

Singing the Sacred: Crossing Borders in the Public Sphere



Introduction

Hymns and various forms of religious singing are generally associated with public worship, where they function as small forms of art and fulfil various functions. Hymns are also active in a variety of settings in the public sphere, where they connect personal lived religion with public religion and politics. The question addressed by this study is how prominent sacred songs and hymns function within the context of lived religion in the fluid public sphere, the reason for their presence, and the agency, influence and significance they could have in various contexts and circumstances.

Scholars attached to the International Society for Hymnological Studies (IAH; formed in 1959) have been giving attention to the performance and functions of hymns in the liturgy, as well as the meanings of hymns in the public sphere. Themes addressed are the cultural or ‘secular’ functions of hymns (Kurzke 2003; 2010); hymns constructing and promoting nationalist identities (Kück & Kurzke 2003); hymns as commodities in the political sphere (Bubmann 2017; 2022), and hymns functioning as protest and ‘war songs’ (Klek 2012; Fischer 2014). The focus has been primarily (but not exclusively) on Europe. The work of the Christian Congregational Music Studies group (formed in 2011, with conferences at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Oxford), corresponds with certain themes, using a broader spectrum of methods and across a wider scope of contexts. Issues receiving attention are, *inter alia*, the influence of globalisation on congregational singing; the role of mass media in spreading congregational music and shaping *transnational* communities; the marketing or commodifying of praise and worship music, and the function of congregational singing in constructing ‘imagined communities’ (Ingalls, Landau & Wagner 2016; Mall, Engelhardt & Ingalls 2021). Becca Whitla (2020) offers important perspectives on hymn singing in diverse settings of coloniality, decoloniality and power.

Simon Frith (1987: 133–151) identified four important social functions of popular music that are also highly relevant for hymnody. Both popular music and hymnody relate to questions of identity; both help people to manage the relationship between their public and private emotional lives; both contribute to organising the sense of time and shaping

memory, and both are something belonging to people and with which people *live*. For Richard Watson, it is important to recognise that the hymn has its roots deep in popular culture and that in their human appeal, hymns belong to ‘believers, half-believers, and non-believers. [...] to all those who feel the stirrings of some religious sense’ (Watson 1999: 17). Reflecting on ‘living with hymns’ is interconnected with the field of ‘lived religion’ where people reflect on their religious experiences in various situations (with hymns, for example), and interpret the experiences and attach meaning to what they experienced. Lived religion is studied in formal institutional contexts, as well as at all levels of everyday life and culture (Ammermann 2021). The theologian Wilhelm Gräb (2006; 2011) did important work on lived religion, also delving into the experience of music as a form of art connected to religious experience. Watson (1999: 1–21) argues that hymns are poetic or aesthetic responses to experience and therefore a form of art. Hymns are a part of the religious experience they express, and they help to create that experience. In so doing, they are subject to endless variations of human sensibility and perception; and to different ideas about doctrine, gender differences, and conceptions regarding authority and power, to mention a few.

This study operates at the intersection of hymnody, hymnology, and lived religion, opening up possibilities for doing or performing a creative practical and public theology – a *sounding* public theology (Wabel & Höhne & Stamer 2017: 9–40). Discussing the presence of hymns in diverse forms of lived religion in the public sphere and placing them in the broader cultural context of their reception histories from different times and settings, I interpret their presence critically to determine the reasons for them being there and the possible meanings they could accrue or create. Narratives play an important role in research on lived religion and in the field of hymnology – histories of hymns and stories of experiences with hymns can open up interesting perspectives. Narratives help to measure conflict zones, establish social institutions, and imagine pasts and futures. For the narrator, random encounters, coincidences, unexpected situations, conflicts, and the special ‘turns of life’ can open up unique details and perspectives that can be related to other data and integrated into further research (Söffner 2021; Breithaupt 2022). When speaking of music, autobiographical or auto-ethnographic perspectives are also highly relevant (Cook 2000: 84). Accordingly, I start with a narrative of personal experiences with a hymn in the public sphere, reflecting on these impressions and interpreting them hermeneutically, and then move outwards to present broader frameworks and perspectives on the reception histories and agency of the hymn.¹

1 Parts of this narrative appeared in Kloppers (2020b), with new interpretations presented here.

Now, thank we all our God (Nun danket alle Gott): A varied history of reception

During a conference in England a few years ago, we sang the hymn, *Now, thank we all our God*² (*Nun danket alle Gott* by Martin Rinckart, 1636) at a hymn festival. Sung into being by human voices, supported by the organ, and carried by the acoustics of the space, a small work of art with many dimensions came into being. The hymn *sounded* at various levels. While being sung in the dedicated ‘sacred’ space of a church building, it resonated outside the walls of the building and was heard by people in the public square outside. At the same time, other small works of art in the form of stained-glass windows that also depicted the hymn, communicated the message *visually* to those who were singing inside, as well as to those on the outside. In synchronised time, all these visual and acoustic elements worked together to speak at a diversity of levels, creating an encompassing work of art reflecting gratitude and trust in the Giver of gifts.

