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Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land: Hymnody in the History of North American Protestantism, and: Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology, and: How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans (review)

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Mary, a tale contained in the longer manuscript, *The Life of Abraham*, dedicated herself to an ascetic life with her hermit uncle Abraham. Seduced (or raped?) by an unvirtuous monk, she throws herself into public prostitution, only to be rescued by her celibate uncle masquerading as a client in the brothel. Predictably, Burrus is not satisfied with a more traditional reading of the “penitent prostitute.” Rather she presents the Syrian Mary, as well as the *Life of Mary of Egypt* and *The Life of Pelagia*, in their full ambiguities of seducer and seduced, and the seducing that the text itself performs for its readers. “Put simply,” Burrus summarizes, a woman like Mary is “already holy, and still, unrepentantly, a ‘harlot.’” In her hyperfemininity, she “also transgress[es] the bounds of a fixed femininity—not least by parodying prior traditions of women’s Lives” (131).

The Sex Lives of Saints is a densely written book, no doubt most enjoyable to those who are familiar with the patristic period and conversant with queer and postmodern theory as well as with literary, feminist, and cultural criticism. Arguably, it might be beneficial to read, first, the saints’s vitae in their English translations before embarking on Burrus’s hagiographic *tour de force*. Conversely, we might get seduced by her lavishly textured interpretations just as she has been seduced by ancient texts of countererotic seduction. Can we allow ourselves the reading pleasure of exploring a saintly erotic that is “self-shattering” (14) and agonizing to the point of transcendence? In the *Lives of Saints*, Burrus writes, “we encounter no ‘safe sex’ ” and “no ‘sexual orthodoxy’ but only the continually reperformed trial of historical witnesses testifying passionately to the possibility of divine eros” (17).

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Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: Hymnody in the History of North American Protestantism. Edited by Edith L. Blumhofer and Mark A. Noll. University of Alabama Press, 2004. 260 pages. \$52.50.

Wonderful Words of Life: Hymns in American Protestant History and Theology. Edited by Richard J. Mouw and Mark A. Noll. William B. Eerdmans, 2004. 288 pages. \$18.00.

How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans. By David W. Stowe. Harvard University Press, 2004. 335 pages. \$27.95.

Much of American religion and spirituality has been shaped, defined, and promoted through its hymnody, but studies of American religious life have not always acknowledged or examined in detail the significance of these songs of faith, theology, life, and worship. All three books under review are contributions that go some way to redress the balance. The main titles of all three are, appro-

priately, quotations of primary hymns of the American experience: P. P. Bliss's *Wonderful Words*, John Newton's *Amazing Grace*, and King David's "hymn," Psalm 137[:4].

Although issued by different publishers, the first two titles are closely related in that they both grew out of the three-year project on the history of American hymnody sponsored by the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE), based at Wheaton College and funded by the Lilly Endowment. Each of these two volumes is a collection of essays by different authors associated with the ISAE project, though not all the contributions appear in print for the first time. The relationship between the two books is underscored by the first chapter in *Singing the Lord's Song* and Appendix 1 of *Wonderful Words of Life*, both contributed by Stephen Marini. The former is based on the database compiled by Professor Marini, a statistical analysis of the most widely published hymns in American evangelical hymnals published between 1737 and 1970; the latter is a listing, culled from the same database, of the 266 most frequently published hymns during the period—from the top-ranking *All hail the power* (Perronet, 1779), which appears in 160 different hymnals, to the bottom-ranking (seventy-sixth) *To God the only wise our Savior* (Watts, 1707), which is found in thirty-five American hymnals. On the evidence of the database, Marini can make the following statement: "American evangelicals have proven to be quite conservative about their hymn texts, retaining much of the classical canon through the late nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries" (*Singing the Lord's Song*, 18). However, the time period is somewhat wide—approaching two and a half centuries—which means that hymns that were in vogue and fairly widely used for a short time either appear low in the ranking or may not be included at all. Thus the basic database needs to be augmented with other, genre-orientated databases that cover a more restricted time period to demonstrate the hymnodic publication and practice within a narrower historical frame. This is exactly the methodology of Chris Armstrong's study of camp-meeting hymns in *Singing the Lord's Song*.

