

# “Amazing Grace” in Virtual Space: Two Pandemic Performances on YouTube

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## “Amazing Grace” and crisis

As a hymn which offers an emotional narrative of rescue and hope, “Amazing Grace” has become a natural place to turn in situations of crisis. As James Walvin highlights, the hymn “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” (2023, 1–2). The popularity of “Amazing Grace,” and its recognition well beyond the bounds of worshipping communities, have led to a constant stream of performances and adaptations in a broad range of different venues and circumstances. Over the centuries, the hymn has evolved to take on a consolatory role, and to a certain extent it provides a source of ready-made meaning. Amidst the social restrictions and global anxiety which accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, special recordings of the hymn designed specifically for the pandemic circumstances received high circulation figures on YouTube, both addressing themselves to people’s needs and utilising the moment of the pandemic to reach a large international audience. Two recordings in particular stand out for their viewing figures, a performance from Andrea Bocelli’s concert live from Duomo di Milano (2020), and a composite video of individuals from fifty countries singing the hymn uploaded to a channel entitled The Normal Christian Life (2020a).

Whilst circulated at a similar time period, and utilising the same basic musical material, these two videos represent radically different visions of faith and what the YouTube medium might be able to achieve. A sense of established usage does not reduce all performances to the same common denominator. Rather, they build upon the opportunities offered by this tradition in two related but clearly differentiated ways. Behind each video stands a different vision of Christian vocation, a different sense of what a video performance might be able to accomplish in the midst of a pandemic, and thus a different sense of the work that “Amazing Grace” might be able to carry out. The two videos each mobilise a different set (or assemblage) of spaces and actors, who together serve to shape the aesthetics, atmosphere, and resonant interactions of their performances so as to produce videos which then take very different trajectories through social media, and faith-based and community spaces. Indeed, a quick glance through the top comments on each of the two videos very quickly shows the different nature of the two performances. Some of the most-liked YouTube comments on Bocelli’s video focus on music’s ability to transcend religious difference (“i’m a muslim, and everytime i listen to this song they say to me do "you know this is a christian music" and i just say "music don't have a religion" we all humans whatever our religion is, lets love each other like our love to music”), on emotions and the heart, on the spiritual or divine nature of Bocelli’s voice (““If god had a voice he would sound like Andre Bocelli ” - Celine Dion”), and on the personal resonance between Bocelli’s own blindness and the lyrics of the hymn (“a blind man singing for the world a Christian hymn: "was blind but

now I see" priceless.....”). The top comments on the Normal Christian Life video, by contrast, focus on the contributors performing from countries where Christians are persecuted (“It made me cry to see our brothers and sisters who had to have their faces blurred. God protect them.”), on the nature of a worldwide Christian family (“My heart was flooded with love for all of my precious family all over the world. How I wish everyone would come to know our Jesus! Thank you for this incredible message!”), and on the worship of Jesus (“Every race, every tribes, every language, and every nation will rise up and give honor to Jesus Christ...”).<sup>1</sup>

## Faith, gifting, and politics

Before turning to the videos themselves, it is important to take a small step back to the longer narratives that stand behind them. Over the course of the years, Andrea Bocelli has built up a strong narrative of faith, gifting, and music in the context of different media appearances. In interviews with the BBC (2021) and EWTN (2021) he has emphasised a conviction that the world as we see it could not have arisen simply by chance; the way that the existence of a creator serves to give everything meaning; and the beauty and power of the way shown to us by Jesus. He repeats well-established Christian apologetic narratives, and has clearly taken a level of ownership of these arguments both for his own life and in his encounters with a wider public. On a more personal level, Bocelli emphasises the unlikeliness of his own rise to success, the gamble of starting out a career as a musician, and the backup plan to practice law that he kept in his back pocket at an early stage in his career. There is a sense that his gifting and rise to success may be the result of a divine destiny or grace, and that this rise carries with it a certain responsibility. Whether or not he is unique in this matter, Bocelli clearly understands himself in some way to have been gifted with something special, and is aware that he is set apart in some way from the kind of “normal” life he might have expected had he continued the path of studying law.

