

Isaac Watts's Hymnody as a Guide for the Passions

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Abstract Isaac Watts (1674-1748) argued that the passions, understood synonymously with the affections, were an essential component of the Christian experience. Watts designed a system of hymnody which allowed the worshipper to excite, cultivate, and express their passions. This paper traces the history of the passions and affections in those who were to influence Watts' thought, before considering the ways Watts' hymns allowed the passions to be experienced and articulated.

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1 Introduction¹

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the dissenting minister, hymnwriter, educator, and philosopher, is a pivotal figure, representing the transition and migration from seventeenth-century Calvinism to eighteenth-century Evangelicalism. He is, in the words of Graham Beynon, an "Enlightenment Puritan" (2016, 192), situated between "Puritanism and Reason, and between Reason and Revelation" (Watson 1999, 136). He inherited the attitudes and priorities of the Puritans, modifying and communicating them for changing society (Rivers 1991, 168). Rather than reject either the Reformed faith, or the ideas emerging in the early enlightenment, Watts attempted to bring the two together into a balance of rational and affectionate religion (see Beynon 2016). The subtitle to Dewey D. Wallace, Jr.'s *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660-1714*, describes a religion defined by three characteristics: variety, persistence, and transformation. A century would pass between the writing of the *King James Bible* and the publication of Watts' *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, and in that time the Reformed faith, which Watts was to both inherit and modify, was strengthened by the depth and breadth of work undertaken by Owen, Goodwin, Baxter, Bunyan, and others. Watts,

1 All original spellings, grammar, and punctuation have been retained throughout this article.

along with others, most notably Phillip Doddridge, would contribute to the evolution of the Reformed faith, providing a new rationale with fresh modes of expression appropriate for the developments in eighteenth-century thinking. Wallace writes that seventeenth-century Calvinism, in its various facets and expressions, responded to the Enlightenment that was beginning to dawn on the intellectual and religious horizon by making various theological adjustments and spiritual transformations, in order to “remain faithful to the celebration of the mystery of grace” (2011, 246).

Watts was born to nonconformist parents,² and attended Thomas Rowe’s Academy from 1690 to 1693 (Wykes 1996, 118-21). Here, Watts became familiar with the Patristics, the Reformers, the Puritans, and Enlightenment thinkers.³ He speaks warmly of Calvin’s *Institutes*, describing them as “a most excellent, Scripturall, argumentative, and elegant System of Divinity” (Wilkins 1693, opp. 112). But Watts’s Calvinism was of the moderate variety; he clung to the core of Calvinism, while explaining away the harsher extremities of the system (Davis 1948, 108-9). This article will show the place of the passions in Watts’s work, and the way he adapted seventeenth-century thinking into a new mode of expression through hymns of affectionate piety and evangelical theology.

2 Passions and Affections

The most common terms to describe the emotional experiences of faith throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were ‘affections’ and ‘passions’ (Frazer 2010, 17). Joy (2013a, 72) and Frazer (2010, 17) have all shown that ‘affections’ was a term predominantly reserved for those emotions which ought to be encouraged and cultivated, while ‘passions’ referred to those emotions which were to be tamed and subdued; elsewhere Louise Joy writes of the “unruly passions with their calmer, less spontaneous cousins, the affections” (2013a, 72). The experience of, and careful reflection upon, the passions and affections has long been an established part of the Protestant experience, and it was within this context and heritage that Isaac Watts would operate;⁴ Thomas Dixon notes

2 During his childhood, Watts’s father was imprisoned on account of his nonconformity (Davis 1948, 4-6).

3 Watts’s own study notes from the Academy are preserved in his personally annotated copy of Bishop Wilkin’s *Ecclesiastes* (1693), held in Dr. Williams’ Library (564.D.6), which demonstrate his familiarity with Origen, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Perkins, Owen, Baxter, Goodwin, Locke, and others. My thanks to the staff at the Dr. Williams’ Library for accommodating my research trips.

