



Amazing Grace

Peter S. Williams

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Talking about ... history

Author: Peter Williams

Keywords: History, slavery, freedom, conscience, faith, politics, social concern

Film title: Amazing Grace

Tagline(s): Every song has its story. Every generation has its hero.

Director: Michael Apted

Screenplay: Steven Knight

Starring: Ioan Gruffudd, Albert Finney, Michael Gambon, Ciaran Hinds, Rufus Sewell, Romola Garai, Benedict Cumberbatch

Cinema Release Date: 23 February 2007 (USA); 23 March 2007 (UK)

Certificate: PG (USA); PG (UK)

Film title: Blood Diamond

Director: Edward Zwick

Screenplay: Charles Leavitt

Starring: Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Connelly, Djimon Hounsou

Distributor: Warner Bros. Pictures

Cinema Release Date: 8 December 2006 (USA); 26 January 2007 (UK)

Certificate: R (USA); 15 (UK)

[Image]

Prominent atheists from Richard Dawkins to Sam Harris have been making waves by attacking religion as a force for evil. For example, best-selling fantasy author Philip Pullman (whose novel *The Ruby in the Smoke* was recently adapted by the BBC) thinks that Christianity is a bad idea because it has had bad results. In the book *Devout Sceptics*, he writes, 'A large proportion of what the Christian Church has done has been intolerant, cruel, fanatical. Wherever you look you see intolerance, cruelty, fanaticism, narrow-mindedness. It's an ugly, ugly spectacle.'

Pullman echoes philosopher Bertrand Russell, who said religion was 'a source of untold misery to the human race'. Russell notoriously stated that religion had provided humanity with only two benefits: Egyptian priests chronicling eclipses and the Church fixing the calendar.

People find it easy to focus on the negative things done by Christians (bad news makes for better headlines), but there are good-news stories out there. Didn't Russell know that mass-education, hospitals, orphanages and experimental science were all the product of Christians putting their faith into action?

Social benefits

In the book *Is Religion Dangerous?*, Oxford philosopher Keith Ward highlights the sort of social benefits of Christianity ignored by Pullman and Russell: 'A Gallup survey in 1984 in America reported that 46 per cent of committed believers engaged in volunteer work, whereas 22 per cent of those with no religious affiliation did so. The general effect of religious belief is to increase both participation in charitable work and giving to charitable organisations.'

Then again, a recent Communicate Research poll of British adults found that 53 per cent agree that religion is 'a force for good in society', compared with 39 per cent who disagree, and that six out of ten people agree that Christianity has an important role to play in public life.

Religion should no more be tarred with the brush of its worst examples than should politics, science or philosophy. The highly influential ancient Greek

philosopher Aristotle held that some people are naturally slaves while others are naturally masters. Such a view is in sharp contrast to the biblical picture of all humanity alike being created 'in the image of God' (Genesis 1:27). However, who would attack philosophy as a subject on the basis that some philosophers promote ideas that harm people?

The antidote to bad philosophy is good philosophy, not the eradication of philosophy. As William Wilberforce (1759-1833) said, 'Just as we would not discard liberty because people abuse it, nor patriotism, nor courage, nor reason, speech and memory - though all abused - no more should we eliminate true religion because self-seekers have perverted it.'

Motivated by faith

Wilberforce is a prime example of a man motivated by his faith in Christ to change the world for the better. While the slave trade was abolished by an act of Parliament in 1807, the actual Slavery Abolition Act wasn't passed until 1833, three days before Wilberforce's death. Unfortunately, just because slavery has been abolished in law, that doesn't mean slavery has been abolished in practice. More than 1.2 million children are currently caught up in human trafficking.

Wilberforce and his campaign against slavery are the subject of the new film *Amazing Grace*, produced by Walden Media, the folk behind the 2005 adaptation of C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Several contemporary films also examine the issue, including the Oscar-nominated *Blood Diamond*. Of course, as C.S. Lewis said, it is important to let people know that we are not Christians merely because we think Christianity is good for us, but because we believe that it is true.

Jesus stated that 'the truth shall set you free' (John 8:32, NIV) and announced from Isaiah that he had come 'to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (Luke 4:18-19, NIV). This year's anniversary of the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade provides us with a good opportunity to reflect again on the truth behind Wilberforce's campaign to set the slaves free: Jesus.

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