Hymnody and the Social Imaginary

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Our liturgical practices—the things we do as well as the things we sing and say—contribute to the formation of what Charles Taylor calls the "social imaginary." As Taylor and others make clear, however, there are other systems and practices in which we are embedded that create and reinforce competing imaginaries. So, from the start any claims we make about liturgical practices and the social imaginary will require us to ask whether our liturgical practices are persistent and powerful enough to compete with those other systems. This may be no more evident than when we consider the broad range of musical influences that shape our acoustic experiences in worship and in our daily lives as well as the diverse contexts in which we encounter music.

In an exploration of the church and its liturgical practices as a context for spiritual formation, which I would argue is also about the cultivation of a social imaginary, David Lonsdale offers a suggestive starting point from which to connect the social imaginary and Christian worship. In Christian worship, Lonsdale notes, a community gathers to "recall and renew, celebrate and ponder" its foundational story in God's saving work through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In worship, we remember, retell, and relive that story, "celebrating it with gratitude and praise."[1] In worship we are "schooled in the beliefs, attitudes, and practices which constitute Christian identity and discipleship."[2]

What, then, might it mean to consider hymnody (or congregational song more broadly) as an instrument for the formation and sustaining of a Christian social imaginary? To answer this question, I proceed in three steps: first, to first briefly describe what Taylor means by "social imaginary," the role of language in its construction, and how it connects to liturgical practices; second, to look at how music functions in everyday life and might contribute to the social imaginary; and third, to discuss several specific examples of Christian hymns and the ways in which they contribute to the formation of a social imaginary.

The Social Imaginary[3]

Political philosopher Charles Taylor uses the concept of the "social imaginary" to describe the ways in which "people imagine their social existence" as it comes

to be expressed in "images, stories, and legends" rather than in theoretical terms. His use of the term "imaginary" here is not to suggest that the social imaginary is a condition of "make-believe" or wishful thinking. Rather, Taylor is clear that the social imaginary is "an essential constituent of the real," shaping, conditioning, and organizing the way we live together and understand our world. [4]

In Taylor's understanding, the social imaginary is "shared by large groups of people" rather than a limited few and is a "common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[5] It has a communal and public character. These initial descriptions are certainly true of most if not all religious traditions. At a more practical level they are suggestive of what we encounter in Christian and Jewish liturgical practices as we think of the communal and public character of our Sabbath and Lord's Day gatherings, the aesthetic/architectural environments in which we worship, the images conveyed through our reading and interpreting of scripture, the ways in which we handle sacred books, and the ways in which concepts come to be embedded in our imaginations through hymns and songs. The social imaginary is both "factual and normative," providing a sense of "how things usually go" and "how they ought to go."[6] Yet this optimistic perspective requires caution. As Taylor notes, the social imaginary can be "full of self-serving fiction and suppression," as has increasingly become evident in US politics. In such cases, it leads to practices that are more death-giving than life-supporting.[7] Of course, the church has not been exempted from such practices; we need only look to the many ways Christians have used scripture to support and continue practices of anti-Judaism, slavery, and racial discrimination.[8]

Taylor connects his understanding of the social imaginary to the constitutive character of language in his 2016 book *The Language Animal*. There Taylor argues that language is more than the encoding of information; language, like the social imaginary, is *constitutive* of reality. As such, it makes "possible new purposes, new levels of behavior, new meanings."[9] Thus, "to learn the language of society is to take on some imaginary of how society works and acts, of its history through time; of its relation to what is outside: nature, or the cosmos, or the divine."[10] When we learn a new expression, that new expression "reveals a new way of inhabiting the world, and the new significances which this way responds to."[11] Through linguistic constitution, "we are given a new way of describing, or a new model for understanding, our human condition and the alternatives it opens for us; and through this we come to see and perhaps embrace a new human possibility."[12] Some might be familiar with cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) which, though oriented toward the individual, operates along similar principles. Through CBT persons learn to recognize distortions in their thinking and re-narrate life events. The re-narration process enables them to re-interpret past events and see new possibilities for their lives. What CBT does not acknowledge is that such re-narration not only corrects distortions in thinking but, from Taylor's perspective, constructs

a new reality. Taylor describes this process as "a regestalting of our world and its possibilities, which opens a new (to us) way of being."[13] The acquisition and development of language, Taylor argues, and our engagement with "certain expressions or enactments open us to certain meanings and ways of being, and thus widen the range of what is possible for us."[14] What Taylor is describing here is not new to those concerned with the development, translation, and revision of liturgical language or to those who over the past generation have sought to develop inclusive and emancipatory language in our liturgical texts. We continue to wrestle with how we name and describe God with some trinitarian coherence, work to find common translations of shared liturgical texts, and are confronted with changing language to describe non-binary human identities. In each situation, the constitutive character of language confronts us with new ways of being and new ways of understanding (or at least naming) the human condition.