The hymn showed up again shortly afterwards. At a busy terminal at London’s Heathrow airport, someone in the dense crowd unexpectedly whistled the tune aloud. It soared above everyone and echoed in the hearts of people who knew it from their childhood. Being a well-known hymn sung worldwide in many languages, it could have spoken to a large number of people, irrespective of the language they spoke. For me, who has been travelling with this hymn from an early age, this fragment *sacralised* the ‘secular’ public space for a brief moment, bringing memories that crossed borders between the past and present.

Leaving Iceland after a conference a few years later, in October 2019, I had another unexpected experience with the hymn, when early one morning I arrived in Danzig, Poland, after a day and night of endless connections, and had a few hours in the city before an afternoon flight. Sitting down on a bench in a bare and cold square, I felt grateful that all had worked out thus far. Voicing my thoughts, the bells of the carillon in the tower of the city halls rang over the square and the city: *Now, thank we all our God!* After the bells had faded away, I sat motionless, hearing the echo in my mind. I then started to wonder about the bells of a city hall (*Rathaus*), the seat of socio-political power, ringing out hymns. It certainly would require the hermeneutics of suspicion. I found the information that a carillon of 14 bells was installed in the tower of the *Rathaus* after 1560. The bells were decorated with the coats of arms of the royals of Prussia, Danzig, and Poland. With the help of a rotating cylinder, the carillon was programmed with different melodies on certain occasions. To welcome the Polish king, for example, the *Te Deum Laudamus* (We

² Translated from German by Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878) in 1858. Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology <https://hymnology.hymnsam.co.uk/n/now-thank-we-all-our-god>

praise you God) was played (Woyno 2020). This clearly reflects a time when there was a strong link between religion and the ruling powers of a city or a region. Religious symbols were utilised to legitimise the powers of rulers by suggesting that their power and position came from God. Apart from acknowledging God's hand in the welfare of the city, nation, and people, God was praised for giving the people a 'good' ruler or king. The sounding of *Te Deum Laudamus* on the entrance of the king into the city could strengthen the set of myths that the king's role was that of an earthly substitute for God. It could also strengthen the religious identity of the people or nation, or foster new identities. Faith identities other than Christian were either ignored or actively subverted – or was a Christian identity subverted by the hymn being adopted for a use that was not necessarily religious?

The reception history of *Nun danket alle Gott* is varied. Written by Martin Rinckart (1586–1649) for his family as a thanksgiving prayer at the table, it was published for the first time in his 1636 *Jesu Hertz-Büchlein*. As a minister in the city of Eilenburg, Rinckart led thousands of funerals during the devastating *Thirty Years War*, with pests and plagues also ruining the lives of people around him. The hymn reflects abundant gratitude, despite the depressing circumstances surrounding its origin. Originally a hymn of thanksgiving and a prayer to be blessed, it was employed later for a multitude of purposes in a diversity of fluid contexts, where singing and public religion coincided almost seamlessly. It became a kind of '*deutsch-nationalen Gratias-Hymne*' that was used not only in worship and in homes, but also in wartime and at prominent political events, such as the proclamation of the *Kaiser* in Versailles in 1871 and later also at the '*Tag von Potsdam*' in March 1933, as part of the National Socialist takeover (Bubmann 2017: 151–153).

Bubmann (2017) refers to three prominent dimensions of living the faith – the *anamnetic* dimension (memory of the past, or the past made present by remembering), the *proleptic* dimension (looking to the future) and the *transformative* dimension. In many situations, the use of *Nun danket alle Gott* served as a form of collective *anamnesis* – a solemn national remembrance and memory of victories and experiences of God's protection, while it also has a *proleptic* function. It was (and still is) sung in situations of loss and suffering. When the last 10,000 German prisoners of war returned from the Soviet Union to Germany in October 1955 (more than ten years after the end of the war), this hymn was sung, very fittingly: *Nun danket alle Gott ... der uns aus aller Not erlösen hier und dort.* (... who delivers us from all distress, here and there.)