Bocelli’s own narrative of vocation is embedded within a broader sense of God-ordained order. Bocelli believes in a fundamental divine order that is carried through in both the good aspects of the world and in situations of suffering, and he values his own role in capturing people’s hearts, in comforting those who are suffering, and in ultimately helping to create a better future. This hope extends beyond his music and has led him to set up his own foundation to carry out a range of different projects which translate both his words and the influence that he built up into action. In many ways, Bocelli describes a relatively traditional Catholic faith and logic of belief, one that has led him to sing for several popes and which, alongside his fame and talent, has led to a degree of institutional recognition from both church and civic institutions. The concert in which his performance of “Amazing Grace” took place in the context of this broader civic faith, an invitation from the mayor of Milan leading to a concert which he insists be understood as a form of prayer rather than as an exhibition. The opening voiceover gives a sense of this integration of faith and a narrative of civic duty:

On the day in which we celebrate the trust in a life that triumphs I’m honored and happy to answer “Si” to the invitation of the City and the Duomo of Milan. I believe in the strength of praying together. I believe in the Christian Easter, a universal symbol of rebirth that everyone whether they are believers or not, truly needs right now. Thanks to music, streamed live, bringing together millions of clasped hands everywhere in the world we will hug this wounded Earth’s pulsing heart, this wonderful international forge

that is reason for Italian pride. The generous, courageous, proactive Milan, and the whole of Italy will be again, and very soon, a winning model engine of a renaissance that we all hope for. It will be a joy to witness it, in the Duomo, during the Easter celebration which evokes the mystery of birth and rebirth (Bocelli 2020)

Whilst it might be easy from his own narrations to build up an image of Bocelli as a model citizen and paragon of his faith who simply desires to offer hope in a difficult time, it is important to emphasise that Bocelli's narrative of faith and calling sits alongside broader political and commercial dimensions when it comes to promoting himself as an artist and to using his voice to advocate for particular causes or individuals. Dale Hudson and Patricia Zimmermann point to the way that Bocelli's statements have "supported pro-life politics, apologies for Silvio Berlusconi's arch conservative and scandal-ridden administration, and Luciano Pavarotti's sexual abuse"<sup>1</sup> (2020, 166). Some of this is a natural outworking of Catholic faith, but other aspects are bound up with different personal relationships and beliefs that have developed beyond anything that the church might require of him as a believer. Bocelli carried on exactly this kind of somewhat controversial political engagement during the time of the pandemic, and shortly after the video performance was aired, Reuters reported that "Italian tenor Andrea Bocelli on Monday issued a scathing criticism of the Italian government's handling of the coronavirus, saying he was humiliated by a recent lockdown, and urged people to disobey rules still in place" (2020). It is clear that Bocelli's broader aims go beyond simply the provision of hope through beautiful music. Rather, this music and his performances sit at the centre of a broader constellation of convictions and goals, offering Bocelli the opportunity to form particular alliances and speak out with a public voice in ways that the seemingly innocuous character of music and heartfelt faith might sometimes serve to obscure or elide.

## Calling, miracles, and media

In common with Bocelli, Nathaniel Oliveri, the main figure behind the Normal Christian Life project, offers a strong narrative of calling, gifting, and a life of faith. Just like Bocelli, Oliveri's experience is coloured by experiences of childhood Catholic faith, however it is also framed by an experience of conversion that has led him to venture beyond that childhood experience to a more charismatic way of believing in his adult life. In testimonies available online, Oliveri describes a feeling of holding the hand of Christ as he goes up to respond to an altar call (History Makers Radio 2018). This early experience is then supplemented by further research, a search for the reality of God, and a series of experiences which Oliveri describes in supernatural terms, hearing God calling his name and experiencing the liquid love of God. Whilst Bocelli offers a defence of his faith in relatively rational terms that he will have learnt from the Catholic institutions around him, Oliveri's faith is framed in different terms, emphasizing direct encounters and experiences which form the basis for his later mission.

