

From Hymn to Americana (and back again): The Productive Practice of “Amazing Grace”

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Introduction

American Christianity is relentlessly public. Whether we are shopping, driving, walking down a city street, or tuning into the radio, professions of the Christian faith bombard our eyes and ears. Recent religious scholarship, notably the work of Sally Promey, has turned to visual culture in an effort to describe and theorize about this kind of privately believed yet publicly sensed religion. Her study *Religion in Plain View* takes up billboards, crosses, roadside art, church architecture, and other Christian displays, arguing that such displays allow Protestantism free reign in casual, social, and conversational spaces (spaces that other religions do not so easily occupy) and thus support the “informal establishment” of White Protestant hegemony. In other words, visible Christianity has become so familiar and inoffensive to Americans that it disguises White Protestantism’s hold on our culture. Visitors of the roadside Christian art display “Salvation Mountain,” for example, participate in a Christian power play when they give it such designations as “folk,” “Americana,” or “quaint.” These terms “wrap [the display] in the sweetly sentimental, failing to acknowledge its ideological agencies.”¹ According to Promey, because Americans are so familiar with Christian forms and vocabularies—the “testimonial aesthetics” of religious display in America—public Christianity will always be the most legible, the most susceptible to “secularization,” and therefore, the most ideologically established. Her angle is to unearth the White Protestant design of American spaces that too often pass as simply “cultural” or as part of our shared heritage.

Promey focuses on sights, but sounds are an undeniable part of this American public. More specifically, American popular music, especially music designated under “Americana” genres, seems to share visual display’s ability to inject Christianity into the domain of “culture.” Folk Alley’s “100 Most Essential Folk Songs,”² for example, is an American folk repertoire placing classic 1960s protest songs (“We Shall Overcome”) and folk-pop hits (“Leavin’ on a Jet Plane”) alongside popularized Christian hymns (“Amazing Grace”). Much of the repertoire contains Christian themes and idioms, and some are directly borrowed from the Protestant hymn tradition. These inclusions bring to mind other hymns that seem to have entered the canon of “secular” Americana: “Oh When the Saints,” “I’ll Fly Away,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” American music, as a sensory culture, is certainly inundated with the vocabulary of the Christian tradition. What happens when Christianity enters the American soundscape in this way? Is this another example of Promey’s materially established White Protestantism, hiding beneath designations of “folk” or “American”?

Not quite. Though Promey’s terms might successfully be applied to American music, I argue for a more optimistic angle, understanding music as an iterative practice that deserves attention

¹Sally Promey, *Religion in Plain View: Public Aesthetics of American Display* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), 240.

²“100 Most Essential Folk Songs,” *Folk Alley*, The FreshGrass Foundation, 2009, <https://folkalley.com/100-most-essential-folk-songs/>.

from the more multidirectional or “bottom-up” frameworks of lived religion.³ This paper uses an example from American popular music, *Amazing Grace*, to demonstrate the disruptions of power and the negotiation of terms that take place, at the level of individual musicians and consumers, when Christian music becomes Americana. Instead of focusing on how a religion not everyone “believes in” becomes palatable by being transformed into folk culture, I interpret Christianity as a versatile theme quite vulnerable to individual reworkings. The practice of Americana is not a vehicle for White Protestant hegemony, but an opportunity for tactical reiteration according to specific social contexts. Popular revivals of hymns, as we will see, tend to emphasize a generally spiritual affective experience more than any particularly Christian meaning, though the Christianity of the songs remains there, available for conscious reengagement. The reiteration of music that has a religious history is, therefore, a productive opportunity for individuals. Transformation of religion into culture is not a religious power play, letting Protestant norms fly under the radar—rather, it opens up space for people to negotiate for themselves the relationship between the religious and the secular in America.

