

# Amazing Grace

Great art is said to exhibit 'polysemy'; that is meaning of a layered nature, many and complex meanings. Similarly a work of scripture should not be considered to have only one 'literal' meaning. To hold this view would be to debase the work under consideration. However this is not to say that there can be an infinite number of meanings to a scriptural passage. This would possibly be to project ones own preconceptions in a dishonest way on to the text. But the text, if it is genuine, will objectively lend itself to a large number of interrelated valid interpretations which will inspire and motivate the religious seeker, sometimes speaking in a direct and personal manner to the seeker.

Whenever I encounter a 'born-again Christian' my reaction often is that I am dealing with one of two possibilities. It is likely, and here I admit a 'judgement' on my part, that such an individual, driven by psychological pain and distraction, trades the genuine religious quest for a narrow set of glib certainties. And no one among us is perfect. And we cannot know the level of the pain of another. Some such people may indeed have had a genuine religious awakening experience. I am reminded of the parable of the seed that fell on stony ground. The individual, when genuinely touched by God, wastes this experience in constantly proclaiming his own salvation and that of those he considers to be similar to himself and the damnation of all others. Such individuals seem to constantly re-live their own awakening experience. I do not here advocate the complementary error which is the Catholic ideal of sainthood involving constant giving of oneself to others at the expense of one's own being.

In 'Varieties of Religious Experience' William James describes how in all societies and cultures religious experience falls into two categories, that of the 'once-born' and the 'twice-born'. For instance in the case of the sincere and devout Roman Catholic spiritual development often unfolds evenly over a lifetime and culminates in death. In the case of the twice-born, and here I do not necessarily mean Christians, the religious life-cycle involves a growing sense of the absence of God in their lives and culminates with an experience of God entering their lives, sometimes in a florid, visionary manner. This absence of God may sometimes involve overtly dissolute and immoral living but this is not necessarily so. It can involve an inner emptiness in an otherwise, at least superficially, moral existence. And contrary to the born-again Christian model the twice-born are frequently psychologically troubled individuals.

Years ago I saw a movie about Bernadette Soubirous, the visionary of Lourdes. She had retired to a convent and was cruelly treated by a senior nun. Her superior was envious that Bernadette had been chosen as a vessel of divine intervention whereas she herself had been a dutiful servant all her life and, seemingly, her efforts had not found favour with God. The movie described how Bernadette's example lead her superior to be reconciled with God.

Broadly speaking it is this of which the Parable of the Prodigal Son may be speaking. It is a parable which speaks of the two forms of religious 'modes of being'. The son that was lost but was found is a metaphor for the 'twice-born'. Such people are a minority and in the right circumstances may have a special religious mission. The

mission of George Fox, the founder of the Religious Society of Friends, began with a visionary experience of an extreme nature. In the person of the faithful son Jesus seeks to teach us that the once-born mode of religious being is just as acceptable in the eyes of God as the twice-born religious form of life. The father says to the faithful son "all that I have is yours". It may in fact be the case that it is necessary to be 'born-again' in order to enter the Kingdom of Heaven but this involves a heightened religious awareness in *this* life and *not* to where one will spend eternity after death.

The philosopher Wittgenstein spoke of how the question as to whether or not God exists was in a sense meaningless. It is a fact, he observed, that a large majority of humans used words such as 'God' and the like and that these words have meaning to them. The real question is how this phenomenon affected the behaviour of such people and interacts with their experience as it moulded this behaviour.

Let me use an analogy. Sound intensity decreases exponentially as it travels from a source. For every unit of distance sound travels from a source it will decrease in intensity some 10(?) times. That is a decrease of 10 times after one unit of length and 100 times after two units of length. I remember years ago hearing an interview with the sound engineer with the Irish punk rock band the Boomtown Rats. He said that the function of the sound engineer was to ensure that the people in the back of the concert hall can hear and that those in the front are not deafened. Put more scientifically while the speakers producing the sound actually *are* on the stage the sound will be experienced *as if* it were emanating from a point source that is the equivalent of, say, 10 times the length of the auditorium behind the stage.

Let us say that the auditorium is a metaphor for the 'known' world, and that the stage is the interface between this world and the realm of the divine. The narrow minded materialistic atheist will point to how the religious believer is deluded as to the existence of anything beyond the obviously known. A religiously minded Unitarian atheist will perhaps debate with the believer the question of life after death and such like but will perhaps agree that the word 'God' can be a useful metaphor for the majesty and complexity of life here on 'Earth'. The disagreement between the believer and the Unitarian atheist is a side issue, important though it might be. But I would suggest that the difference between the Unitarian atheist and the materialist is much more fundamental. The materialist atheist pedantically misses the whole point.

The two modes of religious being as they exist in 'fallen' humanity have their analogous states in 'un-fallen' humanity. In the wonderful movie *Dances with Wolves* the woman Stands Tall with a Fist explains to Lt. John Dunbar of the US cavalry that Kicking Bird was not a chief but a holy man. Did this mean that Kicking Bird went about the tribal unit doing extraordinary feats of charity? Of course not! And while in many tribal societies the shaman was considered to be destined to a higher heaven than others Kicking Bird certainly did not exhibit an overbearing smugness that revolved around the belief that all but his category of human being were damned.

The forces of evolution have blessed and cursed humans with a very large brain and this requires questions of a religious and philosophical nature to be addressed. Again the forces of evolution have designed humans to exist in a tribal unit of some 50 to 80 people. In such a context there is one individual who has a special religious and

magical function sometimes involving the miraculous. The religiosity of such individuals frequently involves visionary experiences. The miracles involve events of a statistically improbable rather than a physically impossible nature. For example when Kicking Bird organises a dance to attract buffalo for his hungry people John Dunbar shortly after rides into the village shouting “tatonka”, the Lakota word for buffalo. He had just happened across a herd nearby. To debate whether there is a causal connection between Kicking Bird’s dance and the appearance of food is, in a sense, a side issue. We exist in a reality continuum in which all things are interconnected. The dance, perhaps, demonstrates the Oneness of all reality rather than ‘making’ the buffalo appear in any narrow sense.

The genuinely twice-born have a highly developed sense of the reality here in this world. This often points to the reality of a spirit world beyond this world. If this spirit realm is, in actual fact, a reality of a virtual nature this is only a side issue.

Unitarians would be the first to admit that religiosity is an aspect of the human condition that can easily be perverted. However the atheist, as the term is usually defined and understood, completely misses the point. Such people are, in a very real sense, blind and cannot see.

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