Oliveri's narrative of disruption and calling continues further to offer the strong sense of vocation on which the pandemic video is founded. Although experiencing some success as a video maker he expressed a longing for more to happen: to use media to make things come about

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<sup>1</sup> This may be a mistaken reference to comments made by Bocelli in relation to Plácido Domingo. I have been unable to track down any direct references to similar statements concerning Pavarotti, whose scandals seem to have received a different framing.

and for God to do the things he had done and promised in the Bible. He felt a gap between what he read and what he lived and felt God calling him to something new beyond the film business that he had been a part of. Oliveri believes that God gave him a gifting to produce media, and decided to start using media to “showcas[e] normal Christians with a supernatural God” (History Makers Radio 2018). Introducing his ministry in the middle of a church service (Glory City Church 2021), one of the first stories that Oliveri tells is a miracle story concerning the recovery of his baby daughter, and he makes it clear that he wants to showcase normal Christians’ stories just like this one as a tool to bring new people to Christ. Oliveri showcases some of the videos he has filmed of people being prayed for and talked to on the streets, and in a similar way to Bocelli, he suggests that what he has to offer is a source of hope for people in times of crisis, telling the story of how different people turned to pray as bush fires were raging in Australia. Oliveri’s belief in divine intervention extends to the events of the pandemic, and his channel includes a video of someone hospitalised as a result of COVID-19 who believes that God sent a cleaner to him to share his own experiences of God’s work in his life and eventually to pray for his healing. The story reaches a climax as the cleaner demonstrates God’s love for the patient by giving him the exact food and drink that he had been craving without having known at all that this is what he had been wanting.

In continuity with this broader experience and life of faith, Oliveri’s narrative of the “Amazing Grace” video is framed as something that God put on his heart, and something that, due to its scale, initially appeared somewhat ludicrous, but which was made possible through the gift of faith. Oliveri emphasises the shoestring budget, the ambitious timeline and the unexpected enthusiasm with which even non-believers became involved in helping make the project happen. This video, as much as any of the others, is understood as something of a miracle where God makes things happen that might not otherwise be possible.

As with Bocelli, there is value in going beyond the narrative the Oliveri himself articulates to the broader context in which he himself is embedded. Oliveri’s ministry initially emerged during his time as a member of Glory City Church in Brisbane, a community which is led and pastored by prophet, television personality, and faith healer Katherine Ruonala. Ruonala herself has a strong media presence, often focussed on the performance of miracles and the sharing of miracle testimonies. It is thus perhaps easy to read Oliveri’s own ministry as an extension of these practices in a way that is more focussed on the grassroots level of experience and less on the influence of a single leader, but which might perhaps take inspiration from the level of success and influence that someone like Ruonala is able to wield. This kind of project is inevitably caught up with similar questions of commerce and politics as someone like Bocelli. Alongside her media and conference appearances, Ruonala sells a number of books and encourages donations via her website. Glory City Church, at the same time, is part of international charismatic networks that spread out to include more controversial communities such as Bethel in the United States which have received considerable media attention for their pursuit or handling of potentially questionable supernatural activities, the associated promotion of political agendas surrounding the Trump presidency, and the damage that sometimes occurs when they fail to deal appropriately with dynamics of abuse and manipulation. Whilst Glory City Church has not attracted the same degree of controversy as a community such as Bethel, it would be unwise to assume that political and commercial strategies are completely absent from the way that they operate or that the everyday experiences which Oliveri seeks to document are

uncoloured by dynamics of power and choices to frame them according to particular narratives and ways of seeing.

## A global network of testimony

Within these two different narratives of faith and vocation, the video performances both take on quite different forms, reflecting the different aims and visions of the people that stand behind them.

The video from the Normal Christian Life opens with a brief teaser depicting individuals from different countries around the world accompanied by a short whooshing sound before cutting to more sobering footage as the video proper begins. Footage of empty streets in different cities appears on the screen and we are shown an opening message: “in this time of turmoil 50 countries unite in song.” The music begins with the voice and image of an individual man standing in the middle of an empty American street surrounded by billboards and LED advertisements. A gentle pad sound accompanies him in the background, but he begins singing alone and, as he sings the first line, he takes off the medical mask that he has been wearing. From here, the video cuts to different cities around the world, first to someone singing in Wuhan, China – the city where we first became aware of the Coronavirus disease – with their face blurred to mask their identity. There is a relatively gentle sense of tension here between Christian faith and politics, with visual references to government restrictions and a hint of the possibility that faith might move beyond them.

As we turn to different countries, different features emerge. As we cut to Spain, we begin to have the song text translated into different languages, with the move to Italy we have two people singing in harmony, and Indonesia brings with it a larger group for the first time. The texture builds a little as piano and different voices and languages are overlaid on top of one another whilst pictures of flags and the names of different countries serve to emphasise the range of different nationalities participating in the performance. The energy of the music builds up further with a slightly “world music” feel as tom-toms and rhythmic singing from some of the black singers enter the texture, and eventually countermelodies, gospel-style flourishes, and orchestral strings serve to enrich the texture still further.