“Amazing Grace”

“Amazing Grace” is perhaps the prime example of hymn-turned-Americana. According to Steve Turner’s history of the song, “Amazing Grace” seems to have undergone a gradual progression from “religious” to “cultural” since John Newton penned its lyrics in 1779. Turner’s book focuses on how *Amazing Grace* “took root” in America, reactivating and changing according to its context. The camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening in the 19th century South required interdenominational hymns that were easily memorized; accordingly, southern compilers set “Amazing Grace” to a popular folk melody at that time.⁴ A century later, Pete Seeger added it to his repertoire of “old American songs,” and countercultural youth found in it a story of self-determination that resonated with the protest songs of the folk revival.⁵ “The folk revival,” writes Turner, “introduced the idea of it being a song rather than a hymn, a story of self-determination rather than divine rescue—two modifications that were necessary for the next stage in its march forward.”⁶ That next stage came with Judy Collins’ recording in 1970, which propelled “Amazing Grace” into the popular mainstream. Now, according to Turner, *Amazing Grace* is performed by believers and “nonbelievers” alike, with both “purely religious” and nonreligious applications.

Turner writes a faithful history of “Amazing Grace”’s life as both hymn and popular standard. Yet his line between “hymn” and “song” may be too neat, and I hope to describe with more precision what happens when we sing and hear “Amazing Grace.” In the following section, I use several revivals of “Amazing Grace” to demonstrate the iterative power of hymns-turned-Americana—how they engage the social world, how they distill religious meaning into sensory affect, and in turn, how they create a constant individual work of negotiating the relationship between religion and culture. I select “Amazing Grace” for several reasons. Firstly, it is especially ubiquitous, touching multiple genres of Americana (both folk and gospel iterations are discussed here). Secondly, its designation as “folk” is especially interesting given Promey’s convictions about the covert power plays of folk art. Thirdly, there is ample discourse on the song available in published textual accounts and films (most importantly Turner’s book and the documentary *Amazing Grace with*

³See Robert Orsi’s definition of “lived religion,” in which he argues that particular socio-cultural networks in particular communities should be central to our study of religion. Robert Orsi, “Introduction to the Second Edition: Fieldwork between the Present and the Past,” in *The Madonna of 115th Street*, 3rd ed. (Yale University Press, 2010), xxvii-lvi.

⁴Steve Turner, *Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song* (HarperCollins, 2002), 117.

⁵Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 170.

⁶Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 170.

Bill Moyers (1990)). I study three recordings and their associated discourse: Judy Collins (1970), Johnny Cash (1975), and Aretha Franklin (1972). The result is an example of how musicians and listeners undergo a conscious negotiation of what's religious and what's cultural when they engage with Christian idioms in music. This is not a comprehensive look at music, hymnody, or American sensory culture. It is a limited example that generates a new angle with which to look at the American public. "Amazing Grace" shows that publicly displayed religion may not always hold abstract power over our culture but can be a productive opportunity to engage thoughtfully and flexibly with Christianity in America.

"Another dimension"

As stated above, Judy Collins' 1970 recording marked the hymn's leap into the pop mainstream, though it had previously endured in unrecorded folk and gospel repertoires. Collins recorded the song at St. Paul's chapel at Columbia University, surrounded by a choir of close friends and family, after her producer heard her spontaneously sing it with an encounter group.⁷ She has spoken effusively about the song's power: "For me it was always the song that gave me...an inner experience...of another dimension."⁸ In another interview, she claims, "That song always does the trick. I have a friend who says it changes the electromagnetic field; that it has the ability to transform the room into something different and better."⁹ Joan Baez shares this type of sentiment, saying, "I don't know whether it's there the first time you hear it or whether it's something that starts as the song gathers momentum."¹⁰ Such accounts are abundant. The lyrics of "Amazing Grace" certainly spoke to these artists; the discursive message of personal redemption was powerful and useful to 1960s folkies.¹¹ Yet their accounts sidestep the lexical message in favor of a deeper reaction. Collins' circle agrees that "Amazing Grace" is more than a song—that it has a transcendent, "magical" effect when experienced in community. "It's like roots reaching so far down," offers a family reunion attendee in *Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers*, a film documenting several stories about the song.¹²