4 This theme is explored in Ted Campbell’s chapter, “Affective Piety in Seventeenth-Century British Calvinism” (1991, 42-69).

that to speak of the “passions and affections of the soul” was to speak in distinctly Christian categories (2003, 66). The passions and affections have their etymological roots in Latin; this distinction can be traced back to Augustine, who was subsequently a major influence on Thomas Aquinas. *Affectus* denotes the love of God, and love for one’s neighbour, whereas as *Pator* means ‘to suffer’, most famously associated with the passions, or sufferings, of Christ in his crucifixion.⁵

While these were the dominant uses of the terms, some authors used them in a more synonymous manner; for example, Edwards Reynolds uses the term ‘passion’ interchangeably with ‘affection’ (1640, 45). Kirk Essary has argued that this ambiguity had its origins in the sixteenth century, where authors such as Calvin and Erasmus rejected an overtly rigid division between the meanings of ‘affection’ and ‘passion’ (2017). Joy draws particular attention to William Fenner’s *Treatise of the Affections* (1650) as being a significant text that notably neglects discussion of the passions. This subtle but conspicuous distinction, she argues, signifies a return to Aquinas’s categories that sought to distinguish between affections as the intentional, godly desires of the soul, and the passions as the potentially harmful, sinful, negative and subjective responses of the body (2013b). The purpose of Fenner’s *Treatise* is the ordering of the emotions, which comes by establishing a distinction between the affections and the passions.

While the prevailing view is that the eighteenth century marks the dawn of the so-called ‘Age of Reason’, with its growing emphasis on reason and rationalism, this view is increasingly contested; Dixon writes forcefully that,

the so-called ‘Age of Reason’ was also an age of ostentatious weeping, violent passions, religious revivals, and the persistence of feelings and beliefs of a kind which, according to the cartoon version of intellectual history, were jettisoned in the 1660s. (2015, 72)

During this period, the tendency to have affection and passion converge into a single field of enquiry continued. Francis Bragge writes that passions are the tendency of our souls towards both good and evil (Bragge 1708, 1) and Samuel Clarke refers to both affections and passions positively and negatively. The affections, in Christian thought, were seen in the light of the nature and revelation of God; writers such as Francis Hutcheson and Joseph Butler corroborate this view, that “the normative authority of our moral sentiments ultimately derives from the fact that they were built into our nature by God for the achievement of his intended ends” (Frazer 2010,

⁵ ‘Passio’ appears in the *Vulgate*, in Acts 1:3 and 1 Peter 5:1, referring to the crucifixion sufferings of Christ.

16). Dixon has observed that the most significant contributors to this field were all members of the clergy (1999, 301); though the texts dealt with matters of theology, morality, and philosophy, they did so from a practical, rather than theoretical perspective, continuing the tradition established by the Puritans. Alan Brinton, studying references to passion in early eighteenth-century sermon literature, observes that the sermons have a broadly ethical agenda, focused on subduing the more negative passions and bringing them under the governance of reason (1992, 52). However, a distinction between the affections and the passions in Christian thought continued in some quarters throughout the eighteenth century, notably in Francis Hutcheson's *Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*⁶ and Jonathan Edwards' *Treatise on Religious Affections*. Dixon has demonstrated a consistency between Augustine's and Edwards' understandings of the affections (1999, 302), and Edwards describes them as the "more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul" (2009, 96). On the distinction between affections and passions, Hutcheson writes that "when more violent *confused* Sensations arise with the *Affection* [...] we call the whole by the Name of *Passion*" (1728, 60; italics in the original), while Edwards writes:

The *affections* and the *passions* are frequently spoken of as the same; and yet, in the more common use of the speech, there is in some respect a difference; and affection is a word, that in its ordinary signification, seems to be something more extensive than passion; being used for all vigorous lively actings of the will or inclination; but passion for those that are more sudden, and whose effects on the animals spirits are more violent, and the mind more overpowered, and less in its own command. (2009, 98; italics in the original)

3 Passions and Affections in Watts's Thought

Isaac Watts wrote two connected treatises on the passions, both in 1729, *The Use and Abuse of the Passions in Religion* and *Discourses of the Love of God*.⁷ Watts's view of the passions corresponds to that of Bragge and Clarke; they are, in Watts's writings, synonymous with the affections. "*Passions* in this Discourse signify the same with *Natural Affections*", and subsequently, "in this Discourse we take *Passion* and *Affection* to mean the

6 For a more detailed analysis of Hutcheson's thought regarding the affections and passions see Darwall 1997.

7 Having stating that they are two books, I take the same view as Davis and Joy, who see the two books as one project (Davis 1948, 223; Joy 2013b).

