Article

"Decide This Doubt for Me": William Cowper's *Olney Hymns* (1779)

James Bryant Reeves

Department of English, Texas State University, San Marcos, TX 78666, USA; jreeves@txstate.edu

Abstract: This paper proposes that William Cowper's *Olney Hymns* (1779) instantiate a curious form of modern belief. Cowper's hymns are riddled with personal confessions of doubt, unbelief, and a sense of exile from the broader Christian church. At the same time, the public nature of his hymns—an emergent genre in eighteenth-century England—placed such private misgivings in a communal context. As congregations collectively sang their individual doubts, those doubts were transformed into tentative affirmations of faith. To believe meant one first had to admit his or her unbelief, joining voices with those who likewise declared that they, too, lacked faith and did not belong in God's church. This sense of exile was abiding for Cowper, and his hymns thereby suggest that a crucial aspect of faith and communal religious identity is Christians' insistence that they can never quite believe what it is they are singing. Belief is, therefore, inextricably tied to a sense of belonging with those who do not belong.

Keywords: hymns; religious experience; doubt; community; religion and literature; literary criticism

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1. Introduction: Desiring Communion

Thy saints are comforted I know,
  And love thy house of pray'r;
I therefore go where others go,
  But find no comfort there.

William Cowper, "The Contrite Heart" (Cowper 1967, pp. 438–39)

William Cowper's (1731–1800) "The Contrite Heart", one of 67 hymns he contributed to John Newton's (1725–1807) *Olney Hymns* collection in 1779, offers an interesting take on Christian community. According to Cowper, God gives the church, made up of those with "contrite hearts", happiness "divine" (Cowper 1967, p. 438). The hymn's biblical inspiration, moreover, is Isaiah 57:15: "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite" (KJV). The problem, however, is that the hymn's speaker cannot be sure if his heart is contrite. In fact, he suspects the opposite. He implores God, "tell me. . . is mine/A contrite heart, or no?", before more assuredly declaring that his heart is "insensible" (Cowper 1967, p. 438). Cowper is paradoxically "pain[ed]", then, that he "cannot feel" (Ibid.). He wishes he felt contrition and love for Christ, but, unfortunately, these inclinations are not only incomplete; they are also weak and infrequent. He only "sometimes" (Ibid.) desires religious desire, placing him two removes from proper Christian sensibility.

To remedy both his lack of contrition and his inability to feel sorry for that lack, Cowper reminds himself of the encouraging benefits of public worship: “Thy saints are comforted I know,/And love thy house of pray’r” (Ibid., p. 439). Longing for a more fulsome faith, Cowper places himself in this community of saints, only to then insist upon his separation from it. “I therefore go where others go”, he writes, but he “find[s] no comfort there” (Ibid.). Finding no hope even amongst his fellow worshippers, Cowper ends the hymn by begging God to “Decide this doubt for me”, to break and to heal Cowper’s heart if it does, in fact, need breaking and healing. In the hymn’s logic, the condition of doubt is a condition in which a believer cannot even discern if he or she is doubting in the first place. One is potentially always in a state of unbelief because humans can never truly know their own hearts, no matter how much introspection and self-examination they undergo.

Christians must, therefore, beseech God to examine and remake their hearts on their behalf. However, Cowper’s simultaneous suggestion that we should do so alongside other believers—singing communal hymns in the “house of pray’r”, the “high and holy place” of Isaiah 57, as we seek “comfort”—reads rather strangely given the hymn’s claim that public worship has not been helpful for Cowper himself. In the end, “The Contrite Heart” offers a portrait of belief and Christian community that is seemingly contradictory. Belief, for Cowper, is inextricably tied to a sense of belonging; although there are certainly doctrinal, intellectual components to belief, Cowper’s own wavering convictions are both constituted and compromised by the communal Christian church. This is because, in Cowper’s thinking, participating in Christian community means being inside and outside the community at the same time. One’s inclusion in the community, in other words, is grounded in the insistence that he or she does not really belong, and that an abiding lack of faith, contrition, and proper religious feeling separates him or her from other “saints” in the congregation. The foundation of Christian community, for Cowper, is its paradoxical impossibility.

