main business here. Instead, I want to explore, perhaps a bit dangerously, three conflicts of message that have endured through all the revisions, though in different proportions: First, the contrast between the celebration of obedience and the celebration of freedom and free agency. Second, the conflict between enmity and love: on one hand, the emphasis on revenge or military triumph, on battling with "the foe," on fighting rather than forgiving, and on the other hand, Christian love and forgiveness. Third, the contrast between promoting goodness for the sake of some future reward and promoting goodness for the sake of the pursuit itself: pursuing virtue for some other reward and pursuing virtue as its own reward. This third conflict, the one that I've already revealed as powerfully present in my own nature, might be summarized as the contrast between *bargaining* virtue, even bribing

virtue—angels are keeping an account book, and the payoff will ultimately be yours—and what might be called disinterested or unselfish or even *genuine* virtue.¹⁹

All three of these conflicts, or dilemmas, or paradoxes, or disharmonies—choose your own term—appear in every version of Christianity, and versions of them can be found in most non-Christian religions, too. The three conflicts can be put pejoratively like this:

- All of us Christians joyfully celebrate the freedom that God has granted us—and woe be unto those who do not obey *my* version of God's commandments.
- All of us Christians love our enemies, following Christ's command, *but* we often do our best to destroy them, unforgivingly. As Kenneth Burke put it, "Yes, I know you're a Christian, but who are you a Christian against?"
- All of us Christians seek to purify our souls of all signs of greed or envy or false pride, *and* we are simultaneously eager, like the Wayne Booth I describe in my anecdotes, to make sure that the records kept by God and his angels and his earthly servants maintain an impressive account of every good thing we do. We all want to be Representative Boy or Girl when the vote is taken up yonder.

(Hugh Nibley has called this sin Successism.)

Now, it is much too easy to adopt that mocking tone about such conflicts, as if they revealed some sort of easily escapable sins. But, in fact, does not the presence of conflicts reveal a terrible hypocrisy in us all, as we zealously sing both pious sides of the oppositions? Is there not an inherent flaw in our thinking, if we can sing both sides without thinking of the conflict? I shall later argue that these paradoxes in our pious language are not simply the failure of believers to pursue the right side of the line. The fault lies, like an earthquake fault, in the territory of life itself; the fault lines are built into the human condition, and whether or not we blame God, as some have done, for creating our temptations to follow the wrong side of the line, those temptations are there.

So as I turn now to a closer look at the three major conflicts, I hope to keep it clear that their existence is not in itself an inherent flaw: the very dramatization of conflict is something to be celebrated because it keeps us reminded that the whole shebang cannot be reduced to one formula.

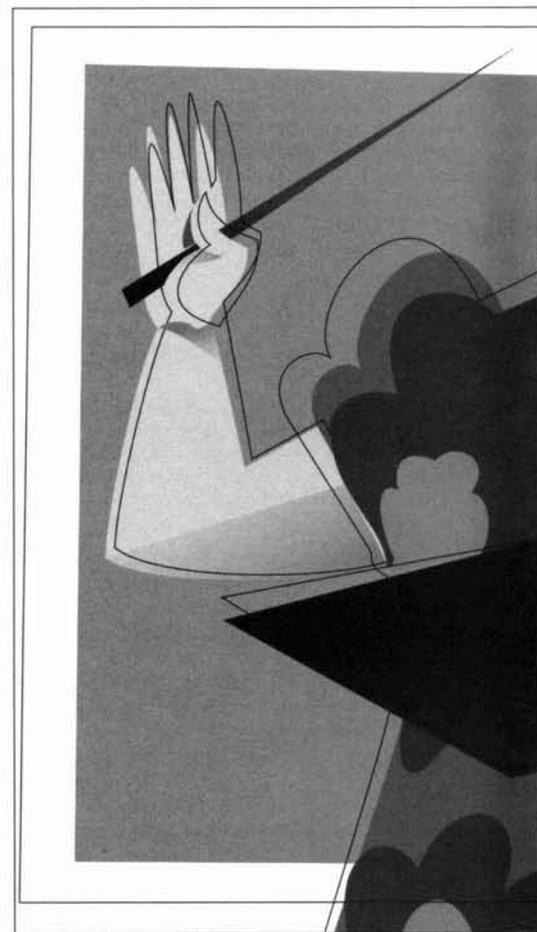
AGENCY & OBEDIENCE

Obedience hymns are on the rise in Mormonism.

