This article is a shortened version of my keynote lecture which I delivered at the conference of the Internationale Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Hymnologie, August 2017, in Løgumkloster (Denmark). The conference theme was: Hymnody and Hymnology in Times of Transformation. The full version of this lecture will be published in the IAH Bulletin (Spring 2018). See also: www.iah-hymnologie.de.

Hymnody in a globalized culture and beyond the sacred-secular dichotomy

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Introduction

In July 2016, there was an interesting controversy around a hymn in the new Dutch protestant hymnal Liedboek – Bidden en zingen in huis en kerk (2013). This controversy concerned a hymn (titled: Jeruzalem, mijn vaderstad, no 737 in the hymnal) that included a reference to ‘negers’, which has the same connotation of ‘nigger’ in English. The discussion centred around one particular strophe in the hymn, that takes an eschatological approach and expresses the yearning for justice for marginalized groups: the ‘negers met hun loftrompet’ (the niggers with their trumpets of glory) and the ‘Joden met hun ster’ (the Jews with their star). The lyrics of this hymn were written by the well-known poet Willem Barnard (1920-2010), and were already included in the previous, 1973 edition of the hymnal. The discussion regarding the hymn was started by the theologian Tom Mikkers, who concluded that this strophe was an example of veiled racism.¹

The example urges the question of what happened between 1973 (when no discussion occurred after publication of the hymnal with the denounced hymn) and 2013-2016? Why are we, at least in the Netherlands, so sensitive to questions regarding racism? Since the 1980s we have a constant, and since 2013, yearly discussion about the colour of ‘black Peter’² and a lot of Santa Claus children songs have been adapted to avoid reference to black Peter as a servant or slave of Santa Claus. It seems to me that due to mobility, migration and multicultural dynamics we now live in hybrid societies and a global culture. Due to articulate

minorities we have become aware of hidden racism in language, art and politics. What has happened between 1973 and 2013-2016? The answer is: globalization.

Globalization, hymnody and hymnology

Globalization is a complex and multi-layered concept, perhaps better described as a process. It seems to be a process which takes place in our contemporary, shrinking world, but it also has historical depth. It is useful to clarify the concept of globalization and to link it to hymnological studies and the dynamics of hymnody. The Dutch-American professor in Global Studies and Sociology Jan Nederveen Pieterse identified three ways of defining or conceptualising globalization in his book on globalization and culture.³

The first one defines globalization as a clash of civilizations and is derived from Samuel Huntington’s famous book with the same title (1996).⁴ According to Huntington, “international politics moves out of its Western phase, and its centrepiece becomes the interaction between the West and non-Western civilizations.”⁵ Huntington develops an ‘enemy discourse’ and constructs the West as a ‘universal civilization’ as opposed to ‘the rest’. His approach of globalization is the core of the many populist programmes in nowadays politics. We see this process at work in the described controversy regarding the hymn Jeruzalem, mijn vaderstad and the Black Pete discussion.

The second definition of globalization is westernization or McDonaldization. This definition of globalization is the core of many globalization debates in the context of economics. McDonald’s (or Starbucks, Coca Cola etc.) is everywhere and the big global companies compete with the small local ones, with as result that every city centre shows the same shops and department stores. In the context of hymnody I saw the consequences of westernization when I visited the Asian Institute for Liturgy and Music (AILM) in Manila, the Philippines. We might see this institute as a counter-movement against the growing influence of English-American hymns in the churches throughout Asia. The founder of the AILM, Francisco Feliciano, stimulated his students to compose hymns which reflect the spirit and identity of the local churches, using the concept of contextualization as theoretical background.⁶

⁴ The first time Huntington presented his theory was in 1993: The Clash of Civilizations?, in Foreign Affairs 72/3 (1993), 22-49.
⁵ Cited in: Nederveen Pieterse, Globalization and culture, 44-45.
The third definition can be summarized as hybridization or global melange. This approach is Nederveen Pieterse’s favourite one and in his opinion all globalization processes lead to hybrid cultures, which reflect both global and local dynamics. He refers once again to McDonald’s which seems to be very much alike in every city. But comparing McDonald’s in several countries, the conclusion is that in Moscow other dishes are served than in Liverpool or Shanghai. In the context of hymnology and hymnody we just can refer to contemporary hymnals. Due to the Reformation, clearly distinguishable schools of hymns writing came into being: Lutheran hymns, Calvinistic psalm singing, Roman Catholic devotional songs, Wesleyan hymns etc. These schools express and produce doctrinal content, denominational truths and different styles of worshipping. In contemporary hymnals, these schools are all blended. Taking protestant churches in the Netherlands as an example, this process of blending started in 1938 with the unofficial, but much used hymnal Gezangen voor de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Hymns for the Dutch Reformed Church) and came to an end, for the moment, in the 2013 Liedboek – Bidden en zingen in huis en kerk. This Liedboek is hybrid in many ways: it comprises hymns from many centuries, countries and denominations. As hymnologists, we are used to calling this approach of globalization ecumenism. Due to ecumenism, hymnals have become hybrid products.