same thing" (1729, 2; italics in the original).⁸ Watts's synonymous use of 'passion' and 'affection' can also be seen in his hymns; he speaks of "angry passions" (1707, 7) and writes: "Our Flesh and Sense, must be deny'd | Passion and Envy, Lust and Pride" (1709, 105). In contrast to this, he draws from the Song of Solomon when he describes his devotion to Christ with the words: "I am my Love's, and he is mine | our Hearts, our Hopes, our Passion joyn" (1707, 68). Watts saw the passions operating in partnership with reason, and resisted the two extremes of one without the other (Dixon 2003, 72-6); he warns of the inadequacies of reason without the fires of passion to bring piety to life, and similarly he condemns those who have neglected reason, leaving themselves exposed to "all the wild Temptations of Fancy and Enthusiasm" (Watts 1729, iv-v).⁹ He subsequently details this relationship, stating that while passion must rely on reason to determine if an object is good, the passions then vigorously pursue it (48). There is much consistency between Watts and Edwards regarding the source and purpose of affection within religious life. Edwards writes that: "true religion, in great part, consists of holy affections" (2009, 95), resonating with Watts' assertion that it is his "[d]esign to treat of the *Exercises of the Passions, or Affections of the Heart in the Affairs of Religion*", and that his foundation for understanding the place of passion in religion is the proposition that "*The Lord our God is the proper Object of our most sincere Affection, and our Supreme Love*" (1729, 108; italics in the original). Watts divided the passions into several categories, and his 'chief' passions are wonder, love, hatred, esteem, and contempt (1729, 9). Lisa Shapiro, in her study of Descartes' *Passions of the Soul*, has drawn up a taxonomy of the primary passions in the writings of several influential philosophers, including Aquinas, Hobbes, and Spinoza, demonstrating that Watts is unique in following Descartes by including wonder among these primary passions (Shapiro 2006, 269).

8 Joy argues that Watts's insistence on diminishing and rejecting the traditional differences suggests that he is unclear of the necessity of maintaining such a distinction. This view not only assumes a lack of understanding on the part of Watts, but also is inconsistent with other writers who also use the terms synonymously (Joy 2013b).

9 Watts was a cautious supporter of the Evangelical Revivals of the 1730s and 1740s; he was supportive particularly of Whitefield's Calvinistic preaching, but had reservations regarding some enthusiastic elements of the movement (see Strivens forthcoming).

4 The Passions in Reformed Hymnody

Augustine's influence was to dominate the development of Reformed hymnody, regarding the relationship between singing and the passions. Augustine's view of music was complex;¹⁰ he writes of experiences where hymns caused the affections of his devotion to overflow (Augustine 1984, 146), but also writes of the temptation and guilt over the way his affections are stirred in the things he experienced when singing of hymns in the praise of God (186). This tension was to reappear in Calvin's thought a millennium later. Calvin (1543) values the beauty of music but cautions against its powers:

And in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious. (95)

The evolution of Calvin's theology of music in the period between 1536-46 has been well documented (see Garside Jr. 1979), and the relationship between Augustine and Calvin clearly shown. The solution to the powerful and distorting potential of music is, as Calvin went on to advocate in the preface to his *Psalter*, to obey the commands of Scripture and only sing psalms. The centrality and clarity of Scriptures, Calvin believed, would regulate the affections of the singer, channelling them heavenward in praise, without the dangerous distraction of music's inherent beauty.

The origins of eighteenth-century hymnody lie within the "well-established tradition of Puritan heart religion" (Coffey 2016, 32). The history of hymnody in the Reformed tradition has been widely studied (Watson 1999, 42-132; Escott 1962, 67-100; Davis 1948, 188-96), demonstrating the monopoly held by Sternhold and Hopkins's *The Whole Booke of Psalmes* (1562) that would only eventually be broken by Watts. Exclusive psalmody would be debated throughout the seventeenth century, with both Augustine and Calvin overshadowing the pages of controversy, as the dispute around the appropriate use of the passions through music continued. Authors such as William Ames, William Perkins, and Richard Baxter all encouraged affectionate piety within believers, and the debate around exclusive psalmody followed similar lines.¹¹

¹⁰ For an exploration of Augustine's view of music, see "St. Augustine: The Problems of Eloquence and Inordinate Love" in *A New Song in an Old World: Musical Thought in the Early Church* (Stapert 2006, 180-93).