FIRST, let's look at the most obvious contrast—between the emphasis on free agency and the emphasis on obedience. Our hymns have always celebrated both, with never an explicit hint about how they might conflict.²⁰ If you look only at the topic indexes at the back of the hymnals, you might conclude that obedience is these days winning over freedom. Unlike the topic list of 1927, the 1985 topic list does not include "Freedom" or "Free Agency." Under "Agency" it does list six hymns. Under "Obedience" there are twenty-two, in contrast with only two in 1927. Thus, at least in the minds of those compiling the topic indexes, obedience is winning hands down, whether they discuss the conflict or not. Yet whatever the committee's choices may mean, the conflict between full freedom and full surrender to obedience is implicit throughout.

Fortunately, I believe, the greatest emphasis by far under obedience is to obey God because of his and Christ's love. There is nothing about obedience to one's area supervisor or stake president. Such obedience to particular human com-

When we sing,
we feel the
glorious sense
that, whatever
the future brings,
this experience
now justifies
the world.



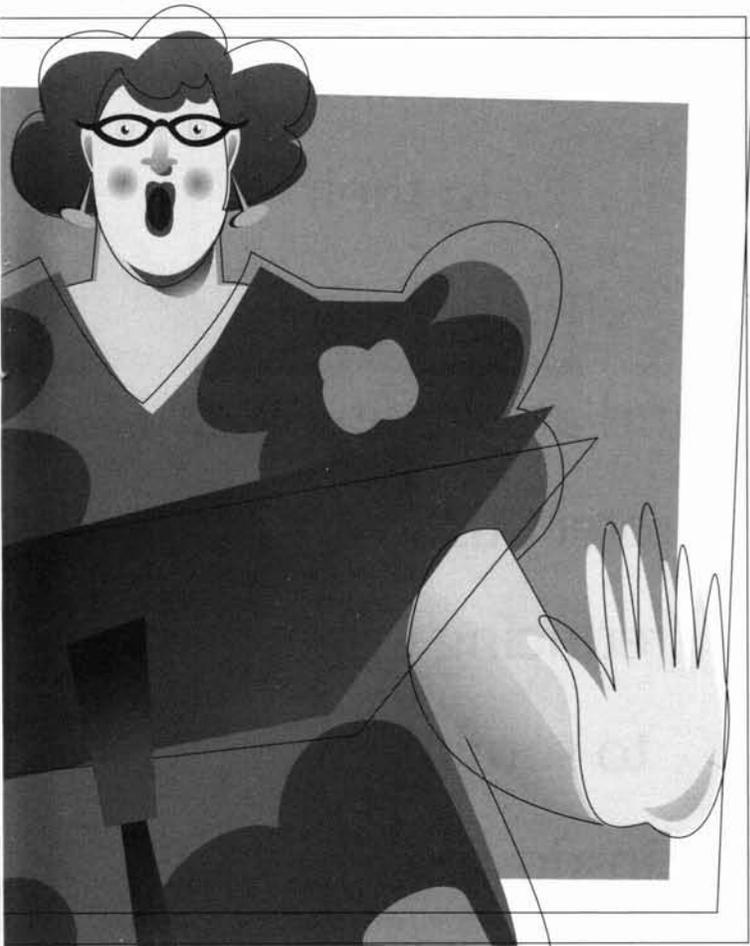
mands is left implicit, as in "Keep the Commandments" (303), a hymn added in 1985:

"Keep the commandments; keep the commandments!
In this there is safety; in this there is peace."

Tracing these two virtues through the hymns, I find more plain ambivalence than simple-minded stress on either side. It is true that both sides have some powerful, narrow adherents. Some hymns seem to move entirely to the opposite side from "Keep the Commandments." In "Know This, That Every Soul Is Free" (240), found in the 1835 first hymnal and in all three editions I'm dealing with, but totally missing from my memory, we read that "God will force no man to heav'n," and "never force the human mind." In its third and fourth verses, we learn that

Freedom and reason make us men;
Take these away, what are we then?
Mere animals, and just as well
The beasts may think of heav'n or hell.
May we no more our pow'rs abuse. . . .

Was this hymn's anonymous poet dealing with someone who had been abusing his powers and ought to stop it? The song sounds almost like a message from the Mormon Alliance. Note



that in relation to the conflict between forgiveness and revenge, when we freely choose truth and goodness, the hymn doesn't say that God grants us a crown or some kind of victory: "Our God is pleased when we improve His grace and seek his perfect love."

Again, it is obvious that many other hymns are ambivalent about these two values, stressing both free agency and obedience. Are these ambiguities about the conflict or harmony between freedom and obedience faults or virtues? *Both sides* of the conflict are genuine virtues without which neither the Church nor its members could survive. But is recognizing their tension, as the hymns force us to, a contribution to our spiritual life?

