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An Ecumenical Hymn Book for the United Kingdom?

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The Australian Hymn Book, an ecumenical hymnal, was published in September 1977 in a blaze of publicity.¹ People in the United Kingdom might regard this fact as being merely of academic interest, but they would be wrong. There is every reason to believe that the publishers are seriously thinking of issuing the book in this country under another title, possibly *With One Voice*. If this happens then this collection, whatever its title, will be a serious competitor to all the hymn books currently used for worship in our churches, as well as to those now being compiled. What follows is not a review of the book as such—until the decision has been made about its future here, it remains unavailable in the United Kingdom—but rather some reflections on its origins, content and possible use by English churches.

First, some background information. Ten years ago the hymn book committees of four denominations—Anglican, Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian—met jointly to discuss the possibility of producing an ecumenical hymn book for most of the major churches in Australia. It was agreed that the time seemed right for such an ecumenical collection to be prepared, so the Australian Hymn Book Committee was formed. In the following four years, from 1968 to 1972, over forty recent hymn books were studied and many thousands of hymns from world-wide sources were examined. The work resulted in two trial books² which congregations were encouraged to use and report back on the reception of the hymns. So, to begin with, this book has the advantage that very few of the hymn books we are now using had when they were first produced; that is, its hymns have been widely sung and evaluated before the final form of the book was issued.³ Most English hymn books have been launched on the churches with only the testing of their authors and advisors behind them, which probably accounts for the large areas of unusable material in most of them.

In 1974 the Roman Catholic Liturgy Commission of the Archdiocese of Sydney considered the possibility of the use of the projected book among Catholics. The outcome was the agreement to issue the book in two forms: a basic edition for general use and another with a Catholic Supplement. So, when the book appeared, five denominations had agreed to use it and its reception was to say the least enthusiastic. The initial print order of 100,000 was quickly exhausted

and a reprint was necessary in the same month that it was first published!

What of the book's contents? The basic edition is a collection of 578 hymns,⁴ about a quarter of which have been written in the twentieth century, including a good many written since the end of the Second World War. It is encouraging to see features which one has been advocating for some time. In particular I would single out four. First, instead of relying entirely on translations of foreign-language hymns made in earlier generations, it is refreshing to see contemporary ones being used.⁵ Second, the world-wide nature of the Christian church is reflected in the choice of hymns: countries of origin include Italy, Germany, France, the Soviet Union, Britain, India, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, the West Indies, several African nations, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Canada, the United States of America, Ireland, the Netherlands, Israel and Poland. However, as one would expect, there are many hymns written or composed by Australians which are published for the first time in the book. British contributors include Sidney Carter, Timothy Dudley-Smith, Fred Kaan, Fred Pratt Green, Erik Routley, etc., and sources such as *Psalm Praise* (1973) and the *New Catholic Hymnal* (1971) were used. Third, there is a generous selection, fifty-seven in all, of metrical psalms by a variety of authors spanning several hundred years of writing. Their inclusion undoubtedly reflects the influence of the Congregational and Presbyterian members of the editorial committee. Fourth, although nineteenth-century hymns are numerous, they do not predominate as they do in many of the standard hymn books currently in use, and there is a welcome generous selection of eighteenth-century hymns, particularly those of Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts. The chronological content of the collection is approximately as follows:

Pre-Reformation	9%	18th century	26½%
16th century	3½%	19th century	29%
17th century	9%	20th century	23%

The book is excellently produced with first-class typography and layout; both words and music are easily read. There has been no pedantic attempt to rewrite older hymns to make them conform to the style of modern language services: 'thou' and 'you' forms exist side by side.

Are there any negative features? For me, there are three. First, the contents of the book have been arranged rather like a 'systematic theology', similar to the contents of *Congregational Praise* (1950) and *Hymns of Faith* (1964); though, unlike these English books, *The Australian Hymn Book* has no section for the Trinity! Such a topical arrangement, with its general and less specific categories, presents difficulties for Anglicans with their liturgical worship and