As the opening verse repeats, the texture cuts right down, and we start to see split-screen videos showing ever more people simultaneously on the screen. These pictures accelerate and we cut back to the opening shot of the figure standing in New York. This is where the video seeks to bring home its message as the figure states that “so much has changed in our world lately,” before the message is continued by other individuals, each in their own languages “So much loss has caused many to realise how fragile our lives are. But the amazing grace and love of Jesus is stronger than life and death itself. Wherever you are call on the name of Jesus.” We are presented with another montage as we see different people around the world speaking Jesus’ name in their own language, and finally we cut back to New York one last time. The figure puts on his mask, walks away from camera, and text appears on the screen in multiple languages “If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved Rom 10:9.”

In this final sequence, we are given a particular interpretation of what the video has been about. The song “Amazing Grace” is there to showcase the way in which individuals around the world have called upon the name of Jesus, and the way in which they have been moved from a situation of weakness and fragility to one of love and grace as a result. The song is a direct enactment of conversion and its results, and its global circulation and familiarity is one that is able to demonstrate the global reach and availability of the gospel. Crucially, in the context of the Normal Christian Life project as a whole, this is not meant to be envisioned as an abstract or purely transactional form of salvation, but rather one that has genuine and visible effects in the everyday lives of those who take it up as God comes alongside them and acts in their lives. This video is there as an act of testimony, drawing upon the testimony captured in “Amazing Grace” as a hymn, showcasing how this testimony repeats itself in the lives of believers all around the world, and suggesting that this testimony might be something that can repeat in the lives of those who watch the video. In this context, the pandemic serves largely to emphasise the urgency of this challenge, which, pre-dates this particular historical situation and will continue to exist well beyond it into the future.

The testimony included in this video is, in many ways, much subtler than the testimony we find in other videos on the channel. There are no stories here of God’s miraculous intervention, no divine healings or coincidences, no visions of angels, and an offer to call on the Lord rather than a step-by-step presentation of the gospel. To this extent it seems to follow some of the wider logic adopted by many megachurches and seeker-friendly congregations that seek to offer an affective and pleasant experience without necessarily presenting anything overly demanding or strange at an early stage in people’s encounters. The fact that most of the videos are filmed in open outdoor spaces in nature and cities rather than having any overt connections to the specificity or enclosure of an indoor church environment contributes to the video’s open aesthetic. At the same time, the identification of participants by the name of their country rather than by their name or affiliation allows them to represent the countries of the world in a rather vague and general sense, aside from any particular associations or tensions that more specific identification with a particular group might serve to invoke.

“Amazing Grace” serves as an accessible and familiar entrance point which many individuals can relate to, and which could potentially serve as a gateway to a range of other involvements and experiences if they decide the performance is compelling enough to pursue a little further. Convincing them to do so is thus a matter of presenting an attractive, vibrant, and inclusive vision of faith, a possibility which the pandemic opens up through the way it has established the editing together of videos from participants around the world as a common format, and one that carries with it the message that we can overcome isolation and celebrate our shared humanity on a much wider scale. This is a point where eschatology and pandemic conventions begin to overlap. As Monique Ingalls (2011) has argued, the bringing together of participants from different places to celebrate through music and worship often carries with it an eschatological vision of the praise of heaven, as well as particular images of how different languages and national identities might ultimately come to relate to each-other. In popularising a new format in which this can occur, the pandemic in turn opens up a new possibility for Christian visions to hook into popular forms of media.

In a chapter on Evangelical use of online video for the purposes of digital storytelling, Tim Hutchings highlights the way that

testimony has flourished in the Evangelical tradition. The practice of telling personal stories is perfectly suited to the core values and concerns of Evangelical theology—the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of salvation through Christ, personal conversion, and the necessity of proselytism and serves as a focus for communal activity, private devotion, and public communication. A spiritual autobiography can validate the subject’s Christian identity by demonstrating the authenticity of their conversion, and demonstrates the truth of salvation by showing the positive consequences flowing from conversion in the subject’s life (Hutchings 2012, 74).