ENMITY & LOVE

The danger of taking metaphors literally.

SAVING that question for later, consider the second conflict, that between the celebration of peace and militancy, between calls for charity and forgiveness and our natural desires for triumph, revenge, and victory. The editors of the various editions have of course worked hard to eliminate the more destructive conflicts among these beliefs. An early hymnal had quite a lot about getting bloody revenge against those who had martyred the Prophet. When I was a kid, this is what we sang in "Praise to the Man"—though it had

already been cut from the new hymnal of 1927:

Long shall his blood, which was shed by assassins,
Stain Illinois while the earth lauds his fame.

Those are the words we sang, religiously, on through the early 1930s, because as I remember it, our wards couldn't yet afford to buy the new hymnal. Hicks reports that Apostle Harold B. Lee, on the 1940s music committee, fought to restore those words "stain Illinois," but the 1927 revision remains to this day:

Long may his blood which was shed by assassins,
Plead unto heav'n while the earth lauds his fame.

On into the '30s, however, in my chapel we were using the unrevised, revengeful hymn, still singing soulfully our desire for bloody revenge on Illinois. But of course, we also sang other hymns that preached loving our enemies.

While the hymnals are considerably freer of literal war talk now than they were a century ago, they're still full of militant metaphor. When we sing "Onward Christian soldiers, marching *as* to war," we do intend it metaphorically: we march not to actual war but only *as* to war. Right? Well, maybe.

But just how metaphorical were our ancestors being when they sang the following:

Beware a fiend in angel form, a demon in disguise; . . .
His favorite weapon is a smile, he ne'er was known to
frown. . . .
Should he in strife the stronger prove, one way is open—
flee;
'Tis no disgrace when overmatch'd; Retreat means victory.
Recruit thy worn and shattered strength, And in some
future fray
Thy might shall make thee conqueror, The demon thou
shalt slay.²¹

Now that could be read as just plain militaristic. Yet a close reading of the whole text reveals that the author of the words, Apostle-poet Orson Whitney, must have meant it all metaphorically, with the fiend being a metaphor for universal temptation to sin. (Having known personally the composer of the music, LeRoy J. Robertson, I am sure that Robertson, at least, meant it all metaphorically). The hymn's originators were not recommending murdering non-Mormons. Nevertheless, that kind of metaphoric repetition of militaristic imagery can often move us toward the literal; it can be taken literally by some singers.

It's hard to imagine that committees have *not* wrestled with this conflict. Though the phrase "Army of God," a topic heading in 1927, does not appear in 1985, I can't help wondering why the hymns "We Are All Enlisted" (250), "Who's on the Lord's Side?" (260), and "Hope of Israel" (259)—about the most thoroughly militaristic hymns we have—were *added* to the 1948 edition and retained in 1985.

Fighting for a kingdom, and the world is our foe;
Happy are we! Happy are we!

Who's on the Lord's side? Who?
Now is the time to show.
We ask it fearlessly:
Who's on the Lord's side? Who?
We wage no common war,
Cope with no common foe.
The enemy's awake;
Who's on the Lord's side? Who?

"Hope of Israel," music by a great uncle of mine, William Clayson, is absolutely all army, battles, swords, war cries, "vanquish every foe today":

Soon the battle will be over;
Ev'ry foe of truth be down.
Onward, onward, youth of Zion;
Thy reward the victor's crown."

We might, if we wished, conclude this section on war and peace by speculating about just which militaristic hymns were being sung, non-metaphorically, by pious Mormons just before they massacred more than 120 wicked foes in Mountain Meadows. But let's not.

BARGAINING VIRTUE VS. GENUINE VIRTUE

Christianity and our hymns are full of ambiguous contradictions.

WHEN we choose to read the militaristic language metaphorically—don't win physical battles, win spiritual ones—we are led to the third conflict, between seeing the ultimate goal of life as winning some future reward and seeing it as achieving some sort of virtue here and now. Even when we read all the military talk as metaphoric, as the poets intend us to, and even though, from edition to edition, we have considerable reduction of explicit exhortation to violence and revenge, such hymns are still loaded with the implication that life's goal is to win—if not by violence then by following the sleazy side of Wayne Booth: chalk up the virtues; get 'em recorded, and *win*.

Winning the crown, not killing the wicked but outclassing them—that's the goal. Right?

Well, not right, many hymns have said. The goal is not to seek reward but to achieve the right quality of soul, here and now. Many of the hymns that initially seem to celebrate victory move quickly into exhorting us about how to think and feel today.

