

Transcript of Interview with Bishop Timothy Dudley-Smith

Born on 26 December 1926, the eminent hymn-writer Timothy Dudley-Smith, former Bishop of Thetford, lives in retirement near Salisbury. This conversation with Anne Harrison took place at his home in June 2006. An edited version is published in the September 2006 issue of Church Music Quarterly.

Bishop Timothy, I know that you wrote poetry for quite some time before you tried your hand at hymns – what led you to begin writing hymns?

I never did really begin writing hymns. I wrote poetry which some friends discovered and set to music, which was a total surprise to me.

And was one particular text a significant starting point in terms of your hymns being published?

Yes, it was ‘Tell out, my soul’. I was editing a magazine and so was sent a review copy of the *New English Bible* New Testament, and while browsing through this I saw the words ‘Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord.’ I said to myself, ‘That’s really verse.’ So I put the rest of it into verse, and really thought no more about it. Not long afterwards, a friend of mine who was helping edit the *Anglican Hymn Book* asked me, ‘Timothy, we’re doing this hymnbook, we want some new stuff. You’re a literary sort of chap, have you written any hymns?’ I said, ‘No, I should love to write hymns but I’m so unmusical that it’s beyond me.’

And that could easily have been the end of it. But he went on, ‘Have you written any verse that we could set as a hymn?’ I replied, ‘Well, since you ask, I did write a kind of metrical version of the *Magnificat* the other day; I think I could still find that.’ I let them see it, they said they could indeed set it to music, and would I try my hand at a hymn on the subject of home. So I did that [‘Lord, you left the highest heaven’], and I turned a favourite sermon into a hymn [‘Christ be my leader’]. So there were three in the *Anglican Hymn Book* [1965] and that was how I began, to my great surprise.

Now, you claim not to be musical but you must have a vivid feel for metre and rhythm, so when you hear your texts with your ‘inward ear’ are you hearing them spoken or sung?

Well, these days I’m hearing them sung. I paid very little attention to the music in the early days. I simply wrote a text and was extraordinarily fortunate in that Michael Baughen and others would then often set it to music, not using an existing tune at all. For example, I wrote ‘Child of the stable’s secret birth’ for a Christmas card, never thinking of it as a hymn. But stanzas which are perfectly acceptable as poetry, with the stresses falling in different places to give variety, become a real challenge for whoever tries to set them to music. So when Christopher Dearnley, then organist of St Paul’s Cathedral, wrote a tune for my Christmas poem and recorded it, he needed to indicate in the printed music where notes were to be added or omitted to accommodate differences between verses.

More recently I’ve discovered that really the only way to make sure that the verses are consistent with one other is to use a hymn tune – it may not actually be the one to which the hymn will eventually be sung. In doing that, I’ve been surprised to find how something in one of the usual metres can be sung to *some* hymn tunes in that metre and not to some others, and equally that there are some tunes to which you can sing almost anything. MELITA, it seems to me, fits almost any text in that metre [8.8.8.8.8.8]. But of course you can’t actually set everything to MELITA, though very occasionally I allow myself to use it!

And have you ever felt that some words of yours have been paired with a tune that somehow slanted the meaning in a different direction from the one in which you were heading? Have you ever been disappointed at the pairing of words and music?

Not quite in the sense I think you mean, but I've been disappointed sometimes because what I really look for is singability. I don't mean a good 'rant' (though I don't mind that to the right words) but a tune that people can sing easily and that doesn't require them to concentrate so hard on the tune that they could be singing any words at all. We mentioned 'Tell out my soul' – I was telling that story once at a meeting and I said that in the *Anglican Hymn Book* they actually set it to what I described as a quite unsingable tune (though they put at the bottom that it could also be sung to WOODLANDS) and a little voice at the back said, 'I wrote the tune!' It was my dear friend Bill Llewellyn, who wrote TIDINGS specifically for 'Tell out my soul', I think. What I really meant was that when they launched the *Anglican Hymn Book* they did it at a huge clergy conference where you couldn't rehearse anything. They just had a few hymns on sheets and got people to sing them, and of course nobody could sing TIDINGS without learning it first. I think, too, that I am slowly acquiring a rudimentary sense that certain tunes convey a mood which does not fit with certain themes.

