

Gareth Atkins and Martin V. Clarke, editors. *Amazing Grace at 250: Global Heritage and Contested Legacies*. Routledge, 2026. 294 pages. \$152.

While John Newton's hymn "Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)" was first published on page 53 of his and William Cowper's *Olney Hymns in Three Books* in 1779, his diary reports that the hymn was first sung by his congregation on New Year's Day, 1773 (6). So it was that scholars of various traditions took part in a year of presentations and celebrations in and around Olney in 2023. This volume creates a permanent record of those presentations.

The introduction begins by thoroughly exploring Newton's famous conversion from a shipper of enslaved people to an Anglican priest, pietist preacher, and hymn writer. Then the editors discuss the development of the *Olney Hymns* and "Amazing grace!" in particular. This in itself is a fascinating essay. The book then explores the global impact of the hymn, how it has been interpreted musically, and the theologically and socially challenging implications of both the hymn and its spread in three sections, encompassing fifteen essays. The authors, while predominantly from the United Kingdom, also represent the US, Canada, and Asia. This is fitting for a hymn that truly found its fame in North America decades after the author's death and then developed an international impact.

The first six essays, under the heading "Global Heritage," explore this reality. Special attention is given to its journey into and influences on German hymnody, told by Walter Kurt Kreyszig; Portuguese hymnody, shared by Marcell Silva Stuernagel; and the Christian churches of Hong Kong, examined by Yee-Nok Enoch Lam. Janet Wooton discusses how the hymn returned to popular use in the British Isles in the second half of the twentieth century. In the process she charts much of the upheaval and innovation in British Christianity prior to the Dunblane Conferences of the 1960s and the renaissance of hymn writing that carried through the 1970s and 80s.

The second section, titled "Music and Musicians," begins by examining the process by which the tune NEW BRITAIN, which first appeared in the American book *Columbia Harmony* in 1829, and which wasn't associated with our hymn until 1835, achieved such ubiquity.¹ Historian Daniel Johnson examines this journey as well as other tunes to which the text has been sung. Other essays examine the adoption of the hymn into black gospel and varied instrumentations and how it has been adapted in what is known as "retuned" congregational song.

In the final section, essayists Gillian Warson, Simon Lee, Fiona Evison, Mark Porter, and Rommi Smith discuss the problematic nineteenth century approach to physical disability in the hymn, influences of the hymn on modern areas outside of the church, contemporary situations, and even the creation of a new composition using and inspired by the text. In the Foreword, Anthony G. Reddie, Professor of Black Theology at the University of Oxford, points out the problematic issues of colonialism and race that come with this hymn and are often left unexplored. This might also be hinted at in the absence of scholarly voices from the developing parts of the church in Africa and South America. This is now an international hymn with international implications. While Newton cannot be held responsible for failing to address post-colonialism, we must be. For all that has been said here, there is clearly much more to say.

¹ Not all of this is unusual; most hymns—the texts—are written separately from their tunes, with associations being made by hymnal editors rather than authors or composers. Hymns are not simply lyrics for their tunes, even though modern hymnals often make that appear to be the case.

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