I don't have to remind you that many hymns taken by themselves leave out all thought of victory or reward, stressing forgiveness and mercy and love and even just plain, daily decency. In "Let us oft speak kind words to each other; / Kind words are sweet tones of the heart" (232), there's not a hint about reward.

So we find in this third conflict something that could be

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said to summarize the other two: the clash between virtue pursued for future payoff or reward and virtue pursued for virtue's sake.

The history of Christianity and Mormonism has been full, as are our hymns, of contradictory messages about what the true goal of life is. At times, the millenarian thrust has made it sound as if the future is all: the whole point of behaving right today is to be able to sit up there, on January First, 2000, looking down at all those damned souls careening into Hell. The contrasting extreme position, pretty much avoided by our tradition, is that what counts is *only* the quality of your soul today, regardless of any good works you may do: retreat to a monastery or hermitage, and spend all your time praying.

We've never gone that far, but we do exhibit a conflict: On one hand, faith without works is dead, so you should worry about totting up the works; on the other, what's important is the quality of your soul now and its relation to God. If that relation is right, you will of course do good works, but it's the quality of your soul now that really counts and you won't spend your time counting on or hoping that some angel has pencil in hand. Our hymns are inevitably full of ambiguities on this issue: "Do what is right, let the consequence follow." Sure, but don't forget: "Angels above us are silent notes taking" (237).²²

As I've said, some of our hymns avoid the account book entirely: In "Scatter Sunshine" (230), "You Can Make the Pathway Bright" (228), and "Should You Feel Inclined to Censure" (235), there's not a hint of any reward but the scat-



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tering of sunshine and the speaking of kind words.

But it is important to stress just how many hymns cannot resist edging toward a different emphasis. In

There is sunshine in my soul today,
More glorious and bright. . . .
For Jesus is my light (227)

there is at the hymn's end a strong shift to the question of why we do it: Well, we do it, at the end of the fourth verse, "For joys 'laid up' above."²³

Many hymns go much more aggressively in the payoff direction; it's all for reward, for some future triumph. Take the third verse of "O Ye Mountains High" (34), for example: the "silver and gold" of Zion's foes "shall be brought to adorn [Zion's] fair head." Taken literally, that's just plain, blatant, material reward. Even taken metaphorically, it is triumph in the future. Here are some more revealing quotations:

We are marching onto glory;
We are working for our crown.
We will make our armor brighter
And never lay it down.
We are marching, marching homeward,
To that bright land afar.
We work for life eternal;
It is our guiding star. (225)

(As I cite these, I am aware that angels above us are taking silent notes as I speak, many of them against me, and there won't be a bright crown in store for me unless the virtue column outclasses the vices.)

It shouldn't surprise us that not only is our tradition ambiguous on this contradiction as on the others, but that most hymns are as well. Consider "Improve the Shining Moments" (226). For most of the way through it sounds as if that were the goal: improve each shining moment, for the sake of making the moments shine. But then suddenly it ends like this:

And God will love and bless you
And Help to you impart.

Everything suddenly becomes future tense; God will reward you. Similarly, consider "Choose the Right" (239). Most of the way through, it sounds absolutely, purely disinterested:

In the right the Holy Spirit guides;
And its light is forever shining o'er you,
When in the right your heart confides.

But then, in the final stanza, we get "Let God and heaven *be your goal*." Hey, wait a minute: I thought my goal was to live in the light, which is forever shining o'er me *now*, not to seek some reward in a future goal!

And even in the hymn I began this paper with, "Have I Done Any Good?", we come finally to "To God each good work will be known"—which taken literally is in direct contradiction of the next line that urges us to wake up and stop dreaming of our mansion above!²⁴

Similarly, in "Count Your Blessings" (241), for two stanzas we sound as if, "when upon life's billows we are tempest tossed," if we count our blessings, we will be "singing as the days go by": life now is redeemed. Then suddenly,

When you look at others with their lands and gold,
[obviously feeling envious and covetous]
Think that Christ has promised you his wealth untold.
Count your many blessings; money cannot buy
Your reward in heaven nor your home on high.

I can't help wondering how some of the wealthy, pious mansion builders on the Wasatch Front east bench feel when they sing that hymn.

The most amusing example of how the conflict has plagued our hymn committees is "Today, While the Sun Shines" (229): the old wording, by L. Clark, is "There is no tomorrow but only today," while the new version is "Prepare for tomorrow by working today." Can you imagine how much irony I saw in this admonition as I labored hard, preparing this paper day

after day, only part of the time feeling that I could call my life a good gift? My mind was often preparing for “tomorrow,” by working away at my computer today. Still, I consider the 1985 revision a genuine corruption of L. Clark’s original meaning.