Cowper was certainly an idiosyncratic religious figure in eighteenth-century England, so his thinking should not necessarily be read as typical. As he recounts at length in his autobiographical memoir *Adelphi* (c. 1767), Cowper was beset by intense spiritual struggles and mental illness throughout his life. In 1763, after being called to defend his sufficiency to act as Clerk of the Journals in the House of Lords, a position procured by Cowper’s barrister uncle Ashley Cowper, Cowper experienced a mental break. Overwhelmed by the impending “public exhibition”, he “cursed the very hour of [his] birth” and turned his thoughts to “self-murder”. Thereafter, Cowper attempted suicide multiple times, until he was eventually confined to the Collegium Insanorum of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton (1707–1788), where, under the guidance of his Methodist cousin Martin Madan (1725–1790), Cowper eventually converted from what he considered the dry, unbelieving High Anglicanism of his youth to the evangelical faith and its “experimental knowledge of the Redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Cowper 1979, pp. 15, 17, 18, 37).

Upon being released from the Collegium, he moved to Huntingdon and spent time with the pious family of the clergyman Morley Unwin (1703–1767). He shortly afterward met the evangelical, Calvinist minister John Newton, who was the local priest in the poverty-stricken rural town of Olney. After Unwin’s death in 1767, Cowper moved to Olney with Unwin’s widow and children, and Newton became Cowper’s de facto spiritual mentor. Despite Cowper’s conversion and his newfound evangelical community, he would continue to struggle with mental illness. In 1771, 1787, and throughout the 1790s, Cowper had more fits of insanity, and he slowly began believing he was eternally, irrevocably damned.[1]

With Cowper’s mental and spiritual struggles in mind, it is tempting to dismiss “The Contrite Heart’s” musings on Christian community as the results of an atypical mind, and the poem’s doubt and despair as mere offshoots of Cowper’s personal demons. Yet, while

acknowledging Cowper's uniqueness—I certainly would not contend that the speakers in Cowper's various hymns represent an "Everyman" figure[2]—I argue in this essay that Cowper's hymns represent a form of modern, evangelical belief that is not simply Cowper's. As I discuss at greater length below, Cowper's hymns were in keeping with many elements of eighteenth-century hymnody. More importantly, they were sanctioned by his spiritual mentor Newton, who compiled the *Olney Hymns* and asserted that they were useful for and relatable to all Christians; in fact, "The Contrite Heart" notably appeared in more than one hundred hymnals across the denominational spectrum from 1779 to 1979, and in recent years it has even been rearranged for congregational worship in two American churches in the Reformed tradition.[3] Cowper's hymns thus reflect modern, evangelical forms of Christian belief and community that remain doubtful about the possibility of true Christian belief and community (even while insisting on their necessity). "The Contrite Heart" is, after all, not simply a hymn about repentance or turning from specific sins. It is a poem about insecurity and a lack of belonging, one unique to the hymn writer but presumably shared by numerous individuals in his congregation and beyond.

The hymn's focus, to put it a bit differently, is on the very conditions of belief, and the ways that belief is sustained (or not) in and through Christian community. Further, the issue of belief and what it entailed was pressingly current in Cowper's time. According to Ethan Shagan, for instance, the Reformation made Christian belief hard. "Belief has a history", Shagan argues; "it changes over time" (Shagan 2018, p. 282). In other words, it is not a "coherent and stable epistemological object which one might either find or not find in a culture". Rather, it is "a changing cultural space in which epistemology is negotiated" (Ibid., p. 21). If "modern", "post-Enlightenment" belief is "propositional", defined by the "sovereign judgment" of "autonomous, critical subject[s]", pre-modern belief was grounded in community (Ibid., p. 284).[4]

Of course, in the Middle Ages, this community was centered, primarily, in Rome. Catholic theologians from Augustine to Aquinas "asserted a category of belief based upon [the Church's] textual and institutional authority", an authority that "transcended the limits of reason even while it relied upon reason" (Ibid., p. 283). By defining belief in terms of one's commitment to the Church and its authority, Medieval Christianity effectively allowed individuals to hold an array of theological opinions, many of them heterodox, while still claiming to be "believers". As long as the individual Christian submitted his or her opinions to the authority of Rome, putting their faith in the Church's official positions and doctrines rather than their own personal convictions (especially, for instance, when the individual was unaware of the Church's stance on a particular doctrine or theological nicety and therefore could not be certain if his or her convictions were correct), the Christian could be said to "believe". In other words, belief did not have to do with the contents of one's thoughts or convictions. It had to do with one's commitment to the Church. Conversely, those outside the Church, as Shagan notes, were said to have no beliefs at all, as only Christian belief was considered proper belief in the first place.

