

No More "Yahweh"



What's all the buzz? The blogs have been buzzing these last few weeks with news from the Vatican Congregation of Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments. This congregation recently issued a directive explaining that the divine name "Yahweh" would no longer be used in the hymns and prayers of the Roman liturgy. Many of those sitting in the pew are not even aware of the new directive, but others are either thrilled or saddened by the news. As composer of one of the most "blogged-about" songs affected by this change, namely "You Are Near," I thought I might offer my own thoughts and give some history behind the singing of the name "Yahweh."

Some History

I composed "You Are Near" in 1970 as a very young, twenty-two year old, Jesuit-in-training. Just a few years earlier, the long-awaited Jerusalem Bible translation of sacred scripture was published. It first appeared in French, with the English version following in 1966. This translation was a direct response to the call of Pope Pius XII in 1943 for new translations of Sacred Scripture based on the original Hebrew and Greek texts. The JB was published as an official Roman Catholic translation, with full imprimatur, and it used the name "Yahweh" in both its original French, and subsequent English, translations.

Along with many of my peers, I welcomed this new translation, found it readable and inspiring, and used it for my own prayer. It was because of the Jerusalem Bible that sacred scripture, especially the psalms, came alive for me in a way it never had before. The translation was "modern," in the best positive sense of that word, and connected with my soul when I came to pray. It was a logical step for me then to look first to this translation when I began setting scripture texts to music.

The Jerusalem Bible

As some may remember, the theologians and scripture scholars who prepared the Jerusalem Bible decided to use the name "Yahweh" to designate the tetragrammaton YHWH whenever it appeared in the original Hebrew text. This decision was surely not a frivolous one, but carefully thought out. In the end, they made the decision based on their desire to be most true to the original text. This, of course, is exactly the same reasoning being used recently by those "re-translating" the texts of the Mass so that they will be "true" to the original Latin.

Here's a short quotation from the Forward of the 1966 Jerusalem Bible:

"It is in the Psalms especially that the use of the divine name Yahweh may seem unacceptable - though indeed the still stranger form Yah is in constant use in the acclamation Hallelu-Yah (Praise Yah!). It is not without hesitation that this accurate form has been used, and no doubt those who may care to use this translation of the Psalms can substitute the traditional "the Lord". On the other hand, this would be to lose much of the flavor and meaning of the originals."

In other words, even in the Hebrew tradition, there are inconsistencies. While the name of "Yahweh" is never spoken aloud out of reverence and respect, still a shortened form of that same name is spoken and sung every time one sings the word "Alleluia."

Respect and Sensitivity

In my reading of the recent Vatican directive, the Congregation is encouraging us to approach the language we use in liturgy with both respect and sensitivity. When I and other composers decided to use the name "Yahweh" in the texts of hymns, we based our choice in the scholarly work and judgment of those who fashioned the Jerusalem Bible. As mentioned earlier, the intention of these scholars was to be clear and true to the original Hebrew scripture texts, to offer a translation that would exhibit both the meaning and flavor of the original.

Within a few years after the release of the Jerusalem Bible, many people became sensitive to the fact that our Jewish sisters and brothers might find our use of this name for God offensive. So after about 1973, you don't find composers, including myself, using the name of "Yahweh" in our hymn texts. So the Vatican directive is really speaking to a practice initiated over thirty years ago. It's just that we've continued to sing those particular hymns. And some of them have become beloved favorites among men and women of Christian faith.

Unless I'm reading it incorrectly, the directive from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments is inaccurate when it states that "Apart from a motive of a purely philological order, there is also that of remaining true to the Church's tradition, from the beginning, that the sacred tetragrammaton was never pronounced in the Christian context nor translated into any of the languages into which the Bible was translated." The Jerusalem Bible translation, mentioned above, did exactly that. And historically, the Jerusalem Bible was published as an official Roman Catholic translation, with full imprimatur, and used the name "Yahweh" in both its original French, and subsequent English, translation.

"Official" Revisions

In the flurry of recent conversation on the liturgical music blogs, there has been speculation about what this will mean for some of the songs we sing. There are, of course, those who hope that the directive will mean the "death" of certain songs. For others, it feels like they're losing an old friend. "You Are Near" is a good example of what I'm talking about. For many, many people, this hymn, based on Psalm

139 is one of their beloved favorites. I can tell you honestly, that of all the songs I've composed, I've gotten more letters and emails about this piece – people telling me how it helped them to pray when they couldn't, or sustained them through particularly difficult times, or helped them through their grieving, or accompanied them on their wedding day -- than I have for any other of my songs. I believe I owe these people an "official" revised text so they can continue to sing and pray a hymn they've loved for so long. If I don't, people will create their own revisions and communities will end up with many different ways of singing the piece.

Composer Considerations

There are many factors I've taken into consideration to find the "right" new text. It's not just a matter of plugging in the word "God" wherever "Yahweh" used to be sung. For one thing, there's the matter of these two words having a different number of syllables. To do a simple exchange of one word for the other would necessitate altering the timing of the musical notes.

In addition to considering the meaning of the words, I tried to attend to the "sound" of the new text. In the case of "You Are Near," for example, the original word "Yahweh" had no hard consonants in it and, therefore, could be sung gently, tenderly. There was an intimacy inherent in singing this name of God. But when I considered "Lord God" as a possible revision, it sounded harsh, most likely because it had many hard consonants. For me, the tender quality was very important to the prayerfulness of the piece, so I crossed that possibility off my list.

Another possibility I considered was "O God." But I realized that I couldn't just plug it into the original notes because the accents would be misplaced. The first beat of a measure always gets a strong accent. That would mean that the "O" got the strong accent rather than the word "God," as would be the case in the speaking of those same words. As people sang this it would forever feel awkward and not quite "right." I could be one of those subconscious musical "speed bumps" that distracts from the true prayerfulness of a piece.

The last important challenge I faced was to find a revision that didn't sound "patched." This is music that many people have sung for most of their lives. After that amount of time, almost any change in lyric will feel new. But eventually I hope that people will "settle into" the new text. I didn't want it to forever remind folks that this song used to be "different."

Final Solutions

In some cases I jotted down pages of possibilities. As I narrowed the list, I spoke with trusted friends and colleagues to ask for their opinion. They were of tremendous help with their comments and encouragement. With so many things to consider, the solutions were not always easy to come by. I'm well aware that I cannot satisfy everyone's sensitivities. But I took great care in the process.

My publisher, OCP, has published a list of revisions on their website (<http://www.ocp.org/directive08>) along with comments and suggestions for implementing the Vatican directive. The OCP missal programs

and hymnals will incorporate the lyric changes in the 2010 publications that arrive to be used at the beginning of Advent 2009.

Pastoral Care

My hope in the months ahead is that sensitive pastoral care will be taken when the recent Vatican directive is presented to worshippers and put into practice. The US bishops, the shepherds of our local church, have not yet had a chance to respond to the directive but will certainly do so in the months ahead. Genuine pastoral care requires more than just an announcement that we will no longer use the divine name of "Yahweh" in our songs. For many it's just not enough to say we'll do it because the Vatican congregation says so. They want to understand. Their faith, informed by reason, deserves an intelligent, thoughtful explanation. And even with careful catechesis, some will choose to continue to sing "You Are Near" just the way they have for the past 37 years. That is the way they know how to pray it. The Vatican directive only applies to liturgical use of these songs. In one's personal prayer, in prayer groups and on retreats we are encouraged to use whatever translation of Sacred Scripture, and whatever form of these hymns, that help us to pray.