We might summarize all three of the conflicts and ambiguities I’ve traced so far with one verse from “Let Us All Press On” (243).

Let us all press on
in the work of the Lord,
That when life is o’er
we may gain a reward;
In the fight for right
let us wield a sword,
The mighty sword of truth.

That is to say, *obey* by wielding a *sword*, for truth, and you’ll gain a *reward*.

THE REWARDS OF AMIGUITY
*The danger is in the illusion
that we have a fixed, ultimate truth.*

WHAT are we to make of all this ambivalence? Well, since I often take sides against those who stress taking sides, and I often claim credit for attacking those who seek credit, and often get cross at family members who exercise free agency rather than obey me, I want to end by stressing that such ambiguities in the hymns and hymnals are by no means unambiguous flaws.

Those virtues that I have implicitly attacked as vices—the stress on obedience, the stress on victory, the stress on reward—are not always and utterly vicious. Three points here: First, our nature is such that we cannot rely utterly on our independent, individual free agency; we need some forms of obedience. Full, independent, individual free choice, without attention to tradition and authority, lands us in personal disaster. Second, our nature is such that we cannot—or cannot with any ease or consistency—fully love and forgive all our enemies; the desire to put them down seems inborn in us, so that one of life’s goals must be to combat that urge. And third, our nature is such that even as we seek to become ever more virtuous, we find ourselves exhibiting the vice of competing with other virtue pursuers, and even hoping or working or praying for their downfall.

Take obedience, for example. Disaster results all around us when we stress irresponsible versions of freedom—messages that ignore how every individual depends on one or another kind of obedience. Little is more destructive than the messages offered in so much popular culture, as for example in Frank Sinatra’s famous, sentimental song boasting that “I did it my way.” Doing it only “my way” is a fairly sure road to disaster. Not obeying, in one sense or another, what one learns from those who have come before—authorities who have pursued God’s word on how to live—is the path to doom. Yet blind obedience, without personal thought and meditation—simply

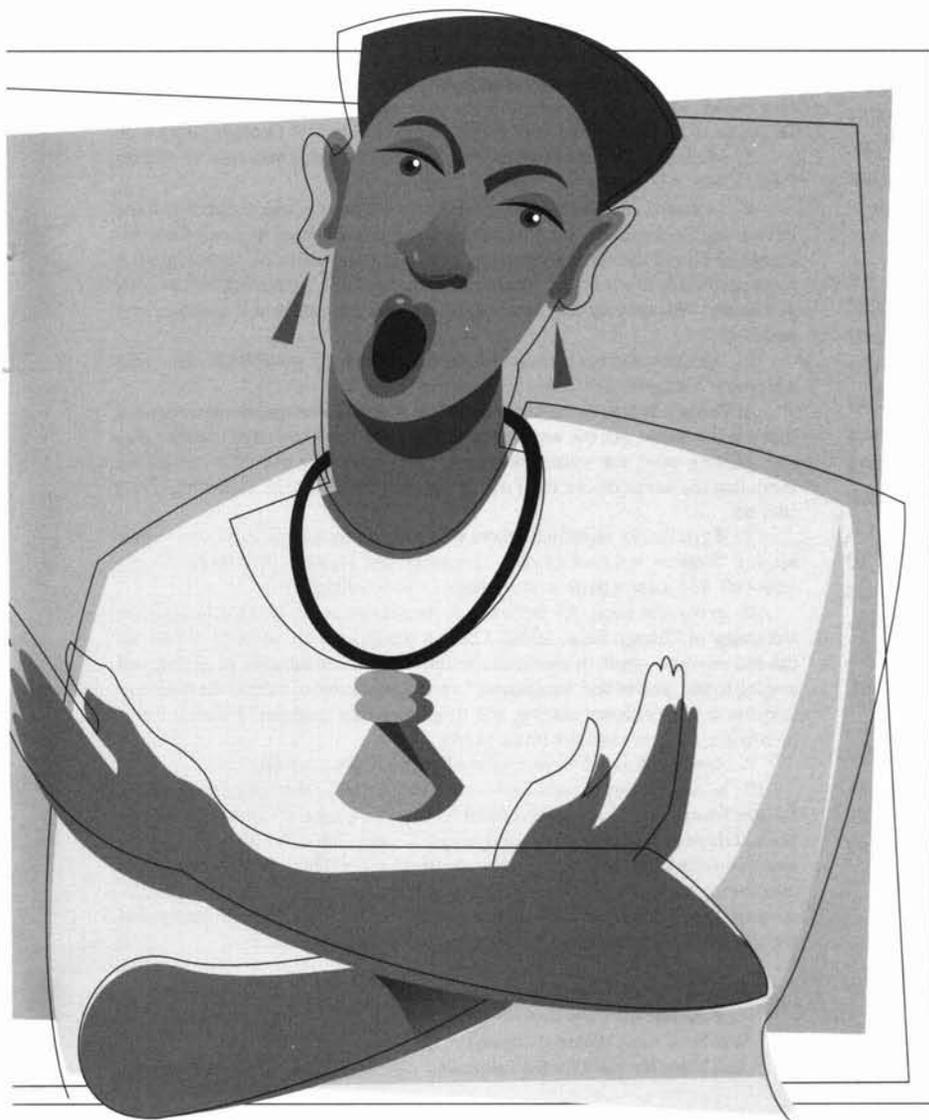
We constantly
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All religions
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mysteries.