In Shagan's account, Reformation shrunk the category of belief considerably. Throughout the confessional age, rival denominations "pitilessly rationed belief, preserving the special epistemic status of Christianity", with its entire claim upon the category of "belief", by "shrinking the category and insisting that so much dubious religious speculation was not really belief at all" (Ibid., pp. 283–84). Thus, because "the warring confessions of the Reformation" each claimed that true belief was only found within their particular sect, a Christendom in which belief had once been pervasive and diffuse was now littered with unbelievers. With unbelief lurking around every corner, and with the church's "authority itself now shattered" (Ibid., p. 283), Christians were forced repeatedly to plumb the depths of their own hearts for signs of error, heresy, and unbelief. Protestantism "offered an alter-

native authoritarian project designed around the novel premise of an unbelieving world", and the "thin line between belief and unbelief" that this new regime of belief created was, in Shagan's terms, "unbearable" for many Christians who worried that their own individual sins might be "unmasked as unbelief" at any point (Ibid., pp. 130, 132). The central issue here was "the inherent tension between an understanding of 'belief' as utterly incompatible with doubt, and a theology of human depravity demanding that even the elect remained mired in uncertainty" (Ibid., p. 134).

Shagan's claims echo the "post-secular" work of the literary scholar Lori Branch. For instance, in a compelling essay on John Bunyan (1628–1688) that resonates with many of my own claims throughout this paper, Branch argues that the Reformation made belief "secular" by transforming "the Christian category of faith into knowledge, into propositional certainty" (Branch 2018, p. 504). Branch highlights Talal Asad's insight that the "secular" is not religion's opposite but is instead a mode of thought characteristic of modernity, one that transforms religion by "imagin[ing] the world of reason and language, of commerce and the nation-state, and eventually of global capitalism, as given, knowable realities purged of faith". "Secularism", for Branch, is "the fantasy of a world without belief", and the "secular" therefore attends Reformation in the various ways the latter made belief empirical and the Bible a "proof text of systematic salvation-knowledge, a roadmap to a spiritual world on a physical model" (Ibid., pp. 513, 505). According to Branch, the post-Reformation "quest for certainty that remade faith into knowledge" eschewed communion in favor of epistemology; believers were tasked with repeatedly searching through the scriptures and plumbing the depths of their own souls to ascertain whether they were truly saved (Ibid., p. 507). Especially for Calvinists like Bunyan and Cowper who believed in double predestination—the doctrine that God chooses in advance those who will be saved and those who will be damned—this drive for certainty frequently produced "epistemological pressures" and "suffering", as one's belief and salvation could never be "perfectly confirmed". "Despondency", Branch claims, "is the necessary basis" of the Reformed, secular drive for certainty, and, in this light, it is no wonder that Cowper's hymns are haunted by his inability to determine conclusively the state of his own soul (Ibid., pp. 507–8).

At the same time, however, Branch advocates for a "post-secular" method of reading that recognizes hope as a shadowing symptom of the modern, secular epistemologies that haunted authors like Bunyan and Cowper. By "post-secular" she means not that we have moved beyond secular reason to "unreason", but simply that we embrace a "humbler epistemology" that recognizes that "no thinking is devoid of belief" and that deconstructs recalcitrant binaries like secular and religious, reason and faith, public and private (Ibid., pp. 514–15). By doing so, we can recognize and reassess authors like Bunyan and Cowper not only as "sufferer[s] at the hands of a modern rationality *avant la lettre*" but also as confessors who testify to and preserve "an essential experience of faith, in the form of faith as hope, as symptom, and as irreducible kernel of Christianity within and over and against that fantasy of certainty" (Ibid., p. 517).

Branch's "post-secular" reading is compelling and offers a productive method for approaching Cowper's seemingly despairing hymns. Indeed, I argue that despite their ostensible doctrinal commitment to "faith as knowledge", Cowper's hymns respond to the persistent Reformed worry about being a member of the elect not by making belief "autonomous", strictly personal, subject to the "sovereign judgment" of the individual. Instead, Cowper's hymns ground belief in community, though somewhat unlike Shagan's pre-modern Christians. That community now comprises individuals who humbly admit their lack of faith and, paradoxically, their exile from the community of which they are a part. By spreading doubt among the group, in fact by claiming it as central to membership in the group—you are only truly fit for communal worship when you are crushed by the

weight of your own unbelief and a persistent sense of exile—Cowper's hymns align belief not with assurance but with persistent uncertainty. At the heart of this uncertainty is the Christian's sense of alienation and a desire for true belonging and communion.

