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Wesleyan Spirituality and German Methodist Hymnody

Friedemann W. Burkhardt

Translated by Helen Wright

At the end of the eighteenth century, long before Methodism was introduced to Germany in 1830, it became a German-speaking phenomenon in North America.¹ Two church fellowships related to the Methodist tradition were formed there: the *Kirche der Vereinigten Brüder in Christo* and the *Evangelische Gemeinschaft*. Over fifty years later, the Methodist Episcopal Church began its own mission among German immigrants, so that in the middle of the nineteenth century German-speaking Methodism in North America was represented by three church communities.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, various short-lived attempts to form Methodist fellowships had also been seen in Germany. In the 1820s, Christoph Gottlob Müller (1785–1858), a butcher and a Methodist in London who had been born in Württemberg, came to his old hometown Winnenden several times on visits and introduced Methodist religious practices to the Pietist circles there. When he came on a visit in the summer of 1830, he began to hold Methodist meetings. An awakening followed and, before he left, a fellowship had formed very much in the manner of English Methodism. This group viewed itself as an independent body and decided to continue to follow the principles of Methodist piety.

At the beginning of 1831, the Wesleyan Methodist Mission Society in London decided to begin a mission to Württemberg.² In the wake of the great movement of immigration to North America in the 1830s, members and workers from Müller's group of Methodist fellowships came to North America. They were accepted into the work among the German immigrants that was being carried out by the Methodist Episcopal Church.³ Through the contacts that the Methodist immigrants to North America had with their relatives and with Müller, their spiritual father, a variety of relationships had arisen between the Methodists in the New World and those in Württemberg by 1840. These connections intensified through subsequent visits, in particular a visit that William Nast paid to Germany in the winter of 1844–45, which included meetings between Müller and Nast.

Against the background of a serious lack of workers in Müller's constantly growing fellowship, and of the freedom of religious opinion and freedom to hold religious meetings that were consequences of the Revolution, Nast asked the

¹ F. Burkhardt, *Christoph Gottlob Müller* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2003), pp. 203–313.

² Ibid., p. 207ff.

³ Ibid., p. 314ff.

bishops of his church to send a missionary to Germany. In the early summer of 1849, the Methodist Episcopal Church finally decided to assume the mission in Germany and to send two missionaries.⁴

As knowledge of the Methodist Episcopal Church mission initiative spread, the *Evangelische Gemeinschaft* began to consider whether it also had a responsibility towards Germany, a consideration that led in 1850 to the beginning of a second North American mission to Germany. Finally, just twenty years later, the *Kirche der Vereinigten Brüder in Christo* also began a fourth Methodist mission in Germany.

Thus, at the turn of the nineteenth century, a meeting of Continental European Protestantism and Anglo-Saxon Methodist Christianity occurred within the increasingly international network of Protestantism in Württemberg as well as in North America.

In addition, there were interactions that did not simply lead to German Lutherans becoming Methodists in Germany and North America. Methodism also underwent a process of sustained modification in the course of its nineteenth century reception by German-speaking Protestant groups in Germany and North America. This evolution led to a loss of some basic characteristics of Methodist piety and to an alignment of Methodism with conditions in Continental European Protestantism. This development can be seen especially in the liturgy, the congregational singing, and the forms of fellowship and congregational life in the various German-speaking Methodist churches and missions. This emerging difference between German-speaking and Anglo-Saxon Methodism, which is obvious today, has never been adequately described or explained. Furthermore, many questions persist concerning the adaptation and reception of Methodist piety in the churches and missions, as well as how the Methodist socialization of their leading figures was effected.

Nast's 1839 hymnbook as a case study

A significant example of this process of modification is the first hymnbook of the Methodist Episcopal Church's German mission, published in 1839, and the subsequent developments in its influence over the course of the next hundred years in North America and German-speaking Europe.⁵

After 1740, the German Methodists in North America and the Methodists in Württemberg maintained contact through letters. Members of the Württemberg fellowship had immigrated to the New World and had joined the work of the Methodist Episcopal Church among immigrants. These North American contacts meant that the Methodists in Württemberg were no longer solely dependent on

⁴Ibid., p. 365ff.

⁵F. Burkhardt, "Kirchengesang und Kirchenlied der wesleyanischen Gemeinschaften in Württemberg," in: *Das Gesangbuch, Geschichte – Gestalt – Gebrauch*, (Stuttgart: Reiner Nägele, 1996), pp. 218–45.

the London center for materials. Now they were regularly supplied with Methodist literature from North America: *Der Christliche Apologete*, the weekly magazine of the German Methodists in North America, as well as a variety of smaller publications. The advantage of receiving literature from Cincinnati was that everything did not first have to be translated into German. Thus, at the beginning of the 1840s the hymnbook of the German North American Methodists arrived in the Wesleyan fellowship in Württemberg. In 1843, C. G. Müller wrote to Cincinnati:⁶

Dear Brothers, . . . for a while now, it has been our habit to sing the spiritual songs of our American brothers in our meetings, and we are glad that we can be one with them at least in doctrine and in spirit, if not in external practices. For alas! our religious freedom is very limited.