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echoing or imitating others with no internal processing—is spiritual death. Many of our authorities these days misread the obedience songs as meaning, “Obey me, because I’m boss.” The ambiguous hymns provide them with words that can be interpreted in that spirit, but if they really sing the hymns of obedience along with the hymns of freedom, they too must face the ambiguities.

My sermon ends then not with a clear indictment of this or that hymn, either musically, poetically, or ethically, but with a major question: What are we to make of all this ambivalence?

I think we should celebrate it. We should also celebrate our hymns’ implicit teachings about how our natures relate to God’s mysterious ways. When we pay close attention to our spiritual language, we find that our pictures of God and his will reflect these paradoxical conflicts. Those who seek a God who is not mysterious, a God who resolves all conflict, get into real trouble, reducing God to something manageable, something pin-downable. Our hymns, in their multiplicity and ambiguity, potentially protect us from that error. Though the topic



indexes never mention God as mysterious, incomprehensible, beyond the pin-downable, the hymns lead us to see him in that mystifying light.²⁵

Because of the inescapable tensions built into Adam and Eve ten or fifteen thousand or million years ago, our natures constantly grapple with conflicting demands, most of which on all sides seem most often to be good or virtuous. That is why all genuine religions must face, as our hymns do, irresolvable mysteries.

Since the lessons about life, if they are honest, are always complex and potentially contradictory, moving from hymn to hymn and from revisions of hymnal to hymnal, one finds underlined not only the vitality of the Mormon tradition, with its constant changes as this or that value is played up or down, but the finally unresolved conflicts within our complex tradition.

I have known some troubled Mormons who see that complexity as some kind of negative evidence against the authorities and their hymn-making appointees. They seem to com-

plain: What kind of prophetic leadership can those men provide if the hymns' advice is allowed to shift from generation to generation and from hymn to hymn and even from verse to verse? Though many of the messages and changes are in my opinion misguided, even silly or dangerous, I would argue in contrast that one of the main blessings our hymns grant us, in their multiplicities and paradoxes, is the lesson that religious commitment can never be reduced to the routine simplicities that some would-be gurus proclaim. Only those who expect prophets and their committees to be infallible, once and for all, have any reason to be troubled when the hymn committees and their authorities change their minds, shifting emphasis from this to that virtue. The changes in *general* convey this admirable message: We "up here" are thinking, we're thinking. What's more, our predecessors, who were likewise thinking, thinking, have proved to be far from infallible. As we change their words, we prove that we also are not infallible.

The resulting blessing might be summarized as "count your many blessings, name them one by one," noting as you count how *this* blessing potentially conflicts with *that* one. It's time, the hymnals sing to us, for each of us to start thinking about how our *many* values rank against one another, and how in those contradictory rankings they require hard thought—thus we celebrate our most fundamental virtue, our practice of free agency, and demand that we learn to practice the complex virtue of casuistry.

We see, then, that underlying all these ambiguities and discords there is one glorious harmony: in the actual moments when we are singing the hymns we love, we are seldom tempted, regardless

of the actual words, to think primarily of some future reward, in a calculating spirit. Instead, we experience, in our souls, the glorious sense that the reward is, after all, now. Whatever the future brings, this experience of mystifying complexities *now* justifies the world. Oh, yes, indeed, I must try harder to be more virtuous, in this or that more literal dimension, but the reward for that trying is now, in this moment of song. There is no tomorrow for which to worry, but only today.

