

**Secular-Sacred Tensions in  
Antebellum Abolitionist Songbooks**

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A small body of antislavery songbooks published in the decades leading up to the Civil War represents an intersection between antislavery poetry and the traditions of public hymn-singing. This corpus of songbooks and hymnals constitutes a little-remembered but vibrant oppositional element within Jacksonian political culture. The anthology politics of these songbooks, as I shall briefly illustrate, lie in the tensions between secular and evangelical Christian purposes. Although these American songbooks emerged from and adapted materials from religious hymnals, within a few years they separated themselves from these origins.

The first antislavery songbook published in the United States was Maria Weston Chapman's *Songs of the Free, and Hymns of Christian Freedom*, which appeared in 1836. Chapman, dedicated to organizing and publicizing Garrisonian abolitionism, framed this book's purpose in the following words:

Those who are laboring for the freedom of the American slave, have felt their need of aid which has ever been sought by those in all ages who have striven for the good of their race;— the encouragement, consolation and strength afforded by poetry and music. This generally expressed feeling was the origin of the present book of hymns with the accompanying strain of poetry; hardly less elevated, though more ornamented and diffuse than is allowed by the severe beauty and sublimity that should model the Christian Lyric.

The antislavery hymnal, Chapman continued, would be a tool for spiritual warfare and, through sanctification of aesthetic faculties, provide recognition of the fraternity of all humanity in messianic faith. However, the manifest differences of ideological origin appear in the specification of an aesthetic difference between ‘simple’ religious music and more ‘ornamental’ topical music. This ideological separation represented at heart a contest over the social construction of evangelical Protestantism in the United States, and specifically its willingness or unwillingness to confront the issue of slavery. Chapman sought to close that separation and expand the appeal of the abolitionist movement through the cultural familiarity of hymn-sing. Her book was a true potpourri of musical sources and texts, combining hymns by Isaac Watts and John Wesley together with poetry by contemporary figures such as William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Margaret Chandler, William Cullen Bryant, and Chapman herself.

This mixture was provocative of itself, for slaveholders shared these same religious hymns and reacted angrily to hearing of their use for antislavery politics. Lydia Maria Child describes, for instance, one political and legal problem encountered by the organizers of public meetings to celebrate British emancipation of slaves in its Caribbean colonies on August 1, 1834. “The planters had a law of ‘constructive treason,’” she wrote, “that doomed any man to death, who made use of language tending to excite a desire for liberty among the slaves; and they found treason in the Bible, and sedition in the hymns of Watts and Wesley; and we had to be very careful about how we used them.”<sup>2</sup> Thus provided with an antislavery context, even the spirituality of Wesley and Watts hymns could be construed as incitement.

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<sup>2</sup> Child, Lydia Maria, *The Right Way the Safe Way, Proved by Emancipation in the West Indies and Elsewhere* (New York, 1860) 57.

Two antislavery hymnals published in the early 1840s followed a similar pattern as Chapman's *Songs of the Free* by mixing sacred and secular materials. Jairus Lincoln's *Anti-Slavery Melodies* appeared in 1843, followed by George W. Clarke's *Liberty Minstrel* in 1844. A strong shift towards secularization can be noted, though, in William Wells Brown's *The Anti-Slavery Harp* published in 1848. Brown compiled his songbook with more focus on fulfilling market demand. He wrote "The demand of the public for a cheap Anti-Slavery Song-Book, containing Songs of a more recent composition, has induced me to collect together, and present to the public, the songs contained in this book." While Brown borrowed to a limited extent from the Lincoln and Clarke song anthologies, its forty-eight antislavery songs are emphatically topical. There are no Watts or Wesley hymns here. Instead, there are poems from newspapers, abolitionist rally songs, and protest anthems against fugitive renditions back into slavery and anathematizing slave auctions. The invocation of Christianity -- as in the song "The Fugitive Slave to the Christian" whose chorus asks "O Christian! will you send me back?" -- arrives largely in terms of rhetorical challenges to unfulfilled promises of freedom and spiritual equality within Christianity. Where Chapman's *Songs of the Free* exhibits a divided mind between spirituality and temporality, Brown's *Anti-Slavery Harp* resolves this conflict in favor of temporality.

Examining dedicated antislavery hymnals for their ideological construction is only one aspect of the publication of antislavery music. Antislavery hymns appeared before Chapman published the first US dedicated hymnals, but these songs remained unassembled. When they were assembled, it was in limited sections within general

hymnals. Church hymnals in circulation within those denominations officially opposed to slavery might include a few select antislavery songs among scores or even hundreds of hymns. This practice continued throughout the antebellum period. Typically, as in the popular and much-reprinted Unitarian *Book of Hymns for Public and Private Devotion*, a reader would encounter Eliza Follen's "Prayer for the Slave" and John Greenleaf Whittier's "Freedom" along with several more scattered hymns having antislavery import.<sup>3</sup> Such items were included, however, in the supplementary sections of a hymnal at the end of a volume, together with hymns on topics such as the harvest, funerals, missions, and martyrs.