This hymnbook was put together under the leadership of the Württemberg theologian William Nast, who had immigrated to North America and founded the German branch of the American Methodist Episcopal Church in 1835. This collection of hymns was, however, not the first Methodist hymnbook in German. There were already nine German hymnbooks in the other two German Methodist churches, which were older.⁷

In any case—and this is what I am leading up to—neither these nine older hymn books nor Nast's 1839 hymn book, were Methodist in their conception and content. Nast says of his hymnbook that it is for Methodists and that the songs must therefore breathe a Methodist spirit.⁸ He criticizes the length of many German hymns and praises the liveliness of English melodies. In practice, however, Nast found it difficult to attribute significance to the Methodist spirit. He assigned German melodies to the songs, and only gave the English versions in brackets. An obvious difference between his and most German hymnbooks, and

⁶C. G. Müller, letter of Nov. 22, 1842 to W. Nast, *Der Christliche Apologete* 4 (1843/8): 30.

⁷For an overview of the development of German Methodist songbooks see Carlton R. Young, *Companion to The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 75–89, 92–93. The first German-language hymnbook of a church, which in the context of North American Methodism was founded among German immigrants, the United Brethren in Christ, was published just four years after John Wesley's death under the title *Das Aller Neuste Harfenspiel* (Pennsylvania, 1795). Additional hymnbooks appeared in 1808, *Lobgesang zu Ehren des Heiligen und Gerechten Israel* (Hagerstown, 1808); 1816, *Herzens Opfer, eine Sammlung Geistreicher Lieder* (Lancaster, 1816); und 1830, *Eine Sammlung von Geistlichen, Lieblichen Liedern* (Harrisburg, 1830). The first hymnbook of the *Evangelische Gemeinschaft* appeared in 1810 with the title *Eine Kleine Sammlung alter und neuer Geistreicher Lieder* (Reading, 1810), but the first official hymnbook followed in 1817, *Das Geistliche Saitenspiel* (Neu-Berlin, 1817). Additional collections of hymns of the EG were published in 1810, *Die kleine Geistliche Viole* (Neu-Berlin, 1818); 1821, *Eine Sammlung neuer Geistlicher Lieder* (Neu-Berlin, 1821); und 1824, *Zween Geistreiche Lieder* (Neu-Berlin, 1824).

⁸In his church newsletter of Oct. 25, 1839, Wilhelm Nast presented his completed hymnbook. In this introduction he describes the criteria for the selection of hymns: "The fundamental principles which guided us in selecting the hymns cannot be better described than by outlining the essential qualities of a church hymn as excellently defined by A. Knapp in his Foreword to the evangelical hymn corpus." Nast then summarizes Knapp's conclusions. Later in this edition he makes further comments regarding Knapp's Foreword. (Cf. *Der Christliche Apologete* 1:43 [Oct. 25, 1839]: 170–73.)

the only similarity of form with Methodist hymnbook practice, was the printing of the songs as poetry and not prose. Apart from this feature, Nast's hymnbook reflected nothing of the character and arrangement of the English hymnbooks of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

The difference is apparent particularly in the list of hymns that made up the book and their organization. The early American Methodist hymnbooks were all dominated by Wesley hymns.⁹ The specifically Methodist content of Nast's book is limited to five Wesley hymns translated into German, a song by John Newton, and two others from unknown English writers. Nast took his content mainly from the *Evangelischer Liederschatz*, which his friend Albert Knapp (1798–1864), deacon of the Stuttgart hospital church and the preparer of a new Württemberg hymnbook, had published two years earlier. Two thirds of the hymns came from the *Evangelischer Liederschatz*. Other sources, also used by the Pietists, were the hymn collections by Philipp Friedrich Hiller, Johannes Goßner, Carl Heinrich von Bogatzky, Ernst Gottlieb Wolltersdorf, and Josef Winckler.