¹¹ Watts' annotations in Wilkins' *Ecclesiastes* demonstrate his familiarity with and appreciation for these authors.

Thomas Ford writes in 1653: "it is clear, That as God requires such a holy affection in his people, so he doth require some expressions suitable to that affection" (1653, 57). Elsewhere, Ford quotes Augustine directly, stating that "hymns are the praises of God with a song. If it be praise, but not the praise of God, 'tis not a hymn" (20-1). While Ford argued in favour of exclusive psalmody, Edward Leigh believed that Scripture permitted new songs to be written and sung so long as they were "agreeable to the Word of God", commending the godly effect of singing these songs, saying: "and God knowing the efficacie of Poetry and Musick, to help memory and stirre up affection doth allow his people to use it for their own spiritual comfort" (Leigh 1662, 610). A generation later, Benjamin Keach argued that

[w]e must sing with Affections; let your joyful Noise be from the sense of God's Love in a dear Redeemer to your own Souls. Let it be by exciting your graces; let faith be in exercise in this Duty as well as in Prayer and under the Word. Let it be with inward Joy. (1691, 191-2)

Elsewhere, in the preface to his textbook, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, John Dennis bemoaned the current state of hymnody, describing the metre of Sternhold and Hopkins as "vile"; and he later wrote that "poetry by the force of the Passion, instructs and reforms the Reason; which is the Design of true Religion" (1704, 13).

In 1708, a series of sermons, *Practical Discourses of Singing in the Worship of God*, were published. Several themes regarding the use, purpose, and expression of passions appear across the lectures. Drawing support from Augustine's experience in his *Confessions*, singing is described as "an *Affecting* Exercise, peculiarly fitted with special Advantage to raise holy Affections of Soul, and enliven every Grace" (Earle et al. 1708, 74). Therefore, the habit of lining out the psalms, where a designated clerk would read each line of the hymn for the congregation to sing it in reply, a practice heavily criticised by Isaac Watts, receives special criticism as a hindrance to the cultivation of godly affections. Not only does lining out break the singer's understanding and flow of thought, but

as the Musick and Sense of the Psalm is and must oftentimes be interrupted, so likewise must it be a great check upon our *Affections*, and a hindrance to the Exercise of our *Graces* in this Duty. (139-40)

The means by which the affections are raised through singing is dependent on a clear comprehension of the subject; "understanding what we sing, having the Sense whole and intire under our eye, our Affections are more easily excited, and assisted to *make melody to God in our Hearts*" (140; italics in the original). The same point is made in the second sermon, which states:

We must distinctly apprehend, and rightly conceive the Sense and Meaning of what we sing. It requires the proper Exercise of the Affections, the suitable working of the natural *Passions* answerable to the various Matter and the different Subject of our Song. (65-6)

The priority then becomes a clear apprehension of God as the object of worship; within the context of considering the infinite excellencies of God's divine nature, the "whole Perfection inspires the Matter of our Song, and the devoutest Affections of Soul" (98).

In sermon five, Mr. Newman puts forward an argument for songs that contain the doctrines of the New Testament, rather than only singing psalms taken directly from the Old Testament. Having established biblical reasons for his view, he refers his readers to "Mr. Watts' ingenious Essay on this Subject" for further satisfaction (154). The essay Newman refers to is Watts's "Preface" to his 1707 *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, in which Watts establishes his reasons for writing new hymns, breaking from the tradition of exclusive psalmody. Watts's "Preface" is one of a trilogy of works in which he particularly addresses the place of singing in the worship of God; the other two being his *Short Essay Toward the Improvement of Psalmody* (1707) and the "Preface" to his 1719 *Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*. By surveying the three works at once, a clear view emerges of Watts's understanding of the cultivation and expression of passion through the act of worshipping God in song. Singing, as shall be seen, represents the intersection of internal and external forms of religion in his mind. He discusses this at greater length in his *Discourses*, condemning outwards acts that are absent of corresponding internal experiences:

The Heart with all the inward Powers and Passions must be devoted to him in the first Place: This is Religion indeed. The great God values not the Service of Men, if the Heart be not in it: The Lord sees and judges the Heart; he has no Regard to outward Forms of Worship if there be no inward Adoration, if no devout Affection be employ'd therein. (Watts 1729, 108)

5 The Passions in Watts Hymnody

Watts's time at Rowe's Academy began to shape his thinking around the weaknesses in the practice of Dissenting hymnody. He later writes in his copy of Wilkins' *Ecclésiastes*, opposite page 230, of his admiration of Benjamin Keach, his disdain for Thomas Ford, and the contribution that Joseph Stennet had made to the arguments for gospel songs (Wilkins 1693, opp. 230). Watts was encouraged by his brother Enoch, in a letter dated March

1700, to publish his hymns.¹² The letter mocks various psalters: “Mason reduces this kind of writing¹³ to a sort of yawning indifference, and honest Barton chimes us to sleep” (Milner 1845, 177). Similarly the hymns of Keach and Bunyan are “flat and dull” (178), while the publication of Isaac’s hymns would provide a better solution, according to Enoch, who writes: “now when yours are exposed to the public view, these calumnies will immediately vanish” (179).

The contrast between the internal passions and the outward expressions of them is at the heart of Watts’s doctrine of praise. His *Preface to Hymns and Spiritual Songs* begins with two statements, which highlight the disparity between the ideal of singing and the reality as Watts saw it. He begins his “Preface” with the exalted claim that “while we sing the Praises of our God in his Church, we are employ’d in that part of Worship which of all others is the nearest a-kin to Heaven” (Watts 1707, iii). Grieved that it is not on earth as it is in heaven, Watts goes on to summarise the practice as he has observed it among churches with the damning criticism that “’tis pity that this of all others should be perform’d the worst upon Earth” (Watts 1707, iii). Watts bemoans the “dull Indifference, the negligent and the thoughtless Air that sits upon the Faces” of the congregation, which he says could “tempt even a charitable Observer to suspect the Fervency of inward Religion, and ’tis much to be fear’d that the Minds of most of the Worshippers are absent or unconcern’d” (iii-iv).

As has been seen, Watts was grieved that religious use of the passions was being neglected in favour of cold and dry reasoning; reason alone was not sufficient to raise virtuous piety to what he perceived to be their rightful place without the aid of the passions and affections (1729, iv). He felt that there were two causes that ought to be blamed and held responsible for the dire state of psalmody. One cause is the habit of lining, and the other is the lyrical content of the existing psalters. To eliminate the practice of lining out, the publisher of Watts’s *Psalms of David* gives specific instructions as to how the psalms ought to be sung, recommending that they are sung without reading line by line, and that if a clerk must be used to read the words, that they read the words in their entirety before the whole song is sung (1719, vi-vii). Watts has a high view of singing, and its role in the passions of the believer. He writes that: “The ART OF SINGING is a most charming Gift of the God of nature and designed for the Solace of our Sorrows and the Improvement of our Joys” (1721, i). While he admits that the metaphors within his lyrics are “generally sunk to the Level of vulgar Capacities” (1707, viii), he does state elsewhere that his ambition

12 Both Davis (1948, 197-8) and Milner (1845, 176-9) transcribe the letter in full.

13 That is, the exclusive psalmody primarily associated with Sternhold and Hopkins’s Psalter.

is to employ, “bright, warm and pathetic language, to strike the imagination or to affect the heart, to kindle the divine passions or to melt the soul” (1731, 84). He intends that this language be sung. Watts is convinced that singing is designed by God to serve the expression of devotional passion. He encourages the readers of the *Preface* to his *Psalms of David* to

remember, that the very power of singing was given to human nature chiefly for this purpose, that our own warmest affections of soul might break out into natural or divine melody, and that the tongue of the worshipper might express his own heart. (1719, iii)

Similarly, he writes in his *Short Essays* that the purpose of singing is “to vent the inward devotion of our spirits in words of melody, to speak our own experience of divine things, especially our religious joy” (1800, 11). And this view is expressed in the hymn texts themselves, as he expects the singer to feel the passions he is intending to cultivate:

Now to the Lord a noble Song!
Awake my Soul, awake my Tongue,
Hosanna to th’Eternal Name,
And all his boundless Love proclaim.
(Watts 1707, 120)