Again, this uncertainty is communal. The church's confession of private, individual uncertainties via song or hymn reading is, in Cowper's hymns, an insistence that the community of believers is first and foremost a community of unbelievers, that the entire church is unable to believe without God's regenerative grace, the experience of which often proves elusive in day-to-day life and in corporate worship. Belief in this sense is, therefore, not propositional; it might more accurately be characterized as a mood or affect, a desire to belong to the community to which one already belongs by virtue of a sense of unbelonging. If this sounds intellectually confused or tortuous, it is worth reminding ourselves that, in Alec Ryrie's words, "our 'choices' about what we believe or disbelieve are made intuitively, with our whole selves, not with impersonal logic" (Ryrie 2019, p. 11).[5] Cowper was highly attuned to belief's intuitive dimension, and, in his reckoning, the feeling of unbelief is never overcome, even as the church recites, studies, or sings hymns together. Nonetheless, when Christians join their voices and collectively acknowledge their unbelief and alienation—from the church and from one another—their communal desire for the contrition they lack is miraculously transmuted into a tentative form of belief sustained by God's grace. This is the hope at the heart of Cowper's seemingly hopeless hymnody.

2. Doubt and Despair in Cowper's *Olney Hymns*

For eighteenth-century English evangelicals, hymnody and Christian community were inextricable. Early in the century, religious dissenters began incorporating hymns, particularly those by Isaac Watts (1674–1748), into their congregational worship alongside traditional psalms (upon which many hymns were modeled). Hymn singing was famously a staple of the Wesleys' Methodist movement of the 1730s, 1740s, and beyond. And, while hymns were not sung in official Anglican services until the 19th century, evangelical Anglicans like John Newton and William Cowper nonetheless read, recited, and sang hymns in prayer group meetings, such as those held by Newton on Tuesday nights in his small Olney parish.[6] Hymns were read publicly and privately; according to Christopher N. Phillips, they provided private "devotional material and early literacy instruction", while also solidifying congregations' and denominations' distinct group identities and communal ethos. Hymns sung, read, or expounded by a preacher confirmed the group's identity to itself, and printed hymnals "proclaimed the identities of the churches that used them beyond the walls of their buildings" (Phillips 2018, p. 2).

At the same time, non-conforming churches and evangelical Anglicans alike employed a surprisingly similar repertoire of hymns. As Isabel Rivers has extensively documented, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, and even Unitarians all sang and studied each other's hymns, while also collaborating on mission work, publishing projects, and social campaigns (Rivers 2018). Thus, hymns were both public and private, inclusive and exclusive. They were read at home by the solitary, devout Christian. They were the sung at church, placing the individual's private devotion in a larger communal context; the individual considered his or her personal salvation at home and then joined voices with other members of the "elect", suggesting, of course, that salvation is not merely about one's private relationship with God but is worked out in a community of likeminded believers. This community was notably expansive. While each church's devotional, reading, and singing practices made them distinct among churches, their overlap with other churches who sang and studied similar songs placed them within the larger church universal.

Newton and Cowper's *Olney Hymns* (1779), published specifically for Newton's poor parishioners in the small, economically beleaguered Buckinghamshire community yet popular in broader evangelical circles throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, participated in these community-building dynamics. Comprising 348 hymns, only 67 of which were authored by Cowper, the *Olney Hymns* are divided into three parts: one focuses on passages from scripture, one on occasional subjects, and one on "The Progress and Changes of the SPIRITUAL LIFE" (Newton and Cowper 1779). The volume's epigraphs indicate the relative newness of hymns in Christian worship by citing Revelation 14:3, "And they sang as it were a *new* song, before the throne", while also suggesting, via a reference to 2 Corinthians 6:10 ("As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things"), that hardship and sadness are central to Christian life and community. This understanding of Christian life as a communal *via dolorosa* is further confirmed in Newton's claim that his hymns are intended both as a "monument" of his friendship with Cowper and as a "comfort" for "sincere Christians" (Newton and Cowper 1779, p. vi). The hymns are for "public use" by "plain people" (Ibid., p. vii), those who are "weak" and "poor" (Ibid., p. viii). Moreover, Newton insists that, while each Christian must place his or her individual faith in Christ, all Christians' journeys are essentially alike: "the workings of the heart of man, and of the Spirit of God", Newton writes, "are in general the same, in all who are subjects of grace" (Ibid., pp. viii–ix). Therefore, the hymns relate Cowper's and Newton's unique individual "experience[s]", yet they are also emblematic of all Christian life; the hymns "coincide with the views of real Christians of all denominations" (Ibid., p. ix).

