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Aspects of Modern Translations of Wesley Hymns into German

Walter and Annegrete Klaiber

The Reception of the Hymns of Charles Wesley in the German-language Regions

The reception of Charles Wesley's hymns in the German-language regions is no success story. There have been early examples of translations, however, and not only by Methodists. Christian Friedrich Schwarz (1726–1798), a Lutheran missionary in India, translated *Jesus, lover of my soul*, one of the few hymns which found its way also into non-Methodist hymnals. In the nineteenth century, however, the translation and propagation of the hymns of Charles Wesley was essentially Methodist business. It was indeed a very active period. The *Zionsharfe* (1863) of the Wesleyan Methodists had no less than sixty hymns of Wesley and the *Deutsches Gesangbuch der Bischöflichen Methodistenkirche* (1865/88) at least twenty-five. The translators normally are not named, but Dr. John Lyth was unquestionably one of the most industrious and skillful of them.

It is important to observe, however, that the translations by Ernst Gebhardt and others of the new hymns of the Holiness movement and the evangelistic crusades were received quite readily by pietistic circles outside Methodism but not the hymns of Wesley. Even the new *Gesangbuch der Methodistenkirche in Deutschland* of 1926 (GB26) had only six Wesley hymns and the *Gesangbuch der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche* of 1969 (GB69) took over four of those and added two new ones, which were translated in the fifties and sixties. Obviously even in German-speaking Methodism there were some difficulties with the reception of the hymns of Charles Wesley.

This changed only in the 1980s. There were two impulses: the Faith Conferences in Hollabrunn, Austria needed a bilingual song book, and the hymns of Charles Wesley could not be overlooked. Lothar Pöll translated a number of them, and although this was only a first beginning it demonstrated that it is worth doing. The second impulse came from the publication of a supplement to the German-language hymn supplement, *Leben und Loben* (1987), for which viable translations of Wesley hymns were sought. Some older translations were revised, others were newly written, and almost all of them were well received and often sung. This fostered continued interest in translations for the new hymnal, *Gesangbuch der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche* of 2002 (GB02). The result was that this hymnbook included twenty-two translations of hymns of Charles Wesley: two from the nineteenth century (one revised), three from the 1950s and 1960s, and seventeen newly translated since 1985. Interestingly enough two "classics," "And are we yet alive" and "Jesus, lover of my soul," which were still in the hymnal of 1969 were not accepted (and when one looks at

the translations, one easily understands why). Whether these new translations will have a stronger echo outside Methodism remains to be seen. Up to the present this does not seem likely.

What are the special difficulties and challenges with the reception of the hymns of Charles Wesley?

The challenges for translation of the hymns of Charles Wesley into German

There are a number of peculiarities and difficulties for the translation of the hymns of Charles Wesley which should be mentioned.

a. Linguistic challenges

There are a number of exceptional linguistic features in the hymns of Charles Wesley—some of them are common to contemporary English, some of them peculiar to Wesley—which creates a number of challenges to those who attempt to translate Wesley texts into modern German. I want to mention some of them, though the following list is by no means complete:

- Many meaningful notions in Wesley’s English are monosyllabic whereas the German equivalent has two syllables (*love/Liebe, grace/Gnade, truth/Wahrheit, faith/Glaube*).
- This poses special problems when these words form the rhyme; it leads to the predominance of “masculine” rhymes, whereas the German needs the “feminine.”
- The hymns of Wesley are often characterized by a very dense reflective poetry, which contains many allusions to striking images.
- The plethora of biblical quotations and allusions, which are typical for Wesley’s poetry, are difficult to translate.
- Wesley uses a number of stereotype theological formulas, which have no equivalent in German theological language, e.g., blood applied.”
- Based on the above realities, as a rule of thumb one could say that you would need double the space in German to express the same thoughts and sentiments of Wesleyan English.
- The typical “pathos,” which Wesley’s texts may share with others of the eighteenth century and which forms an important ingredient of its special effect, is difficult to repeat in modern German.
- That points to a general problem. We have to translate eighteenth-century English texts for German speaking people of the twenty-first century in a way that they may use them for their own praise and confession in the present age!