Towards a new profile for hymnology

The controversy regarding Jeruzalem, mijn vaderstad however, shows that taking globalization into account is more than being aware of the hybrid or ecumenical character of contemporary hymnals. In the five centuries which divide us from Luther, the world has been deeply transformed. We might say that the Lutheran Reformation challenged the worldview in which was place for only one truth. When Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, as the legend tells, a process of decentring truth started. ‘Decentring’ is a term coined by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Reflecting on language and discourse, Derrida wrote in L’écriture et la différence (1967):

“In effect, what appears most fascinating in this critical search for a new status of the discourse is the stated abandonment of all reference to a centre, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute archia.”

In the current global society several truths (plural) exist next to each other and they are all worth the same. Several metaphors are used to describe the society we live in. Bauman speaks of ‘liquid modernity’, Castells of the ‘network society’. Are we, as hymnologists, fully aware that we study hymns which are used in hybrid, network-like cultures in which there is no real, firm criterion to judge the truth of the content? From a Biblical point of view, Jeruzalem, mijn

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vaderstad is an eschatological hymn, evoking the optimistic view of mankind as described by Saint Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians (3:28). From an ethnic point of view, the text might be considered offensive and racist. Is the former perspective more true than the latter? How might we decide? There is no widely accepted authority on which truth or moral claims might be based.

This brings me to the main question of my presentation: what is the role and function of hymnology in the context of globalization and hybrid cultures? To keep the relevance in a changed and changing culture, we have to design a new profile for hymnology which reflects on, evaluates and perhaps also criticizes contemporary society. To say it a bit bluntly, the period of pillarization in which there were clear boundaries between Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Socialism and Liberalism, is behind us. To keep the relevance of hymnology, we have to contextualize our studies and to realize that the object of our study is not the hymn as such, but the performance of hymns in contexts which are global and local at the same time. To describe our scholarship, we might say that we, as hymnologists, are specialized in studying music from a ritual-religious perspective. The troika ‘music-ritual-religion’ is the core of our business. In the following, I will elaborate on the contextualization of hymnology, using the unavoidable dynamics of globalization, and on the relevance of performance for hymnological studies.

Global religion(s)

Bryan Turner, professor of sociology in New York, distinguishes between global religion and global religions in his book Religion and modern society (2011). Let us first elaborate on the latter. Global religions refer to the transformation of existing religions by globalising processes.8 As examples, Turner mentioned the emergence of religions as worldwide systems of leadership and institutional apparatus on the one hand and the competing of these world religions on a worldwide spiritual or religious market on the other. Also the growth of diasporic communities, primarily in global cities, is an example of the globalization process.

The emergence of a worldwide spiritual or religious market in combination with the dominance of individual self-development in the Western world, has led to religious experimentation. Sociologists have identified the emergence of a quest culture (‘the quest is the best’)9 that attempts to find meaning experimentally from different religious, spiritual and non-religious traditions. “The


result is growing religious hybridity. (...) Spiritual markets, religious individualism and hybridisation create problems for traditional forms of authority, and their individualism is often incompatible with the collective organisation of traditional religiosity.”

We, as hymnologists, cannot act as if the denominational organization structures nowadays are still the same as in the 1950s. We have to respond to these actual, religious situations in which hymns are used and produced.

Turner mentions a second approach to globalization and religion: global religion (singular) or religious globalization. In this approach Turner follows the theory on religion by Emile Durkheim and an essay written by the already mentioned French philosopher Jacques Derrida On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness (2001). To explain what he means to be religious globalization, Turner refers to the link between globalization and law, especially the human-rights agenda which came up after the Second World War, resulting in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948. Turner states that “[r]eligious assumptions about suffering and healing have played an important role in shaping human-rights institutions”. Truth, forgiveness and reconciliation have turned out to be of great importance in the aftermath of civil wars and genocides and “Judaeo-Christian religious assumptions have been globalised in the reparations culture.”

We only have to re-imagine bishop Tutu as a member of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa to see the religious content of these concepts, although in a legal context.