Newton says he will avoid doctrinal "controversy" (Ibid., p. x), though he also admits that his hymns' Calvinistic theology may not be accepted completely by all Christians. Indeed, Cowper and Newton were members of the Established Church, but their eclectic evangelical leanings owed much to the Calvinist dissenting traditions of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; though an Anglican priest, Newton was famously friendly to nonconformists, for instance, and Cowper insisted that there were "no greater Names in Divinity" than the dissenting hymn writers and ministers Isaac Watts and Philip Doddridge (1702–1751) (Cowper 1979, p. 143). Yet, in the *Olney Hymns*, Newton claims that his specific theological convictions are secondary. He is simply relaying his own "views and feelings", and what he has been "taught of God". This distinction implies that doctrine and Christian experience are not exactly commensurate, as even those who disagree with his doctrine are imagined as having similar religious experiences and awakenings. Newton also makes a point about the limits of proper speech: As a Calvinist, he is often expected to keep his theological understanding out of public discourse, but Arminian Christians are not expected to do the same. He justifies his inclusion of Calvinist tenets not because they are necessarily true but because they are his sincere beliefs and because he feels they are "friendly to holiness" and right living (Newton and Cowper 1779, p. x).

In other words, he justifies their inclusion not theoretically but based on his own experiences and religious practice. Newton offers the hymns for the "service" of all who love Christ, noting that they were primarily intended for those in the "parish and neighborhood of *Olney*, for whose use the hymns were originally composed" (Ibid., p. xi). The hymns are entirely personal, drawn from the well of Newton and Cowper's lived experiences as struggling, doubting Christians often in need of comfort, and entirely communal, designed for the use of a specific congregation and community in which both authors were situated. On one hand, the hymns are consistently written in a first-person perspective that gives voice to intensely personal moments of adulation, wonder, joy, despair, and doubt. On the other, the hymns situate these private emotions and experiences in broader, more universal narratives by foregrounding scriptural referents and

analogs. Cowper's "The Contrite Heart", for instance, obviously details his own affective experiences, and his sense of failure and incompleteness; this hymn and Cowper's others are notably less hopeful and spiritually assured than Newton's. Yet, as mentioned above, even this hymn is paired with a scriptural reference, Isaiah 57, a pairing that subsumes Cowper's sufferings and insecurities into a biblical narrative applicable to all Christians.

Before diving into Cowper's hymns in more depth, it is worth highlighting this point: Cowper's *Olney Hymns* were considered resolutely orthodox and biblically grounded, even at their most personal; they were compiled, organized, and advocated by the parish's Anglican priest, Newton. Whatever we may think of Cowper's religious melancholy and mental, spiritual struggles, Newton did not seem to think that Cowper's case was too unique to serve as a model for his parishioners. To the contrary, in their written correspondence throughout this period, Cowper himself repeatedly insists to Newton that his case *is* unique, and that he is separated from God in a way that other Christians are not. Against such claims, Newton's letters repeatedly, steadfastly maintain to Cowper that such is not the case, and that Cowper is not beyond the pale. In short, Cowper's condition was every Christian's condition simply because, in Newton's mind, Cowper was a Christian. Cowper's sufferings differed in degree, not in kind. It was a perverse form of hubris for Cowper to think otherwise.[7]

