

Fighting words: Christian smite songs

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

Since I always played in the band, I never learned the words of my schools' fight songs. That's just as well, if Warren St. John's account of such songs is accurate: they are "anachronistic," "out of date," "bloodthirsty," "chauvinist," "white," "cheesy," "martial," "intimidating," "medieval," "fighting," "drunken," "strafing" and "violent." Few of the songs, he says (writing in the *New York Times* last year), are "sensitive," "pacifist," "tolerant," "inclusive" and other good things.

To illustrate violence, St. John picks out the college in which three generations of the Marty family have an interest. It is distinctive to him for one reason: "Fans of St. Olaf College in Minnesota issue a broad warning to rivals: 'We fight fast and furious, our team is injurious.'" He spares us the lines deriding St. Olaf's crosstown rival: "Tonight Carleton College will sure meet its fate / Um! Yah! Yah! Um! Yah! Yah!" Garrison Keillor favors that rouser, which he traces back to a Norwegian folk song, "Jer Har Ute Pulten."

Opponents of the St. Olaf Vikings won't tremble at the fight song: it is probably the only college fight song in waltz time. That's a good rhythm for sensitive, pacifist, tolerant and inclusive types.

Speaking of violent fight songs, the Lutheran Hymnal on which I grew up has, like other hymnals, belligerent themes. One section is even marked "Christian Warfare."

There one finds: "Fight the good fight with all thy might"; "Soldiers of Christ, and put your armor on . . . wrestle and fight and pray / Tread all the powers of darkness down / And win the well-fought day." "Stand up!—Stand up for Jesus, Ye soldiers of the Cross! . . . The trumpet call obey; / Forth to the mighty conflict." "A glorious band, the chosen few . . . They met the tyrant's brandished steel, / The lion's gory mane . . . A noble army, men and boys / The matron and the maid."

“Soldiers of the cross, arise / Gird you with your armor bright, / Mighty are your enemies, / Hard the battle ye must fight.”

In other books you'll find: “Lord of battles, God of armies, / He has gained the victory”; “We are soldiers every one, / and the fight is just begun.” “The warrior grasps the battle brand/ And seeks the field of fight. / And madly lifts his daring hand / Against all human right.”

Fault me if you wish for pointing out this violence. Say that doing so is a symptom of weakened mainline Protestant churches with their incessant talk about the Prince of Peace and shalom and reconciliation. Fault me also if I do not elaborate on the rationales for what is valid in those Christian fight songs: 1) After all, there is a war on, and biblical writers urge us to see cosmic significance in the dramas of our days. 2) These hymns speak mainly of spiritual warfare. 3) They aren't in waltz time. 4) God is the main agent in them. 5) They are more realistic than many happy “praise songs.”

In one of the old Lutheran fight songs (“Erhalt uns Herr”) we ask God to “smite” and “restrain the murderous Pope and Turk.” Then, alas, came Pope John XXIII and Vatican II, which took out all the fun of smiting the pope, leaving us only the Turk. And, at St. Olaf, Carleton College.