The film, depicting the return of the soldiers and their singing (Wochenschau 1955), is very touching. The voice and tone of the commentator, however, alert the viewer to 'something more': the focus on the political achievements of Konrad Adenauer, the first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949–1963). Negotiating with Russia for the return of the soldiers was one of his biggest successes – certainly something for which the people were very grateful. There was a strong awareness of the importance of the event

as a visual spectacle and there clearly were many preparations for the event. In the film, it is not clear whether the soldiers and their loved ones sang *Nun danket* spontaneously. It probably was scripted carefully into the whole of the event, the ritual of homecoming, to make a deeper impression on viewers after the event. Singing the hymn certainly had a lasting impact on the soldiers and their loved ones; viewers of the film were also touched. However, with its strong undertones of German patriotism, history, religiosity, and nostalgia for a lost childhood, the singing in the film also functioned as a commodity with emotional value to sell the political success of Adenauer to the viewers.

What is meant by nostalgia for a lost childhood? There is a strong possibility that the phrase, ‘...von Kindesbeine an’ / ‘who from our mothers’ arms’... contributes to the popularity of the hymn. People who sing it surely remember that God was with them from the very beginning – and that God carried them through difficult times in their lives. It functions as *anamnesis* – recollecting things that had happened, remembering the concrete evidence of God’s protection in the past, with the memory serving as an assurance of God’s protection in the present and in the future. These associations probably helped the hymn to move from the personal sphere of a table prayer to the broad public sphere, and to function in a variety of cultural, religious, social, and political contexts.

Psalm singing in various countries

Identity is about the political and cultural memory embedded in a nation’s psyche. A nation’s historical narrative could also reside in music that ‘negotiates the borders between myth and history, thus “memorialising the past”’ (Bohlman 2011: 196). Certain hymns and psalms, prominent at religious and cultural gatherings, played an identity-giving and political role that strengthened the collective cultural memory of the Afrikaans-speaking people. Functioning at the level of a civil religion, these hymns and psalms helped to keep the grand narrative of God protecting ‘his people’ (*‘sy volk’*) alive (Kloppers 2002). However, nationalism, stimulated by the singing of hymns and psalms is not limited to the South African context – it corresponds with practices worldwide (Kück & Kurzke 2003). In the Netherlands, Scotland, and other countries, where Calvinism is prominent, metrical psalms used to play a prominent role.

A strong sense of ‘the other’, strangers, or the perceived presence of strong enemies, contributes to the formation of collective national identities (Kurzke 2003: 223). Uncovering the paradoxical attributions behind the political categories of belonging and demarcation, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018) shows how emphasising the similarities with one’s own people and exaggerating the differences with others, create identities that are formed by conflict. He refers to these ‘mistaken identities’ as the fictions of

belonging, or 'the lies that bind'. A relevant narrative in this regard is the story of the new Scottish Members of Parliament boarding the train on their way to Westminster after a landslide victory in 1922, accompanied by a large group of people singing metrical psalms on the platform. Through singing psalms in public, boundaries of religion and the public sphere were crossed, nationalist ideals promoted, and the convergence of political and religious identity fortified. The politicians were encouraged to stand up for Scotland, knowing that God was on their side, and that 'God's Word', in the form of God's song, accompanied them into their new political context and seat of power. The singing had a foundational, integrational, legitimising, and compensational function (Fischer 2014: 223–236). As there were no female delegates, it also cemented the idea that (only) men were suited for politics. A further example from Scotland is the singing of Psalm 100, the *Old Hundreth* – 'All people that on earth do dwell, sing to the Lord with cheerful voice...' at the 'reconvening' of the Scottish Parliament on 1 July 1999. The singing was a form of thanksgiving, of 'memorialising the past', while looking at the future. A psalm sung in the public sphere of the seat of politics served as 'a badge of identity', showing how deeply a psalm or psalms could become entrenched in the cultural memory of a nation (Kloppers 2012). These case studies show that the use of religious songs in various contexts is often laden with ideology, influenced by the politics of power, culture, nationalism, identity, race, and gender. The hermeneutics of suspicion should accompany all forms of lived religion expressed in singing hymns or religious songs.