This refers us to another level of the issue which touches the question of the translation only indirectly but which is very relevant for the task of inculturation.

b. Theological challenges

Charles Wesley represents with his hymns very distinctively the faith of the young Methodist movement. Many hymns are doctrine in song. But not all of these doctrinal thoughts are readily receivable to German-speaking minds, which are shaped by the theology of Luther and Calvin.

The following examples suffice to illustrate this point.

- An important figure of speech in Wesley's hymns is the parallelism between the events in heaven and on earth. This leads to impressive but sometimes strange phrases.
- Although Charles is sceptical about his brother John's doctrine of entire perfection, the aim of fully overcoming sin was an important theme for Charles in his hymns.
- In this context their special view of the doctrine of justification is important. Although the Wesleys, too, taught that our righteousness remains always God's own righteousness, they were convinced—in contrast to Zinzendorf—that Christ's righteousness becomes also our own which proves itself in good works. As Charles writes in the last verse of "And can it be":

No condemnation now I dread,
 Jesus, and all in him is mine.
 Alive in him, my living head,
 and clothed in righteousness divine,
 bold I approach th'eternal throne,
 and claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Is it possible to translate this? Christoph Klaiber has chosen the following words:

Verdammnis schreckt mich seither nicht.
 Ich lebe: Jesus ist nun mein.
 Er ist mein Haupt und Lebenslicht.
 Gerecht bin ich durch ihn allein.
 Kühn fordere ich vor seinem Thron
 die Krone, die durch ihn mein Lohn.

Although we may admire the boldness of these words this remains a difficult statement. This was obviously true also for some contemporaries of Wesley. The Moravian Christian Gregor added to Count Zinzendorf's hymn *Jesu, thy blood and righteousness* (which was translated by John Wesley), two verses which show an almost anti-Wesleyan affect and points succinctly to the difference between the Wesleyan and Lutheran doctrine of justification:

Und würd ich durch des Herrn Verdienst
 auch noch so treu in seinem Dienst,
 gewönn den Sieg dem Bösen ab
 und sündigte nicht bis ins Grab,
 so will ich, wenn ich zu ihm komm,
 nicht denken mehr an gut und fromm,
 sondern: Da kommt ein Sünder her,
 der gern fürs Lösgeld selig wär.

Translated this would mean: Even if I should win the victory over sin and evil, I would only plead in the last judgment to be saved because of the ransom paid through the death of Jesus Christ. John Wesley translated the second stanza of the original hymn in his own way:

Bold shall I stand in thy great day;
 for who aught to my charge shall lay?
 Fully absolved through these I am,
 from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

But after this short excursion into the question of inculturation, back to the task of translation.

Are there aids to overcome the difficulties for this task?

c. Aids for the translation of the hymns of Charles Wesley

The goals of translation:

- The first goal is a hymn that can be sung! The translation may not necessarily meet highest poetical standards, but text and tune should fit together and people should like to sing the hymn.
- The second goal is that each stanza—and the entire hymn—must have an authentic message which people can accept and with which they can agree. Given the wealth of meaning in Wesley's hymns, it is often necessary to set priorities and to make a choice among them.
- The translation of a hymn should not only be correct (and therefore sometimes abstract and neutral), but meet also the emotional atmosphere of it. The associative transfer of images and metaphors is very important to reach this goal.

Realizing the goals of translation:

- First learn the tune and sing it until you know it by heart.
- Sing the original English hymn stanza by stanza.
- Make a rough version of the translation without considering rhyme or rhythm.
- Work on single formulations and try a first evaluation.