Whilst this use of testimony can sometimes be understood in relatively rational terms, highlighting the content of the testimony or the logic of particular events behind it, these are not always the most important elements. As Suzanne van Geuns has highlighted, the emotional dynamic of testimony is often crucial to the way that it works. According to van Geuns, “Evangelical testimonies emerge as operating in a particular Evangelical ‘emotion/trigger circuit,’ in which some sensations and feelings, following Luhmann, are actively understood as triggered by an external force, i.e. God” (2019, 100). Following on from this, “testimonies move readers into a frame where having a personal relationship with God becomes desirable, without formally educating the readers about the specificities of that frame” (2019, 100); “testimonies are designed to offer a key tenet of Evangelical faith—that the relationship with God is real and fulfilling—in the shape of a story that will make readers feel this” (2019, 103).

Setting aside many of the narrative elements of testimony that are present in Oliveri’s other videos, the video of “Amazing Grace” focusses largely on this emotional component, pointing towards the work of God within the lives of a vibrant global network of individuals, demonstrating what it might look like to call on God, and singing a narrative of salvation in a way that depicts the action as a highly desirable. Talking to the church congregation within which his media project initially emerged (Glory City Church, 2021), Oliveri emphasises the response that the video has received as churches have asked to use it in services, and as people have played it in jails and at funerals. In this latter case he emphasises the way in which the video depicts a foretaste of what it will be like in heaven with different tribes and tongues joining together in worship. Through the video, Oliveri has clearly succeeded in reaching out to and emotionally moving certain audiences, and this, along with the high number of YouTube views, show that something of the formula that he has to offer carries a degree of resonance that at least some parts of the population find in some way moving.

## Hope, prayer, and the transmission of transcendence

In contrast to the video from the Normal Christian Life, Bocelli’s “Amazing Grace” performance is not entirely self-contained but exists online both as the final part of a longer concert performance and as an excerpt taken from that performance.

The majority of the concert which Bocelli gave in the early months of 2020 was filmed inside a cathedral in which we see just two lonely figures, Bocelli himself and the organist accompanying him. The concert has a generally meditative tone, with shots of the figures and the inside of the

cathedral interspersed with aerial footage of different cities. We are taken through a set of well-known classical repertoire, including settings of *Panis Angelicus* and *Ave Maria*. Towards the end of the concert, the camera takes us on a journey from the front of the cathedral down to its door, and here we switch to pre-filmed material showing Bocelli alone in front of the cathedral with a single microphone. Bocelli walks out into the public realm in silence – the first silent period in the film. Having reached the microphone, he begins singing for the first time completely unaccompanied, and also for the first in English, singing repertoire that is far from Catholic in origin. The camera zooms away but always keeps Bocelli in the centre and, as the song goes on, a gentle orchestral accompaniment appears and the camera cuts to shots of Paris. In verse three, with its pandemic-relevant emphasis on death and peace at the end of life, we cut to shots of London, and some disembodied choir oohs appear, showing that Bocelli is no longer completely alone, despite the visual appearances. He embellishes the melody, and the key changes a couple of times. Verse four, which repeats the opening lyrics, has a full texture with soaring orchestral and choral accompaniment and with moments of reharmonisation. As Bocelli extends and repeats the final line, the texture builds but then cuts down again, and we are presented with the slight glimpse of a smile on his face. One review of the concert talks about the “melancholic individualism exemplified in Andrea Bocelli’s staged spectacles” (Hudson and Zimmermann 2021). However, this final song seems to push us a little beyond this to a different realm of more optimistic and more highly networked experience. Whilst Oliveri’s video pushed us out of individual isolation to imagine a global network of believers coming together in a heavenly chorus, Bocelli’s accompaniment feels more ephemeral, perhaps even heavenly in nature. He is indeed supported, but by unseen forces, lacking in the specificity which would allow us to connect them with particular life-stories or human realities.