To me, the greatest gifts of life are such moments of spiritual transcendence of the fallen, often ugly, often tragic world: those hymnhighs, in which we feel not that we have every concept pinned down, but that we have really connected with God, or Jesus, or our dead loved ones, or at least some final, mysterious bit of Truth or Reality (with a capital T and R). Hymns sung can yield such moments—especially when they are musically powerful and are sung full of spirit.

But like other sources of such spiritual highs, hymnhighs can reinforce the illusion that we now possess the one fixed, ultimate truth—the quest is over. Whether as authorities re-

sponsible for hundreds or thousands or millions of people, or merely as individual seekers, we suffer the temptation to think that we have finally nailed the truth down, and we then descend into the ordinary, daily world, over-confident about our discovery. Hymnhighs are not directly translatable into literal, pinned-down truths about daily behavior. But the music that has produced the high can also build an illusion that the words conveyed a final, fixed truth.

I do believe that some of the pinned-down messages are indeed blessings, such as "Do what is right, let the consequence follow" or "Have I done any good in the world today?" Their only danger is that they may leave us over-confident about the meaning of those words "right" and "good." Many other hymns require, but fail to invite, careful thinking about their messages. Some of them come dangerously close to implanting the Saul-syndrome. In these hymns, the point of life becomes: chalk up more credits than others have, put down our foes, even kill them; march on, not *as to war*, metaphorically, but to actual destructive putdowns. And before you know it, you have come to believe that the surest proof of virtue is winning—as is preached by a famous Mormon prophet of profit whom I resist naming—and the surest proof of vice is losing.

ONE reason I like so much the hymn "If You Could Hie to Kolob" (284), a hymn that I cannot ever remember singing until quite recently, after the tune was changed in 1985, is that it faces this problem of inescapable mystery head on:

If you could hie to Kolob . . .
And then continue onward. . . .
Do you think that you could ever,
Through all eternity,
Find out the generation
Where Gods began to be?
Methinks the spirit whispers,
"No man has found 'pure space,'
Nor seen the outside curtains,
Where nothing has a place."

And then: "There is no end to spirit," . . . to race, to virtue, to might, to wisdom, to light, to union, to youth, and on through mysterious non-ending after non-ending. Of course, some interpret this hymn as if it were pinning things down; I see it as opening things up.

And as I concluded this paper at both symposiums, I asked "Let's now sing this song," which everybody then did, nobly.

NOTES

1. Talk delivered to Sunstone Symposium, 31 July 1998. Because of the audience-centered nature of the topic, I have preserved here the oral style. The "talk" is, however, somewhat revised since then, partly because a revised version was given at the Chicago Sunstone Symposium, 7 November 1998.

2. One line of research that I had not even suspected at that time is a recent scientific study of how all unusually intense experiences embed themselves per-

manently into our memories and often produce lifetime addictions. Those experiences can range from the noblest moments with the best hymns, as they "addict" us to pursue similar experience, down to the basest forms of drug, alcohol, and nicotine addiction. Once you've experienced love of any kind of "high," research now shows, your brain is geared to want more of it. See "Hardest Habit to Break: Memories of the High," *New York Times*, science section, 27 October 1998, 7, 9.

3. Michael Hicks, *Mormonism and Music* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

4. As several auditors have pointed out, to confine my fake-research to these three is highly distorting. It ignores the many Sunday School hymnals (in a different color), and the many songs we sing and sang in Primary. No formal hymn is more powerfully in my soul, for example, than the "Little Purple Pansies" we sang in Primary: "We are very tiny but must try, try, try/ Just one spot to gladden, you and I."

5. With considerable assistance from David Haglund, a student of mine with a Mormon background.

6. At the Chicago Sunstone Symposium in 1998, one questioner suggested that it is the music, not the words, that produce the highs, and that we often sing just ignoring what our words are saying. That's obviously true. But it does not mean that the words do not enter our being, with the chance of producing effects later on.

7. If you do not object to authors who persistently refer to their own works, see my "Story as Spiritual Quest," *Christianity and Literature* 45 (winter 1996), 163-190. The subject there is "story-highs," not hymnhighs.

8. In my new book, *For the Love of It: Amateuring and its Rivals* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), I deal at length with the problem of how we can redeem time—both in our leisure hours, whether worshipping or playing and singing music, and in our "non-leisure" work "assignments." I think the book underplays the role of hymn singing, as it dwells on other "amateur" pursuits: works of love like amateur chamber music playing.

