**Introduction**

The words and music of “Amazing Grace” are well known to millions of people the world over. Though the words were written in the late eighteenth century, and the music evolved in the nineteenth century (though with much older origins), the hymn’s modern popularity emerged quite suddenly after 1970 and has endured for the past fifty years. From 1970 onwards, the hymn has enjoyed remarkable commercial success. It has sold millions of records, as singles, on 45s and on LPs, and more recently on video and digital recordings. It has been recorded by innumerable artists: by major singers and musicians, by orchestras, bands, and pipers. It has appeared in every conceivable genre of music, from rap to classical renditions, and has been recorded in some of the world’s great concert halls, in South African townships, in churches, on windswept coastal promontories, and in many hundreds of private homes, thanks to the astonishing technology available in the modern digital age. Any number of professional singers and musicians have adopted “Amazing Grace” as their own theme song. In the process, “Amazing Grace” has transformed some performers into global superstars and has helped fill the coffers of major entertainment corporations.

In addition, and especially over the course of the past half century, “Amazing Grace” has moved far beyond the lucrative, eye-catching world of commercial music-making to establish itself as a simple hymn for humankind. It is at once Christian in origin and expression, yet widely loved because of its simple secular appeal. “Amazing Grace” has become a source of support for individuals, and sometimes whole nations, in times of trouble
and distress. Above all perhaps, it has also become a ready-made musical tribute and comfort, played in the shadow of grief and bereavement. Today all this is well known, but it is much less clear how it came to be.

How did “Amazing Grace” come to occupy such an unusual—perhaps even unique—position? How did a hymn written by an English cleric in the late eighteenth century become so important in the lives of millions of people in the twenty-first? What is the trajectory of the hymn as it emerged from its conception in eighteenth-century England to its current position of widespread affection? Equally curious, John Newton, the man who wrote “Amazing Grace,” had, in his early years, been the captain of a slave ship. Here was a man involved in the grim cruelties of buying and transporting Africans across the Atlantic. Yet twenty years after he left his slave ship in Liverpool, he wrote a hymn that is widely loved by African Americans—descendants of those enslaved people—and by millions of others for the way it speaks to compassion and salvation, qualities Newton never showed to the ranks of Africans packed onboard his ships.

Many people may be perplexed by John Newton. He is remembered primarily for his godly work and for his uplifting hymns, though his earlier life was marked by inhuman brutality. What enabled a man with such a violent background to write a hymn of enduring compassion and hope? How could a man whose slaving days were marked by callous brutality become so devout, so godly, and so influential a Christian?

We need to remember that John Newton was not alone. Indeed in many respects he was typical of his contemporaries. There was nothing unusual in finding eighteenth-century God-fearing people involved in the godless business of slavery and slave trading. On both sides of the Atlantic there were countless white merchants, politicians, royals, sailors, landowners, planters—and even clerics—who saw no conflict between their involvement with Atlantic slavery and their religion. Moreover, few of Newton’s contemporaries thought there was a clash between their Christian faith and their cruelty towards enslaved Africans.¹ We ought not to be surprised that a man of God had been a slaver. Long before Newton, the Christian world had sanctioned the enslavement of Africans. From the earliest days of American settlement,
when Bartolomé de Las Casas, bishop of Chiapas, formally called “Defender of the Indians,” specifically sanctioned African slavery in Spanish America, very few clerics, congregations, and individual Christians felt any qualms about African enslavement—though Las Casas himself came to regret his initial support for it. Throughout colonial North America, particularly in the US South in the run-up to the Civil War, there were lively theological justifications for slavery. The harsh reality remains: John Newton belonged to a Western Christian culture in which, until very late in the day, only a tiny fraction of white believers saw any moral or religious objection to slavery. He was just one small element in a society where the buying, selling, and owning of Africans went largely unchallenged. Though it may surprise us today, vanishingly few of his white contemporaries ever thought about it.

It is true however that John Newton changed, and so too did many others. The preacher who wrote “Amazing Grace” in 1772 was not the same man who captained the Liverpool slave ship *Duke of Argyle* in 1750. Moreover, Newton spent much of his later life confessing the wickedness of his earlier years, praying for forgiveness, and seeking, as best he could, to redeem himself. After 1787 he finally broke cover, turned against slavery in public, and lent his powerful voice to the campaign by the British Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade to bring the slave trade to an end. That trade was abolished by the British Parliament in 1807—the year of Newton’s death.