Come, happy Souls, approach your God,
With new melodious Songs,
Come render to Almighty Grace,
The Tribute of your Tongues.
(174)

The second cause for the poor performance of singing among the worshippers of his day is that Watts believed that when singing, “spiritual Affections are excited within us” but that these affections cannot be fully realised by singing of Old Testament psalms and experiences (Watts 1707, vi-v). Likewise, in the “Preface” to his *Psalms of David*, Watts describes the experience of having the words of David on his tongue as something that “interrupts the holy melody, and spoils the devotion” (Watts 1719, xiv). Watts readily admits that the original words of the psalmist keep the “spring of pious passion awake” when sung by those who can understand them experientially, but observes that “our affections want something of property or interest in the words, to awake them at first and to keep them lively” (i). However, Watts ultimately hopes that his imitation of the Psalms, written through the lens of the New Testament, will correct this, intending that the singer “find by Sweet Experience any devout Affections raised” through his words (xxii). He hopes that the soul of the singer will be “pos-

essed with a variety of divine affections, when we behold him who is our chief beloved hanging on the cursed tree” (1800, 11). It is unsurprising that Watts’s most enduring hymn, *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, portrays the crucifixion of Jesus as being at the heart of the devotional life of the believer, while also stressing the divine and incarnate nature of Jesus as being both the “Prince of Glory” and “Christ my God”, echoing the confession of faith from Thomas in John 20:28. Watts’ primary intention through his hymns and psalms is to provide songs for Christians to clearly articulate the doctrines and experiences that belong to the New Covenant. In *The different Success of the Gospel*, he writes:

But Souls enlightened from above,
With Joy receive the Word;
They see what Wisdom, Power and Love
Shines in their dying Lord.
(1709, 95)

Regarding Watts’s perceived need for hymns about Christ, the state of Dissenting praise is summed up by Harry Escott who comments:

In preaching and prayer Christ and His Cross were at the centre of the worshipper’s thought, but when he sang his praises, it was as if Christ had never been born, had never died and rose again from the dead.
(1962, 254)

Watts was grieved that Christians who only sang metrical psalms had no songs to express the joy of their salvation. Scholars have long established the link between Watts’s theology and his hymnody; Manning describes Watts as having a cosmic view of the cross, as the central feature both of the universe and Christian doctrine (1942, 83); Crookshank observes that “Watts the logician argued that Old Testament Scripture viewed in New Covenant light both allowed and obligated him to Christianize the Psalms” (2004, 19); and Watson writes, “Watts’ hymnody [...] insists on the importance of revealed religion and on the saving grace of Jesus Christ” (1997, 135-6). This theme comes out in the hymn, *A Vision of the Lamb*, in which the opening verse concludes, “Behold amidst th’ Eternal Throne | A Vision of the Lamb appears” before describing the experience of the worshipper:

Our Voices joyn the Heav’nly Strain,
And with transporting Pleasure sing,
Worthy the Lamb, that once was slain,
To be our Teacher and our King.
(Watts 1707, 26)

In his *Hymns and Spiritual Songs* and then in his *Psalms of David*, Watts intended to provide the Church with songs that could voice the whole panorama of the affections – “the most frequent Tempers and Changes of our Spirit, and Conditions of our Life are here copied, and the Breathing of our Piety exprest according to the variety of our Passions” (Watts 1707, vii). Watts goes on to describe what this spectrum looks like; his songs are designed to give voice and expression to “our Love, our Fear, our Hope, our Desire, our Sorrow, our Wonder and our Joy, all refin’ into Devotion, and acting under the Influence and Conduct of the Blessed Spirit” (vii). Watts locates the articulation of these passions within the sovereign workings of the Trinity; his hymns and psalms, and the affections they articulate, are “all conversing with God the Father by the new and living Way of Access to the Throne, even the Person and the Mediation of our Lord *Jesus Christ*” (Watts 1707, viii).