9. A more informed listener has told me that I got it wrong.

10. In the discussion period after the Chicago talk, I was asked to name my favorite hymn, and what came to mind first were a couple by Luther, but I suppressed those—hypocritically?—and named "Come, Come, Ye Saints." Its powers have been reinforced over the years by my love for T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. After hundreds and hundreds of lines of wonderful portraits of our brokenness, the destructive fires of life as we live it, and hundreds of other lines giving us glimpses of the divine, symbolized by the rose in the garden, Eliot concludes:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
.....
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are infolded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

I wonder whether Eliot had ever heard our hymn. (From "Little Gidding," *T. S. Eliot The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1971], 145.)

11. Pronounced "fark," of course.

12. For a fine account of how we Mormons tend to ignore Christ's central message about human inequalities and suffering, see Eugene England, "Becoming a World Religion," *SUNSTONE* 21:2 (June 1998), 49-60.

13. I think it was that series, but there were others at the time; I was not, am not, a viewer of such shows. David Haglund, my assistant, is sure that it must have been *21 Questions*. But who wants to spend time doing research on a question like that?

14. Only the one line was sung, and that only in my elderly bass voice.

15. Hicks, 145.

16. After my Chicago symposium talk, a learned professor confessed to me that he did not understand the word "casuistry." The application of our principles to rival "cases," deciding which of the principles must be sacrificed if the others are to be honored, has been practiced by almost everyone from the Garden of Eden on. The word came into popularity in the seventeenth century, as the Jesuits explored the many conflicts they experienced in the real world. Because they and

others often "went too far" in excusing too much lying and cheating and just plain trickery in the name of noble causes, the name "casuistry" became more and more suspect over the centuries. For a good introduction to casuistry, see Albert R. Jonsen and Sephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For a much deeper probing of how casuistry actually is required in every part of our lives (especially as found in the Romantic period), see James Chandler, *England in 1819* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998). You will find that casuistry is regularly practiced by every Mormon except those who destroy themselves or others.

17. Hicks, 131.

18. The topical index references to the millennium and the second coming dropped drastically in 1948, but exploded again in 1985. Surely, millennialism was not thought to be doctrinally unsound, but as various confident prophecies of the end were undermined, the hymns that sounded too confident about the immediate future were dropped. The second coming is now promised in very general terms, with no hint that it is "tomorrow."

19. See *Bribes: The Intellectual History of a Moral Idea* by John T. Noonan Jr., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), for a splendid tracing of ambiguities through history in the idea of Christ's redemption, as it relates to various versions of "payoff," defensible and indefensible.

20. I have assumed that the hymn committees had many discussions about many potential conflicts. But after my Salt Lake Symposium talk, one member of the committee for the 1985 hymnal stated that she could not remember such matters ever being addressed.

21. 1927 ed., #251, esp. verse 4.

22. Thus our hymns still reflect something of the battle between Luther and Catholicism: the version of Catholicism that he attacked was saying, in effect, "Beware a Fiend in Angel Form," that you can buy a glorious future with good works now, or even with shoddy imitations of good works. Luther went to the opposite extreme: nothing you can do will have any effect on whether you are saved; that's settled already. But if you are saved, you should engage in good works, and you will. But you do not do them to earn reward. To do good to earn reward is in itself sinful. At the symposium in Salt Lake City, there was a splendid debate between two Mormon "theologians" and two Protestant ministers; the debate moved quickly to a sharp contrast between works, almost as if Mormons talked only of that, and faith or sense of salvation, as if Protestants don't care about good works. (This session featured Rev. Tom Goldsmith, Mike Gray, Paul Murphy, and Van Hale [tape #SL98-174].)

23. I wonder why they chose to use quotes around "laid up"?

24. At the same time, I must say that there is a slight improvement in another line: from "the world has no use for the drone" to "To God each good work will be known." But the emphasis is still on getting credit.

25. Bertrand Russell reports how he ended up an atheist: In his early teens, he began to think rationally about how an all-powerful god who was all-loving could allow so much human suffering. So, thinking he was moving with brilliant, strict logic, he decided there is no God. In other words, God, reduced to one literal notion, turns out to be in conflict with God, in some other literal notion, and so the solution was foolishly seen thus: there can be no God.



FUGUE

All my feet fight to keep me
from running into the street
and being crushed by flowers.

In this wilderness
of symphony and silence,
say what you will, it is a blessing
to be spineless.

Fear frees us from staying still.

I feel the way the trees must feel
the wind shift right before they lift
their leaves.

Memorize the hand
on the forehead, darkness imposing
a sense of permanence.

If the pulse in the night slows
and the stars

shiver with cold,
open every cloud against your ear
and listen close:

the angels are panning for gold.

—NICOLE MELANSON