Why is “Amazing Grace” set apart from the other performances in the concert, performed in a different location, with different backing, in a different language, with different visuals, and arising from a very different faith tradition? In one sense, this final song is Bocelli’s move from singing within his own tradition inside the Catholic space of the cathedral to address a larger global audience united by the circulation of Anglo-American cultural products and the associated circulation of the English language. We can read this as acknowledgment of the global dynamics of culture and religion, the need to address them, and the potential power that can be had in using a song such as this to speak to a shared intimacy and commonality in a moment of global turmoil – particularly since his performance is now moving from a space which, for many around the world, was off-limits or subject to restrictions over the course of different lockdowns, to a space where there were often fewer restrictions or fewer dangers of viral transmission that indoor spaces presented. The change of genre also changes the nature of Bocelli’s performance. Here he is no longer singing art music compositions as a professional performer. Instead, the vernacular nature of “Amazing Grace” serves in some sense to personalize his performance and bestow it with a more direct sense of meaning and personal significance than had been the case up to this point. There is potential theological meaning here, and Elsabé Kloppers suggests that the move to perform in front of the cathedral

symbolis[ed] the Christian message of hope, carried from the public sphere of the church to the more visible public sphere – thus signifying that it is meant for all people, whether they accept the message as hope connected to the Christian faith with the content of the Christian faith, or as a diaconal gesture: hope offered to them by someone who adheres to



the Christian faith. [...] Through the autonomous effect of beauty, in the space for resonance, a sense of the infinite was opened up and a space for meeting God and others was created, confirming that texts, music and other forms of art could resonate with people and mirror something of the beauty (of God) and the truth (of God) amidst the horrors of the present situation (2020, 5).

“Amazing Grace” thus becomes a means of taking the potentially transcendent beauty present within the performance as a whole and extending it and opening it up for a larger audience.

Unlike Oliveri’s video, there is no call for action. Whilst the video from the Normal Christian Life presented us with a gospel message at the end, this video instead presents us with some brief credits acknowledging the role of the city, the cathedral, different music promoters and the contribution of YouTube itself as a platform. There is an acceptance and acknowledgment that the performance sits at the intersection of a range of different faith-based, civic, and secular actors and that it is acceptable for it to do so. Faith carries meaning in the public realm, musical performance of faith carries economic weight in the industry realm, and a performance such as this also has value as entertainment. We are triangulating between different realms in a manner that is built upon this kind of peaceful coexistence of different priorities and agendas and an institutional logic of faith that is very happy for the world to be structured in this manner. Secular and civic actors are very happy for believers to believe and to showcase this belief, whilst faith-based actors are very happy for there to be a broader secular and civic logic to society in which their beliefs co-exist alongside a range of other convictions and priorities.

If Oliveri’s video can be understood through the lens of testimony, then Bocelli’s requires a different kind of interpretation. In their analysis of religious livestreaming, Oren Golan and Michele Martini suggest that “the Catholic position perceives social media as conducive to the transmission of key religious values and authentic expressions of devout behavior. Accordingly, the Catholic leadership encourages the pious use of social media for daily expression of Christian gospel by believers and for establishing a religion at the forefront of the public domain” (2019, 440). Alongside this emphasis on visible religion within the public domain, they also draw attention to the broader significance of livestreaming which takes place from holy sites in a range of different religious traditions. They draw attention to the way in which livestreams are able to maintain the constant presence of the transcendental, promote a sense of affinity, or reach out in evangelism. They highlight the religious aura that surrounds both religious objects and holy locations and the role of livestreaming in mediating this aura of holiness.

In offering the concert as a prayer, Bocelli takes on something of a priestly role, offering something sacred in a holy setting on behalf of those watching with him. These people can, perhaps, join their own prayers with his, but he is the one who enters into the sacred space. In emerging out of the church in the lead up to “Amazing Grace,” Bocelli is, to a certain extent, moving out of this field of priestly action in order to enter a space that is held more in common. This is a move which brings the religious into a wider civic environment, undergoing a degree of change and transformation in the process, but nevertheless drawing the two together in a way that foregrounds the role of the church as part of society, and a part that has something important to offer in that wider space. Bocelli frames the concert in humble terms, but in taking on this role he cannot entirely maintain his own insignificance. As Hudson and Zimmermann point out: “The

performance instantiated individual longing, loss, disconnection, emptiness in large spaces, and supplication to a higher power” (2021). There is clearly an important mediatory role that is being enacted here, and one that takes the struggles of different individuals relatively seriously. However, “drone videos over Beijing, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Florence, London, New York, Paris, São Paulo, Venice, Warsaw, and other cities under lockdown were intercut, suggesting the grandeur of one person speaking for the entire globe” (2021). Bocelli’s performance is, in many ways, the opposite of the networked religion showcased by Oliveri, one in which the sacred is embodied in special sites and people over and above its presence in a distributed manner which is immediately accessible to everyone.