the varied demands of the Sundays of the church year, especially when the Series 3 lectionary is used with its wide-ranging biblical themes.⁶ This topical arrangement is probably a reflection of the fact that out of the four main denominations participating in the project, three—Congregational, Presbyterian and Methodist—are non-liturgical churches.⁷ Second, the book does not fully represent the hymn traditions of all the major denominations in Australia. Although some examples are included, one would like to have seen more from Lutheran hymnody. The two Lutheran churches in Australia are particularly strong but neither participated in the production of *The Australian Hymn Book*. This was because they had already been working on a joint hymnal for more than sixteen years when the idea of the ecumenical book was raised. Their *Lutheran Hymnal* (Adelaide 1973) was published five years later. Third, *The Australian Hymn Book* is, naturally enough, strong on recent contributions from Australia and South-East Asia but somewhat weaker on material from Europe as a whole. For example, contemporary Dutch hymn writers such as W. Barnard, A. C. Besten, H. Oosterhuis, J. Wit, etc., are not represented, nor are such German hymn writers as D. Trautwein, C. Weiss, K. Rommel, G. Valentin, and others.⁸

The question is: Is *The Australian Hymn Book* a suitable ecumenical hymnal for British churches to use? It could be argued that its antipodean perspective is not entirely appropriate for us who live on this side of the world and in close proximity to the continent of Europe. For example, in German-speaking countries there have been two notable contributions to ecumenical hymnody recently which are not reflected in this new book. *Gemeinsame Kirchenlieder* (Berlin 1973) is a modest collection of 102 hymns, but its importance is that it was produced by Protestants and Catholics together and is now being used by Christians in both East and West Germany, Austria and Switzerland. *Gotteslob* (Stuttgart 1975) is a hymnal for use by the congregations of German-speaking Roman Catholics. Included are a high number of hymns, suitably marked, appropriate for singing when non-Catholics and Catholics join together for worship.⁹

It could also be argued that an ecumenical hymn book edited and compiled in this country would be preferable to *The Australian Hymn Book*. But it would take ten years or more to produce such a book. Are the churches prepared to wait that long when this book offers an almost immediate opportunity? Individual congregations might be ready to use it, but would the Baptist, Methodist and other churches be prepared to put aside their denominational hymn books in favour of it? At this juncture it seems doubtful. There might be the possibility, if the publisher was willing, of using *The Australian Hymn Book*, under another name, as a basic collection to which each denomination could add its own supplement, exactly as the Roman Catholics have done in Australia. This has been the practice on the

continent in recent years. In Holland, the *Liedboek voor de Kerken* (1975) is used in Catholic, Reformed, Re-Reformed, Lutheran and other churches, and most have produced their own supplements of additional material bound together with the basic collection. In Germany, both East and West, the basic *Evangelische Kirchengesangbuch* is widely used by Lutheran and Reformed churches alike, with each territorial church body producing its own supplement to be bound together with the basic hymn book.¹⁰

The Australian Hymn Book is a most interesting, and in many respects, an exciting, collection. But whether it can become the basic hymnal for British churches, with or without supplements, is an open question. We shall see what happens if and when it is published here.¹¹

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NOTES

- 1 *The Australian Hymn Book* (A Collins Liturgical Publication : Sydney 1977) available in Harmony and Melody Line editions.
- 2 *Hymn Book Report One* (1972), and *Hymn Book Report Two* (1973).
- 3 The same procedure was adopted when the Dutch ecumenical hymn book was being compiled. The final form was *Liedboek voor de Kerken* (The Hague 1973), but it was preceded by trial volumes: *Honderdnegentien Gezangen* (1962), and *102 Gezangen* (1964).
- 4 The Catholic Supplement adds a further 55. The first is a re-written version of No. 28 in the main part of the book: *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation*; it is made to express a theology foreign both to its original author, Joachim Neander, and its translator, Catherine Winkworth.
- 5 Among the new translators are: Honor Mary Thwaites (1914-); Colin Alexander Gibson (1933-); John Webster Grant (1919-); and Henry Ralph Wardlow (1929-).
- 6 The music edition does have a general church year index, but it covers seasons rather than Sundays in the main.
- 7 The Catholic Supplement has a good many liturgical hymns.
- 8 Original hymns, with translations, of many of these authors are to be found in *Cantate Domino* (Kassel 1974).
- 9 Many of the 'ecumenical' hymns in *Gotteslob* are the same as those found in *Gemeinsame Kirchenlieder*.
- 10 For a survey of these regional editions of the *Evangelische Kirchengesangbuch*, see *Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnologie* (1977), pp 165-8.
- 11 Since this article was prepared, Collins have announced that the book will be published in the United Kingdom under the title *With One Voice*, probably in February 1979.