The subtext for this volume, *Singing the Lord's Song*, is how immigrants sang their faith in the New World of the United States and Canada. The contributions range from the experiences of slaves, women, and Native Americans in the early nineteenth century (Kay Norton), through the transplanted experiences of Presbyterians (Barbara Murison and Darryl G. Hart), the linguistic issues of German Mennonites (David Rempel Smucker), Swedish Covenanters (Scott E. Erickson), and Spanish Protestants (Daniel Ramirez), to the nondenominational radio revivalism of the early twentieth century (Daniel Fuller, Philip Goff, and Katherine McGinn). In the process these authors chart some interesting chronological ebbing and flowing of the experience and practice of hymnody. For example, the consequences of the move to a "Hymnal" rather than a "Psalter" in later nineteenth-century Canadian Presbyterianism (Murison)—a phenomenon that can be paralleled in American Presbyterianism, though not specifically addressed in either of the two volumes under review—were to some extent reversed by the movement to restore metrical psalmody within American Presbyterianism in the twentieth century (Hart). Similarly, nineteenth-century

tensions between traditionalists and progressives with regard to hymnody were closely related to the linguistic shift from German to English (Smucker), whereas twentieth-century Hispanic Christians have experienced unity in the reverse tendency of translating English hymns into Spanish (Ramirez).

Similar essays occur in the second volume, *Wonderful Words of Life*, except that they are presented within a threefold structure. The first section—entitled “In the Beginning was Watts”—is devoted to the psalms and hymns of Isaac Watts, though, of course, references to Watts occur throughout the volume. Watts’s psalms and hymns were the most common songs of faith sung by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelicals, providing models for many other authors within the movement, and therefore the appropriate starting point for any consideration of evangelical hymnody. Here is found an assessment of Watts’s foundational and seminal influence (Mark A. Noll), an outline of his impact on American worship and spirituality (Esther Rothenbusch Crookshank), and two case studies—*Our God our Help in Ages Past* (Watts) and *I love love thy kingdom Lord* (Dwight, who was strongly influenced by Watts)—which demonstrate that in evangelical hymnody spirituality is often intertwined with political concerns (Rochelle A. Stackhouse).

The second section of *Wonderful Words of Life*, “Hymns and the Ordering of Protestant Life,” offers five independent essays on various aspects of American Protestant hymnody, both historical and contemporary. The historical essays deal with missionary hymnody in the nineteenth century (Robert A. Schneider), the marketing of revival hymnody in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Kevin Kee), and the influence of the Youth for Christ movement on evangelical hymnody in the second half of the twentieth century (Thomas E. Bergler). The other two contributions in this section reflect on cross-cultural and cross-confessional issues: the adoption and use of Protestant hymnody in contemporary Roman Catholic worship (Felicia Piscitelli) and the incorporation of the Black Gospel tradition into white congregations (Virginia Lieson Brereton).

With the final section of *Wonderful Words of Life* the preoccupation with phenomenology gives way to theology: “Hymns as Good (or Bad) Theology.” Given the subtitle of the book, “History and Theology”—together with the fact that much of what makes evangelical hymnody “evangelical” is primarily theology—one would have expected to encounter more than the three offerings of this section. Jeffery VanderWilt’s study of how death and eschatology are encountered in evangelical hymns reveals that in such hymns a “hunger for transcendence” (183) can be detected, an important observation in view of the tendency in contemporary evangelical worship to stress immanence rather than transcendence. As Stephen Marini writes: “If modern evangelical hymns can be reduced to a narrow term, it would be nearness to Christ rather than the otherness of the sacred” (*Singing the Lord’s Song*, 27). The “nearness to Christ” is taken up in the following two contributions of this section. Susan Wise Bauer focuses on “narrative theology” in hymnody, expressions of personal history in coming to faith, in which Biblical narrative and personal narrative are combined. Among these studies of evangelical hymnody this contribution is particularly important since it deals with what lies at the heart of the subject matter of

evangelical hymnody—conversion and witness to such individual conversion. But Richard J. Mouw's study of nautical imagery in evangelical hymnody is of similar importance. Of course, for a hymn writer like John Newton, who had been a sea captain, such metaphors grew out of his experience, but being rescued from stormy seas, or piloted through dangerous shoals, were the frequently employed images of conversion and discipleship that are to be found in many hymns by other evangelical authors.