The *Olney Hymns*' formal arrangement demonstrates these points more fully, as Cowper's frequently despondent, always hesitant meditations sit comfortably (and unproblematically, to Newton's mind) alongside Newton's assertive declarations of faith. For instance, consider one of Cowper's most famous hymns, "Walking with God", the third hymn printed in the *Hymns*' two volumes. The poem beings as follows: "OH! For a closer walk with GOD,/A calm and heav'nly frame;/A light to shine upon the road/That leads me to the Lamb!" (Cowper 1967, p. 433). As the emotional exclamation that begins the hymn, "Oh!" highlights the speaker's present state of despondency and turmoil; he longs for a "calm and heav'nly frame" precisely because he does not currently possess one. The hymn then shifts into the past tense, reflecting upon the "blessedness" (Ibid.) and assurance Cowper once knew when he first accepted Christ as Savior. Embedded in these reflections is an acknowledgement that such assurance has faded, and he no longer knows where and how to find it, with his repeated questioning in the hymn's second stanza: "Where is the blessedness I knew[?]" and "Where is the soul-refreshing view[?]" (Ibid.). The "mem'ry" of this past assurance remains "sweet", but alongside that memory Cowper feels an "aching void" (Ibid.). The hymn's final three stanzas call the Holy Spirit (imagined as a peaceful, innocent dove that Cowper has violently forced from his heart) to return and to overtake Cowper's heart once more. The hymn ends with a declaration that, if the past was blessed, and the present a void, the future shall find Cowper "calm and serene" (Ibid.) once more, walking closely with his God.

In this way, the poem walks us through Christians' everyday struggles and their dark night(s) of the soul in narrative fashion. Ecstatic joy upon encountering Christ inevitably gives way to apathy and misery, and the present Christian life is lived amid this misery. Christian living is, to Cowper's mind, not characterized by fullness and joy but by a longing for fullness and joy amidst emptiness and pain. Assurance is not the defining feature of the Christian, then. The desire for assurance is.

In contrast, the volume's following hymn—again, placed side-by-side with Cowper's without any sense of irony or incommensurability between their two outlooks—is Newton's "By Faith in Christ I Walk with God". Newton's hymn remains entirely in the present tense throughout, averring repeatedly that the speaker walks with God in the here and now. "By faith in CHRIST I walk with God" (Newton and Cowper 1779, p. 5), he asserts, and heaven is firmly in his sight: "With heav'n, my journey's end, in view" (Ibid.). Although he is

pressed on all sides by "snares and dangers" (Ibid.), this hymn's speaker never wavers. He "triumph[s] over all by faith/Guarded by [God's] almighty hand" (Ibid.). Moreover, he pities those devoid of such divine communion, those who "blindly stray" in a "desert" (Ibid.), focusing on this life's pleasures rather than piety, devotion, and the friendship of God. Indeed, for Newton, God is quite simply a friend who is near in each moment, ready to "converse", to hear Newton's "grief and pain", and, crucially, to offer immediate relief, as "he reveals his love to me" (Ibid.).

The experience of reciting or singing these two songs must have been markedly different for Newton's parishioners, but the spiritual universe each hymn occupies is the same universe. Newton's hymn does not contradict or cancel out the hymn that precedes it; rather, Newton's hymn qualifies and responds to Cowper's without discounting it. When the two hymns are juxtaposed, Newton's glosses Cowper's not as an example of spiritual failure—Cowper is not straying in a "desert", obsessed with worldly things, after all; he is "upon the road" waiting for a "light"—but of a struggling Christian who is "guarded" by God's "hand", whether he knows it or not. Cowper's hymn, featured prominently and deliberately at the beginning of Newton's collection, movingly expresses his anguish, isolation, and unfulfilled yearning for communion. Newton's hymn responds pastorally, seemingly assuring Cowper's speaker (and those like him) that divine "converse" is available for him, too. Cowper's inability to participate wholeheartedly in worship is, according to this schema, his primary qualification for participation in Christian community.

The communal logic at play here is even more evident in Cowper's "Jehovah-Roph, I Am the Lord that Healeth Thee". Here, Cowper states that "we" are "waiting to feel [God's] touch" because "we" are "Deep-wounded souls" (Cowper 1967, p. 434). The poem employs these first-person plural pronouns from start to finish, and Cowper's more typical "I" speaker is entirely absent. Cowper outlines the congregation's unbelief while asking God for mercy: "Our faith is feeble we confess,/We faintly trust thy word;/But wilt thou pity us the less?/Be that far from thee, Lord!" (Ibid.). The initial gesture is tentative, offered only via the interrogative "Wilt thou?". To ground the community's hopes more firmly, Cowper alludes to the doubting father of Mark 9:24, who appealed to Jesus to exorcise his demon-possessed son: "'Lord, I believe', with tears he cry'd,/O help my unbelief" (Ibid.). Cowper then turns to an earlier narrative in Mark's gospel, in which a woman sneaks through a crowd to touch the hem of Christ's garments, adding that, like the father in Mark 9, she felt "strong misgivings" (Ibid., p. 435) as she approached Christ.[8] Cowper applies these stories of biblical doubters to the entire church. He concludes the song by comparing the church's affective state to these characters, placing Christian life within a larger narrative context defined by doubt, uncertainty, and unbelief: "Like her, with hopes and fears, we come,/To touch thee if we may;/Oh! Send us not despairing home,/Send none unheal'd away" (Cowper 1967, p. 435). In this hymn, then, the church corporately admits its collective unbelief, thus shoring up private, individual faith that will sustain the Christian in his or her daily life at "home". Hymns like "Jehovah-Roph" do not merely state what the church believes. They also state what it *does not* believe as well, and that collective unbelief helps constitute the church community.

