

JOHN BROWNLIE

HYMNS FROM
THE EAST

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Hymns from the East

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Brownlie J.

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Hymns from the East Being Centos and Suggestions from the Office Books of the Holy Eastern Church

INTRODUCTION

This fourth series of Hymns from the Office Books of The Holy Eastern Church, differs from the preceding three in this, that the hymns are less translations or renderings, and more centos and suggestions.

One cannot continue long to interest himself in any work, and receive from time to time the observations and criticisms of his fellows, without, if he have his eyes and mind open to receive impressions, feeling himself impelled to alter his methods in some particular or other.

In previous volumes the author has been careful to give, for the most part, carefully executed – that is to say, truthfully rendered translations from the originals. Work of that kind is useful, and absolutely necessary for certain purposes; but, unless for the hymnologist, or for the liturgiologist, it is far from being attractive. To be true, renderings can hardly be graceful, and they must lack much of the literary charm which attaches itself to productions which are more untrammelled. Hence, unless, as has been said, to the few who are specialists, translations are not much in favour. They have earned a reputation, and that reputation adheres to them: they are cold and uninspiring. Such is their reputation, not always just, but who can say that it has not, on the whole, been earned?

Perhaps it would be wrong to say that there is any prejudice against translations from the Greek or any other language whatever, as such. The reluctance to welcome translations is really reluctance to welcome poems which do not find their way to the heart. For this reason there is perhaps not more than a score of translations which have won their way from permanent hymnals to a permanent place in the affections of our devout fellow-countrymen. In this connection it is to be noted that we speak of *translations*, and not of *suggestions* such as, “Art thou weary,” or “O, happy band of pilgrims,” and many others, which have advanced into great favour, and are termed translations, but are not.

True hymns are sacred lyrics, and a lyric to be lyrical and heart appealing, must be *inevitable*. It must be the spontaneous expression of the heart of the author – an expression which *had* to come. It is the latent secret of the power of true hymns, for what *must* be uttered will assuredly, sooner or later, find its way to some heart. Such jets of living poetry must be awaited: they cannot be forced. But a translator must deliberately sit down at his desk and work – manufacture, if you will – and endeavour to turn on the lathe of graceful culture, elegancies which readers may admire, but will never feel.

Perhaps translators from the Greek have a singular temptation to eschew. Hymns from the Offices have to be created in Greek, as has been pointed out in a former Introduction, before they can be the source of living poetic inspiration. No doubt the necessity of forming a cento is also the privilege, but it may easily entice a translator to be satisfied with a lifeless stringing of inept fragments. All this and much more has been brought home to the writer times without number.

If one would have his work to be permanently useful; if he would aim at any particular employment of his hymns, he must observe the conditions which such an aim implies. A translator who aims at the use of his work in public worship, must aim at pellucid simplicity both of phraseology and of structure; and if they are to be widely, permanently, or deservedly popular, they must be gifted with becoming grace. This cannot be done in translations pure and simple. The present collection gives the result of an experiment. The Greek has been used as a basis, a theme, a motive; oriental

colour, and it is to be hoped some of the oriental warmth has been preserved. Now and again an oriental figure is retained, and to those who have any knowledge of the worship of the Eastern Church, it must be obvious that the peculiar themes of her praise are in abundant evidence.

What, then, is the net result? To an unpractised eye, if no indication of the source of these hymns had been given, could anything about them have suggested their source? To the unpractised eye, nothing. But no one who knows the Greek Offices will travel far before he overtakes well-known landmarks. This is just as it should be. It is sufficient that a fertile source of suggestion has been found – of theme, thought, form, colour – and that from this ancient source it is possible to procure much that is beautiful for the adornment of the worship of God's house to-day. And this gratifying fact is made plain, that the themes of Greek Church praise are the grand themes of the praise of the Church in our land and in all Christian lands; – The Christ in all the Might and Glory of His Person and Work: the need of our humanity, and the way in which Christ met it: His miraculous birth, which is not shorn of any of its mystery, and the embellishments of the event, which are never toned down, but, in true oriental fashion, made, if possible, more dazzling: His Passion and His Death, and the fulness of their atoning efficacy. But, as is to be expected, the grand theme of the Greek singers, as became those who, more than we have done, caught the first inspiration of their praise from the apostles, is the glorious Resurrection of our Lord from the dead. Here, the praise of the Greek Church touches its highest note, and pours forth its most enchanting melody. “Christ is risen,” and the glad response, “He is risen indeed” – these words constitute the keynote of all that is best and most beautiful in Greek worship. The Knowledge and the Wisdom of God are everywhere extolled, and the attribute of Light is continually and cordially applied to the Deity.

One cannot acquaint himself with the Church of the Apostles, with its glowing service, and with the noble stand it has made, and still maintains, for the truth of God and for the Kingdom of Christ in the world, and not feel pained with the fact, so little to the credit of the Church of the West, that, of our sympathy it has little or none. This is largely due to our ignorance. But is ignorance in many cases not culpable? Is it not so in our case? A little more acquaintance with the Eastern Church would vastly alter our attitude towards it, and speedily remove most of our prejudices.