Religion is being talked about here. When these artists articulate larger-than-life transcendent experiences, they tactically distance themselves from "religion" as revealed through organizations and institutions, but embrace "religion" as an emotional and universal spirituality. This move was characteristic of the latter phase of the youth counterculture, which saw an increased interest in religion in the midst of a "widespread yearning for less complicated times." Musical artists settled into a more down-home spirituality whose values cut deeper than what a singular Christian vocabulary could offer.¹³ Articulating "Amazing Grace" as transcendent, as "roots reaching so far down," designates the song as like religion but also beyond religion, prioritizing an ineffable life-altering experience over the Christian narrative of justification, and depreciating institutional Christianity in the process. Collins speaks about how she activated the song at protests for racial justice:

During those days...I sang 'Amazing Grace' as a rune to give magical protection—a charm to ward off danger, an incantation to the angels of heaven to descend. I had left

⁷Judy Collins, "Foreword," in *Amazing Grace: The Story of America's Most Beloved Song*, by Steve Turner (HarperCollins, 2002), ix–xii.

⁸*Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers* (PBS, 1990), 18:45.

⁹Cited in Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 177.

¹⁰Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 173.

¹¹Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 170–172.

¹²*Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers*, 7:50.

¹³See Turner's discussion of Bob Dylan and former Beatles' turn to the religious, 184–185, alongside his commentary on the reluctance to put Christian themes in pop music, 185.

the choir of the Methodists and was not sure magic worked outside of church walls—whether wine would be turned to blood and bread to flesh in the open air in Mississippi. But I wasn't taking any chances.¹⁴

Because “Amazing Grace” was no longer a hymn but still had magical powers, individuals could think about its Christian content in juxtaposition with a powerful experience that did not seem so Christian anymore. As this quotation demonstrates, Collins’ powerful attachment to the song demanded a conversation about what “religion” or “magic” really was or could accomplish, and she seemed to conclude that it could accomplish much more “outside of church walls.” Many Americans likely relate to this kind of thought process. To perform or listen to “Amazing Grace” is an opportunity to negotiate for oneself just how religious one wants to be; people do this when they gush about the song’s power yet modify Newton’s original verses to be less explicitly Christian (pop recordings often jettison “When we’ve been there 10,000 years...”). The words of the chorus do not matter much, having been overwhelmed by affective experience, but encounters with verses, which are less familiar and more variable between versions, can cause unexpected run-ins with Christianness. This type of dynamic, which may have begun with Collins’ popular recording, begins to show us how flexible the Christianity of the song really is.

“I was hiding behind it”

Johnny Cash also recorded “Amazing Grace,” on the 1975 album *Johnny Cash Sings Precious Memories*, and the conversations surrounding this version resonate with those around Judy Collins. In Bill Moyers’ documentary, Cash explains why he dedicated the album to his brother, who died working on a public works project. Though he had recorded gospel before, this album transformed hymns into “memories” of his brother, activating them in the social world. Listeners in YouTube comments also see the song as primarily social, recalling it as their deceased family member’s favorite song.¹⁵ Indeed, this recording was part of a burgeoning association of “Amazing Grace” with death and funerals,¹⁶ and speaks further to the ability of musical practice to activate religious idioms according to social forces.

Cash also included the song in his repertoire for prison performances, and the reactions of prisoners in Huntsville, Alabama are preserved in Moyers’ documentary. One prisoner reflects that as soon as the fullness of his prison sentence really set in, “the words of Amazing Grace became real to [him].”¹⁷ Another prisoner expresses a disconnect between his church life before prison and a “true” understanding of the song:

[Moyers: When did you first understand the meaning of Amazing Grace?] That was in November 1987 when I got here (laughs)...because I was one of these church crowds! Who never realized, y’know, the true meaning of Amazing Grace. I was hiding behind it...I was very involved in the church, I was a deacon in the Baptist church, I sang in the choir, I taught Bible study, I...y’know. [And you tried to have your wife killed?] And I tried to have my wife killed, okay?¹⁸

This man compares two iterations of “Amazing Grace”—one which he used to sing in church and one which he heard in prison—in order to argue that the socially grounded, true-to-life version

¹⁴Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 182

¹⁵Johnny Cash, “Amazing Grace,” Legacy Recordings. YouTube, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SnJke2Je_0.

¹⁶Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 199

¹⁷*Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers*, 47:01.