Later in the *Olney Hymns*, and immediately following "The Contrite Heart's" doubt-filled ending, the volume presents another hymn by Cowper that speaks to the church's communal suffering and brokenness. "The Future Peace and Glory of the Church" answers "The Contrite Heart" much in the same way Newton's hymns sometimes follow and qualify Cowper's, yet this time Cowper himself writes the response. If "The Contrite Heart" makes only tentative claims about the possibility of divine healing and overcoming doubt, "The Future Peace and Glory of the Church" is much more unflappable. The hymn begins with God himself declaring that he will eventually pull the church through, rescuing doubting

believers from their "Comfortless, afflicted, broken" (Ibid., p. 439) hearts. Assuming the pastoral posture more typically associated with Newton's hymns, Cowper then tells the church: "God shall rise, and shining o'er you,/Change to day the gloom of night;/He, the Lord, shall be your glory,/God your everlasting light" (Ibid.). While believers cannot provide adequate comfort to other believers, scripture's promises ensure that, as the church is God's chosen, it can take comfort knowing that doubts and unbelief, felt so acutely in the present, are not permanent. While the present may feel like one long extended dark night of the soul, God will one day be Christians' "eternal noon" (Ibid.).

Once again, this pairing—of a hymn full of communal dejection and a hymn in which the church's faith is more obviously steadfast—illustrates the importance of reading the *Olney Hymns* in sequence. At the very least, the pairing demonstrates that even Cowper's most seemingly individualistic, despairing hymns contribute to a broader, more expansive view of faith than is available if we read his hymns in isolation. To put it a bit differently, "The Future Peace and Glory of the Church" allows us to read the unbelief of "The Contrite Heart" as a form of belief; it is a form of hopeful unbelief that believes despite itself.

It is worth reading even Cowper's most despondent hymns in this context, recognizing that his sense of divine abandonment is, in the *Olney Hymns*, shared among Christians. For instance, "Jehovah our Righteousness" contends that it is impossible for Cowper to experience God. The very act of worship, of prayer, or of singing is itself always compromised: "I cannot make thy mercies known/But self-applause creeps in" (Ibid., p. 440). God's ways may be "perfect", but Cowper's "polluted" (Ibid.) ways, his tendency toward self-regard, short-circuit his worship.[9] True heartfelt prayer and devotion are unachievable. Even when God grants Cowper "Divine desire" (Cowper 1967, p. 440), Cowper returns that desire via his own corrupted prayers, a process through which it is deformed and devalued into mere "impatience" (Ibid.). Indeed, according to Cowper, self-interest is always "bubbling from below" (Ibid.), no matter how intently one worships or prays.

The point is not that God's mercies are not real; it is that they are ineffable, unspeakable, impossible to be expressed or captured by one as sinful as Cowper. In fact, the hymn's fifth and final stanza suddenly shifts the focus towards God's faithfulness: "The Lord shall be my righteousness/The Lord for ever mine" (Ibid.). The hymn, as with all those printed in Book I of the *Olney Hymns*, is preceded by a scriptural reference (Jeremiah 23:6) that places it within a universal, biblical context: "In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, The Lord our Righteousness" (KJV). The salvation being claimed in this verse is communal—it applies to all "Judah" and "Israel"—yet the individual speaker's membership in this community is always tenuous. Because Cowper cannot praise properly, he must completely depend on God's grace. A crucial element of that dependence, however, is the disquieting recognition that attends it: Cowper can never be certain that the grace he is relying on is his to claim because it is quite simply impossible to experience it beyond fleeting instances that are always up for questioning and doubt. As I have been arguing throughout this essay, though, in Cowper's hymns, belief is often intensified by its proximity to doubt, and private misgivings give birth to collective belief and affirmation. For Cowper, these are the very conditions of belief.

