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Wild(e) Religion

The Legacy of Oscar Wilde for Queer Theology

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It's a challenge for me to reflect on Wilde's "legacy" because his works, to paraphrase his remark about Pater's *Renaissance*, have had such a strange influence on my life. I mean that professionally as well as personally, since my undergraduate interest in Wilde studies presumed my own queer, or at least gay, engagement with Wilde's prose. My coming-out and integration as a gay man depended on my understanding of the hagiography of Saint Oscar, the mythologization of his story as a liberationist hero, if not Catholic martyr. As we seek to discern the "ownership" of Wilde's legacy, I wish to address that question in both cultural history and personal narrative. When I began graduate school at the dawn of queer theory, I didn't expect to write on Wilde's religious thought. Some of the texts I consider here are certainly unexpected in their "ownership" of the Wilde legacy. The question I want to pose concerns who *doesn't* own the legacy of Wilde, and why—which I don't think I'm fully prepared to answer. I discuss some surprising readings of the Wilde story and point to his texts explicitly for what they offer us. But the main point of my essay is to show the noticeable absence of attention to Wilde's religious thought by liberal theologians, particularly from gay or queer approaches.

When I first became interested in Oscar Wilde's views on Christianity, the vast majority of scholarship in the humanities dismissed his attitude as "aesthetic"—before the "performative" rage in literary theory made that term less pejorative. Wilde's engagement with Christian typology, theology, and liturgy was "play" in the trivial sense (again, not understanding "trivia" positively). The main exceptions to this generalization include mostly German, or Germanic, studies of his philosophical prose where it touched on Christian representation, and two articles in the *American Benedictine Review* by the Trappist monk John Albert, who considered both contemplative practice and homosexuality in *De Profundis*. In 1997 Ellis Hanson published *Decadence and Catholicism*; I published my monograph in 2002 and other work on

Wilde elsewhere; and Patrick O'Malley has written seriously about Wilde's religious thought, in both a chapter in my 2004 Palgrave guide and his 2006 book on Catholicism and sexual deviance. These studies all suggest the importance of taking both Wilde's homosexuality and religious thought seriously and, significantly, that they ought to be considered together.

The past decade and a half has clearly shown a shift in the secular humanities' approaches to religion; its study has respectfully (and prolifically) entered cultural criticism. This move has affected Wilde studies, although mainly outside the subject of sexuality. I'm thinking of Jarlath Killeen's book on *The Faiths of Oscar Wilde* and his monograph on the fairy tales, both of which seek to recover Wilde's Irishness rather than his homosexual Catholicism; Katherine Brown Downey's book on *Perverse Midrash*, which considers Wilde and Gide in biblical rereading; and indeed Jennifer Stevens's discussion of Wilde in her study of *The Historical Jesus and the Literary Imagination*. Stephen Arata also writes eloquently on "Oscar Wilde and Jesus Christ."

Although these critics have further elaborated on Wilde's Christian representations, there has been scant attention paid by gay or queer theologians to Wilde's thought, despite what a number of us who are literary historians have demonstrated. Instead, it has been the religious right—in particular, conservative Catholics—who have rediscovered Oscar Wilde. Beginning with Joseph Pearce's 2000 *The Unmasking of Oscar Wilde* (later released by Ignatius Press, Pope Benedict XVI's English-language publisher), we see a bizarre diaspora of Wilde's legacy in which he is firmly inserted into a narrative tradition of Augustinian converts. Pearce, formerly aligned with the National Front prior to his own conversion, has written books on C. S. Lewis and other "literary converts." His biography of Wilde concerns a spiritual journey driven by sin, fall, and grace. This narrative reflects a desire to rehabilitate Wilde as a traditional Catholic writer, yet it struggles with what to do with his homosexuality. In November 2000, the centenary of Wilde's death, the Vatican-backed Jesuit quarterly *La Civiltà Cattolica* published an article by Father Antonio Spadaro inaugurating the Church trend (Heer 2001, 21). In 2009 *L'Osservatore Romano* (the Vatican's official newspaper) praised Wilde in a review of a book by Paolo Gulisano that casts him as an aesthetic moralist and intellectual (Taylor 2009).

Between these two formal gestures, conservative Catholic laymen followed the Church's example in the journal *Crisis* and on the website www.catholiceducation.org. Libertarian Jeffrey Tucker writes that, "Wilde's work can be fully appreciated as springing from the Catholic intellectual and moral tradition, completely apart from his personal vices" (2001). In response, Pat Buchanan wrote that Catholics should be more forgiving of Wilde (Heer 2001, 21). Andrew McCracken maintains that the celebration of "promiscuous" Wilde as a gay martyr "oversimplifies his complexity; indeed, it ignores the major movement of his life, a life that may also be seen as a long and difficult conversion to the Roman Catholic Church" (2003). The popular press is completely confused about what to do with clerical and lay gestures recovering Wilde. Some Catholics have criticized the Church for this embrace; others

protest that we must love the thought and teachings but hate the sin (no one can resist the temptation to love this sinner). Secular journalists are unsure what the trend means. It seems no accident that this conversation unfolded during the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the Roman Catholic Church was waging war on both the priest sex-abuse scandals and the widespread greater acceptance of homosexuality in civil legislation. As the homosexual was scapegoated by the Church and the figure of the priest increasingly came to resemble the fin-de-siècle vampire, a symbol of cultural anxiety like the contemporary terrorist, addressing Catholic homosexual martyrdom became strangely imperative.