Much of this general reluctance to include antislavery songs in hymnals arose because of widespread perception that their publication in such volumes breached a barrier between secular and sacred domains. Moreover, hymns that condemned slavery might be read as anathematizing the wicked rather than only wickedness, violating Christian injunctions to mercy. According to one standard work on hymnology published in 1860, "We must think it puts in jeopardy the spirituality of worship, especially in our own day and country, in which political passions are rampant, and denunciation of rulers *needs* no stimulus." Thus just as imprecations from the Psalms were eliminated from hymns, so too were specific condemnations to be avoided. Instead of condemnation, according to this concept of appropriate hymn choice, divine powers of justice should be worshipped. The hymnologist, Austin Phelps, wrote:

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<sup>3</sup> *A Book of Hymns for Public and Private Devotion* (Boston: Ticknor & Fields, 1857, 10<sup>th</sup> ed.; originally published 1848) 450-451.

“Has the supreme Judiciary at the Capital, given a blow to freedom which reverberates through the land? Has the national legislature struck down a barrier against Slavery? .....We would improve such a calamity by singing strains like these:

Dread Jehovah! God of nations!  
See, gracious God! before thy throne.  
On thee, O Lord our God, we call.  
Oh Lord, our fathers oft have told.  
Great Shepherd of thine Israel.”<sup>4</sup>

This more conservative position, while opposed to slavery, viewed the role of hymn-singing as rising above the immediacies of political opposition in order to invoke salvation through divine protection of the faithful. Austin Phelps, author of this position and a Congregational minister, held a teaching appointment at the most orthodox Calvinist of institutions, Andover Theological Seminary. When Phelps published his *Sabbath Hymn Book* in 1858, he followed his own advice and included only two hymns that made oblique reference to slavery.<sup>5</sup> Phelps, who was to spend a decade as president of the Andover seminary, was typical of many northern clergy who accounted themselves as antislavery but resolutely excluded those sentiments from their church practices.<sup>6</sup>

What self-censorship did not achieve, institutional censorship could and did accomplish.

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<sup>4</sup> Phelps, Austin, Edwards A. Park, and Daniel L. Furber, *Hymns and Choirs: or, the Matter and the Manner of the Service of Song in the House of the Lord* (Andover, MA: Warren F. Draper, 1860) 134-135.

<sup>5</sup> Phelps, Austin, *The Sabbath Hymn Book: for the Service of Song in the House of the Lord* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1858) 255 (#1112), 273 (#1196).

<sup>6</sup> Phelps writes that “in college I was the only anti-slavery man in the crowd, and I enjoyed the solitude of my opinion.” Phelps, Elizabeth Stuart, *Austin Phelps: A Memoir* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1891) 210.

It became a matter of public comment, for instance, that a pro-slavery figure in the Presbyterian church omitted “a single verse of a certain hymn containing anti-slavery sentiments.”<sup>7</sup> To be fair, the exclusion of antislavery hymns from hymnals was not entirely limited to theological or social conservatives. Some determined abolitionists simply felt that such songs were out of place in a hymnal. For example, James Freeman Clarke, a leading Garrisonian abolitionist, permitted only one antislavery song (‘Anti-Slavery Meeting’ by James Russell Lowell) in his *Service Book: for the Use of the Church of the Disciples* (1844).<sup>8</sup>

Other general hymnals from the antebellum decades took a more substantive view of the role of antislavery hymns. Cyrus Prindle’s 1846 Methodist hymnals, for example, included a solid section of 28 antislavery hymns within a selection of over 750 hymns.<sup>9</sup> Prindle’s inclusion of this twenty-page section assuredly recommended the collection to its publisher, Orange Scott, one of the leaders of the 1844-45 Methodist schism over slavery. The 1847 Baptist hymnal *Sacred Melodies for Conference and Prayer Meetings* adopted a similar strategy, creating a separate 13-poem antislavery section in a volume of 266 hymns.<sup>10</sup> The hymnal’s unknown compilers demonstrated their critique of the United States by including the song “My country! ‘t is of thee / Stronghold of slavery, / Of thee I sing...” sung to the tune of “America”.<sup>11</sup> Ironically, this radical voice, found in the midst of a general hymnal, joined a church hymnal to ex-slave William Wells

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<sup>7</sup> *Dr. Newton’s Columns on the Position of the Old School Presbyterian Assembly on the Subject of Slavery* (Jackson, MS: Purdom & Bro., 1859) 99.

<sup>8</sup> Freeman, James Clarke, *Service Book: for the Use of the Church of the Disciples: Taken Principally from the Old and New Testaments* (Boston: Benjamin H. Greene, 1844) 184.

<sup>9</sup> Prindle, Cyrus [comp.], *A Collection of Hymns, for the Use of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection of America* (New York: O. Scott, 1846) 379-399.

<sup>10</sup> *Sacred Melodies for Conference and Prayer Meetings, and for Social and Private Devotion* (Dover, NH: Free-Will Baptist Printing Establishment, 1847) 231-241.

<sup>11</sup> *Sacred Melodies* 235-236.

Brown's abolitionist songbook and its demands for immediate liberation of African American slaves. If a secular-sacred tension had created the antislavery songbook, at the same time that same tension inflected and altered the social conscience of general church hymnals through recognition that hymns could respond to worldly injustices.

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