3. Conclusions: Hymning Our Doubt

Hymns are events that are instantiated materially and that straddle the boundaries between doctrine and devotion, cognitive and pre-cognitive, the personal and the communal, doubt and belief. When sung aloud with fellow congregants, we are affected not only by hymns' content—when a hymn is familiar, of course, the words often roll off the tongue without any thought or conscious effort at all—but by the bodies and voices that

surround us, too. The priest's oddly perfect pitch, the young acolyte's distracted fixation with his vestments, the choirmaster's timbre, the infant crying in the back (and the parents desperately trying to calm it), and the off-key and off-tempo gentleman belting lyrics loudly from the front pew all contribute to the experience of the hymn. When we join the singing, we add our voice to the throng—quietly, hesitatingly, disjointedly, perhaps—and what matters in that moment is not necessarily, or not only, our mental state and doctrinal convictions. What counts, according to the *Olney Hymns*, is that our unique, individual voices are subsumed by the chorus of voices echoing throughout the nave.

Cowper's *Olney Hymns* often project the divine as inaccessible and totally unavailable to the isolated, despairing Christian. Yet, hymns are the ideal vehicle through which to approach the ineffable divine. As Niklaus Largier states when pondering the contours of the "figural" and our inability to access the "real", "If anything, our words can only be humble praise in the form of hymns, positing the human in the position of an abject enthusiasm that undermines itself time and again in gestures of prayer, a position that, thus acting its freedom, gives itself up to the play and the acknowledgement of the voices and textures of voices that we participate in through the practices of contemplation" (Largier 2022, p. 46). When we give ourselves up to the "play" of "voices" that surround us, collectively affirming that we, too, cannot quite believe what we are singing, we are not doubting individuals; we are a doubting church, and the act of hymning our doubt together is a form of grace that transmutes unbelief into a collective affirmation: *Lord, help our unbelief and decide this doubt for me*!

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Notes

[1] For more on Cowper's life and mental struggles, see (King 1986), which remains the essential account despite its age. Scholars persistently consider Cowper's mental illness and despair as keys to understanding his work, thereby treating him as an anomaly in eighteenth-century evangelicalism. For a summary of commentary on Cowper's religious melancholy, see (Buie 2013).

[2] For one such argument, see (Pollard 1955).

[3] For the hymn's various appearances in eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century hymnals, see (Hymnary 2025). "The Contrite Heart" has also recently appeared on worship albums entitled *Help My Unbelief*, produced by Red Mountain Church, a Presbyterian church in Birmingham, Alabama, in 2006, and *The Olney Hymns: Suffering and Living in the Shadow of the Cross* (2021) by Grace Church Waco, a church affiliated with both the Southern Baptist Convention and the Acts 29 Network.

[4] For a notable counter to the idea that Reformation made belief suddenly difficult, one that can help nuance some of Shagan's more sweeping claims, see (Justice 2008). Justice reminds us that belief has always been attended by doubt and uncertainty, that belief and unbelief are in many ways inseparable. As he puts it, belief "does not settle the mind, but riles it" (p. 13).

[5] For a similar argument, made from a slightly different angle, that belief is necessarily shaped more by the communities we inhabit than cold hard logic and reason, see (Cottingham 2014).

[6] For an overview of eighteenth-century hymnody, see (Marshall and Todd 1982).

[7] See (Cowper 1979, pp. 334–36 and 341–43) for evidence of this sort of back-and-forth argumentation between Cowper and his mentor.

[8] The woman's story is told in Mark 5:24–34.

[9] Of course, Cowper's oft-noted references to his own depravity and the singularity of his spiritual condition have a scriptural precedent as well. In 1 Timothy 1:15, St. Paul writes, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (KJV). My contention throughout this essay is not that Cowper did not take this mindset to unhealthy lengths; in his personal life and writings, he most certainly did. My argument is simply that in his *Olney Hymns*, written in a period of lucidity in the late 1770s, Cowper and his spiritual mentor portray doubt and even complete unbelief as recurrent features of Christian living. Thus, the community of believers is a community of unbelievers who long for belief. Cowper's unique personal outlook doesn't negate this point. In addition, and more speculatively, it's worth considering

whether Cowper's most idiosyncratic expressions of alienation from the church and God's elect do not, in fact, constitute a wholly modern form of faith that paradoxically considers unbelief the most sophisticated form of belief available.

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