- Test the areas of meaning of different words and notions and observe the change of meaning they have undergone throughout history.
- Start with the actual translation and begin with that part which attracts you most.
- Continue this with the entire text. This may be easier if you do it while singing.
- Critically evaluate your first draft of the text, noting whether the translation is linguistically correct, understandable, and fits the tune.
- Enlist the insight of others. Such joint critical evaluation is sometimes difficult, but in most cases it is very valuable.
- It is more fruitful to deal with gaps, uneven phrases, and weak expressions through dialogue with others. New solutions for difficulties can be expected.

After all of the above, another test with the sung text is necessary and this is achieved by asking the following questions:

- Do the words, emotions, and message of the text correspond to the profile of the tune?
- Are the key notions assigned to the stressed parts of the time?
- Are there linguistic dilations or compressions or word reductions which can be avoided?
- Can one do without weak rhymes, if there are no good ones?

During this work there may be phases of resignation and enthusiasm, there will be tough rethinking of problems again and again, and the playful task of working with a puzzle in which the different parts finally come together into a whole. How good this will be is another question. There still may be doubts on the possibility of “entire perfection”!

d. Examples for difficulties and solutions for the translation

1. The density of notions and thoughts

The translation of *A Charge to Keep I Have* (UMH 411, cf. GB02 547, “Ein heilig Amt ist mir vertraut”) in two instances needs two stanzas to translate one of the verses of Charles Wesley. See Example 1.

2. The “pathos” of the poetry of Charles Wesley

The old, as well as the new, German translation of “O for a heart to praise my God” (UMH 417, cf. GB02 270: “Schaff in mir Gott zu deinem Ruhm” [Dienst]) have difficulties in rendering the flow of the original. In addition, there is the problem of the change in the sequence of the stanzas, which disturbs the train of thought of Wesley’s hymn. See Example 4.

3. The representation of the Wesleyan doctrine

The hymn, “Spirit of Faith come down” (*UMH* 332), has in stanza 4 a short summary of an important part of the Wesleyan doctrine—but even in the original not in a satisfying poetic form. The German translation, “Komm, Geist des Glaubens, komm” (*GB02* 252) concentrates on two metaphors, which try to render the abstract thoughts of the original. In the same hymn we find the typical phrase of “blood applied” (stanza 1), which is very difficult to translate. Another example is found in “Come let us use the grace divine” (*UMH* 606:3; cf. *GB02* 263:3: “Kommt, nehmt die Gnade Gottes an”). See Examples 2–3.

Difficult to translate is also the phrase “Salvation to God,” cf. “Maker in whom we live” (*UMH* 88:2, see *GB02* 42:2, “Schöpfer der ganzen Welt”) and “Ye servants of God” (*UMH* 181:2+3; see *GB02* 43:2+3 “Dient freudig dem Herrn”). See Examples 6–7.

4. The richness of metaphors

The plethora of metaphors and images of the poetical language of Charles Wesley can often be translated only in some sort of selection. Some of his allusions are difficult to understand, cf. “And can it be” (*UMH* 363:2+3; see *GB02* 293:2+3, “Kann es denn sein”). But there are also examples of very good solutions, cf. “O for a thousand tongues to sing” (*UMH* 57:3; see *GB02* 1:3, “Mein Mund besinge tausendfach”). See Examples 8–9.

Regarding “Hark! the Herald Angels sing” (*UMH* 248,3), it may be questioned as to whether the more literal translation “Hört die Engelchöre singen” (*GB02* 176,3) or the rather free paraphrase “Freut euch, freut euch Menschenkinder” (*GB02* 177,3) is more adequate! See Example 5.

It also was not easy to decide whether to translate the first line of “Come, sinners, to the gospel feast” (*UMH* 616:1) rather literally or with a more “invitational” sense; cf. *GB02* 522:1, “Kommt alle, kommt” See Example 10. This hymn also illustrates the problem of the selection of stanzas.

If we examine the translations carefully, we have to admit that among the “good” translations there are only a few which in themselves are good German poetry. This will limit their reception in other theological traditions. But some translations may pass this test (cf. *GB02* 87, 242, 269).