More than once have we listened to depreciations of the Greek Church, and the epithet “stagnant” has always been incorporated as a first-rate misdemeanour of the Orthodox Church of the East. The assumption in the epithet is that the Greek Church is not missionary and aggressive, and the implication is that it has been so from earliest times. Until men acquaint themselves with the history of this Church, and open their eyes to facts which are readily accessible, it is useless to attempt to lift them out of their prejudices.

How much did the Church of the East suffer by the great Roman schism of 1054! After, in the words of Dr. A. van Millingen, in his *Byzantine Constantinople*, having in “the empire of which New Rome was the capital, defended the higher life of mankind against the attacks of formidable antagonists, and rendered eminent service to the cause of human welfare;” after having elaborated the Christian doctrines and formed the creed of Christendom for the world, she was shorn of much of her strength by the departure of the West. The spring, and energy, and enterprise were largely taken from her. No fault of hers that she was left with the meditative souls who could ponder the mysteries of God, but could not trade in the merchandise of the Kingdom. So she was left in possession of her splendid attainment, without the aptitude to fit herself to aggressive enterprise, while Rome, with all the qualifications which have fitted her for an aggressive task, has made for herself a place and a name which have eclipsed the glory of the old home. And so we forget the Church of the Apostles, to which we owe so much.

But worse. How much did the Church of the East suffer, and how much does she still suffer, by the overthrow of the empire by the Turks in 1453 – by the overthrow of the empire, and the domination of a powerful, unscrupulous, and fanatical race, down through the 600 years succeeding! How would the Church in these islands have stood such fiery trials? Would we have continued an

enterprising missionary Church through it all? It might be good for us to try to understand that, when a despotic Sultan stands over you, allowing you to breathe on condition of no proselytising, the conditions are not favourable to well advertised missionary effort. All that can be done in such circumstances, and under such conditions, is to hold fast to the faith, and let the light shine, which the Greek Church actually does.

Since the tenth century, Russia stands to the credit of Greek missionaries. Not that Russia can be considered much credit in the meantime by the West; but the ground for hope in Russia is the Christian element that has entered into her national life. And our Protestantism has not yet succeeded on the same national scale in missionary effort, a fact which ought to incline us to think less of the stagnation of the Greek Church. But why refer specially to Russia as a product of Greek missionary effort? Would Rome, or the Church of the Reformation in the West, be what they are to-day, but for the zeal and devotion of that Church in bye-gone days?

It is an easy matter for us in these days, with our national liberty and recognition of the Christian faith; with the noble souls around us who are the products of centuries of grace; with wealth, and all that Christian work calls for to its aid, to look disparagingly upon the Church of the East, the mother of us all, as she lies in sore straits despoiled of her splendour, and trampled under the heel of the Turk. Well we know the theory of cross-bearing, but, in comparison with the Church of the East from the very earliest down to the present day, we know but little of its practice. Our laurels are not too firmly knit upon our brows: let us take heed, and let us exercise the grace of charity and a spirit of sympathy.

But our prejudices, which are, as usual, due to imperfect knowledge, culpable or otherwise, charge this Church, which claims to be Orthodox, with being heretical in doctrine and worship. To put the common view, this Church, which is the repository of Apostolic doctrine, and from which we, in common with others, have derived, has, along with the truth, a large admixture of error, which renders her dangerous and to be avoided.

We, who plume ourselves on the orthodoxy of our doctrines and purity of worship, have a remarkable facility for detecting and magnifying the errors of others: of creating them where they do not exist, and of exaggerating them where they do. This facility has this advantage, that it keeps our eyes away from ourselves and from the errors which are nearer home. Like the beams of the winter sun which have little warmth in them, the line of our vision is somewhat oblique.

This is a subject much too large to occupy our attention to any extent here. It may be enough to remark in regard to the major charges, that nowhere does the Eastern Church address worship, either to the Mother of our Lord, or to the saints and angels. They are venerated and invoked, but worshipped, never. Worship, as we understand it, is addressed to the Triune God, and to Him alone. This is a rather dangerous subject to touch, and this is not the place to safely approach it; but it may suffice to say that we might be a great deal the better, and none the worse, and it might be comforting and strengthening in times of affliction and trial, to realise more than we do, that our Lord wore our flesh when He sojourned with us on the earth, and that He derived His humanity from Mary. We might thus even be induced to use Her name with greater veneration and affection than have yet characterised our references to Her, when these have had to be made, and so aid the fulfilment of Her own prophecy, "Behold, from henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed." And might it not be good for us to remember that there *are* saints and angels, and that we are "compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses?" Who doubts the fact? Do not they who tacitly ignore the existence of the Blessed Dead?

If any of the hymns contained in this volume should touch the heart of anyone who reads them, or, better still, at any future time, sings them, may he, as he remembers the source from which they have come, think reverently and sympathetically of the struggling Church of the East.

HYMNS FROM THE EAST

MORNING

I

Now, God of Light, the morn appears,
And life revives, and beauty glows;
The night has gone with all its fears,
And lo! the light in brightness grows.

II

Thine be the glory, God of Light,
For all the joy from morn that springs;
O may a morn dispel each night,
And bless our lives with beauteous things.

III

Give us this day the light that dwells
In every heart Thy presence fills;
That night with all its fears dispels,
And life, and hope, and joy instils.

IV

Then shall our nights no darkness bring,
But morn, bright morn, for ever shine;

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