Whichever way we view John Newton, his most astonishing memorial remains his hymn, “Amazing Grace,” which continues to have a humane resonance 250 years after he wrote it. How can we explain the appeal and relevance for millions of people in 2022 of a hymn that was written specifically for humble rural parishioners of an isolated English village in 1772? This book is an attempt to offer an explanation.

My first serious encounter with “Amazing Grace” was not in church but in my work on slavery and the slave trade. John Newton the slave ship
captain and author of “Amazing Grace” has drifted in and out of a number of my earlier books on slavery. In places I devoted a great deal of attention to him. Almost inevitably, “Amazing Grace” became, after a fashion, a musical background to much of what I wrote. At the same time I also developed a highly personal curiosity about the hymn. As a schoolboy, I had belonged to the choir at St. John’s Church in Failsworth, Greater Manchester, and eventually became head choirboy. Between 1948 when I joined the choir and 1960 when I abandoned the church, I adhered to a regime of choral singing, with weekly rehearsals and two, sometimes three, services every Sunday, in addition to all the other high days of the Christian calendar. Not surprisingly, my head soon filled with dozens of the hymns that I sang every week. To this day, I know many of them by heart, and though I lost my faith more than six decades ago, I still enjoy singing those hymns (though normally my only opportunity to do so takes place at funerals). But among the many hymns which those years of youthful choral singing implanted in my brain, “Amazing Grace” is notable for its absence. It did not appear in the hymnbook used in my church, and it continues to be absent from many of the subsequent editions published for the Church of England. As a result, I came late to the pleasures and the curiosities of “Amazing Grace,” and I did so, not in England where I live, but on my frequent visits to the US, when teaching and researching the history of slavery.

The ubiquity of “Amazing Grace” in modern American cultural life, indeed the way it often seems to provide a soundtrack to American life itself, left me curious. What is so special about “Amazing Grace”? Its appeal can’t merely be the simple music, nor even its memorable verses. After all, there are many other hymns which are no less impressive, and which have equally haunting music. Why “Amazing Grace”? How did the words of an English slave trader develop such a unique status and position in American life—and far beyond the US? This simple curiosity took on a greater urgency when it was fired by one particular event.

In 2015 President Obama sang “Amazing Grace” at a funeral in Charleston. It was a breathtaking moment of political brilliance and a unique historical moment. The reaction of Obama’s audience that day in
Charleston was equally revealing. What was it about that hymn, that president, that congregation, in that city, that seemed to speak to a much more complex and tangled story of the US and of its tortured, slavery-based history? I set out to explore that story.

In June 2015, a white supremacist gunman shot dead the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, a South Carolina state senator and charismatic pastor, along with eight of his parishioners, as they gathered for a Bible reading session in their Charleston church, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal. A week later, President Obama gave a funeral eulogy to a congregation in the TD Arena of the College of Charleston, which was packed with more than five thousand people inside, and more outside in the sweltering heat. Even by the standards of that brilliant presidential orator, what happened that day proved a spellbinding experience: unforgettable for those present and stirring even for the calloused journalists who covered the story.

Obama spoke with intellectual and emotional insight—all marked by the profound misery of the occasion. As he spoke, the president returned time and again to the concept of grace, naming each of the murdered victims as he spoke. The word and concept grace drifted through the oration, almost like the descant to a hymn. Quoting from President Kennedy (“I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty”), Obama offered a carefully chosen account of the idea of grace and how it reflected the life and work of Reverend Pinckney. He noted that, “according to the Christian tradition, grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It’s not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God.” Obama carefully paced his oration, and as it evolved, the huge gathering—and the clerics assembled behind the president—were moved to respond, adding their own voices to Obama’s words. It was as if Obama had become a presiding preacher to his own vast congregation, playing to their feelings, to their biblical knowledge, and to their Christian faith. Eventually, Obama turned,
knowingly, to the presiding bishop behind him, paused—and began to sing “Amazing Grace.”

No one could claim that Obama is blessed with a good singing voice, but his rendition of “Amazing Grace” that day was one of the most electrifying moments in modern presidential history: a moment of brilliant and calculated audacity. As Obama began to sing, the organist and musicians assembled for the service hastily took up the unexpected task of following the president’s vocal pace and rhythm and providing a suitable musical backing. Suddenly and unexpectedly, a presidential eulogy had become a choral moment recognizable to anyone familiar with the musical tradition of African American churches. There were unmistakable echoes of the call-and-response songs from the cotton fields of slave days.

Obama’s singing looked and sounded spontaneous. It seemed as though the most powerful man in the land had been swept along on a tide of grief and sadness, succumbing to the emotional power of the occasion. In fact, the president had spent a great deal of time prior to the funeral thinking and talking about singing that hymn. At first he was unsure about whether he should sing. When he raised the question with his wife and advisors, they thought it a bad idea. But Obama explained that if, on the day, he felt that the congregation was on his side, singing “Amazing Grace” would have the desired impact. And how could a largely African American audience not be on the side of the nation’s first Black president at such an emotional event? On the day, Obama quickly realized that he had the support of that huge congregation: the moment was indeed right to sing. The impact was exhilarating. In retrospect, it was regarded “as one of the most powerful moments of his Presidency.”

I’ve watched and listened to that event many times, and repetition does not dim the brilliance of the moment—it continues to have a spine-tingling effect. What did it matter that Obama couldn’t sing very well? It was a sensational and deeply moving moment that impelled first the assembled clerics around the president, then the whole congregation, to rise and sing along with their president. Equally striking, no one seemed to need a printed copy of the hymn to join in. “Amazing Grace” was as familiar to most people there as the words of the national anthem. A
huge assembly of American citizens were, in an instant, revealed to be word perfect with the hymn “Amazing Grace.” On that day in June 2015 in Charleston, thousands of Americans, without the printed words to hand, joined their president in singing a familiar hymn. Moreover, they were singing a hymn that is perhaps the most famous piece of writing from the pen of an Atlantic slave trader . . . It seems an odd historical twist that brought together that president, that hymn, and that city to create such a memorable occasion.

The city of Charleston, the College of Charleston, and the hymn “Amazing Grace”—each has its own distinctive link to slavery. The port of Charleston was at the center of slavery in colonial North America and was the place where gunfire heralded the start of the US Civil War. The college was founded in 1770, when that port was the major disembarkation point for enslaved Africans destined for the expanding slave frontiers of colonial North America. Some 40 percent of all the Africans shipped to North America landed in Charleston. Across the entire history of the Atlantic trade, more than two hundred thousand Africans landed in the Carolinas and Georgia. Inevitably, the College of Charleston itself was entangled with slavery and with the legacy of the slave past; enslaved labor helped in its early construction, and a number of its trustees, faculty members, and leaders were slave owners. After the Civil War, the college remained defiantly segregationist, and almost went bankrupt in the vain effort to resist integration in the 1960s. National and local pressures finally saw the first African American students enroll in 1967.

The hymn sung by President Obama at the College of Charleston in 2015 was itself born of slavery. It was written in 1772 in the small English town of Olney by the Reverend John Newton, who had, by then, put behind him his former life as the master of a Liverpool slave ship. On one slave ship voyage, in August 1749, Newton had himself landed at Charleston, as first mate on the Liverpool slave ship the Brownlow, and
had helped to disembark 156 enslaved Africans there. It was a new vessel of a mere fifty tons with a crew of twenty and it had trawled for eight months along the Gold Coast and the Windward Coast, collecting 218 enslaved Africans. By the time it docked at Charleston however, via Antigua, only 156 Africans had survived. The Brownlow had suffered a catastrophic loss of life. A slave uprising had cost the lives of four Africans and one crew member; most of the African fatalities had been caused by highly contagious diseases—notably dysentery. In late August, the surviving Africans were advertised for sale “on reasonable terms” at a store on Broad Street.

At first glance, these issues—Charleston, slave ships, “Amazing Grace,” and President Obama—might seem to be linked only by the historical imagination. In fact, what unites them, and what fixes them in popular memory, is the complex history of Atlantic slavery.

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Few hymns have acquired the widespread fame, resonance, or poignancy of “Amazing Grace.” It is played today by lone pipers and major orchestras, in moments of personal isolation and on state occasions. “Amazing Grace” has long since slipped its original moorings in Christian worship to become an anthem familiar to millions. It is, at once, a song for our times and a hymn for everyone. But this was not always the case. So how did this happen? How did a simple Christian hymn, designed merely to accompany a sermon delivered by the Reverend John Newton, come to hold such sway over millions in all corners of the modern world? What follows seeks to offer an explanation.