¹⁸*Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers*, 49:35.

he heard at a depraved moment was somehow more true than the church version. He could accomplish this because “Amazing Grace” had moved out of the hymn world and entered the Americana canon of artists like Cash. In this case, hymn-turned-Americana is an opportunity to scrutinize institutionalized religion and discover the “real power” of a song. Its Christian origins are *legible*, certainly, but are dislodged precisely because of that legibility: prisoners judge “grace” and “goodness” not as something received in church (after all that work, this man still tried to have his wife killed), but something discovered via real life experience and expressed in a more authentic performance of the song. In the process of molding “Amazing Grace” to the social needs of prison life, Johnny Cash created additional opportunities for Americans to relocate the religious.

“The next best thing”

“Amazing Grace” also belongs to the Black gospel tradition. In this genre the seminal recording belongs to Aretha Franklin, who titled a two-night live album at a church in L.A. after the hymn. Aretha’s version contained only two stanzas but stretched to over ten minutes as she ad libbed lyrics and lengthened syllables. This concert demonstrates once again how the intense sensory dimension of music could be prioritized over lexical meaning: When the Rev. James Cleveland introduced Franklin, he asked the audience to “enjoy one of the greatest sounds in the world...the sound of gospel.”¹⁹ Like those in Collins’ folk circle, Aretha and her listeners were seeking the visceral sensory power of hymns rather than their explicitly Christian content or message. Cleveland was not interested in words, but *sound*.

It was still important, however, that this concert was composed of hymns. A compilation film of the event reads: “In 1972, Aretha did something different [after recording so many pop hits]. She came to Los Angeles to record an album of the music she sang in her youth.”²⁰ This text points out, yet again, that there is a flexible social power to be activated in “old-time” religion. As a woman in Moyers’ documentary states, “Amazing Grace” is “a song that’s always been sung by Black people.”²¹ The film also makes a key differentiation between Franklin’s earlier career (as more commercial, secular, popular) and the live album (as “different,” folk, and Black, speaking to her more “traditional” sensibilities). The religious origins of “Amazing Grace” were important to the identity of this recording, though only in a particularly sensory form and a specifically Black context.

Cleveland’s introduction to the concert extends this fascinating interplay of the religious and the cultural. Before the first night’s show, he told the audience:

We want you tonight to be a part of this session. We want you to, y’know, let the folk know you’re here. Many of you who’ve never had the opportunity to hear Aretha sing gospel, you’re in tonight for a great thrill...I’d like for you to be mindful though, that this is a church, and we’re here for a religious service. And we want you to be a part of it, we want you to give in to the Spirit. Those of you who aren’t hip to giving in to the Spirit, then, you do the next best thing (laughs).²²

Cleveland acknowledged that the night was both an inspiring religious service and an entertaining cultural performance. Two types of audiences are present (those looking for “the Spirit” and those looking for “a great thrill”), but these two receptive registers overlap. The wonderful “sound

¹⁹ *Amazing Grace* (Neon, n.d.), 5:45.

²⁰ *Amazing Grace* (Neon, n.d.), 2:21.

²¹ *Amazing Grace with Bill Moyers*, 39:29.

²² *Amazing Grace* (Neon, n.d.), 4:20.

of gospel” is simultaneously religious and social, and audience members can oscillate between postures of respectful veneration (“be mindful”) and free enjoyment (“tonight I want you to relax”). This interplay was made possible because in America, hymns can become songs when appropriate, but never seem to fully depart from their religious history. Their enduring “religious” status lends something fresh, powerful, and sacred to Americans’ experience of them.

To summarize, Collins, Cash, and Franklin all used “Amazing Grace” to cultural or social ends. They and their listeners departed from a purely devotional usage of the song. But they also talked about and around the song’s Christianness, taking from it what they needed. Collins found a sense of universal spirituality that helped an explosive youth counterculture “settle down” into home and society. Cash’s prisoners found a sound more sacred and redemptive than their previous experience with religion and hymns. Franklin found something “different” from her previous hits; the hymn lent a certain sacrality to the “sound of gospel” that audiences already loved. In each case, Christianity stands boldly in a public world we might call “culture.” But Promey’s angle, in which seemingly banal Christian display hides insidious White Christian nationalism, feels off the mark. Instead, through the medium of sound, we encounter religion in the register of memory and nostalgia, community and social change. We are forced to pay attention to the positive and productive ways in which people engage and talk about Christian themes encountered in the secular public. This departure from Promey’s terms may be a result of different angles on our respective materials; it may also suggest that the medium of sound works differently than display. Fully answering these questions requires further exploration.