One more point that deserves attention in Taylor's discussion of language is his discussion of *joint attention* as a necessary condition for communication with others. Drawing on the work of developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello,[15] Taylor notes that "language doesn't just develop inside individuals, to be then communicated to others," which would limit language in some way to the sharing of information. Rather, it "evolves always in the interspace of joint attention, or communion,"[16] "in a context of intense sharing of intentions"[17] that establishes "a relation of potential communion with others."[18] In joint attention, "not just you know and I know [individually], but it is understood between us that we know together."[19] I think here of the simple exchange "The Lord be with you. And also with you." This is not simply an exchange of ideas or of information; it is an enactment of a reality that summons us to joint attention with the one we worship. Such speech events and conversational exchanges (ritualized or not) set up "a circle of communication, of joint attention. But its 'creativity' goes far beyond this inaugural force. In the way we exchange, talk to one another, treat one another, we establish and then continue or alter the terms of our relationship, what we might call the 'footing' on which we stand to each other."[20] From a Christian perspective, we are offering a normative social claim about the gathered community. This perhaps explains why (or perhaps how), as Taylor notes in his conclusion, our encounter with "divergent ethical or religious ways of life, or distinct political structures and social imaginaries" is not simply an encounter between differing ideas *about* the world but with "different human realities" in our construction of the world.[21]

James Smith has picked up on many of the themes Taylor introduces in his discussion of the social imaginary and the constitutive character of language. In a series of books produced over the past fifteen years, Smith explores what he calls our "cultural liturgies" and the tensions between those cultural practices (paradigmatically for Smith the "liturgy" of the shopping mall) and our lives as Christians. Smith reminds us that "there are no private stories; every narrative draws upon tellings that have been handed down (*traditio*)." As Smith alludes to here,

tradition concerns an active process of handing down or handing on and receiving that which has come before us. The social imaginary, then, is "received from and shared with others" and becomes "a vision *of* and *for* social life."[22] Here Smith captures Taylor's description of the social imaginary as both factual/descriptive and normative/anticipatory. In doing so, Smith emphasizes the transmission of the social imaginary and the catechetical character of liturgical practices. Yet, he is clear, as is Taylor, that there is a connection between language and enactment: "Christianity is a unique social imaginary that 'inhabits' and emerges from the matrix of preaching and prayer. The rhythms and rituals of Christian worship are not the 'expression of' a Christian worldview, but are themselves an 'understanding' implicit in practice—an understanding that cannot be had *apart from* [his emphasis] the practices."[23] Smith's concluding commentary in *Desiring the Kingdom* on the Christian liturgical practices of song (to which I return below), confession, scripture and preaching, creed, intercession, Baptism, and Eucharist suggests connection to Taylor's understanding of joint attention as they shape a way of life and, in doing so, construct a Christian worldview. In language familiar to liturgists, Taylor's and Smith's claims about the constitutive role of liturgical practice and language point us again to consider how the church's liturgy is especially a "fount" from which a Christian worldview emerges.

Music and the Social Imaginary

My concern to link the social imaginary to music and, especially to hymnody, was prompted by John Wesley's claim that the Methodist hymnals (and especially the 1780 *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodist*) constituted "a little body of experimental [i.e., experiential] and practical divinity." Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver Beckerlegge note that the main purpose of the 1780 hymnal was to serve "as a primer of theology for the Methodist people and a manual both for public and private devotion."[24] Through the hymns as well as the structure of the hymnal—ordered not by the church year or other liturgical purpose but by Wesley's understanding of the shape of Christian experience—practical divinity—"the Methodist people were not only brought to religious convictions: they came to understand their Bibles better, a secure foundation of evangelical theology was laid upon their minds, and they were built up in the Christian faith."[25] Wesley commends the hymnal "as a means of raising or quickening the spirit of devotion, of confirming his faith, of enlivening his hope, and of kindling or increasing his love of God and man."[26] These claims undergird the historic Methodist emphasis on hymnody for worship and doctrine.