The index of Nast's hymnbook is comparable to that of a dogmatic treatise. It follows Knapp's model and what was up to that point the usual hymnbook arrangement in Württemberg. The choice of this arrangement is simultaneously a decision against the Wesleyan principle of arrangement, which organized the hymns according to the course of an ideal Christian biography and thereby brought the experiential aspect into sharp focus. When the Methodist Episcopal Church began a mission in Germany in 1849, the missionaries were surprised to learn that their hymnbook was already being eagerly used in the Wesleyan fellowships in Württemberg.¹⁰ In the very first year of the North American mission, preparations were underway for printing the hymnbook in Germany. In the spring of 1850, the leader of the North American mission, Ludwig Sigismund Jacoby (1813–74), asked the Wesleyan Mission Society in London to introduce his printed hymnbook into their Württemberg societies. In 1851, it was officially introduced.

The use of this hymnbook was significant in the forming of an identity among the Württemberg Methodists. They had felt themselves connected to the German Methodists in North America even when, with Nast's hymnbook, they really only had a variant of the hymnbook of the Protestant church in Württemberg.

The third edition of Nast's hymnbook contained about twenty-five English hymns, among which were fourteen by Charles Wesley. In 1868, with the first publication of a hymnbook for Germany, this number was reduced.

⁹ Anastasia van Burkalo, "Expanding Horizons. Two Hundred Years American Methodist Hymnody," *The Hymn* 17, No. 3 (1966): 77ff.

¹⁰ L. Nippert, letter of Dec. 10, 1850 to Wilhelm Nast, *Der Christliche Apologete* 13 (1841–1843): 19.

Wesley hymns in hymnbooks

North America	Germany				
German branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church	<i>Bischöfliche Methodistenkirche</i>				
1839 1846 1888	1851	1861	1868	1896	1926
5 14 24	14	15	13	12	6

This tendency continued in the new *Bischöfliche Methodistenkirche* hymnbook in 1896, in which the number of English songs was limited to eighteen. Among them were twelve by Wesley and two by Isaac Watts.

The committee that put together the hymnbook commented on the relatively limited number of English hymns in the 1896 book:¹¹

Furthermore, up to now the “English” hymn has been dominant and must be limited to a healthy number; since however, it has proved itself to be a source of blessing in the historical development of our church, and some of the hymns fill a gap, a complete removal was not feasible, without arousing the feeling of loss, which would have been more subjective than objective. Although we were aware that it would not raise the musical and poetic value of the hymnbook, the best among the translations of English hymns were retained. . . . We would have liked to have separated the chorales from the spiritual folksongs and the hymns of English origin, but for reasons of expediency we refrained.

This development, found only in Germany at that time, is striking for two reasons. First, it would have been possible in Germany to introduce a genuinely Methodist hymnology to a greater extent. Müller had already translated some Wesley hymns, which were sung in his fellowships. After Müller’s death, the English minister Dr. John Lyth published his own hymnbook three years after his arrival in Germany as superintendent of the British mission. That hymnbook contained 613 hymns, about 100 of which were translated from English, including 71 by Charles Wesley.¹² What was strikingly different about this hymnbook also was that the songs were not printed as prose but as poetry.

Second, in the German hymnbooks of the Methodist Episcopal Church in North America during the course of the nineteenth century, the number of Wesley hymns constantly increased: the first edition in 1839 had five, the third in 1846 as many as fourteen, and the new hymnbook of 1888 contained twenty-four hymns by Charles Wesley.

The hymnbooks of the *Evangelische Gemeinschaft* and the *Kirche der Vereinigten Brüder in Christo* in America, however, remained completely unaffected by attempts to take on Methodist hymnody. Throughout the decades, they presented a relatively closed collection of hymns. Neither in the nineteenth nor in the twentieth century were they inclined to adopt Methodist hymns.

¹¹ “Foreword,” *Gesangbuch der Methodistenkirche*, (Frankfurt a.M.: Anker Verlag, 1926), p. v f.

¹² Thoroughly discussed by F. Burkhardt, *Das Gesangbuch, Geschichte – Gestalt – Gebrauch*, pp. 228–233.

Summary

The first Methodist hymnbook that the Methodist fellowships in Württemberg received from North America in the 1840s, and which was officially introduced by the London Mission authorities in 1850, was (according to content and arrangement of hymns) a variant of the hymnbook used at that time in the Württemberg Lutheran state church. The same themes, criteria, and songs that had formed the model for the Württemberg hymnbook of 1841 were definitive for this hymnbook, *Evangelische Liederschatz*, which was produced in 1839 by Albert Knapp, the leader of the Methodist Episcopal Church's mission to the Germans.

In North America, English hymnody, primarily Wesleyan, found increasing acceptance in the hymnbooks of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the second half of the nineteenth century. A contrary movement, however, is noticeable in the hymnbooks of the German mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church: English hymnody was systematically removed. And in the German Methodist denominations of North America and Great Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century, a non-Wesleyan hymnody became accepted, and even the biographically and experientially oriented Wesleyan outline was given up in favor of a dogmatic outline in the manner of continental European Protestantism.