Hymns in the public sphere in various contexts in more recent times

From a broad historical overview, I move to hymns in the public sphere in various contexts in recent times. Hymns are part of the cultural offerings representing Christian symbols in the public sphere, forming a link between personal faith, the public church, and public Christianity, while also forming bridges to a pluralist society. They are part of a secular and post-secular culture, where the Christian religion has not returned, as is often claimed, but from where it has never disappeared. Not only has Christianity shaped Western culture, it continues to shape it in a multitude of ways not always observed consciously. After big disasters or tragic incidents, people often gather in public to pray and sing. It happens as part of formal commemorative events, but often also in informal situations, such as the ritual of singing during the fire in Notre Dame Cathedral (2019) and the singing from balconies during the Covid-19 pandemic (Kloppers 2020a). At the start of the Ukraine war, people sang hymns such as *Dona Nobis Pacem* in public spaces. Quotations from hymns, and especially lines from the biblical psalms, appear on many public buildings; hymns also play a role in non-religious literature and films.

Politicians quoting hymns in public: President Joe Biden quotes *On Eagle's Wings*

It is not surprising that politicians would quote hymns in public. While not doubting the sincerity with which they do it, politicians surely can touch people in different ways and rise in the estimation of people who are oriented religiously when doing so – thus also cementing their position of power. In his first speech as President-elect, President Biden quoted the refrain of *On Eagle's Wings*, a religious song written by Father Michael Joncas in 1976. He introduced the hymn with its references to Psalm 91, Isaiah 40:31, and Isaiah 49:16 as a hymn that means a lot to him and his family, and that meant a lot to his late son Beau. He also referred to the faith that (he believes) sustains America:

It captures the faith that sustains me and which I believe sustains America. And I hope it can provide some comfort and solace to the 230 million ... thousand Americans who have lost a loved one through this terrible virus this year. My heart goes out to each and every one of you. Hopefully this hymn gives you solace as well. It goes like this: "And he will raise you up on eagle's wings, bear you on the breath of dawn, make you to shine like the sun, and hold you in the palm of his hand." (Biden 2020.)

Referring to the loss of his son and the difficulties for him and his family, he went on by acknowledging the grief of the people amid the pandemic, especially those who lost loved family members and friends. He then proceeded by calling the American nation to action: 'And now, together – *on eagle's wings* – we embark on the work that God and history have called upon us to do. [...] with faith in America and each other...' Note the strong link: 'God *and* history', faith '*in America and each other*', as well as the aspect of 'calling' that is brought to the fore. Apart from personal comfort to people, the hymn functioned to call the nation together, promising strength through faith (in America?), connected to an ethical appeal to go out and work for a better world.

The reference to the hymn functioned at a religious, ethical, personal, and cultural level, and was meant to mobilise people. It also functioned as a commodity at a political level. It started life in the Catholic ambit, became international with translations into Polish, Spanish, Italian, and many other languages, and crossed borders to all denominations. At Luciano Pavarotti's memorial service, the people sang it in Italian (according to Joncas, in Pattison 2020). The first big civic usage of it was at the memorial service after the Oklahoma City bombings in 1995. Quoting a popular song with a religious theme associated with difficult circumstances could comfort people. However, it could also be beneficial in promoting the popularity of the politician and in fostering his or her political beliefs.

President Obama sings *Amazing Grace* – *Amazing Grace* in other settings

An earlier instance of the use of a hymn in public by an American president was President Obama singing *Amazing Grace* in June 2015 at the memorial service of a Senator from the House of Representatives. The Senator was also the pastor of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston. Nine days prior, a 21-year-old white supremacist man entered this church during a service, sat for a while, and then opened fire with a gun, killing nine people, including the Senator. The president's task was to offer comfort, not just to the family and the people of Charleston, but also to the nation. His speech was more than a speech – it resembled a sermon in the strongest sense of the word, and not the least in the tone of his voice. He referred to the concept of 'grace' that can change everything. He then paused a moment before singing *Amazing Grace* – with the choir joining in 'spontaneously', followed by the rest of the people. After the singing, he read the names of the people who died in the shooting, ending with 'May grace now lead them home'. It comes as no surprise that he finally extended the wish for grace to his country (Kloppers 2020a). (In the video, it is clear that there were members of the choir who expected the singing of the President, indicating that it was rehearsed carefully before the service.)