Examples of translations of hymns by Charles Wesley
(GB02 represents *Gesangbuch der Evangelisch-methodistischen Kirche*)

1. A Charge to Keep I Have (UMH 411)—Ein heilig Amt ist mir vertraut (GB02 547)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <p>1. A charge to keep I have,
a God to glorify,
a never-dying soul to save,
and fit it for the sky;</p> <p>2. To serve the present age,
my calling to fulfil;
O may it all my powers engage
to do My Master's will!</p> <p>3. Arm me with jealous care,
as in thy sight to live;
and Oh! thy servant, Lord, prepare
a strict account to give.</p> <p>4. Help me to watch and pray,
and on thyself rely,
assured, if I my trust betray,
I shall forever die.</p> | <p>1. Ein heilig Amt ist mir vertraut,
das will ich treu versehn;
ich will zur Ehre meines Herrn;
nur ihm zu Diensten stehn.</p> <p>2. Zu retten vor dem ewgen Tod
die teur erkaufte Welt
ist mein Beruf und sein Gebot,
dazu bin ich erwählt.</p> <p>3. Drum sei all meine Zeit und Kraft
Ihm, meinem Gott geweiht.
Für ihn, der neues Leben schafft,
bin ich zum Dienst bereit.</p> <p>4. Ach rüst mich, Herr, mit deiner Kraft;
und heiligem Eifer aus,
der unermüdlich wirkt und schafft.
am Bau an deinem Haus,</p> <p>5. Lass mich vor deinem Angesicht
stets leben recht getreu,
dass ich in deinem reinen Licht
nicht einst verwerflich sei.</p> <p>6. So hilf mir denn, mein Herr und Gott,
stets wachsam sein und flehn
und lass mich fest auf dich vertraun
und wohl vor dir bestehn.</p> |
|--|--|

2. Spirit of faith come down (UMH 332)—Komm, Geist des Glaubens komm (GB02 252)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1. Spirit of faith come down,
 reveal the things of God
 and make to us the Godhead known,
 and witness with the blood.
 'Tis thine the blood to apply
 and give us eyes to see,
 who did for every sinner die,
 hath surely died for me.</p> <p>4. Inspire the living faith
 (which whosoe'er receives,
 the witness in himself he hath,
 and consciously believes),
 the faith that conquers all,
 and doth the mountain move,
 and saves whoe'er on Jesus call,
 And perfects them in love.</p> | <p>1. Komm, Geist des Glaubens, komm!
 Mach Gott uns offenbar!
 Zeig, wer er ist, was er getan,
 was Christi Opfer war.
 Lass meine Augen sehn
 den, der für Sünder starb,
 dass er, der alle Welt erlöst,
 auch mir das Heil erwarb.</p> <p>4. Mach hell das Glaubenslicht,
 das du in uns entfacht,
 das in sich trägt der Liebe Glut
 und leuchtet in der Nacht.
 Der Glaube kämpft und siegt,
 weil du ihm Hoffnung gibst
 und uns die große Liebe schenkst,
 mit der du selber liebst.</p> |
|---|---|

3. Come let us use the Grace divine (UMH 606) Kommt, nehmt die Gnade Gottes an (GB02 263)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>3. Thee, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
 let all our hearts receive,
 present with thy celestial host
 the peaceful answer give;
 to each covenant the blood apply
 which takes our sins away,
 and register our names on high
 and keep us to that day.</p> | <p>3. Wir öffnen unsre Herzen dir,
 Gott, Vater, Sohn und Geist,
 gemeinsam mit dem Himmelsheer,
 das Frieden uns verheißt.
 Das Blut des Bundes tilgt die Schuld
 und macht von Sünden rein.
 Schreib uns für deinen großen Tag
 ins Buch des Lebens ein.</p> |
|---|--|