If we look back at the consequences of the dynamics of globalization in the context of religion and in relation to the already mentioned decentring of truth, we might become a bit pessimistic about the position of religion in our society. Indeed, the influence and importance of institutionalized religions have declined and truth has turned out to be fragmented and convertible. At the same time, we have seen that religious values have become part of a global religion. We do not live in a ‘secular age’, but in post-secular societies in which religion has not disappeared but changed. The decline of institutional religion goes along with complex and confusing developments such as the growth of Secular Sunday Assemblies, seemingly secular roads to justice and reconciliation, the promotion of religious, ascetic lifestyles such as body management (sports, wellness cults) and dieting, and the growth of youth cultures that blend

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10 Turner, Religion and modern society, xvi.
11 Ibid., xix.
12 Ibid., xxi.
secular music with religious themes. The institutional form (‘religion’) is being replaced by more individualistic forms (‘religiosity’). This approach of global religion and religiosity goes beyond the dichotomy of the sacred and the secular. We have to rethink what sacrality means, we have to be aware of new forms of sacrality (are they really new?), which we might call the secular sacred. Why should we, as hymnologists, confine our studies to denominational practices, knowing that much of the material we study is also part of other religious or secular sacred contexts, and why should we not acknowledge that our expertise can be useful to understand the dynamics of the post-secular society?

A performative turn in hymnology

To keep the relevance of hymnology in a globalizing, post-secular world, we have to redefine the scope of our scholarship. The processes of globalization, individualization of religious practices and the transformation of religion into religiosity, global religion and the secular sacred resist the top-down use of established repertoires, such as Genevan Psalms and orthodox Roman Catholic hymns. A hymnal is not the same as the practice of singing hymns and a lot of hymn performances in ritual contexts do not find their way to a hymnal. The challenges we meet in the field of music, ritual and religion demand a performative turn in hymnology. A hymn as product might be a symbol of denominational identity, but the performance of a hymn goes beyond the boundaries of denominations or institutional religions. A hymn is sung and the singing of it leads to experiences of community and unity. Experiences of seeing one’s own position as part of a comprehensive whole makes life meaningful. This ‘comprehensive whole’ can get a name (God, Allah etc.), but the experience itself, without naming and categorizing, is valuable in itself.

At the hymnological conference in Cambridge, 2015, Scotty Gray presented his book *Hermeneutics of Hymnody: A comprehensive and integrated approach to understanding hymns*. In his book, he aims at overcoming the fragmentation of hymnology. He presents a comprehensive and integrated hermeneutics of hymnody: “Hymns are a beautifully rich and complex polyphony of thoughts and feelings and sounds. There are biblical, theological, liturgical, literary, musical, historical, biographical, sociocultural, and practical voices in this polyphony.” Although I am very sympathetic to his project, we have to be aware that much of the knowledge we have as hymnologists does not count for those who sing hymns. Studying hymns leads to another kind of knowledge compared to singing hymns. While we sing a hymn much of the content might disappear in the act, and sometimes in the effort of singing. Or perhaps only part of the content is consciously digested. While we sing a hymn, we are not busy interpreting the lyrics, but we experience the sounds with our body, taste some remarkable words and hear the choir or people surrounding us participating in the singing. We experience

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that the hymn acts upon us. Singing is not an expression of our thoughts, but becoming part of
a sound environment which is first and foremost a physical and sensual experience. In
hymnology, we have to move on from hymns as object of our study to the singing of hymns. I
have been inspired to this move by, among others, the cultural musicologist Christopher Small
(1927-2011). Small does not speak of ‘music’, but of musical performances, which he refers to
with the verb ‘to music’ and the participle ‘musicking’ that goes with it. Meanings are created
during and by the performance, in the network of all those involved in the act of ‘musicking’. It
is hard to verbalize and interpret this musical knowledge, but it is there, in our bodies, it is
embodied and experienced knowledge.

**Hymnology as platform**

To meet the challenges of globalization and the transformation of religion and religious
practices and to keep the relevance of hymnology, we have to redefine our scholarship. I
propose to look at hymnology as a platform where several disciplines meet. What binds all
these disciplines is the study of singing in religious-ritual practices. We have to be aware that
the content of the word ‘religious’ has changed due to the described processes of globalization.

Comparable to ‘ritual studies’, hymnology is not a school, characterized by specific
methods or theories, but a multidisciplinary platform for the academic, critical, and systematic
study of singing in religious-ritual practices. The identity of the platform of hymnology is
determined by three characteristics which are elaborated on in the following.

