

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Mysticism, Politics Are Central to Great American Hymns

By: Reverend Charles Brock
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TEN DEFINITIONS OF MYSTICISM using Moses as a prime example of the first six definitions:

- First are the major theophanies of God, for example with Moses at the burning bush at Mount Sinai when Moses learned the name of God.
- Secondly, Moses begs to see God's glory, God agrees and says I shall "make all my goodness pass before you, and I shall pronounce in your hearing my name YHWH."
- A third, God spoke to Moses much of the time.
- Fourth is a cooperation of wills. "God and I are (at) one."
- A fifth way is called "Identification Mysticism" pointing out that one equates, associates, relates, links with a subject, a special history, a person, even an object.
- There is a sixth sense is the experience of dereliction and distance from God.
- A seventh level is the overpowering relation to objects or expressions of God, for example the Shechinah (light and/or name of God), the throne of God, and Ezekiel's chariot of fire.
- There is an eighth point. It is from the Jewish Polish mystic Martin Buber – I, You, and It. They are the elemental variables whose combination and re-combination structure all experience as relational. Human inter-subjectivity affirms the polymorphous I-Thou encounter.
- The ninth way is Eastern "monism," which means, roughly, all in all. You are God. God is you, and that table, and that universe, and everything plus.
- You are the tenth way!

Our greatest political/freedom hymn, the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, is based on the Union marching song, *John Brown's Body*:

*John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave,
His soul's marching on.*

*He's gone to be a soldier in the army of the Lord,
His soul's marching on.*

One can relate this to the Crawford County Underground Railroad, Girard Unitarian-Universalist Church, and slavery generally today. Brown was the “Boss-Conductor” in Crawford County as was Rev. Charles Shipman of Girard.

These lines seemed to give general satisfaction, the idea that Brown’s soul was “marching on,” receiving recognition at once as having a germ of inspiration in it. They were sung over and over again with a great deal of gusto, the “Glory hallelujah” chorus being always added.

Some researchers have maintained that the tune’s roots go back to a “Negro folk song,” an African American wedding song from Georgia, or to a British [sea shanty](#) that originated as a Swedish drinking song. Anecdotes indicate that versions of “Say, Brothers” were sung as part of African American [ring shouts](#). The appearance of the hymn in this call-and-response setting with singing, clapping, stomping, dancing, and extended ecstatic choruses may have given impetus to the development of the well-known “Glory hallelujah” chorus.

Given that the tune was developed in an oral tradition, it is impossible to say for certain which of these influences may have played a specific role in the creation of this tune, but it is certain that numerous folk influences from different cultures such as these were prominent in the musical culture of the camp meeting, and that such influences were freely combined in the music-making that took place in the revival movement. (*Stauffer & Soskis, p.19. Accessed via Google Books, Wikipedia*)

Amazingly, the lyrics by Harriet Beecher Stowe became the Union’s *and* the Confederacy’s marching song.

Two British Prime Ministers, Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan, both had American mothers, and both had the hymn sung at their funerals.

The “glory” of the Lord is an important Hebrew and Christian mystical area, but there are many other mystical moments including points four and five in the summary of mysticism at the top of this article.

The political implications are obvious. But they should be applied to today, especially to the Black Lives Matter movement and other places of political and religious persecution in the world. The list is endless.

The following hymns can be found on YouTube:

[Battle Hymn of the Republic](#)

Lyrics by Harriet Beecher Stowe

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the [coming of the Lord](#);
He is trampling out the vintage where [the grapes of wrath](#) are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.

(Chorus) *after each verse*

Glory, glory, hallelujah

Glory, glory, hallelujah

Glory, glory, hallelujah

His truth is marching on

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling [camps](#),
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps:
His day is marching on.

I have read a fiery [gospel](#) writ in burnished rows of steel:
"As ye deal with my [contemners](#), so with you my grace shall deal";
[Let the Hero, born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel](#),
Since God is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;
He is sifting out the hearts of men before [His judgment-seat](#);
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!
Our God is marching on.

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that [transfigures](#) you and me.

As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

He is coming like the glory of the morning on the wave,
He is Wisdom to the mighty, He is Succour to the brave,
So the world shall be His footstool, and the soul of Time His slave,
Our God is marching on.

In The Garden

I come to the garden alone,
While the dew is still on the roses;
And the voice I hear, falling on my ear,
The Son of God discloses.

(Chorus) after each verse
And He walks with me, and He talks with me,
And He tells me I am His own,
And the joy we share as we tarry there,
None other has ever known.

He speaks, and the sound of His voice
Is so sweet the birds hush their singing;
And the melody that He gave to me
Within my heart is ringing.