4. O for a heart to praise my God (*UMH 417*)—Schaff in mir, Gott, zu deinem Ruhm (*GB 270*)

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <p>1. O for a heart to praise my God,
a heart from sin set free!
A heart that always feels thy blood,
so freely spilt for me!</p> <p>2. A heart resigned, submissive, meek,
my great Redeemer's throne,
where only Christ is heard to speak,
where Jesus reigns alone.</p> <p>3. O for a lowly, contrite heart,
believing, true and clean,
which neither life nor death can part
from him that dwells within!</p> <p>4. A heart in every thought renewed,
and full of love divine,
perfect, and right, and pure, and good—
a copy, Lord, of thine!</p> <p>5. Thy tender heart is still the same,
and melts at human woe;
Jesu, for thee distressed I am—
I want thy love to know.</p> <p>6. My heart, thou know'st, can never rest
till thou create my peace,
till, of my Eden repossessed,
from every sin I cease.</p> <p>7. Fruit of my gracious lips, on me
bestow that peace unknown,
the hidden manna, and the tree
of life, and the white stone.</p> <p>8. Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart;
Come quickly from above;
write thy new name upon my heart,
thy new, best name of love!</p> | <p>1. Schaff in mir, Gott, zu deinem Dienst
ein Herz, das dir getreu;
der du der Welt zum Heil ersiehst,
mach ganz von Sünd mich frei!</p> <p>2. Dein zartes Herz fühlt immer noch
der Menschen bitterm Schmerz;
ich schrei zu dir, ach, hör mich doch,
erneure, Herr, mein Herz.</p> <p>3. Herr, schenk mir ein zerbrochnes Herz,
das gläubig ist und rein,
auch demutsvoll; in jedem Schmerz
laß es geduldig sein.</p> <p>4. Ein Herz, ergeben dir allein,
das taugt vor deinem Thron,
wo niemand sonst soll Herrscher sein
als du nur Gottes Sohn.</p> <p>5. Ein Herz, verkläret in dein Bild,
von deinem Geist beseelt,
durch Gnade fest, recht weich und mild,
zum Kampfe stets gestählt.</p> <p>6. Ein Herz, das sich von dir nicht trennt,
das treu bis in den Tod
für dich in reiner Liebe brennt,
ein solches schenk mir Gott.</p> | <p>1. Schaff in mir Gott, zu deinem Ruhm
ein Herz von Sünde frei,
das fühlt, dass es dein Eigentum
Kraft deines Blutes sei.</p> <p>2. Barmherzig fühlst du immer noch
mit Menschen ihren Schmerz.
Ich schrei zu dir, ach hör mich doch,
erneure, Herr, mein Herz.</p> <p>3. Schenk mir ein reuevolles Herz,
das sehnlich nach dir schaut
und voller Demut auch im Schmerz
auf deine Hilfe baut.</p> <p>4. Ein Herz, ergeben dir allein:
Mach es zu deinem Thron,
wo niemand soll bestimmend sein
als Jesus Gottes Sohn.</p> <p>5. Ein Herz, im Denken völlig neu,
das voller Liebe ist,
vollkommen, rein, gerecht und treu—
dein Abbild, Jesus Christ.</p> <p>6. Ein Herz, das niemals wird getrennt
durch Leben oder Tod
vom Namen, den es von dir kennt:
Die Liebe bist du, Gott.</p> |
|--|---|---|