## Networks and virtuality

The virtual nature of the performances does important work in constructing what they are able to do. In the case of Bocelli, it allows the performer to appear alone and isolated in a way that he would not be able to in a live performance, whilst the use of YouTube as a platform provides an immediacy and intimacy which would not be typical of a television broadcast in another medium. In Oliveri’s case, it is the collapsing of distance and the revelation of a global network which this highly networked and distributed form of communication draws to the forefront. Both performances foreground the stark aloneness and isolation which many sometimes felt throughout the course of the pandemic before slowly softening the fear of this initial affect through the company of others. In both cases this accompaniment is, in some sense, virtual, but the way in which this virtuality is visualised and made present leads to very different effects, either drawing attention to the locations being mediated or obscuring them through the space opened up between audio and visual elements.<sup>2</sup>

Both videos offer a very different imagination of space. Bocelli’s video, as it is closely associated with the resonant space of the cathedral and the empty space outside of it, foregrounds very strongly a certain sense of physical emplacement. Through Bocelli’s isolated presence in this space, viewers get to experience a feeling of being present in architecture which many of them have lost access to through pandemic restrictions. Indeed, if we think of the potential for locations to become connected through digital transmission, then we also have the potential for some of listeners’ sometimes claustrophobic spaces at home in some sense to be transformed acoustically and visually into resonant cathedrals through the connection that is offered through the virtual medium. Oliveri’s video, on the other hand, exists first and foremost as an act of virtual networking between a whole range of (public, outdoor, domestic, and international) locations. Space here is the matter of participating as a node in the same network that all the other contributors to the video are also participating in through their contribution. Whilst Bocelli’s video is almost priestly in nature, Oliveri’s allows a much closer identification with the situations and locations of viewers as individual people amongst many others.

There are potential gaps here which open up between the imagination of the media and the reality on the ground. Emily Lawrence has observed that “online churches use the social media platform almost as a disguise, to give off the illusion of an interactive community. However, in maintaining a controlling authority through heavy moderation of these social media, the communities are quite the opposite” (2015). In the case of Oliveri’s video we are offered the impression of a set of networked locations, and a global body of believers embedded within but

transcending their national territories, but much of this impression is the result of his own hand in collecting and editing together these videos. Some of these different individuals may well have a greater sense of this global connection or ability to interact with each other in more than a spiritual sense than others. Our imagination is stirred to imagine global faith in a certain way, but realities such as disconnection, power-imbalances, and divisions that often characterise international relationships are concealed behind the spiritual relatedness which the video sets out to portray. Indeed, it is important to emphasise the editing and production process which a video such as this often conceals behind a polished finished product. The Normal Christian Life website credits a number of different individuals involved in different aspects of the production process. Whilst I have been unable to track down any references to the specific process behind the video, it seems to have involved a call for submissions, which were likely coordinated by means of some kind of musical score and backing/click track which would have ensured a certain level of uniformity whilst also allowing different groups to build on this in a variety of different directions, some of which made it into the final cut, and some of which did not (The Normal Christian Life 2020b).

Hudson and Zimmermann (2021) point to similar concealments that have the potential to appear in pandemic media more generally, suggesting that the proliferation of drone shots that appear in pandemic media serve to marshal a romantic sense of global connectivity whilst concealing the crises being experienced in hospitals as a result of inadequate equipment and overwhelming numbers of severely ill and dying patients. However, whilst Hudson and Zimmermann point to the potential of “small and low” individual produced media as a potential antidote to the illusion which “big and high” videos have to offer, a project such as Oliveri’s does not necessarily get a great deal closer to a comprehensive picture of lived experience on the ground. Rather, it points to one aspect of experience, offering it as an aspirational mode of being. This aspiration is grounded in momentary lived experiences of individuals and the testimonies which they are able to share and offer, but at the same time potentially conceals many of the deeper complexities that make up experiences of faith in a time of crisis.