Do you think that one of the reasons certain of your texts have captured the public imagination is that they've been paired with particularly striking tunes?

Oh yes, I've no doubt about that at all.

What is it (apart from the quality of the text and a striking tune) that makes some hymns take off and become really widely used?

Well, it's an extraordinary thing which I would find hard to explain. It is easier to identify certain things which can limit the usefulness of a text. For example, I didn't write 'Tell out, my soul' as a hymn, I had no thought of publication in writing it, but actually it doesn't use language that will offend the inclusive language lobby, which I had never heard of at the time. It doesn't use archaisms, which in the 1960s I wouldn't have minded at all – it could have been full of 'e'ers' and 'o'ers' and 'e'ens', but it happened that it wasn't. It is on a theme which has a wide appeal to people who think of the *Magnificat* as part of their liturgy and people who think of it as part of their Bible; it appeals to Roman Catholics because it's Mary's song. And in that sense I suppose it simply avoided a lot of pitfalls that could have greatly limited a text, and I had no idea that the pitfalls even existed!

Or take 'Lord, for the years', which I wrote [in 1967] for the Scripture Union, for their centenary. For a long time it wasn't sung very much, and then when we got to the VE and VJ Day commemorations in 1995 it became quite well-known as a hymn because it proved to say the kinds of things people wanted to say then. A succession of anniversaries, centenaries and so on have used it, and that's how it has become as well-known as it is.

I believe that it's been used at weddings too. Do you envisage people singing it to celebrate your 80th birthday?

I hadn't thought of that! Not impossible, I suppose.

Your birthday is on Boxing Day, and I know you've written a number of Christmas hymns. Is there any one that you particularly hope people might sing this year? Or indeed are you writing a new hymn for this Christmas?

I've written a new one for this year's Christmas card, as usual. Since we've been living here we've attended our local village church, and because we send some of the congregation a Christmas card, it soon became known that I wrote a new Christmas hymn each year. It's rather touching that they now ask for a copy in advance and include it somewhere in their Christmas services. It's quite good for me,

because I have to think to myself, 'I shall probably hear them sing this.' Since they would probably be the first to say that they're not in any sense trained choristers, it has to be something congregational.

I've actually written one this coming Christmas to DREAM ANGUS, which struck me some time ago as being ideal for a Christmas hymn, as it's a lullaby. So I wrote to John Bell and said, 'I know this is not your tune, but you introduced it into mainstream hymnody – would you mind if I were to do this?' I had a very welcoming letter back, but then I found out what a difficult tune it is to write to because there are different versions of it. However, Bill Llewellyn has helped me with a firm arrangement and I've written some words, so perhaps we shall sing that this Christmas.

Going back to your early days, do you remember using a particular hymnbook?

Yes, as a child we used *Ancient and Modern* (the old blue book). I had a great attachment to 'O happy band of pilgrims' and I can remember belting out 'For all the saints' – I'm sure to the discomfort of my neighbours as I have never understood what it means to sing in tune. I hope it was a joyful noise to the Lord but it wasn't to anyone else!

Then at school we sang from the *English Hymnal*, which introduced me to a lot of things which were quite new to me. At my theological college we sang from *Songs of Praise*, and in the duller bits of some addresses I used to browse in the back of it and think, 'Why on earth did they put this into a hymnbook?'

When did you particularly grow to love Charles Wesley's hymns? I know that you've written about Charles Wesley and are a great admirer of his work.

That's quite right – I think that I had already become increasingly an admirer of the Wesley hymns I knew when SPCK asked me if I would like to do an anthology for the bicentenary [of his death]. I greatly enjoyed that – it was published in 1987 so I suppose they asked me in 1985 or 1986. I didn't realise at the time how much he'd written, but my great standby was Frank Baker's *Representative Verse of Charles Wesley* which I borrowed from the University Library in Cambridge. Then I began to borrow from the Library, bit by bit, the thirteen volumes of the Osborne edition of the verse of John and Charles Wesley, until we got to Volume 13 which they couldn't produce, to my astonishment. However Wesley House could, and I also advertised in the *Methodist Recorder* and had one reply, which enabled me to purchase a set which has been on my shelves ever since.