5.1 Sovereign Love

It has been said that no subject was more prominent in eighteenth-century hymnody than God’s providence (Harlan 1979, 181). Watts writes that as “Foundation of these Discourses, I chose to treat the *Love of God*, which in a sovereign Manner rules and manages, awakens or suppresses all the other Passions of the Soul” (Watts 1729, vi). This theme appears frequently in his hymns, as the singer responds to the arousing influence of God’s sovereign love at work, creating godly passions with them:

Now shall my inward Joys arise
And burst into a Song,
Almighty Love inspires my heart
And Pleasure tunes my Tongue.
(1707, 38)

Let God the Father live
For ever on our Tongues;
Sinners from his first Love derive
The Ground of all their songs.
(207)

The Father’s love shall run
Thro’ our Immortal sons,
We bring to God the Son
Hosannas on our Tongues:
Our lips address
The Spirit’s Name

With equal Praise,
And Zeal the same.
(1709, 315)

Along with Edwards, who argues that “surely God is so sovereign [...] that he may enable us to do our duty when he pleases” (2009, 188), Watts sees the sovereign love of God as being the source of all godly passions, throughout the duration of the believer’s life; his hymns allow the singer to voice their prayers and pleas that God would create and sustain these pious affections within them. Watts sees the believer as being ultimately dependent on God for this influence. He writes of “this sacred and sovereign Affection of divine Love”, which “commands and influences, excites and subdues the other Passions of Nature” to ultimately constrain them all to be “subservient to its own great Designs, i.e. to the Honour and to the Enjoyment of God, the Object of this divine Affection” (1729, 146-7):

But Oh! How base our Passions are!
How cold our Charity and Zeal
Lord, fill our Souls with heavenly Fire,
Or we shall ne’er perform thy will.
(1709, 92)

Great God, subdue this vicious Thirst
This Love to Vanity and Dust;
Cure the vile Fever of the Mind,
And feed our Souls with Joys refin’d.
(259)

Renew mine Eyes, and form mine Ears
And mould my Heart afresh;
Give me new Passions, Joys and Fears,
And turn the Stone to Flesh.
(246)

John Coffey notes that Watts would have doubts over Athanasian orthodoxy in later life (2016, 39), but when he wrote his hymns he was unequivocal as to the nature of the Trinity, going so far as to describe it as the “peculiar Glory of the Divine Nature” (Watts 1707, 206). Watts sees the three persons of the Trinity as being involved in this process of subduing of sinful passions and the cultivation of godly affections; of the role of Christ, Watts writes in *The Distemper, Folly and Madness of Sin*:

Madness by Nature reigns within
The Passions burn and rage

Till God's own Son with Skill Divine
The inward Fire asswage.
(1709, 265)

Watts also sees the Holy Spirit as being an essential component within the sovereign influence of God upon the believer's passions. When speaking of the fruits of the Spirit in the life of the believer,¹⁴ he writes that the "sanctified Affections are so great Part of the new Creature, that the very Graces of the holy Spirit are called by their Names," concluding with the rhetorical question: "What is this blessed Catalogue of the Fruits of the Spirit, but the Passions of Nature refined and renewed by Grace?" (1729, 172-173). The necessity of the Holy Spirit in the cultivation of the passions is expressed throughout his hymns:

Come Holy Spirit, Heavenly Dove,
With all thy quickening Powers,
Kindle a Flame of sacred Love,
In these cold Hearts of ours.
(1707, 109)

Eternal Spirit, we confess
And sing the Wonders of thy Grace;
Thy Power conveys our Blessings down
From God the Father and the Son.
(1709, 248)

5.2 Wonder

As has been seen, one of the surest methods of cultivating godly passions commended by Watts to his readers was that time spent consciously reflecting upon their wonder at the uniqueness of an object produces greater degrees of affection for it; therefore, he urged that they continually fill themselves with wonder, towards God and the Christian gospel. Watts writes: "this Passion discovers itself by lifting up of the Hands of the Eyes, and by an intense fixation of the Sight or the Thoughts" (1729, 12). For Descartes, the passion of wonder is what makes learning possible (Fisher 2002, 10), and, according to Watts, the key to raising the passion of wonder is to "contemplate the Nature and Perfections of God" and to consider the "amazing Instances of his Providence and Grace which he has manifested in his Word" (1729, 57). The highest object of love is God, and this love

¹⁴ Galatians 5:22-3.

is fuelled by wonder; “sincere and fervent Love is ever finding some new Beauties and Wonders in the Person so much below’d” (126). Wonder perceives the degree to which an object is “rare and uncommon” and when this wonder is fixed upon God, the passion of love grows; “when so glorious and transcendent a Being as the great and blessed God becomes the Object of our Notice and our Love, with what Pleasure do we survey his Glories” (125).

