

A Hymn of Hate?

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A hymn of hate by William H. Smith

Fourth of July staple "Battle Hymn" has nothing to do with the God of the Bible

My friend came from old Virginia stock, spoke with the soft accents of Dixie, and should have known better. But destined for a military career and a lover of all things martial, he requested 'That Hymn' during a pre-service hymn sing. The Yankee minister, however, knew better and refused to accept the request.

It was a hymn whose chorus every red-blooded American can sing. A hymn that was guaranteed to bring the crowd to its feet as the conclusion of the Pensacola Fighting Tigers High School Band's patriotic half-time show in the 1960s... A hymn whose rousing version was a standard in the repertory of the Bellhaven College (Jackson, Miss.) Concert Choir during its glory days. What was it? 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic.'

Why did the New Jersey minister refuse 40 years ago to let us Southern boys sing the hymn whose secular version ('Glory! Glory! Hallelujah! Teacher hit me with a ruler!') we sang almost every day? It was not sensitivity to Southern sensibilities.

Perhaps it was because he knew something about the author, *Julia Ward Howe*. She was a classic leftist. Born into a wealthy New York family, she settled with her philanthropist husband in Boston. Active in the Unitarian Church, she preached in congregations throughout New England and joined organizations of the 19th-century left such as the Women's International Peace Association. And, as her hymn reveals, she had that ability to hate that liberals quickly condemn in conservatives but righteously indulge in themselves.

More importantly, our minister understood the words we so thoughtlessly sang. Before you sing The Battle Hymn this July 4, perhaps you will want to think about what Mrs. Howe would have you sing. *Mrs. Howe's Christ is not the Christ of the Bible*. If, *'In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea/With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me,'* it was not the 'glory of the One and Only who came from the Father,' of 'God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side,' and who 'became flesh' (John 1:14,18) that Mrs. Howe saw. It was only the glory of humanistic goodness. If *'he died to make men holy'* it was to make them holy by the

power of sacrificial example that would motivate them to '*die to make men free.*' It was not to make them holy by the efficacy of an atoning sacrifice which frees from sin's guilt and power.

Mrs. Howe's eschatology is not the eschatology of the Bible. If she could not believe in judgment in the hereafter, she surely believed in it in the here and now. Her eye had '*seen the glory of the coming of the Lord*' not at the end of the age, but in the 1860s. '*He hath loosed the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword*' in the form of the Union army marching against the South, God through them '*trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.*' One greater than Uncle Sam wants you in the righteous army which will execute judgment on the wicked whose cup of wrath is full.

'He hath sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat/He is sifting out the hearts of men before his judgment seat./O be swift, my soul, to answer him! Be jubilant my feet!/Our God is marching on.

Mrs. Howe was nothing less than an early and ardent proponent of liberation theology. Sin is social. Salvation is freedom from structures of oppression. Redemption is by warfare. Judgment is now. Consider this little-used verse of her hymn: *I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel/'As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal;/Let the Hero, born to woman, crush the serpent with his heel/Since God is marching on.'*

If she believed in moderation and toleration in religion, she gave little place to lead to the discovery of religious truth, coercion must lead to social righteousness. She had no gospel of peace--that this day is a day of mercy in which we can be saved from the wrath to come by a God who, in love, provided the propitiation his justice demands and now pleads with sinners to be reconciled.

Mrs. Howe's hymn is a liberal hymn of hate stirred by the passions of war and based on a 'God is on our side' mentality. Today, some whose patriotic zeal is high and theological discernment low might be tempted to sing it. Worse, some on the religious right may march into the culture wars singing it.