James Smith picks up on this Wesleyan understanding of the formative role of hymnody and connects it to his discussion of the Christian social imaginary. He notes, "singing is a mode of expression that seems to reside in our imagination more than other forms of discourse. Partly because of the rhythms of music, song seems to get implanted in us as a mode of bodily memory. Music gets 'in' us in ways that other forms of discourse rarely do."[27] He continues by noting that a song

gets absorbed into our imagination in a way that mere texts rarely do. "Because of its nature as a 'compacted' theology, coupled with the way that singing knits a vision into our bodies, song has a catechetical role to play in the formation of our understanding and the emergence of a Christian worldview."[28] Taylor offers a similar observation in *The Language Animal*, especially as we consider the ways in which music and text influence each other and our understanding: "Music accompanied by words can acquire a certain semantic direction. We understand it through the contextualization provided by the words. This is what we see in opera, in cantatas, in liturgical music…. That is, certain musical forms: melodies, harmonies, rhythms, become expressive of finely nuanced meanings,"[29] Taylor argues, less through "assertion but of portraying through expression."[30]

Tia DeNora, through a series of case studies in her book *Music in Everyday Life*, provides a substantive analysis of the ways in which music plays a role in the constitution of aesthetic and affective agency. While she focuses her study primarily on how music functions in the lives of individuals and, therefore, in the construction of personal agency, her overall argument connects well to the ways in which Taylor and Smith talk about the social imaginary. Three themes in her book are relevant here: music as a technology of the self, music as a means of "entrainment," and music as a device of social ordering.

Technology of the self

One of DeNora's primary claims is that "music is appropriated by individuals as a resource for the ongoing constitution of themselves and their social psychological, physiological and emotional states."[31] Notice here that her focus is not on what music "means" but "what it 'does' as a dynamic of social existence"[32] as it constitutes, modulates, structures, and re-structures our emotional states, our feelings, motivations, desires, comportment, and energy.[33] We have all experienced this in some way, whether we use music to relax or to get energized, when music helps us name how we are feeling or allows us to linger with a feeling, when we are brought to tears we did not know we were withholding or to outbursts of joy. Sometimes we seek music that "matches our mood," but from DeNora's perspective it seems our moods more often come to match the music we listen to. Of course, we do not all respond to particular forms or events of music in the same way. As DeNora notes, "music's 'effects' come from the ways in which individuals orient to it, how they interpret it and how they place it within their personal musical maps, within the semiotic web of music and extra-musical associations … such as occasions and circumstances of use, and personal associations."[34] Why is this piece of music "meaningful" or important? Because of where we were, what we were doing, or who we were with when we heard it; because it was part of a wedding, funeral, ordination service, or some other significant life event. I think, for example, of the way in which Dan Schutte's song "Here I am, Lord," especially its refrain, has become in important ritual song in the ordination service for Minnesota United Methodists:

Here I am, Lord.
Is it I, Lord?
I have heard You calling in the night.
I will go, Lord,
If You lead me.
I will hold Your people in my heart.[35]

This refrain never fails to evoke some emotional response in me, perhaps from the tension between "Is it I" and "I will go." Or consider how the different musics experienced in our adolescence continue to shape our listening and emotional connections decades later. These personal experiences seem consistent with DeNora's assertation that "music can be used as a device for the reflexive process of remembering/constructing who one is, a technology for spinning the apparently continuous tale of who one is. To the extent that music is used in this way it is not only … a device of artefactual memory … it is a device for the generation of future identity and action structures, a mediator of future existence."[36] Here, in DeNora's argument that music serves to shape future identity and action, we get a sense of how the "personal imaginary" and the social imaginary might intersect.

Entrainment

A second concept in DeNora's work is *entrainment*, which she defines as "the alignment or integration of bodily features with some recurrent features in the environment."[37] DeNora reminds us that we are not simply bundles of emotion but bodies through which we experience and encounter music—in our ears, in the vibrations under our feet, in our visual and sometimes emotional engagement with a performer, and through the performer's embodied engagement with the music. She points to the ways in which music accompanies or initiates marching in step (as some might experience in singing "Onward, Christian soldiers"), how it may lead to synchronized bodily movements, such as in dance or swaying in rhythm, tapping our feet or snapping our fingers in rhythm with the music—responses not uncommon in some Christian worship settings. Through entrainment, our bodies "are aligned and regularized in relation to music, they are musically organized, musically 'composed'."[38] Such organization or composition may come to be "regularized and reproduced over time"[39]—we might even say ritualized. DeNora's primary case study for this argument explores how music is used to shape the *flow* of aerobics classes—shifting the emphasis from the individual to a social group. We might consider, from a similar perspective, how music is used to shape the flow of worship in contemporary Christian worship events, the regularity of that shape for some communities, and the association of that shape with specific emotional states, or religious feelings.[40] Although her discussion of entrainment focuses primarily on the relationship between an individual and music, the shift to its use in social settings like exercise classes and worship may open the way to consider entrainment as one form of *joint attention*.

The bodily character of entrainment does not shift us into what Taylor calls the "linguistic dimension." Yet, as we come to share in an event of entrainment, we do seem to come to a place of joint attention and a sense of "knowing together." Rather than sharing words, what we know and how we feel is expressed in the shared actions of our bodies, whether cycling, swaying, or dancing. Where a form of entrainment does seem to shift toward the linguistic dimension is in congregational song, as we align not only bodies through breath and intonation but also through speech and text in common rhythms. Nathan Myrick picks up on this in a discussion of entrainment during "musical worship." He notes, first, "that musical activity embodies our social imaginaries through entrainment." Second, he sees in his congregational studies that "the music acts as the 'coupling factor' for the entraining phenomenon." In contrast to DeNora's emphasis on entrainment between music and the individual, however, Myrick argues that it is not music that 'synchronizes' with people "but rather people entrain *with other people* [my emphasis] through the presence of musical rhythms." He is nevertheless cautious about entrainment, noting that "the quality of this formation is contingent on the enculturation of the individual (the cultural proficiency one possesses) and the negotiation of relational power dynamics inherent in any ritual activity."[41]

Device of social ordering

Myrick's caution points us, in a way, to a third theme in DeNora's work: music may function as a device of social ordering. DeNora builds on a case study of how music is used in the retail sector and the ritual space of the shopping mall. She draws our attention to the ways in which music is used, at times unwittingly and often at the subconscious level, "as a means of organizing potentially disparate individuals such that their actions may appear to be intersubjective, mutually oriented, co-ordinated, entrained and aligned."[42] Music is used as a "device of scene construction"—a sonically imagined world that "may entail realignment of bodily comportment … a realignment of emotional state … or a realignment of social conduct."[43] As a result, identity comes to be "construed as put together in and through a range of identifications with aesthetic materials and presentations."[44] That is to say, I may shop at one store because of the quality, character, or style of a product but I also do so, DeNora would argue, because this store aligns with my sonic identity (or because my identity has come to be aligned with this soundscape). There is a reason why Abercrombie & Fitch *sounds* so different from Brooks Brothers. Some shopping areas have used this same principle to dissuade the presence of certain groups as well—broadcasting classical music in areas where adolescents have started to hang out. It is only a small step to see how this applies to decisions about where Christians choose to worship, particularly the ways in which the "soundscapes" of congregations not only reflect but shape and embody racial, social, and economic identities.[45] DeNora takes this step herself as she concludes her discussion of music in the retail sector: "in situations ostensibly devoted to worship it is possible that music helps actors to picture their relation to God and to religious values … music helps to order consciousness, imagination and memory."[46]

DeNora invites consideration of two critical points in the ways both profane and sacred soundscapes contribute to social identity. First, given the importance of music as an aesthetic resource for the shaping of social identity, "for entrainment and for the shaping up of embodied aesthetic agency," she notes the consequences when particular communities—which she names as "micro- or idiocultural settings"—are deprived of access to these aesthetic resources through various forms of artistic censorship. Through the removal of "materials that had hitherto provided the tacit reference points for collective identity work, for entrainment and for the shaping up of embodied aesthetic agency … actors are deprived of a resource for the renewal of a social form and the modes of arousal, motivation and readiness for action that go with these forms."[47] Here we might point to the ways in which Christian missionaries excluded (and, in some cases, continue to exclude) local musical idioms and traditions from Christian worship.

Second, DeNora points to cultural differences expressed in the production of music, especially differences in music production between what she names as modern and traditional cultures. She invites us to consider "how and where music is created, how musical forms undergo change, how music is performed and the quality of the performer-consumer relationship … how music distribution is controlled and, in modern societies, consolidated, as with the large record production forms and the burgeoning empires of music distribution."[48] Her questions about the means of production invite further questions for those concerned with liturgical music: Who controls the creation, production, and distribution of music for Christian worship? Is there a difference between what a denomination does in the production of a hymnal and what a recording company/recording artist does in the development and promotion of contemporary worship music? What are the consequences of these production practices for the development of a Christian social imaginary? What is the place of the church in the development of that social imaginary? In many ways, the "worship wars" of the 1980s and 1990s, which seemed focused on competing styles of music and patterns of worship in predominantly white congregations (and seemed to ignore the development of Black gospel music and its influence on African-American worship), not only avoided such questions about production and distribution but failed to attend to the ways in which these competing repertoires have also contributed to competing social imaginaries.

Hymnody and the Social Imaginary

I noted earlier that my thinking about these questions was prompted, in part, by John Wesley's claim that the Methodist hymnals constituted "a little body of experimental and practical divinity." Emma Salgård Cunha, in her recent book *John Wesley, Practical Divinity and the Defence of Literature*, explores some of the ways Methodist hymnals served not only the spiritual formation of Methodist people but also the ways in which these hymnals began to construct a particular religious and political identity that increasingly distinguished the Method-

ists from the dissenting churches and the Anglican establishment in England. As she notes toward the conclusion of her discussion, "from the earliest model of the Davidic psalms, sung worship replicated the impulse of its singers towards group self-definition based on shared experience."[49] On the one hand, that group self-definition developed from the ways in which the Methodist hymns (which included the texts of the Wesleys, Isaac Watts, John Newton, and others) were excluded from the Anglican liturgies—even as hymns began to acquire a "semi-liturgical status" among the Methodists.[50] On the other hand, Methodist hymnody became an active means of self-definition. As Cuhna argues, "Wesley's deliberate depiction of the Methodist hymnals as exemplarily practical and experiential comes to resemble a defensive strategy through which he unites his readers by criticizing both the dissenting churches and the Anglican hegemony."[51] Methodist liturgical and theological identity developed from these experiences of exclusion and resistance and came to be "encapsulated by the communal act of hymnody" through the "combination of an outward-looking message of free grace and of an active life of faith" with a structure of social organization—the class meetings, bands, and societies—in which that message was proclaimed and practiced.[52]

What Cunha describes seems consistent with Taylor's understanding of the constitutive role of language and the place of the linguistic dimension in constructing a social imaginary, as well as with Smith's understanding of the catechetical/formational role of hymnody in that construction. For the early Methodists, the hymns offered language, imagery, biblical interpretation—a web of meaning—that, in Taylor's words, not only suggested "new purposes, new levels of behavior, and new meanings" but that also provided a framework for "new feelings, desires, goals, relationships, and values,"[53] as we see in DeNora's discussion of music as a technology of the self. The Methodist hymns became, within the early Methodist movement, constitutive of a new social as well as religious identity. Wesley himself, in his preface to the 1780 collection, framed the importance of the hymns and the hymnal this way: "In what other publication of the kind have you so distinct and full an account of scriptural Christianity? Such a declaration of the heights and depths of religion, speculative and practical? So strong cautions against the most plausible errors; particularly those that are now most prevalent?"[54] They are, as Taylor argues, performatives that "help to bring about what they (at least in part) represent."[55]

Awet Andemicael makes a similar argument in an insightful discussion of the function of hymnody in Richard Allen's theology and liturgical practices.[56] As part of her discussion, Andemicael reflects on John Newton's hymn "How lost was my condition." The hymn was first published in 1779 in *Olney Hymns* among a series of hymns based on Isaiah (in this case most likely Is 53:4-5); it found popularity in African-American and other hymnals of the early 19th century but largely disappeared by the end of that century. The hymn portrays Jesus as the physician who cures "sin-sick souls" (leading some hymnal editors to add the

refrain "There is a balm in Gilead" at the mid-point and end of the stanza). The four stanzas below are from the 1801 African-American hymnal *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns Selected from Various Authors*, which omits Newton's second stanza.

> How lost was my condition,
> Till Jesus made me whole;
> There is but one physician
> Can cure a sin sick soul:
> Next door to death he found me,
> And pluck'd [orig: snatch'd] me from the grave;
> To tell to all around me:
> His wond'rous power to save!
>
> Of men great skill possessing,
> I thought a cure to gain,
> But that prov'd more distressing,
> And added to my pain:
> Some said that nothing ail'd me;
> Some gave me up for lost,
> Thus every refuge fail'd me,
> And all my hopes were cross'd.
>
> At length this great physician,
> How matchless in his power (orig: grace),
> Accepted my petition,
> And undertook my cure (orig: case),
> First gave me sight to view him,
> For sin my sight had seal'd,
> Then bid me look unto him,
> I look'd and I was heal'd.
>
> A dying, risen Jesus,
> Seen by the eye of faith;
> At once from danger frees us,
> And saves the soul from death:
> Come then to this Physician,
> His help he'll freely give;
> He makes no hard condition,
> 'Tis only—look and live.[57]

Andemicael writes, "Unlike personal testimonies in sermons and autobiographies, which people could read or hear, hymns containing similar testimonies invite listeners to participate personally, singing themselves into the role of the convert-

ed sinner and co-living the spiritual journey to salvation."[58] DeNora's concept of bodily entrainment may not strictly apply to Andemicael's claim, but Andemicael is describing, at the least, a kind of emotional and spiritual "attunement" between the individual and the narrative of the hymn. Where in DeNora the emphasis remains on the individual and the individual's aesthetic agency, with music serving as a technology of the individual self, Andemicael helps press us toward an emphasis on the development of a social identity in relationship with others through text and tune. Through communal singing, the emotional and spiritual "attunement" she describes aids in the construction of a social identity, shaping "the way we perceive and believe our relationships with others to be" as it "affectively index[es] memories of relationships with others."[59]

Newton's more familiar Olney hymn "Amazing Grace" seems, in some ways, a doxological response to the healing received from that physician. Yet unlike "How lost was my condition," "Amazing Grace" has become in many ways *the* expression of an American evangelical piety shared by evangelical and mainline Protestantism, Roman Catholic communities, and beyond the church.[60] Bill Moyers' 1990 documentary provides some sense of how "Amazing Grace" has functioned—and continues to function—to shape the social imaginary of American life.[61] It has remained in hymnals for over two hundred years, is present in more than seventy hymnals published in the 21st century, and appears at or near the top of any Google search of "top ten" hymns. It is played by bagpipers at funerals for police and firefighters, made its way into American popular music through a recording by Judy Collins, was the focus of a much-discussed documentary performance by Aretha Franklin, has been sung by presidents,[62] and is being used for PSAs addressing teen homelessness. As Kevin Lewis argues, it has become a "cultural icon"—but one that functions as a "comfort song" akin to "comfort food."[63] He notes both the positive and negative aspects of such comfort as it "sounds" in the American social imaginary. One the one hand, its comforting power "would seem to rise out of persisting needful personal and local community negotiation with identity-strengthening (or identity-threatening) traditional beliefs and values…. The song plays over and over again,… into the construction, re-construction, maintenance and repair of adult identities: fluid, shaky, and threatened, as of course identities must be, in a free-market culture of free-for-all individualism."[64] On the other hand, he argues, it "functions in our lives all-too-often to purge and to render passive. Its weightlessness consists in its harmlessness, in its function of letting off steam, in reducing emotional pressure and energetic resolve. It celebrates the static: me, 'just as I am.' It does not lead me to be and to do better. It confers an ever-renewable blessing on things as they are."[65] Whether we agree with Lewis or not, we cannot deny the place "Amazing Grace" occupies in the American religious imagination.

What of more recent hymnody? The "hymn explosion" that began in the 1960s in the US and England was, in part, a response to the (perhaps dysfunctional) Chris-

tian social imaginary of the mid-twentieth century and to the growing concern for social, economic, and racial equality. Hymn-writers in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have continued that work, offering in poetic form a way to imagine and nurture a different ordering of Christian life. There are many examples we might explore from Mary Louise Bringle, Dan Damon, Shirley Erena Murray, Adam Tice, and others included in recent hymnals. I have chosen one very recent example, not (yet) in contemporary hymnals and communal repertoires. In "When Life Becomes a Contest" David Bjorlin helps us name the reality of modern life and begin to re-imagine our relationship to one another, to creation, and to God. Bjorlin described his purpose in writing it this way: "the way unfettered competition, consumption, and growth (all hallmarks of late capitalism) have negatively impacted our relationship to ourselves and with our neighbors, our planet, and our churches needs to be recognized and renounced so we can begin to imagine new ways of living in community with one another and the earth."

When life becomes a contest
for new and better things,
when markets speak as prophets
and cynics rule as kings,
when children are exploited
to fund our lavish schemes,
God, give us broader visions
and nurture deeper dreams.

When earth becomes a product
to buy, abuse, and sell,
when woods are turned to wastelands
where creatures cannot dwell,
when we inflame your climate
to dangerous extremes,
God, give us bold solutions
and nurture deeper dreams.

When church becomes a business
that only seeks to grow,
when Christ is voted chairman,
our sacred CEO,
when faithis one more racket
and wealth alone redeems,
God, give us greater wisdom
and nurture deeper dreams.