GB26, Nr. 462 = GB69, Nr. 349

- 5. Hark! The herald angels (UMH 240)**
- Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
 3. Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
 Light and life to all he brings,
 risen with healing in his wings.
 Mild he lays his glory by,
 born that we no more may die,
 born to raise us from the earth,
 born to give us second birth.
 Hark! the herald angels sing,
 "Glory, to the newborn King!"
- Hört die Engelchöre (GB02 176)**
- Friedensfürst, du bist geboren,
 3. Sonne der Gerechtigkeit.
 Du bringst denen, die verloren,
 Leben, Licht und Herrlichkeit.
 Christus hat sich hingegeben,
 schenkt uns Heil und neues Leben.
 Von dem Tod sind wir befreit,
 neu geboren in Ewigkeit.
 Hört es, freut euch überall:
 Gott wird Mensch, ein Kind im Stall.
- Freut euch, freut euch (GB02 177)**
- Freuen wird sich, wer gefunden
 3. seinen Heiland Jesus Christ,
 freudig wird er dann bekunden,
 dass er neu geboren ist.
 Jesus Christus ist das Leben,
 Gott zur Ehre uns gegeben.
 Das Vergangne zählt nicht mehr,
 nur der neue Mensch wie er.
 Freut euch, freut euch, Groß und Klein,
 selig, selig sollt ihr sein!
- 6. Maker in whom we live (UMH 88)**
2. Incarnate Deity,
 let all the ransomed race
 render in thanks their lives to thee
 for thy redeeming grace.
 The grace to sinners showed
 ye heavenly choirs proclaim,
 and cry: "Salvation to our God,
 Salvation to the Lamb!"
- Schöpfer der ganzen Welt (GB02 42)**
2. Du Mensch gewordner Gott,
 der uns unendlich liebt,
 der uns erlöst von Sünd und Tod
 und wahres Leben gibt:
 Wir wenden unser Herz
 dir, unserm Heiland, zu.
 Dein Blut, o Lamm, dein Todesschmerz
 bringt unsrer Seele Ruh.
- 7. Ye servants of God (UMH 181)**
2. God ruleth on high, almighty to save,
 and still he is nigh, his presence we have;
 the great congregation his triumph shall sing,
 ascribing salvation to Jesus our King.
 3. "Salvation to God, who sits on the throne!"
 Let all cry aloud and honor the Son;
 the praises of Jesus the angels proclaim,
 fall down on their faces and worship the Lamb!
- Dient freudig dem Herrn (GB02 43)**
2. Im Himmel herrscht Gott, vollendet sein Heil
 und sieht doch die Not, die hier unser Teil.
 Die Schar der Erlösten, sie stimme mit ein:
 Nur einer kann trösten, nur Jesus allein.
 3. Ruft: Ehre sei Gott, der sitzt auf dem Thron!
 Befolgt sein Gebot und preist seinen Sohn!
 Ihr Engel, singt Lieder dem Namen des Herrn!
 Fallt vor dem Lamm nieder und dienet ihm gern.

8. And can it be (UMH 363)

- 'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies!
Who can explore his strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries
to sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore;
let angel minds inquire no more.
- He left his Father's throne above
(So free, so infinite his grace!),
emptied himself of all but love,
and bled for Adam's helpless race.
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
for O my God it found out me.

9. O for a thousand tongues (UMH 57)

- Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
that bids our sorrows cease;
'tis music in the sinner's ears,
'tis life, and health and peace.

Kann es denn sein (GB02 293)

- Geheimnis groß: Gott selber stirbt.
Wer kann der Liebe Weg verstehn,
die mir, dem Sünder, Heil erwirbt?
Kein größres Wunder ist zu sehn.
So liebt uns Gott! Drum betet an,
was unser Geist nicht fassen kann.
- Er kommt von seines Vaters Thron.
Nicht messbar ist der Gnade Tat.
Nur Liebe treibt den Gottessohn,
der sich für mich entäußert hat.
Unendlich frei ist Gottes Gnad,
weil sie auch mich gefunden hat.

Mein Mund besinge tausendfach (GB02 1)

- Dein Name, Jesus, heilt den Schmerz,
macht aus dem Leid ein Lied,
dringt Sündern wie Musik ins Herz,
ist Leben, Heil und Fried.

10. Come, sinners, to the gospel feast (UMH 339/616) Kommt alle, kommt zu Gottes Fest (GB02 522)

- Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;
let every soul be Jesus' guest.
Ye not one be left behind,
for God hath bid all humankind.
- Kommt alle, kommt zu Gottes Fest,
zu dem er euch jetzt laden lässt.
Kein Mensch soll nun noch draußen stehn,
zum Mahl des Herrn kann jeder gehen.