The prime function of the singing of the hymn was to comfort the families and the people in the inner circle. It was widened to encourage and inspire people of colour or mixed race, who were the target of the racist attack and who furthermore have a strong resonance with this hymn. The role that the recording and performances by Aretha Franklin (1972) played is legendary, even though the reception history of the hymn stretches back much further. They could identify with President Obama as a black person who could rise to hold the highest political position, but who would not shy away from showing his faith in public by singing this iconic hymn – thus identifying with what strengthens them, and who they are. The hymn singing was and is a strong tool to promote black group identity. However, *Amazing Grace* is also a spiritual icon for many other people in the USA, functioning as a commodity to foster cultural identity at a much wider level. Many people would identify with the president's singing and be strongly touched by it. The secondary 'spin-off' of the singing would be the popularity of the president of the United States of America himself. Through the televised video of this service and especially through his singing, he rose in popularity, also in other parts of the world (Bubmann 2017). The singing thus had a spiritual and pastoral – as well as a cultural, personal, and political – function.

Amazing Grace, a kind of 'autobiographical' Christian hymn with words written in 1772 by the English Anglican clergyman and poet, John Newton (1725–1807), developed to become a world hymn. Translated into numerous languages it is indeed one of the most prominent hymns sung at funerals worldwide, while it also functions in a wide

range of public spheres. During the Covid-19 lockdown, a Church of England vicar, the Rev Pat Allerton, played *Amazing Grace* on his phone in a street in London – the powerful rendition of Judy Collins – and something extraordinary happened:

Faces appeared behind glass, windows opened and people leaned out. Residents came onto balconies. Some held up small children to see. A woman aided by a walking frame shuffled onto a path. A couple of older men in vests stood with their arms crossed; women in hijabs came out of their homes; a man wearing a kippah stopped to listen.

Amazing Grace faded and Allerton took up his microphone. As he began the Lord's Prayer, some people bowed their heads, some put their hands together, some mouthed words taught many years before. A few wept. No one laughed or jeered or heckled. In the middle of one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth, this was a communal moment of spirituality. (Sherwood 2020.)

This is indeed a striking description of religion lived in public and the role that a hymn such as *Amazing Grace* could play in comforting people across the boundaries of religions, uniting them in a 'communal moment of spirituality'.

Andrea Bocelli gave a solo performance in the *Duomo di Milano* on Easter Sunday 2020 (during the Covid-19 lockdown). Ending the performance, he walked out closing with *Amazing Grace*, symbolically carrying the hymn into the public sphere. As he sang in the quiet, empty square, the cameras and YouTube carried it to the public all over the world. It had millions of views on YouTube. It is indeed very striking to see the singer who is blind, singing with eyes closed: '...was blind, but now I see.'

These narratives present a hermeneutic reading of *Amazing Grace* functioning in a range of public contexts. Utilised as a religious or spiritual instrument in the fluidity of the public sphere, it functions as a device to promote or subvert ideas, to foster processes of constructing identities or perceived identities, while also deconstructing others. It certainly is also utilised as a commodity to promote the popularity of politicians or singers.

President Cyril Ramaphosa quoting *Thuma Mina* – Send me!

In 2018, the new President of South Africa, Cyril Ramaphosa, quoted Hugh Masekela's version of *Thuma Mina* (Send me) at the end of his inaugural address. Originating from the biblical prophecies (Isaiah 6:8, 'Here I am! Send me!'), and sung in various indigenous languages, *Thuma Mina* is very popular in South Africa. It crossed borders: it is included in hymnals all over the world and now functions as a sacred song across countries and

cultures. Masekela's version has a sharp socio-political edge. He released his album *Send Me* in 2002, eight years after the dawn of democracy. According to Maluleke (2018), the themes of poverty, HIV, drug addiction, violence, abuse, migration, dictatorship, and hope in his music were a direct result of his sensitivity towards the marginalised and his alertness to social issues. Maluleke (2018) refers to Masekela's biography *Still Grazing (The musical journey of Hugh Masekela, 2004)* in which he remarks that 'they were surrounded by music everywhere' when they were young. Among the many kinds of music were the choruses sung in the churches, including those he learnt from his 'God-fearing, Lutheran prayer woman' grandmother. Maluleke quotes Masekela's colourful descriptions of the influence of African church music on him as a child:

Bible-thumping 'born again' men and women of the Holy Sanctified Donkey Church, a palm-leaf-crowned baby donkey in the lead, would sing soulful African gospel ... pleading with us to repent, to accept God. "Guquka" (repent) they'd yell, wiping drenched foreheads with their white handkerchiefs. ...punctuating their songs with an occasional "Hallelujah!!! Aaaamen!!!" [...]

