

A Wretch Like Who?

Flipping through the monthly missalettes at many Catholic churches, one finds a wide selection of traditional Protestant hymns. For those who attend Mass regularly, this is all to the good. They all too rarely get to hear the lovely chants of centuries past, and the new music produced since the liturgical reforms of the 60's tends to be either treacly or impossible to sing or both. But these traditional hymns appear in some odd forms. They are usually shorn of all harmony: Catholics—rightly, alas—are not expected to be able to do more than carry a tune, and even that is often a bit iffy. More significantly, the lyrics of the hymns are often changed. The alterations are sometimes merely modernizations of the language—which are not always particularly felicitous—or attempts to make the texts inclusive. Often, however, there are alterations in the very theology of the old hymns. Those who alter the texts are not, as one might suspect, trying to purify these Protestant artifacts of heresy before allowing them to pass the lips of the orthodox. Rather, they make changes that have more to do with the sensibilities of modern, middle-class Americans than with either traditional Protestant or Catholic beliefs.

The most popular religious song in America is probably “Amazing Grace.” It is to be found in the hymnal of almost every Christian denomination, and is popular in the larger culture, as well: many will remember Joan Baez singing it a cappella at Woodstock or Bill Moyers examining it on a PBS documentary. We all know the first stanza:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound!)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

That is how almost everyone remembers it—it is also the way John Newton wrote it. It is not, however, the way the monthly missalette—or even the more respectable *Collegetown Hymnal*—invites Catholics to sing it:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound!
That saved and strengthened me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Another missalette renders the second line, “That saved and set me free.” Whoever is responsible for these alterations clearly has a different view of himself and of humanity in general than did the author of the text. While Newton believed that human beings were wretches, in desperate need of a savior, these twentieth-century adapters clearly believe that they and the congregations who sing their words are perfectly nice people—almost nice enough to be Unitarians. They are not bad—certainly not *wretches*; they have simply lost their way. They are not wicked; they merely have a handicap—a dysfunction—from which they hope to recover.

The alteration, of course, weakens the text as a poem: forceful diction is replaced with bland verbiage. What is more, the new wording is not in harmony with what follows:

’Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.

A *wretch* would have good reason to fear, and good grounds for relief on realizing he will not be punished as he deserves to be. The merely bewildered or weak do not have the same cause for dread and thus not the same cause for rejoicing. Christian theology, both Catholic and Protestant, once insisted that what was called “a conviction of sin,” was the beginning of conversion—the recognition of one’s utter sinfulness was the essential first step toward redemption—but the altered text has glossed over that stage.

“Amazing Grace,” has been altered before. The final stanza that most of us recognize—

When we've been there ten thousand years
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we first begun.

—is not Newton's, but was added later by one John Rees. Still, those lines are not jarring. They grow naturally out of the previous verses. They merely amplify the hope of heaven expressed in Newton's fourth verse. The new alterations, on the other hand, undermine the author's central point—the nature of grace. Grace is amazing because it saves *wretches*, not because it puts a final polish on nice people. The Grace of God does what no other power could do.

The life Newton led allowed him to feel the full burden of human wickedness: he had lived a wretch's life. In his younger days he had sailed as a slaver. His conversion was a Wesleyan change of heart that led to a dramatic transformation of life. His later years were spent as a clergyman of the Church of England, the friend and protector of the poet William Cowper, and finally an ally of Wilberforce in the abolition movement. The recent alterations of his text deny this remarkable history. But more importantly, they set the singer apart from it and suggest that, while the 18th-century slaver may have been a wretch, the singers of the new version are not: they are good people. The only question left is why they need to be saved.

“Amazing Grace” is by no means the only hymn to be so watered down. In the otherwise admirable Catholic hymnal *Worship II*, a significant version of Isaac Watts's “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed” appears. Many Protestants know that hymn in both its original form and with the added refrain “At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light.” The first stanza asks,

Alas! and did my Savior bleed

And did my Sovereign die?
Would he devote that sacred Head
For such a worm as I?