Two observations concerning these collections of essays: First, they are a welcome addition to our knowledge and evaluation of important strands of American hymnody, but at the same time, as much as they illuminate and inform, they nevertheless only present a partial and fragmentary picture. The focus on evangelical hymnody is understandable enough, since these essays grew out of the ISAE project. But there were other strands of hymnody—such as Lutheran, Episcopal, and other denominations that have within them an evangelical presence—which have either contributed to evangelical hymnody or, as Felicia Piscitelli's study demonstrates, embraced evangelical hymnody within their own patterns of worship. It is frequently overlooked, for example, that both Charles Wesley and John Newton were, and remained, Anglicans. Second, I take issue with a statement made in the unsigned introduction to *Singing the Lord's Song* (but presumably written by the editors, Edith L. Blumhofer and Mark Noll). In referring to the Chicago evangelistic campaign of Amzi Clarence Dixon in 1908, in which revival hymnody was given prominence, it is concluded that this action "summoned hymns out of the churches into the public space" (vii). I think I understand what was meant, but the impression given is that it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that hymnody transcended the confines of public worship. This is an indefensible thesis since hymns have long been sung outside the public worship of the churches. Indeed, many major reforms and new developments in the hymnody of public worship have come about because of the new forms and styles that originated outside the churches. Religious music and song outside the worship assembly has always run parallel with the hymns heard and sung within it; sometimes the influence has been from within the church to the world outside and other times the world outside has conditioned the church within—a phenomenon that figures significantly in the third book under review here.

Compared with the two books discussed above, David W. Stowe's *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans* is a sequence of vignettes painted with much broader brush-strokes: it is multifaith, rather than simply ecumenical, and deals with a wide variety of forms and styles rather than being restricted only to hymnody, though there is a primary concern for sacred song. Although the material is presented in an approximate chronological sequence, Stowe is primarily concerned with showing how different approaches to religious music have conditioned the spirituality of Americans.

Music has always been central to the ways in which Americans have thought about and practiced their religion. . . It is most obviously a means of communication with the divine: a mechanism for expressing praise and thanksgiving, for

petitioning mercy, protection, and power . . . Sacred songs are densely layered artifacts, gathering additional meanings over time (3).

Thus Stowe examines such areas as early American Psalmody, the hymnody of Methodists, the compositions of William Billings, the worship music of the Moravians, Ephrata Cloister, Shakers, Mormons, the Gospel hymns of Sankey and Bliss, the Spirituals of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and the African-American Black Gospel of the twentieth century. But Stowe moves beyond familiar Christian parameters to include discussions of the religious music of Native Americans, American Buddhists (in a very interesting chapter titled: "Onward Buddhist Soldiers"), and Jewish immigrants. As his book progresses, his field of view becomes ever broader, embracing the religious overtones of various aspects of jazz, such as the famous movie, *The Jazz Singer*, Duke Ellington's theological symphonic jazz, the music of Herman Poole Blount (under the pseudonym Sun Ra), inspired by ancient Egyptian religion, and the religious jazz of John Coltrane—as well as the protest songs of the 1960s, which are linked to the camp meeting hymnody of the early nineteenth century.

In his discussions Stowe concentrates on the cultural, political, religious, and social contexts rather than on the character of the music, and tends to talk about the concepts that are expressed in the texts rather than the musical expression of those texts. As he explains in a final note (301–303), his method is essentially that of the ethnomusicologist, building on the disciplines of folklore studies and anthropology, among others. The resulting book is therefore a study in phenomenology, a sequence of descriptions of various aspects of religious music in American experience. In the process, the author is sometimes drawn into overstatement or superficial assessment, but in the main has presented a many-faceted ontology of American religious music that is not easily found elsewhere.

The material in these three books significantly assists the task of fitting the historic and cultural pieces together, but the jigsaw puzzle of American religious music in general, and American hymnody in particular, is far from complete: though the edges and corners are mostly in place, we still have to discover more of the pieces.

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Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond. By Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence. Palgrave, 2002. 241 pages. \$24.95.

Islam in South Asia has been deeply marked by the mystical and devotional tradition of Sufism, particularly by the Chishti Order, the most widespread and influential Sufi order in the region and the one with the deepest identification with the Indian subcontinent. In this book, Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence have