

BOOK REVIEWS

Singing Church History: Introducing the Christian Story through Hymn Texts. By Paul Rorem. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2024. 228 pp.

When I taught church history courses for Fuller Seminary, I always included a segment in each class session called “Voices from the Heart.” It was a brief devotional exercise that asked students to sing a hymn, reflect on a reading, and join in a prayer drawn from whatever period we might be discussing that day. Students consistently expressed appreciation for this aspect of the course.

In his preface to *Singing Church History*, Paul Rorem admits that he often did something similar by asking students to sing a hymn in the middle of a class—partly to rouse drowsy students, but for a pedagogical purpose as well. He understands that while we often cite the adage *lex orandi, lex credendi*, it is equally true that the law of song is the law of belief. This book shares that insight beyond the seminary classroom.

Rorem’s intent is neither to provide a history of hymnody nor a history of Christianity, but to give an overview of how the church’s song reflects and illuminates its story. He does this mostly chronologically up to the Reformation; moving forward from the sixteenth century, the chapters are more thematic (though still roughly chronological): Pietism, Watts and the Wesley brothers, revivalism and the social gospel, African-American hymnody. In each chapter, Rorem tells the story of how the hymnody of that era or movement illuminates the theological and other concerns that were the broader picture of the history of Christianity.

Each hymn Rorem mentions refers the reader to an appearance in a contemporary hymnal, mostly *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* or the *Lutheran Service Book*. This may limit its usefulness somewhat for non-Lutheran readers. I wish he had consistently included references

to the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, still widely in use in some parts of American Lutheranism.

He tells delightful and sometimes quite detailed stories about representative hymns in each chapter—more than the usual thumbnail history one can find in any hymnal companion. His fascinating excursus on “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” is a case in point. Rorem traces its evolution from a medieval poem attributed (probably wrongly, Rorem advises) to Bernard of Clairvaux, to a Latin hymn, to the famous German translation by Paul Gerhardt, and then to modern English translations. He explains how each iteration of the hymn reflected changing theological sensitivities. Rorem does not neglect the role of the familiar melody, adapted by Hans Hassler from a German love song and soon firmly attached to Gerhardt’s text, and then later morphing into the world of twentieth century popular music with adaptations by Peter, Paul, and Mary, and Paul Simon. He notes the irony of this Cistercian hymn being so widely embraced by thoroughly anti-Catholic Protestants. His account opens startling new vistas into the medieval hymn itself.

Nearly half of the book deals with hymns prior to the Reformation, obviously the longest stretch of Christian history but not a time that we normally associate with hymnody. We cannot fault Rorem for that; he is, after all, a scholar of early and medieval church history. Still, I wish he had given a little more attention to more recent centuries. His chapter on revivalism discusses nothing earlier than Fanny J. Cosby, so there is no mention of Appalachian folk hymnody. There is nothing here about post-Vatican II Roman Catholic hymnody or late twentieth-century writers like Fred Pratt Green, Brian Wren, or Ruth Duck.

That quibble aside, the book is full of insights into how Christians have sung their faith through the ages. It would be useful for any pastor or church musician, and it is accessible enough that it could be the focus of a study by lay people in any congregation. That would be an enjoyable and helpful way to sing—and indeed to learn!—church history.

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