Because of that, I suppose, the American Hymn Society asked me to speak on Charles Wesley, so I gave them ten points on why Charles is a hymn-writer for today. All this soaked me in him and what has been written about him. Then Dick Watson did me the honour of asking me to write the entry on Charles Wesley in his forthcoming *Dictionary of Hymnology*, which I've done, but with a good deal of trepidation – I'm really not a Wesley scholar, I'm a Wesley lover.

And have you ever been involved yourself in editing a hymnbook?

Well, I was the publisher of *Youth Praise* [Church Pastoral Aid Society, 1966] but I had nothing to do with the editing. Then Michael Baughen, who's been a seminal influence, set to work on *Psalm Praise* [1973] and asked me to be one of a group, not so much editors as contributors, because it was a book largely written by what would otherwise have been the editorial team. That taught me how very difficult it is to be both a contributor and an editor, because you arrive at a meeting with your stuff that you believe in, and you hear a lot of other people's stuff some of which you don't quite believe in, and it becomes all very difficult. So I declined such invitations as came my way until I was asked to join the committee for the new *A & M, Common Praise* [2000]. Henry Chadwick, the then Chairman, is an old friend and that was an invitation I couldn't resist.

If you go through *Common Praise* there is a surprising amount of fairly contemporary material, though the book as a whole is firmly on the traditional side. Talking simply of words, I think there are

something like fifty living contributors, which must take one right back to the early days of *Ancient & Modern*, when the same might have been true. I don't think it would have been true in succeeding editions. We could easily have included more, but I am a great lover of the old hymns, and I wouldn't have wanted to see some of the good old material make way for the untried new beyond a certain point.

Your 1989 book Praying with the English Hymn Writers draws on the tradition of individuals using hymns in their personal devotions. Do you think many Christians still do this?

Well, *I* do! I just have no information about how far other people do, apart from occasional anecdotal evidence. A friend of mine wrote to me the other day saying they had bought *A House of Praise* when it first came out and had spent the year using it in their private prayers, reading together (husband and wife) one hymn a day, saving the Christmas ones until the end. I was very touched by that.

I wondered if, for some people, listening to CDs of Christian music either in the home or in the car might have taken the place of devotional reading of hymns.

I'm sure that, as you say, there are people who do listen to that kind of thing as an act of devotion and edification – I don't think it actually fulfils quite the same sort of role. I quite often finish my own prayers with 'Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go' (which is headed 'Before work'), and very suitable it is as you begin to turn towards what lies on your desk for the day.

I know that you've always found it important to submit your work to others for comment, which shows admirable humility because it can be quite a painful process. Could you describe how that developed?

Yes, I will indeed. I first did this, of course, as a member of the *Psalm Praise* group; I don't think I was necessarily very willing to listen to what people had to say, or rather, I did listen but tended to think that my version was better! But it soon became necessary for me to have some kind of musical consultant, and at the same time I was putting together a collection.

I couldn't at that time find somebody who would publish a collection of my hymns – by now I'd written something over a hundred – and I decided to put together my own private resource as a source book for editors. Having prepared that, I wanted to put in suggested tunes. So with great courage I approached Derek Kidner, whose writings I admired and who had the tremendous advantages of being a biblical scholar, firmly rooted in an orthodox faith, and a concert quality musician, and having been the musical editor of a hymnbook [*Christian Praise*, 1957]. To my great pleasure he said he would be willing to look at everything I was going to put into the book.

Then I asked if I could send him year by year what I wrote. At that time I was really only writing on holiday in Cornwall, so at the end of every holiday I would put together the six or eight texts and attach some questions to each: Is my theology right in verse 3? Do you prefer this expression or that in verse 4? Is there a tune? And I always say he gave me the confidence to go on. He suggested tunes, he answered my questions; *very* occasionally he said, 'I don't think this will do at all' and I simply withdrew the text. Sometimes he suggested a word, for which I'm grateful, but not often. It was really a question that when a hymn had been past him I felt some confidence in it.