## The affordances of a hymn

Whilst all hymns afford a range of different meanings and usages, “Amazing Grace” has come to offer us a wider range than most. Its narrative can be taken up in different contexts and with different emphases, and the broader cultural usages which the hymn has taken on serve to broaden those possibilities for meaning-making still further, hooking into wider webs of meaning and significance that extend into political, racial, personal, communal, emotional, and historical realms, among others. Its ever-growing history of commercialisation, political deployment, personal usage, communal performance, and global circulation means that “Amazing Grace” often sits at a nexus of different interests, powers, and possibilities. Public usage of the hymn then becomes a matter not simply of performing its narrative, but of negotiating, shaping, and harnessing the wider swirl of interests which it has come to embody, connect with, and symbolise. As different individuals or communities seek to respond to the situations around them, they are drawn to the possibilities which this hymn has come to offer, and to the possibility that these might be brought into alignment with the different projects they are carrying out – harnessing established resonances between the content of the hymn and wider identities and narratives, re-using and reworking them for particular situations and moments, and using the

hymn's performance to bring their particular sets of values and narratives to more public prominence and feeling. "Amazing Grace" is able to carry this power not simply because of its familiarity and prominence, but because of the way in which its different narrative possibilities are open enough and powerful enough to resonate with a range of different hopes, fears, regrets, and stories.

Both of the performances examined in this chapter act on a highly affective level, mobilising feelings of relationship, of togetherness, of place, and of change and, in doing so, they gather very different assemblages of people and spaces around the hymn, layering further interpretation through the agendas and beliefs of those behind the performances. Whilst regular usage within situations such as Sunday worship may serve to numb us to the way in which the spaces, networks, individuals, and agendas they are surrounded with shape the meaning and significance of hymn performances, the novelty and artificiality of pandemic media can help to bring some of these elements into the foreground. As we encounter projects that offer something different, many of the standard elements of our experience are brought into question, and a space is opened up to reflect on both the strange and the familiar in new ways. At the same time, a period of crisis deepens our consciousness of particular aspects of human experience and aspects of the world around us, deepening our awareness of certain needs and relativizing our experience of other priorities.

Projects driven forwards by particular individuals can make us highly sensitive to the agendas behind them, as it can sometimes feel easier to understand the motivations of one person than of a more nebulous collective or institution. Whilst each of these projects has something to offer its listeners in the form of comfort, feelings of connection and transcendence, hope, divine connection, or even salvation, both videos in some way are also hoping for something in return. Oliveri's video is part of a broader project to build a media ministry, to share Christian experience, to convert individuals to a charismatic faith, and perhaps even to allow that faith to have an influence on politics and nations, whilst Bocelli quickly made use of the civic capital he has built up through this kind of project to articulate his views on the pandemic and to look for a place of influence within the wider civic sphere. As with potential reactions to the videos, such hopes are by no means unilateral or transactional in nature. Bocelli's video, for example, may well have served to enhance conformity with pandemic regulations through the comfort it has to offer but it may also have served to work against them through its close connection to his later utterances. Both projects hope to build up credibility and influence, but it would be overly cynical to reduce them simply to the strategic outworking of particular agendas. Rather, through their embodiment of particular worldviews, convictions, and hopes for the world, both videos become part of broader economies of interaction and exchange. As they envision what human individuals need, how they relate to one-another, and what they might ultimately hope for in their current situation, these different performances seek to bring about something of the world that they aspire to both through their performances and also beyond them, as performance serves as one act and experience within different projects of world-making and transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> A frequency analysis of different word combinations across the whole set of comments demonstrates both similarities and differences. For Bocelli’s “Amazing Grace” video, the top words are “andrea,” “god,” and “grace,” the top bigrams are “thank you,” “the world,” and “andrea bocelli,” and the top trigrams are “but now I,” “now I see,” and “blind but now.” For the Normal Christian Life video, the top words are “god,” “jesus,” and “lord,” the top bigrams are “the world,” “god bless,” and “thank you,” and the top trigrams are “god bless you,” “brothers and sisters,” and “bless you all.”

<sup>2</sup> The potential for music to offer a sense of virtual togetherness in a plague or pandemic situation is one that goes back well beyond the 2020 pandemic. Remi Chiu describes a similar situation during the sixteenth-century plague in Milan: “The litany, which so effectively encouraged participation and stitched together the processional body, became even more useful in suturing together members of segregated households; its musical simplicity and short-range call-and-response structure were essential when isolated neighbours could not even see each other. With their voices comingling, the penitents breached the walls between each other’s houses, and between their homes and the streets, eroding the conceptual boundaries between public and private worship. [...] here, music is indispensable in coordinating the corporate, interactive ritual, allowing penitents to project themselves back onto the streets and re-join each other virtually in their beleaguered city” (2018, 40).