My friends and I rushed from one street to another, from squares to open fields, following Lekganyane's Zion Christian Church brass bands as they marched in their military khakhi uniforms [...] We marched behind these battalions for God, lifting our knees high, following the ethnic pipers as though bewitched. We drank in the noises and revelled in the hilarious chaos of African sorcery and madness – oblivious of cold, rain, wind, dust or curfew. (Masekela [2004] in Maluleke 2018.)

By quoting *Thuma Mina*, President Ramaphosa wanted to encourage people to make personal sacrifices after the destructive corruption under President Zuma and inspire them to help eradicate poverty and corruption. It touched people deeply and motivated them to 'be sent'. However, after a huge sum of undeclared money was found in a couch in Ramaphosa's home, shortly after the Covid-19 period, people were not convinced about his anti-corruption stance and questioned the use of a religious song to influence them politically. These examples show how politicians use hymns to cross borders, inspire people and mobilise them, but also how hymns function in public to manipulate the emotions of people and to promote personal popularity.

Struggle songs from the time of apartheid

In a so-called 'post-secular' world, sharp distinctions between faith, religiosity, spirituality, and 'the secular' do not exist. In Africa, the lines between sacred and secular have been fluid all along, as described in Masekela's narrative above. During the years of struggle against the apartheid government, 'songs of the church' were crossing borders seamlessly between the 'sacred' space of church buildings and the political space of protest and rallies for freedom. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Mayibuye Centre 2000: CD 1, nr. 4) explained the singing of freedom songs in the public domain of the church as a way of 'getting rid of the energy, the spirit of war'. It meant lamenting, and singing *about war* 'before God', while also bringing a consciousness for what has to change when crossing the threshold of the church back 'into the world'. The singing opened up new spaces, it crossed borders, it had a performative, a 'reality changing' function, and it transformed the people singing and hearing it. An example that functioned in many settings is *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* (*God bless Africa*), written by Enoch Sontonga in 1897 and currently part of the National Anthem of South Africa. Initially meant as a hymn for church and school, its layered meaning intensified when sung in the public sphere during the struggle; it was used to negotiate cultural identity and carried a strong political message (Cook 1998 / 2000: 79–80, 126; Coplan & Jules-Rosette 2008). One of the most striking performances was that of Ladysmith Black Mambazo in Montreux, Switzerland, in 1989 (available on YouTube). In the public sphere of the concert hall, just before the last song, Joseph Shabalala announced unexpectedly: 'We'd like to pray with you now', and started singing *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika*. The group joined in. The singing touched people and convinced the world of the inhumanity of the system of apartheid. Coplan (2020) recalls listening to the group in Carnegie Hall in New York in 1988: '[...] for three uninterrupted hours [...] they kept the audience spellbound at the edge of their seats in awed, worshipful silence'. This shows how meaning and value reside in what is enacted through performance (Cook 2002: 82) and the influence exerted in the public sphere by people singing and sounding a *prophetic* voice. During the Covid-19 lockdown, people sang *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* spontaneously in Cape Town – to function in an *anamnetic* and *proleptic* way, to comfort people and give hope.

Songs can create an ethical consciousness; for example, prophetic songs protesting against injustice in the world (as illustrated above), and other songs allowing people to pray for peace and the protection of creation (Bubmann 2017: 148). *Mayenziwe 'ntando yakho*, a fragment from the Lord's Prayer often sung in public spheres, operates at all these levels. Certain that God is in control, the 'we' give the earth into God's hands and confess their dependence: *Your will be done on earth, O Lord. Mayenziwe* and other songs such as *Siyahamba* and *Siph' Amandla Nkosi* found their way into hymnals across the globe. Was it wrong to expect more of these songs in the very public memorial service for Archbishop