This theme appears frequently in his hymns, as singers are encouraged to meditate upon, and subsequently wonder at, God. Singers, transported to the crucifixion scene, “survey” the “wondrous cross”; Watts’ use of equivocal, experiential lyrics allows the singer to locate themselves within the biblical narrative from which his hymns are drawn. The following hymns demonstrate the place of wonder as one of the primary passions in Watts’ thought, with a particular focus on the incarnate and redemptive revelation of Christ:

Mortals with Joy beheld his Face,
Th’Eternal Father’s only Son;
How full of Truth! How full of Grace,
When thro’ his Eyes the Godhead shone! (1707, 3)

There I beheld with sweet Delight
The blessed Three in One;
And strong Affections fix my Sight
On God’s Incarnate Son. (1709, 272)

The hymn *Longing to Praise Christ Better* begins: “Lord, when my Thoughts with wonder roll”, before speaking of “my Maker’s broken Laws | Repair’d and honour’d by thy Cross”. The second verse allows the singer to “behold” and “view” the ascended glory of Christ, and the third verse begins, “My Passions rise and soar above | I’m wing’d with Faith, and fir’d with Love” (1707, 82-3).

5.3 Death

Louise Joy argues that Watts’s view of the passions is death-centric: “Watts implies that affectionate religion is founded on a death wish” (2013b, 305). There are, however, several weaknesses inherent in this interpretation. While it is clear, and will become clearer, that Watts’s view of the passions is that they are only ultimately perfected when the believer passes from life to death, his view of death is far from morbid. He does not, as Joy says, undermine the desirability of the heavenly passions by recommending death as the only means by which they can be attained. Watts’s

optimistic view of death can be seen in his books, sermons, and hymns, and in holding this view he is consistent within the wider religious scene. He urges his readers to regulate their passions by living with an expectation of death (1729, 103); death, he states in a sermon, yields sweetness to the believer as the corrupt affections of flesh and blood are left behind (1753, 476, 478). Bragge observes that, while death is to be dreaded from a bodily perspective, the experience of death is a temporary evil, it is also the great cure that ends the miseries of the world (1708, 251-3). Similarly, Hutcheson writes that if death is the cessation of the pleasures and pains of life, then it is an inconsiderable evil. But, he goes on to say, if there is life beyond death, then for the virtuous, death can be seen as a “ground of Hope and Joy” (1728, 196-7).

Parisot (2011) and Van Leeuwen (2009) have demonstrated the connection between graveside poetry and funeral sermons; both were typically delivered by members of the clergy, and therefore their emphasis did not lie in the Gothic macabre, but upon the Christian afterlife. Many of Watts’s hymns are filled with a hopeful view of death:

*Jesus, the Vision of thy Face
Hath overpow’ring Charms,
Scarce shall I feel Death’s cold Embrace
If Christ be in my Arms.
(1707, 20)*

*Then shall I see thy lovely Face
With strong immortal Eyes,
And feast upon thy unknown Grace
With Pleasure and Surprize.
(8)*

*Yes, and before we rise
To that immortal State,
The Thoughts of such amazing Bliss
Should constant Joys create.
(1709, 106)*

Therefore death, in Watts’ thought, is far from a morbid obsession, but rather it is the doorway to a perfected experience, and this view is consistent within his wider context.

6 Conclusion

Passions played a significant role in the experience of post-Reformation spirituality, and Watts's doctrine of the passions was inherited from his Puritan forbearers and was expressed both in prose and hymnody. Watts stands as a break-through figure in Anglophone hymnody, creating a system of praise that allowed the expression of devotional piety through a more emphatically Christo-centric lyric, departing from the metrical psalmody of the seventeenth century that Watts saw as dampening the passions of the singer by neglecting to give voice to their Christian experience. In doing so, Watts introduced a new phase in English-speaking Protestant worship, as his hymns were adopted and adapted by Independents, Baptists, Anglicans, Unitarians, and Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic, and Watts would remain as the dominant hymn-writer for over two centuries.

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