The worm image is a vivid one. Worms still mean something to us: low and slimy, evidence of corruption, decay, and rot. The modern version discards the worm and substitutes something more hygienic. The new last line reads, “For sinners such as I?” emphasizing the plural “sinners” instead of the singular “worm.” Furthermore, the idea of being a sinner has been so completely trivialized in American culture that no one need mind being called one or admitting that he or she is one. The realm of discourse in which we usually hear about sin shows how insignificant the idea has become. That discourse is not religion; it is food. Food is “sinfully rich,” “sinfully delicious”—and this of course in an age that does not regard gluttony as a real sin. Even among religious people, sin is rarely a term that still contains much sting—not like “wretch” or “worm.”

In Protestant hymnals another 18th-century hymn, Robert Grant’s “O Worship the King,” contains five stanzas. The last one runs

Frail children of dust, and feeble as frail,
In thee do we trust, nor find thee to fail,
Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end,
Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend!

The *Collegeville Hymnal* gives the Catholic congregation only four verses. Two stanzas are truncated in order to avoid the unpleasantness of having the parishioners call themselves dust—we can assume that on Ash Wednesday this adapter prefers to hear “Repent and believe the good news” instead of “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” The fourth stanza—originally—reads

Thy bountiful care, what tongue can recite?
It breathes in the air; it shines in the light;
It streams from the hills, it descends from the plain,
And sweetly distills in the dew and the rain.

The Catholic version cuts the second couplet of this stanza, as well as the offensive couplet about dust in the last stanza and fuses the remains of the two stanzas. The image

of God's bountiful care coming down like the rain is sacrificed in order to get rid of the frailty and dust: bountiful care is fine so long as we don't sound as though we need it too much.

Many other Protestant hymns are simply not sung in Catholic churches—or even much in Protestant churches—because their view of human nature is too negative. Think of those lines from “Rock of Ages”—“Foul, I to the fountain fly; / Wash me Savior, or I die.” The middle-class parishioner will not like being called foul any more than being called a wretch. In the same way, some traditional Catholic observances that are still in the missals are seldom enacted in many Catholic churches: On Good Friday, the Reproaches in which Christ accuses the people are not so often heard as they once were. In many parishes one rarely hears the congregation reciting the general confession during the penitential rite—“I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do”—much less see anyone strike her or his breast at the appointed place. Instead, one hears only invocations such as “Lord Jesus, you come to gather the nations into the peace of God's kingdom” introducing the plea “Lord have mercy.” Why the people need mercy remains an open question. There are, on the other hand, more celebrations of the “gathered community,” in which we hear priest and people telling each other in word and song how great they are.

The basis of Christian belief is guilt and redemption. All human beings are sunk in sin—both the actual sins they have committed and the original sin with which all people are stained: all people deserve damnation. Their situation is so desperate that they need a divine redeemer to save them. And that is the role of Christ. As no one's own merits are sufficient to save her or him—in some Protestant views merits cannot even *help* save—all need the grace of God, which He gives through the sacrifice of Christ.

It is important to note that the idea of a redeemer, a savior, is impossible without the idea of fallen humanity. You cannot be saved if you are not lost. You cannot be redeemed if you are not in hock. You cannot be freed if you are not enslaved. American culture, even in its churches, avoids the idea of *real* sinfulness. It nevertheless clings sentimentally to the idea of redemption. Popular culture on a large scale both tells people that they are OK and embraces some vague cultural Christianity—often something no more sincere than the pop star’s “Thank you, Jesus” at the Grammy awards or the Christmas episodes of every TV sitcom.

Our culture does not believe in wickedness—that is, in culpability. The “conviction of sin” is hardly possible to us. We believe, not in sin and forgiveness, but in illness and recovery. It is the endless message of our culture that everyone is basically good and that most of our problems will be solved when we realize that—in other words, when we build up our self-esteem. Where does this leave the Christian believer? The essence of the faith is the idea of salvation, and the whole idea of being lost is at odds with what the culture presents. The culture champions the validation of the ego, while the tradition of the faith enjoins one to “glory in nothing but the cross of Christ,” to admit one’s sinfulness, to avoid self-esteem—under the old name of pride—as a deadly sin. Churches try to fuse the two contradictory messages by glossing over the Fall, the depravity—that is, the *need* for grace—while at the same time celebrating the *result* of grace—salvation, and redemption—as if they were evidence, not of God’s goodness and the sinner’s need, but of the goodness of each of us as he or she is now.