Desmond Tutu? At this service, it became clear that the colonial legacy of hymnody continues to play a strong role even in churches with many, or even predominantly, black members. Admitting that colonial hymns can be sung in a 'decolonial key' (Whitla 2020: 127–162), more could have been expected here. It was said that the hymns and music were Archbishop Tutu's choice, but the question is: What were actually suggested as possibilities – for example, material that family members or the church people love, or material that a choir had in its repertoire? The service was firstly for the family, but it was also a very prominent state funeral for a person who won the Nobel Prize for Peace. Meant also for people in the worldwide public sphere to participate in the mourning, and to honour the life of a much-loved person, one would expect more of the global songs mentioned above to have been included in the service – surely the fragment from the Lord's Prayer, *Mayenziwe*. A strong message of the role Archbishop Tutu had played in politics, religion, and reconciling people would have gone out through the singing. It could have brought a message connecting people from all over the world, helping them to cross borders. What could be more prophetic in this situation than a song with a text such as *We are marching in the light of God* – remembering (*anamnesis*) the march for freedom under difficult circumstances, of crossing borders amid the darkness to march 'in the light of God', while praying: 'Give us the strength, Lord, to be fearless!' Sung in the context of the memorial service, the *anamnetic* function would be expanded to include the *proleptic* dimension of hope, of looking to the future, of praying to be fearless, while also bringing about *transformation* in those singing, hearing, viewing, and listening.

The afterlife of struggle songs that became global songs is important. Material from other cultures could be appropriated in ways that could hurt people, even if meant differently. If a song says: 'We are marching in the light of God', it is not meant to be sung happily as: 'We are singing in the light of God / We are laughing in the light of God' (John Bell's example from what he had heard in Evangelical circles). There are also German versions of *Siyahamba* and *Siph' Amandla Nkosi*, with texts expanded arbitrarily. These songs can function in various ways and in a diversity of contexts in the public sphere and be a sign of multiculturalism. It remains relevant, however, to ask why they function in various contexts and to what end. Hymnic inheritances should be questioned to note reverse forms of colonisation, cultural imperialism, or 'entertainment', and of superficial ways of 'acknowledging other cultures', without really bearing in mind the possible circumstances of suffering under which a song came to be sung (Whitla 2020). The way a song is used or performed should be considered carefully. At an international hymn festival, *Mayenziwe* was performed dramatically, at a rapid tempo and high volume by a worship leader from the USA dressed in indigenous African 'attire'. Trying to open up a discussion afterwards, I asked about the importance of a text when choosing the tempo. Being a prayer that 'God's will must be done', could a slower tempo be considered? I added

that my colleagues at the University of South Africa had indicated that in their churches in South Africa (consisting primarily of black members), they sing at a moderate tempo. The worship leader answered with authority that he based his choice of tempo on that of a (male) American scholar. Was it wrong to sense a feeling of cultural appropriation – not to mention the use of patriarchal power?

The struggle song *Senzeni Na* (What have we done?) was adapted well to new situations (Kloppers 2020a). Sung as a protest song against the Apartheid regime, people now sing it at public gatherings to protest against injustice in many forms. The University of Pretoria *Camerata* made a video to commemorate the murder of a female student at UCT in September 2019, also remembering other women who were murdered and those who suffer from abuse daily. The choir sings *Senzeni Na* while sitting scattered in the hall, with seats randomly open between the choir members – symbolising the women and girls who were murdered, and who thus were missing from their seats. With seats open between the singers, this video took on a new meaning during the Covid-19 period: the open seats now also symbolise the people who died during the period. It shows how struggle songs can obtain new life in new contexts – they can comfort people and, at the same time, be a prophetic voice. The dissonance at the beginning of this song is striking – it painfully captures the wrong in society. *What have we done?*

Performing a sounding or resonating public theology

Hymns can point in many directions and can fulfil many aims. Singing hymns is an act enabling people to cross borders between the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’; the religious and the secular; the private and the public. It inspires people to cross borders between cultural groups, nations, and diverse contexts. While crossing borders between times past, present, and future, hymns fulfil an *anamnetic*, *proleptic*, *prophetic*, and *transformative* function, thus changing people and circumstances in the present and giving hope for the future. Much is made of the ‘new opportunities’ for worship through digital media that were opened up during the Covid-19 lockdown. To me, the most authentic expressions of faith lived in the public sphere were not the digital services constructed for YouTube, but the actions that involved people spontaneously reaching out to their communities. It was the *communal* singing of hymns at certain places, and people making music from their balconies and windows, together with their neighbours in support of their communities, that struck me most. Singing together in public is about the shared presence and the shared public sphere where unity and support are enacted. Communal singing is also about crossing borders on behalf of those who find it hard to sing – an ethical act that makes God present for others. The spontaneous singing of well-known hymns in public was (and is),