I'd stay in the garden with Him
Tho' the night around me be falling;
But He bids me go; thro' the voice of woe,
His voice to me is calling.

There is a mystical closeness that a version such as the one above, by Elvis Presley, which is smooth and comforting. There are no political connections, which can be part of the problem with evangelical mysticism.

I wish I knew how

I wish I knew how
It would feel to be free
I wish I could break
All the chains holding me
I wish I could say

All the things that I should say
Say 'em loud, say 'em clear
For the whole round world to hear

I wish I could share
All the love that's in my heart
Remove all the bars
That keep us apart
I wish you could know
What it means to be me
Then you'd see and agree
That every man should be free

I wish I could give
All I'm longin' to give
I wish I could live
Like I'm longin' to live
I wish I could do
All the things that I can do
And though I'm way overdue
I'd be starting anew

Well I wish I could be
Like a bird in the sky
How sweet it would be
If I found I could fly
Oh, I'd soar to the sun
And look down at the sea

Then I'd sing 'cause I know, yea
Then I'd sing 'cause I know, yea
Then I'd sing 'cause I know
I'd know how it feels
Oh, I know how it feels to be free
Yea yea! Oh, I know how it feels

Yes, I know, oh, I know
How it feels
How it feels
To be free, Lord, Lord, Lord

Source: [LyricFind](#): Adam Clayton / Dave Evans / Dick Dallas / Larry Mullen / Paul David Hewson / Billy Taylor

This is a great jazz piece with “freedom” words, and the tune is named after Nelson Mandela. It can and should be applied to other areas of the world, including the United States. It is in the Unitarian-Universalist hymnal.

Shall we gather at the river? *arranged by Aaron Copeland*
[Female soloist version.](#) [The small choir version.](#)

Shall we gather at the river
Where bright angel feet have trod
With its crystal tide forever
Flowing by the throne of God?

Yes, we'll gather at the river
The beautiful, the beautiful river
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God

Soon we'll reach the shining river
Soon our pilgrimage will cease
Soon our happy hearts will quiver
With the melody of peace

Yes, we'll gather at the river
The beautiful, the beautiful river
Gather with the saints at the river
That flows by the throne of God

Based on the *Book of Revelation*, this hymn has been used for contemporary revolts in the South, too. See my previous article on Frederick Engels and D.H. Lawrence, which discussed the *Book of Revelation*.

[I'm a poor wayfaring stranger](#)

I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger
Traveling through this world below
There is no sickness, no toil, nor danger
In that bright land to which I go

I'm going there to see my Father
And all my loved ones who've gone on
I'm just going over Jordan
I'm just going over home

I know dark clouds will gather 'round me
I know my way is hard and steep
But beautiful fields arise before me
Where God's redeemed, their vigils keep
I'm going there to see my Mother
She said she'd meet me when I come

So, I'm just going over Jordan
I'm just going over home
I'm just going over Jordan
I'm just going over home.

Source: [LyricFind](#)

Songwriters: *Traditional*

The Welcome Table

I'm gonna sit at the welcome table
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table one of these days, hallelujah
I'm gonna sit at the welcome table
Sit at the welcome table one of these days, one of these days

I'm gonna feast on milk and honey
Oh yes, I'm gonna feast on milk and honey one of these days, hallelujah
I'm gonna feast on milk and honey
Feast on milk and honey one of these days, one of these days

I'm gonna to tell God how you treat me
Yes, I'm gonna to tell God how you treat me one of these days, hallelujah
I'm gonna to tell God how you treat me
Tell God how you treat me one of these days, one of these days

All God's children gonna sit together
Yes, all God's children gonna sit together one of these days, hallelujah
All God's children gonna sit together
All God's children gonna sit together, one of these days, one of these days

The Welcome Table

The marriage feast of the Lamb is referred to in the [New Testament's Book of Revelation](#). This event takes place when those who put their trust in [Jesus Christ](#) are joined with him in heaven. African Americans bound in [slavery](#) were never welcome to their master's table and this song echoed their hope of the tables turning in future glory."

The song, "We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table," has a history lost in the mists of time. Some say the "welcome table" was originally a Jewish tradition, where all are welcome. And Judaism does have a strong heritage of hospitality to the stranger. Some say the "welcome table" refers to being in heaven, where all are welcome. It is pretty clear that the song took on meaning during the Civil Rights era, when protesters would sometimes sing, "I'm gonna sit at the Woolworth's counter."

The exclusion of African Americans from those lunch counters was one of the triggers and important symbols of the Civil Rights movement. I find it interesting and somewhat ironic that we placed the song in our Unitarian-Universalist hymnal in the "communion" section, which seems to refer to the Christian Eucharist. I do know many churches open their "communion tables" to everyone, as opposed to only "the baptized." And some have joked that Coffee Hour is our UU communion. To some degree, I suppose that is true. It is a way of breaking bread together. And the song expresses well our aspiration to not be racist, to welcome all kinds of people around our table.