The songs written for Catholics since the liturgical reforms of the 1960’s rarely ask the singers to admit that they are imperfect. Rather, they are often simple bragging accompanied by guitars. Probably the worst example is “And They’ll Know We Are Christians by Our Love.”

We are one in the spirit, we are one in the Lord,
We are one in the spirit, we are one in the Lord,

And we pray that all unity may one day be restored,
And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love,
Yes they'll know we are Christians by our love.

Through the lyrics we also assure each other that we will walk with each other—walk hand in hand—and many other wonderful things. But what most marks the song is the lie that occurs in every refrain. No one reading the history of the Western world would say that Christians can be known primarily by their love—much less for walking hand in hand—even metaphorically.

In another song that has become popular in Catholic churches, Jean Anthony Greif's "We are the Light of the Word," the Beatitudes in Matthew are transformed into self-congratulation. There is a touch of supplication in the verses—

Blessed are they who are meek and humble,
Theirs is the Kingdom of God.
Bless us, O Lord, make us meek and humble,
Bless us, O Lord, our God.

—but there is only self-satisfaction in the refrain. It declares,

We are the light of the world,
May our light shine before all,
That they may see the good that we do,
And give glory to God.

In both these songs, the shift from the second person to the first makes all the difference. Think of the common expression taken from the same passage in Matthew as Greif's song: we still call good people "the salt of the earth," but what would we think of someone who announced, "I am the salt of the earth"? Jesus's admonition that His followers *must* do good in the world becomes a smug congregation's boast that it *has* done good. These songs are far from the spirit of traditional Christian worship, even though one is based on a Biblical passage and the other takes most of its language from Scripture: the change from "you" to "we" is enough almost to reverse the meaning. What would be heard as a command—a command that has, almost certainly, been disobeyed—becomes something else. "We" are now celebrating our own goodness,

which we hope others will recognize. A hymn is a song of praise, and here we praise ourselves. “Self-praise is no praise,” of course, and the boasting seems especially out of place in a setting where all is supposedly directed to praising something greater than ourselves.

To these songs, as to the alterations of the old ones, there are poetic objections: These are the plain white bread of self-satisfaction, not the richer flavor of Christian irony, which acknowledges both that the speaker is a miserable sinner, an unprofitable servant, a wretch, a worm *and* at the same time proclaims that God loves him enough to die for him anyway. The human is now always described blandly—at worst as a sinner, usually just as “us.” And God is often made just as bland: New hymns seldom talk about “The Lord of years, / The Potentate of time, / Creator of the rolling spheres, / Ineffably sublime.” Instead, God is usually *just* our helper or friend.

More importantly, the alterations of the old hymns show what Flannery O’Connor called “the vaporization of religion in America.” They continue the long tradition in which American Christians have let the essential doctrines of their faith be trivialized in the face of a larger culture that celebrates the goodness of all people. For while the American tradition begins with the Puritans and their extreme Calvinist idea of human depravity, its defining moment was the emergence of the Unitarian movement at the end of the 18th century. The early Unitarians and the Transcendentalists who followed them disagreed with traditional Christians not so much on the nature of God, as on the nature of human beings: feeling all people to be basically good, they rejected the idea of original sin, and that stance naturally led to the rejection of the idea of a divine savior, leaving no place for the Second Person of the Trinity. For a time the view won over many churches in New England. It utterly conquered the larger culture. Modern Americans believe in their innate goodness—and even if they attend churches which espouse the old doctrines of Fall and Redemption, they still prefer services in which they will be treated, not as wretches who seek forgiveness, but as good people who seek

affirmation. Students of American culture will see the new or altered hymns as merely a continuation of a trend that has shaped our culture for two centuries.

Those who actually believe in the doctrines of Christianity will view with alarm a movement through which the Church itself undermines its basic doctrines. They will be saddened to sing bad poetry, when they could sing good. Even more, they will be appalled to see their own hymns weakening the one Christian doctrine that can be verified from the TV news, from the behavior of their colleagues—and themselves—at work, and from the quarrels over their dinner-tables: human depravity. What sets Christianity apart from the rest of the world’s religions is that Christians both recognize a fall and proclaim a savior. They will know we are Christians, not by our love, but by our recognition that we are worms and wretches.

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