Till captives caged by money
are fully freed to give,
till all of us live simply

so all can simply live,
till peace cascades like waters
and justice finally streams,
God, give us hopeful visions,
and nurture deeper dreams.[66]

Bjorlin offers no consolation for, no softening of, no evasion from reality in his description of the economic, ecological, and social contexts experienced by much of humanity. Rather, he brings back to our imagination the prophetic vision of Joel 2:28 / Acts 2:17-18—sons and daughters who prophecy, young men who see visions, old men who dream dreams of a community and world restored to God's order. In doing so, he helps us name the brokenness of our world and of our way of being in the world; the "deeper dreams" remain implicit until the final stanza which describes a world of freedom, simplicity, peace, and justice. As communal song, we are brought together in protest and prayer, imagining a social order that contrasts with what so many experience and framing a Christian vision for that order.

Bjorlin proposes setting the text to "King's Lynn," an English folk tune adapted and arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams for the 1906 *English Hymnal* and set there with G. K. Chesterton's "O God of Earth and Altar," which begins "O God of earth and altar, / bow down and hear our cry, / our earthly rulers falter, / our people drift and die…." Bjorlin notes the thematic connections between Chesterton's text and his own. Several contemporary hymnals, including *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELCA) and *Glory to God* (PCUSA), use the tune to set Horatio Nelson's 1864 text "By All Your Saints Still Striving." The tune, like Bjorlin's text, offers neither consolation nor softening; rather, it has a kind of assertiveness or insistence in melody and rhythm that accompanies the assertiveness of the text, focuses our attention, and unites the singing community in protest and petition. Less a new way of describing the human condition than an honest assessment of that condition, text and tune help unite us in naming the distortions in our way of living and imagining a new and more faithful way of being—the reconstruction of a Christian social imaginary.

These few examples demonstrate, I believe, that over time and with sustained practice hymnody can and does contribute to the construction of the social imaginary. Uniting images, sounds, and rhythms in mind, breath, and body, hymnody has the potential to constitute a new vision of the real even as it may function as a "technology of the self." It evokes the joint attention of a community and draws that community into a kind of communion. It constructs a "soundscape" that may be peculiar to a community or that may be more broadly shared. It can shape our affective lives and be "encoded" in our bodily memory. Through repeated practice our singing can evoke new desires, goals, and values or bring back to life desires, goals, and values we once had. It has a contribution to make to the ongoing shaping of a Christian social imaginary.

Notes

1. David Lonsdale, "The Church as Context for Christian Spirituality" in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality,* ed. Arthur Holder (New York: Blackwell, 2005), 244.
2. Lonsdale, 244. Although my focus here is on Christian liturgical practices, similar claims can be made about the place of Jewish liturgical practices. See, for example, Steven Kepnes' discussion of liturgical selfhood in *Jewish Liturgical Reasoning* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 45-77. Kepnes writes, "In liturgical acts, people practice the ideal relations of brotherhood and sisterhood. In liturgy, people not only imagine ideal relations but get to act them out in a kind of theater of the ideal" (76).
3. This initial discussion draws on my chapter "Individualism and Community within Worship Practices" in *Theological Foundations for Worship,* ed. Khalia J. Williams and Mark A. Lamport (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 218-231.
4. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 183.
5. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 23.
6. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 24.
7. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries,* 183. As William Cavanaugh notes, "Once the imaginations underlying modern political processes have been exposed as false theologies, we can begin to recover true theological imaginings of space and time around which to enact communities of solidarity and resistance…. Precisely as a *body,* the body of Christ is not confinable to a spiritual 'meaning' secreted away in the soul of the individual believer. In the Eucharist people are gathered into a community in which the calculus of individual and group is overcome by a mutual participation." *Theopolitical Imagination* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 4.
8. Lauren Winner analyzes several historical examples of death-giving (or life-defeating) Christian practices in *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
9. Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2016), 4.
10. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 22.
11. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 29.
12. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 46.
13. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 46.
14. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 47.
15. Michael Tomasello, *Origins of Human Communication* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008). See also Cathal O'Madagain and Michael Tomasello, "Joint attention to mental content and the social origin of reasoning," *Synthese* 198 (2021): 4057-4078.
16. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 50.
17. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 56.
18. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 90.
19. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 90.
20. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 265.
21. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 328.
22. James A. K. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 66. Smith continues his exploration of these themes in *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) and *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017).
23. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 69.
24. *The Works of John Wesley,* Vol. 7, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodist,* ed. Franz Hildebrandt and Oliver A. Beckerlegge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 1.
25. J. Wesley, *Collection of Hymns,* 61-62.
26. J. Wesley, *Collection of Hymns,* 75.
27. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 171.
28. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom,* 172.
29. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 242.