Turner argues that the folk revival “introduced the idea of [Amazing Grace] being a song rather than a hymn.”²³ In each case here, though, “Amazing Grace” is both song and hymn. This example suggests that in Americana, the transition from hymn to song is never complete; rather, it requires constant conscious and unconscious work. A theoretical framing may be helpful here. Performers and listeners, as the social theorist Michel de Certeau would have it, play tactically with the vocabularies available to them; every time they do so, they assign their own temporal meanings to the material and subject the vocabulary to a playful scrutiny. As Certeau puts it, “to the extent that this instrument that ‘creates opinion’ [e.g. a religious institution] is manipulable by those that have it at their disposition, it is legitimate to inquire into the *opportunities it offers for changing ‘belief’ into ‘mistrust,’* into “suspicion,” and indeed into denunciation.”²⁴ I suggest turning this lens on other artifacts of Christianity in American music. When a religious song seems to have become palatable to “secular” Americans, its practice does not cement that religion’s power over our culture but may actually make it more slippery. Telling a religious history of an Americana song—“Amazing Grace,” “I’ll Fly Away,” “Oh When the Saints,” even “Blowin’ the Wind”—doesn’t speak to hegemonic Protestant devices as much as it speaks to the versatility and vulnerability of religious themes in American music. Vulnerability, indeed, because Christianity in popular music can also put consumers on the defense. When Bob Dylan added gospel to his discography, for example, he did not allow Christianity to “hide in plain sight,” but put it on a pedestal for scrutiny (his fans were certainly not pleased, and are free to articulate this whenever they iterate a Dylan song from his “Christian era.”²⁵). Many American cultural forms seem to be vessels for values we “don’t believe” or “don’t want”—Promey’s massive crosses on American highways come to mind—but I encourage students of religion to see such designs as opportunities for iterative practice and productive social possibility. It is important for us to turn toward the American experience with empathy and hope rather than pessimism.

²³Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 175.

²⁴Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 189, emphasis added.

²⁵Michael J. Gilmour, *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 68.

Conclusion: Thinking with and around privilege

Christianity is undoubtedly privileged over other religions in the construction of Americana. When Cat Stevens converted to Islam in 1977, for example, his conversion was lamented by fans and somewhat ridiculed by music critics as a departure from the culture.²⁶ Stevens/Islam returned to music in the 2000s to produce Islamic devotional songs; that he did this makes us confront the difficult reality that his Islamic music could never attain the same “American” status or popularity as his 1970s repertoire. It is also difficult, with this in mind, to process Turner’s more celebratory passages:

The use of ‘Amazing Grace’ in the wake of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington illustrated its power to unite Americans and those around the world who felt sympathy for America. Somehow ‘Amazing Grace’ could embrace core American values without ever sounding triumphalist or jingoistic.²⁷

Critical scholarship should be careful not to celebrate perceived American harmony too much. We know that those “core American values” exclude many Americans and have informed decades of Islamophobia; thanks to Promey, we know that sensory culture is an important part of their design. But we also know, from the empathetic approaches of religion scholars, that value in America is felt, not chosen rationally. American cultural productions often feed on our desire for familiarity, making it easy to fabricate American heritage in favor of the Christian tradition. A scholar’s most important job in such a country, then, is to study people’s experiences of sensory authenticity with precision and critical empathy, looking for their complexities, locating their productive potentials. In the culture of hymns-turned-Americana, for example, where non-Christians sing about Christian things, people go to work on religion in a variety of ways. Their work deserves our careful attention.

²⁶Anonymous, “Cat Stevens Quits Pop,” *Rolling Stone*, June 25, 1981. See also Gilmour, *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan*, 67.

²⁷Turner, *Amazing Grace*, 205.

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