I find it poignant that our version of the song includes the verse, "No fancy style around that table." I suppose that could refer to clothing, the way we dress, or fancy food or table settings. And there is nothing inherently wrong with "fancy style." It can be an expression of beauty, or personality. But we also know that such things as clothing and table settings are a way of distinguishing class. The call for "no fancy style," and "simplicity" of presentation of food and clothing is a way of eschewing class and race and ability distinctions, a way of saying "We're all welcome here because we are all human." It also calls to mind the fact that religious pilgrims are often dressed in very simple clothing and eat very simple food, as a way of emphasizing that we are all the same before God, or if you prefer, emphasizing our common humanity.

Multiculturalism is very hard work, partly because reality is largely socially constructed. We encounter each other's socially constructed reality when we interact, and we don't know what the unconscious assumptions are – that's one reason intercultural marriages are so difficult. And yet, I deeply believe that seven multiculturalism is worth it. It's worth it because diversity is enriching. It broadens our world views, helps us to see that things can be done in more than one way.

The Radical Welcome Table

If the welcome table is truly a place of reckoning, those who seek true reconciliation must listen to those who yell and scream against racial and economic injustice, as reckoning is never comfortable. A radical welcome table that honors the victims of Mother Emanuel (Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church mass shooting) is steeped in the Black prophetic tradition, in which divine liberation and transformative change are the ultimate goals. Such changes cannot occur simply through symbolic gestures like the removal of the Confederate flag.

To be clear, I understand and experience the pain that my fellow South Carolinians feel – those who have been forced to look at the flag for their entire lives and have fought tirelessly to have it removed. After the horrific tragedy at Mother Emanuel on June 17, 2015, the monument to John C. Calhoun was found with the words “Black Lives Matter” spray-painted on it. Many decried this as an act of vandalization, but this act represents the transformative change that many want to occur.

Removal of the flag is not enough without attention to present day issues affecting Black people like high unemployment, mass incarceration, and racial oppression. As a state senator and pastor, Rev. Clem Pinckney was known for championing the causes of the poor. At the time of his tragic death at Mother Emanuel, he was working in the state Legislature to place stricter background checks on guns. He did all of this while simultaneously fighting to have symbols like the Confederate flag removed.

The ‘Radical’ Welcome Table - Faith, Social Justice, and the Spiritual Geography of Mother Emanuel in Charleston, South Carolina [Priscilla McCutcheon \(bio\)](#)

[Amazing Grace](#)

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.

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

The Lord hath promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;

He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

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

This very popular hymn was written by John Newton. Newton went to sea at a young age and worked on slave ships in the slave trade for several years. In 1745, he himself became a slave of Princess Peye, a woman of the Sherbro people, but later returned to sea and was the captain of slave ships. Some years after experiencing a conversion to Christianity, Newton later renounced his trade and became a prominent supporter of abolitionism. Now an evangelical, he was ordained as a Church of England clergyman and served as parish priest at Olney, Buckinghamshire, for two decades. He also wrote hymns, including "Amazing Grace" and "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken." Newton lived to see the British Empire's abolition of the African slave trade in 1807, just months before his death. (*Hatfield, Edwin F. (1884), "John Newton", The Poets of the Church: A Series of Biographical Sketches of Hymn-Writers, Anson D.F. Randolph & Company, retrieved 4 May 2017*).

It was sung by President Barack Obama at the funeral of State Senator Clem Pinckney in Charleston, South Carolina.

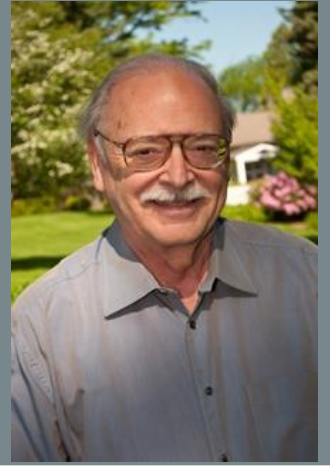
The Mother Emanuel shooting (also known as the Charleston church massacre) was the [mass shooting](#) in which nine [African Americans](#) were killed during a Bible study at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Among those killed was the senior pastor, Pinckney; three victims survived. This church is one of the oldest [black churches](#) in the United States, and it has long been a center for organizing events related to [civil rights](#).

[Alleluia \(Randall Thompson\)](#)

The use of "Alleluia" in all places certainly can be a mystical experience based on identification with the word and its meaning (mystical ways five and seven above). There are many musical examples.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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