30. Taylor, *Language Animal,* 244. Some contemporary musicologists push against the notion of music as "language." Julian Johnson, for example, argues that "music does not say; it takes place. It puts its participants into *communion,* in the sense of partaking in something shared, but it does not convey information or communicate any extraneous content; it does not pass messages, tell stories, express emotions, or represent things." Julian Johnson, "Music Language Dwelling" in *Theology, Music, and Modernity: Struggles for Freedom,* ed. Jeremy Begbie, Daniel K. L. Chua, Markus Rathey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 309.
31. Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 47.
32. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 49.
33. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 53.
34. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 61.
35. Daniel Schutte, "Here I am, Lord,"© 1981, OCP Publications.
36. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 63.
37. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 77-78.
38. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 78.
39. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 79.
40. For a brief discussion of flow in contemporary worship, see Zachary Barnes, "How Flow Became a Thing" in *Flow: The Ancient Way To Do Contemporary Worship,* ed. Lester Ruth (Nashville: Abingdon, 2020), 13-23.
41. Nathan Myrick, *Music for Others: Care, Justice, and Relational Ethics in Christian Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 67.
42. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 109.
43. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 123.
44. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 131.
45. Melanie Ross picks up on this at several points in *Evangelical Worship* (New York: Oxford, 2021) as she considers the "soundtrack" of particular congregations and liturgical traditions.
46. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 146. Yet Clive Marsh and Vaughan Roberts suggest that "as social imaginaries became disembedded from theological and religious worldviews, becoming more fragmented in the process, one of the ways in which integration could be maintained was by locating it in personal experience…. In contemporary Western society … music creates a social imaginary which functions as religions have in the past (and still do for many) and it is therefore not unreasonable to speak of the 'spirituality of music'." Clive Marsh and Vaughan S. Roberts, "Listening as Religious Practice (Part Two): Exploring Qualitative Data from an Empirical Study of the Cultural Habits of Music Fans," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 30:2 (2015): 304.
47. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 127.
48. DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life,* 156.
49. Emma Salgård Cunha, *John Wesley, Practical Divinity and the Defence of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 136.
50. Cunha, *John Wesley,* 117.
51. Cunha, *John Wesley,* 118.
52. Cunha, *John Wesley,* 136.
53. Taylor, *Linguistic Dimension,* 4, 33.
54. J. Wesley, *Collection of Hymns,* 74.
55. Taylor, *Linguistic Dimension,* 74.
56. Allen (1760-1831) was the first African-American to be ordained in the Methodist Episcopal Church and became the founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.
57. *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns: Selected from Various Authors,* ed. Richard Allen and John Ormrod, (Philadelphia: John Ormrod, 1801), 6-7.
58. Awet Andemicael, "The Theology of Richard Allen's Musical Worship" in *Theology, Music, and Modernity,* 273.
59. Myrick, *Music for Others,* 122.
60. https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/amazing-grace (accessed November 10, 2023) provides a helpful overview of the origin and history of the text and its tunes as well as an analysis of the text.

61. See https://billmoyers.com/content/amazing-grace-bill-moyers/ (accessed November 9, 2023) for the video and a transcript.
62. Vincent Lloyd, noting the place of "Amazing Grace" in the national social imaginary, presses against the sentimental and affirming responses to President Obama's singing of "Amazing Grace" at the funeral for Clementa Pinckney at Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston: "Obama's performance of grace, like his rhetoric of hope, pacifies. It turns attention away from the depths of white supremacy, as not just an individual vice or a subculture but a pathology of the United States as a whole, infecting everything from laws and policies to ways of seeing, knowing, and feeling. And it distracts from the grassroots organizing work that would be required to rightly address racial injustice. Grace promises unity in transformation, but from a position of power." Vincent Lloyd, "Afterword: Amazing Grace," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 40:1 (Spring 2022): 122.
63. Kevin Lewis, "America's Heirloom Comfort Song: 'Amazing Grace,'" *Implicit Religion* 16:3 (2013): 277.
64. Lewis, "America's Heirloom Comfort Song," 282.
65. Lewis, "America's Heirloom Comfort Song," 286.
66. Quote and hymn text as provided by David Bjorlin in an email of 8 September 2023. "When Life Becomes a Contest"© 2023 GIA Publications, Chicago, IL. Used by permission.