however, only possible because there are people who still have hymns engraved in their collective cultural, religious, and hymnic memory. Worship and singing (the cornerstones of organised religion) were prohibited during the Covid-19 lockdown. Children could not learn hymns spontaneously in worship or in public for some time. It contributed to the loss of an essential part of the resource of collective hymns and psalms embedded in the memory of people – those known from the *communal ritual of public worship* that are recognised in the wider public sphere. The *Most-loved-Christmas-Songs* events in Finland happening in the public sphere, certainly are events keeping a corpus of religious songs alive among the people (Innanen 2016), be it for emotional, spiritual, pastoral, historic, nostalgic, or patriotic reasons. Singing in a ‘sacred tone’ creates a unique virtual space of experience in which everyone can have individual transcendental experiences, but still be tied together in the communal experience of sound. Singing hymns expresses in an extracted way the relationship that different people have with the world and with others. The examples in this study show that singing hymns as an aesthetic religious practice creates a public religion that is a complex phenomenon of resonance transcending the sphere of reason. The sound, the specific atmosphere, and strong feelings of community brought about by suggestive emotionality play an essential role in this form of lived religion (Bubmann 2017: 160).

Singing and hearing hymns open up space for the presence of God. Hearing a part of a fragment of the hymn *Nun danket alle Gott* unexpectedly at daybreak one morning in a cold and bare square in a strange city was a profound experience, even if the ringing originally had a political purpose. Interpreting the experience, I can say it *embodied* the presence of God and connected me with a long tradition of faith, crossing borders between past and present; between the community and me, and between the sacred and public sphere. After the bells fell silent and the echoes faded, another religious song started to play in my head, a song by Leonard Cohen: *Ring the bells that still can ring – there is a crack, a crack in everything. That’s how the light comes in...* (Tischer 2017 for religious aspects of Cohen’s songs). Wind and music in the cracks can bring down walls, as illustrated by the public singing that contributed to the cracks in the Berlin Wall and broke down divisions between the East and the West. Singing brought down walls in South Africa. Songs in the cracks of trenches can bring reconciliation and hope, as illustrated by *Silent Night* being sung on both sides during the First World War 1914–1918 (Kloppers 2020a: 8–9). Echoes of hope can bridge divisions – in the dark times of suppressive systems, a pandemic, and in times of war.

Hymns do not *describe* God – hymns *embody* God. The singing of hymns as an aesthetic response to religious experiences is an *embodiment of theology*, of making God present through the bodies and voices of the performers, the singers. Performing a sounding public theology, reflecting on the singing of hymns and interpreting religious

experiences and forms of lived religion, means crossing borders hermeneutically between fields of hymnology, congregational singing, performance studies, reception histories, ritual studies, sociology, ethnomusicology, cultural studies, psychology, liturgical studies, and other areas of research. It includes embodied autobiographical perspectives, and reflecting as active participants on performances of lived religion while knowing these expressions and experiences are inseparable from myth, and cultural and political powers. Singing *Mayenziwe / Your will be done* communally at the end of the live performance of my lecture in Helsinki was meant to illustrate the paper. It changed the listeners into participants singing, and listening to the singing – opening up possibilities for forms of sacred experiences (individual and communal), for *prophetic* dimensions and facets of *anamnesis*, *prolepsis*, and *transformation*. The singing created experiences on which one could reflect (individually and communally) to give meaning to what was experienced. Done within the setting of an academic conference open for anyone to attend, it was a living example of hymn singing in the fluid public sphere serving multiple implicit and explicit purposes. Connected to the content and meaning of the paper, it provided new opportunities for participating in hymno–theological reflection, for doing a creative form of practical theology, and for *enacting* or *performing* a *sounding* public theology through which borders can be crossed.

Conclusion

Narratives and reception histories from various contexts were woven together with autobiographical experiences of hymns, reflected upon and interpreted hermeneutically within a wider cultural context, to illustrate how seemingly insignificant fragments of sacred songs and hymns function in ‘non–religious’ or ‘secular’ contexts of the fluid public sphere. I have shown that hymns can cross borders in contexts of lived religion to comfort people through a variety of rituals in different situations and that the singing of hymns can transform people as well as political and social systems. Forming a part of the beliefs, self-concepts, values, myths, symbols, and the collective cultural memory of people, hymns are used as tools cementing ideologies and as instruments of power that construct cultural, political, social, gender, and race identities – thereby actively subverting other identities. Hymns often function as a part of calculated political, cultural, communal, and personal performances meant as propaganda to influence people politically. A hermeneutics of suspicion should accompany the functioning of hymns in public, especially where songs and hymns cross borders to accrue or create new meanings in new contexts.

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