You grew up with the Book of Common Prayer, the Authorised Version and using 'Thee' for God – was it difficult for you when changes in language were really becoming intense in the 1960s? You yourself, I believe, now don't use archaisms in your hymn-writing.

I can remember how very odd it seemed when the *Revised Standard Version* first came out, but of course it was pretty conservative really, and I found it quite refreshing. When I left my first curacy our lay reader gave me a copy as a present, which I still value.

As for writing, I could awfully easily have written a pastiche of Victorian hymnody – it's much simpler if you can have 'Thees' and 'Thines' for your rhymes. If you take the 1950 *A&M* and look at the first fifty hymns, you'll find that a surprising number have 'Thee', 'Thy' or 'Thine' as part of the rhyme scheme. And 'o'er' and 'e'er' and so on can be very useful in terms of scansion. But I made the decision to avoid these sort of archaisms fairly early on.

Inclusive language was a much more difficult problem – I mean, I had never heard of it at all when I put my first collection together. It was the Americans, of course, who introduced me to inclusive language and the strong feelings in the 1980s over this. I found it very difficult to believe that there was this opposition to the generic 'man'. I could understand people not wanting to sing 'brothers' and the rest of it, though Paul uses the expression, but the juxtaposition and contrast of 'man' with God' – I just didn't see any other way to do this. However, it became clear to me that here was a real cause of stumbling, so I set myself to change what I'd written – if it had come five years later I'd have found it very difficult but fortunately I was able to do so, and now I do actually write naturally in those terms as far as inclusive language of persons goes. On inclusive language for the deity I'm totally unrepentant, in that if this is how Scripture speaks then I don't feel I can be wrong do the same.

Are there some kinds of words which you would find very difficult to include in your own hymns? Are you conscious of steering away from certain areas?

I do think there are things that we need to pray about that it is less appropriate to sing about, usually in the darker side of life. Hymnody can't ignore that darker side, but when we are singing, for the most part, we are singing in terms of aspiration. It's hard to put into words, but I do also have a sense that there are certain categories that are somehow inappropriate, if not for public worship in general, at least for congregational hymnody. I have tended not to use those, but at the same time I try to push my boundaries out a little and make occasional references to scientific knowledge and other contemporary issues, let alone to social needs and conditions in a hungry world. But I don't think I would have found a place for Fred Kaan's 'council flat' [in 'Sing we a song of high revolt'].

It's a weighty responsibility, as you yourself have said, to put words into the mouths of worshippers, and that applies to hymn-choosers as well as to hymn-writers. Do you think the church is doing enough to train clergy and musicians in how to choose hymns well in an act of worship?

I don't really know what the church is doing; I expect the RSCM is probably doing as much as anybody. But on your general point, yes, I do feel very strongly that actually the bigger responsibility rests in the first place with [hymnal] editors and in the second place with the leaders of worship. If writers are to follow their bent and so push their boundaries a bit, we *shall* produce some things that are going to be usable in only very limited contexts. And no doubt we all produce sub-standard things from time to time and can't see it ourselves – this is part of the creative process. This is where the role of the editor is so important. But then the leader of worship is the person on whose shoulders is the responsibility to say, 'These are my people, into whose mouths I am going to be putting these words – are these words going to be suitable for them?' It is a big responsibility, not helped by a lack of knowledge of our precious heritage of hymnody, even among some clergy and church musicians.

Would you like to see the Church of England having a core repertoire of hymns that every worshipper should know? With the breadth of music available now it's quite difficult sometimes, for example at big diocesan occasions, to find shared repertoire. Is it anything you've ever considered?

Well yes, interestingly enough, I have. When friends of mine were thinking of editing hymnbooks in the days when the Jubilate Group was getting going – I've never been a member, but I've always been close to them – I wondered whether one couldn't produce a supplement that, by being rather larger than any single supplement, could be used with eight mainstream hymnbooks, for example. But I rather dread the thought of any actual central direction, an official Anglican core or an approved list. I believe that this has been resisted down the years, and I think rightly.