First, there is the central object of the study. Hymnologists study practices of singing in
religious-ritual contexts. I propose to redirect the object of our studies from ‘hymn’ to ‘ritual
music’, or even better: ‘singing in religious-ritual contexts’. I am aware that the object of study
is defined here more broadly than we are used to. In a traditional view on hymnology, the
object is confined to Christian hymns and hymnals. In broadening the object of study to
‘singing in religious-ritual contexts’, I refer to the Durkheimian approach to religion and ritual.
Durkheim looked at rituals as means to give places, moments or objects a special status.
Through rituals, we set apart a moment in time, a place or an object. This ‘set apart’ quality is,
according to Durkheim, the sacrality of the ritualized moment, place or object. So, through
ritualizing we distinguish between the sacred and the profane. From this perspective, we might
say that singing is a way of ritualizing. On the one hand, the singing reveals the values which are

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17 Christopher Small, *Musicking. The meanings of performing and listening* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan
18 I am inspired to this platform idea by my colleague Paul Post, who has described the field of Ritual Studies as a
https://pure.uvt.nl/portal/en/publications/ritual-studies(53922eba-41ab-4c03-adad-535d1a6a4fc5).html..
778.
important to a social group. This is what Gordon Giles experienced when he criticized the
popular hymn *I vow to thee, my country*. In his reflection on the media storm that raised after
his critical publication, he wrote: “For a hymn that is popular has a foothold in the psyche of
society and therefore opens insights to the things that really matter (the ‘sacred values’. M.H.)
– life, death, love, pain, sacrifice.” On the other hand, the singing itself is an act of ritualizing
and sacralising the occasion. For example, when we sing the national anthem, we ritualize the
occasion. This happens at national remembrance days, sacred days on the nation’s calendar.
The ‘set apart’ quality that characterizes the sacred makes it possible to incorporate both
supernatural and natural references. The sacred, as set apart category, can refer to the
supernatural (God, transcendence) and to the natural (the immanent, negotiable values of a
society etc.). Why should we, as hymnologists, confine our expertise to the institutional sacred,
the sacred which seems to be monopolized by the churches? Due to the dynamics of
globalization, hybridization, mixing and blending, there is much more sacrality in our societies,
sacrality which is, at least partly, produced by singing as a ritual activity. So, as a hymnologist, I
am interested in the hymns used in churches, in the hymns used in soccer stadiums, in national
anthems used at the occasion of commemorations, in songs made for festive days, in music
(including pop music) used as part of cremation rituals as strong indicators of attitudes towards
death.

A second important characteristic of hymnology as a platform is a plurality of methods.
Hymnology itself is not a method, it does not have one method, but is characterized by a
plurality of methods that is part of the multidisciplinary nature of this platform. I refer once
again to Scotty Gray’s book *Hermeneutics of Hymnody*, in which he perfectly describes this
multi-method approach. To his ‘polyphony of voices’ I want to add an approach from the
perspective of performance. We have to take into account that singing is something that
happens, and the act of singing itself evokes a meaning-making process which might go beyond
the hymn itself.

A third characteristic of hymnology as a platform is a certain disciplinary tradition. We
have national and international hymn societies, and the IAH is one of them, in which
researchers meet and present their research. We have our own journals, the *IAH Bulletin,
Jahrbuch für Liturgik und Hymnology, Sacred music, The journal of Jewish music and liturgy, The
Hymn: journal of congregational song*; dictionaries and outstanding scholars.

I would like to add a fourth characteristic of hymnology as a platform, but I am a bit
hesitant. What are the most used theories or concepts used in hymnology? Reading and
rereading hymnological studies, for example the main lectures of the past three IAH
conferences, in 2011, 2013 and 2015, I come across several theoretical notions, but theory
seems not to be a systematic part of hymnological studies. To challenge us, I will sum up some
relevant theoretical questions:

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1. How to define ‘hymn’: what is a hymn, both as a product and as a performative category?
2. How to classify hymns: is the hymn a religious or a cultural phenomenon, or both?
3. What is a hymnal?22
4. What are the functions of hymns?23
5. How do hymns relate to the sacred and religion?
6. How do hymns evoke meaning-making processes?
7. What is the influence of hymns on the body?
8. What happens when hymns are transferred from one context to another?
9. What questions need to be asked about gender issues and hymns?24
10. How might we develop a musical-ritual criticism?25

To present hymnology as a platform with four characteristics – its own object of study, the plurality of methods, its own traditions and a canon of theories and concepts – is both a description of a reality and a programmatic effort. I am convinced that we have to move forward and to deal with the consequences of both globalization, decentering and hybridization, and the performativ turn to keep hymnology relevant. In the hybrid and dynamic societies we live in, our expertise of singing, ritualizing and sacralising might help to explore, analyse and evaluate the use of music for the benefit of both individual and collective needs of people.

**Coda**

In my own academic career, I have developed from being an liturgical studies scholar (Liturgiewissenschaftler) to a ritual studies scholar. I started studying Gregorian chant as both an ecclesiastical and cultural repertoire, and ended up, at this very moment, studying, among other things, reconciliation songs in Rwanda and the modern Requiem as an expression of dealing with death. So, the new profile for hymnology which I have outlined is strongly autobiographical. Quoting Martin Luther: “Here I stand, I can do no other.”

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23 E.g. shaping identity, marking time and life-cycle, fostering community.