Diversity is good?

Diversity, yes, but not revolution. In other words, I hope people who are desperately keen to embrace the new won't lose touch with the old, and that people who value the old won't close their minds to the thought that the 'old' was once 'new' – it had to be tried out by worshippers who'd sooner have been singing something by Charles Wesley.

One new way of singing, of course, is by projecting the words on a screen. For a hymn this will usually mean that only one verse or even part of a verse is visible at a time. Does that worry you in terms of the experience of the person singing that hymn?

Yes, it worries me in several ways really. I'm worried by the fact that people can't see the hymn as a whole – we are suffering the same loss that the Americans have suffered for years, in that they never see the hymn as a piece of poetry because the words are always between the staves. Equally if you sing only one verse at a time from a screen you can't see the whole.

You don't know what's coming next. We were on holiday in Yorkshire and went to a delightful family service in a local church. The leader (I think he was perhaps their lay worship leader, a gifted sort of chap who made everyone feel thoroughly at home) said, 'We're going to have our next song, to help you all feel that we are a congregation. Here's the first verse, and I want you to do the actions.' Well, the first verse was 'Give a little nod to the head beside you, give a little nod, give a little nod.' Then came 'Give a little pat to the hand beside you', and then – I'm serious about this – 'Put a little hand on the knee beside you'. I was thankful to be singing this between my wife and my daughter, and we had no idea how many more verses were going to come! It's a slightly extreme example, but it does illustrate the point that you don't know where you're heading.

I would also love Christians to have hymnbooks on their shelves at home; the days when everyone took their own hymnbook to church are probably gone, but I think that a Christian home is not properly equipped if it doesn't have at least a copy of the book they use in their church. But for many churches now there is no book as such...

I loved the image you used in one article on hymns, the marking of ice skating in the Winter Olympics, with marks both for technical excellence and artistic merit. Do you find that, if you're going to a service and encountering a new hymn, you tend to give it marks out of ten rather than worshipping through it, or do you find it easy to divide your critical self from your worshipping self?

No, not easy actually. I'm the sort of person who needs to have met something several times before really feeling that I have grasped it. So on first singing a new hymn, if it obtrudes in any way, if I feel it's at fault in its rhyme scheme and so on, I find that quite a turn-off and have to tell myself that this is not what I'm here for.

A final question – is there one hymn collection you would choose to have with you if you were marooned on a desert island?

I would find that an extraordinarily difficult choice to make, because different hymnbooks have meant different things to me at different times. In my school chapel when we were singing from *The English Hymnal* there were certain hymns there that I hadn't met before that spoke to me and have stayed with me since. At university in the Christian Union we were still singing from *Golden Bells* [Children's Special Service Mission, 1925]. I can remember a very distinct moment of truth when we were singing Elizabeth Clephane's 'Beneath the cross of Jesus' – it just came to me that this was exactly what I wanted to say and where I wanted to be, and it was a defining moment for me. There's that quotation that I'm very fond of from Bernard Lord Manning about the hymn that is a means of grace to

somebody: we have to compare it with a communion cup which is perhaps decorated tawdrily or is a bit battered through the years, but is a sacred vessel and we must respect it as such.

And then, of course, I have a very soft spot for *Common Praise* because I worked on its editorial committee. As a Charles Wesley lover, I would give serious consideration to *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* and indeed to *Hymns and Psalms* because it's a nice long book and that would certainly help with the desert island. Perhaps I could be allowed the *HymnQuest* CD-ROM, drawn from all the books one could possibly want: and I guess I might at last find the time to become computer-literate!

Thank you so much for what has been a fascinating conversation, and best wishes for your eightieth birthday.

***A House of Praise*, Bishop Timothy's collected hymn texts, 1961-2001, was published jointly by Oxford University Press, UK, and Hope Publishing Company, USA, in 2003. A small supplement of 36 new hymns, *A Door for the Word*, was issued by the same publishers in 2006. All these texts fall within the CCLI licensing scheme.**

Oxford University Press assume the administration of these hymn texts in Europe and Africa from 1 January 2007, while Hope Publishing Company continue to do so elsewhere.

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