One finds the most bizarre treatment of Wilde outside the Roman Church, in a book written by an evangelical Christian apologist. In 2002, Ravi Zacharias published *Sense and Sensuality: Jesus Talks with Oscar Wilde on the Pursuit of Pleasure*. This fictional dialogue is part of Zacharias's "Great Conversations" series in his ministry to intellectuals, including "Jesus Talks with" books about Buddha, Krishna, and (my personal favorite) Hitler. The back cover asks: "Why *versus* Why Not? Why did God place us in a world full of pleasures if we aren't meant to pursue them all? . . . Oscar Wilde asks Jesus Christ to respond to this question about *critical lifestyle choices*" (emphasis mine). Zacharias calls Wilde an object of "profound pity"; he "struggled with habits and propensities that ultimately crushed him beneath their weight"; "he threw his life away" (2002, 5). His "was a dark and scary personality because the admixture of truth and error mangled his mind" (2002, 6). Zacharias's introduction is apocalyptic as he reminisces about visiting Wilde's grave at Pere Lachaise two days after September 11, 2001. The dire sense of an ending, where moralism and decadence meet, is palpable in Zacharias's neo-Victorian polemic against sensuality. True to Wilde's cultural indictment, there is no irony in his style. Like Wilde's philistines, Zacharias cannot understand Art.

The imagined conversation takes places on Wilde's deathbed, where his illness is specified as syphilis. While speaking with Robbie Ross, Wilde has a vision of Christ. This Jesus is a judge, not a compassionate lover. In their conversation, Wilde predicts that the time will come when laws will not govern sexuality, an end-of-days that Zacharias's Christ staunchly denounces and condemns. A new Dante in hell, Wilde is introduced to Pascal for correction. Zacharias's Christ teaches that no one, certainly not artists, will be exempt from God's morality or judgment. He calls Wilde to conversion, to renounce his sinful desires. Successfully bringing Wilde to contrition, the dialogue ends with a passage from *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. This Jesus criticizes Wilde for his ability to feel compassion for criminals when instead he should have been filled with compunction over his own homosexual sin. The work concludes with Wilde asking Robbie to call for a priest immediately.

In his epilogue, Zacharias laments "a life terribly misspent" (2002, 91). "A study of Wilde's life reveals with no mistake that the gift of sexuality is a precious gift from God; any perversion of it in any form plunders the sacred and denudes beauty" (2002, 92). So from here where do we go to read religion in Wilde's works? Is *Dorian Gray* a moral tale of crime and punishment or a sequel to Huysmans's *A*

Rebours, writing a mystical theology of the body? Are the fairy tales devout Christian parables or attempts to subvert a hegemonic hermeneutics? Is *Salome* midrash or pornography?

The answer to these questions would seem to be “all of the above,” which is less postmodern rejection of dichotomies and more Catholic sacramentalism, where flesh and spirit meet, something Wilde seems to have understood very well. In making this argument, which I’ve consistently maintained, I do not preach an epistemology of Wilde as an orthodox Catholic. Rather, I suggest that Wilde’s mystical insight recognized that disembodied questions always have profoundly corporeal answers. Without elaborating on this aesthetic overmuch, I use the remainder of this essay to sketch some queer theological themes in two major works of nonfiction prose: *The Soul of Man under Socialism* and *De Profundis*.

Wilde’s 1891 *Soul of Man* is more esoteric than it’s usually given credit for. Wilde focuses on the idea of perfection in “being,” the sacrament of the present that is the quintessential aesthetic moment, and in “becoming,” the contemplative process of perfection, being made into something. Echoing Pater, this is “experience.” The Christ-idea operates as the imperative to personal transformation. Wilde teaches Christ’s message as “Be thyself” (Wilde 2001, 135). The call to live as an individual is Christ-consciousness. Wilde cites Jesus’s rejections of the demands of family life (“Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” [2001, 137]). Wilde preaches that one “may commit a sin against society, and yet realize through that sin his true perfection” (2001, 136). He associates this individualism with art, and Christ with individualism. Wilde’s sole critique of Christ’s aesthetic is his renunciation: namely, the glorification of suffering and pain. The essay concludes with the statement that humanity seeks neither pain nor pleasure, but simply “Life. Man has sought to live intensely, fully, perfectly. When he can do so without exercising restraint on others, or suffering it ever, . . . he will be saner, healthier, more civilized, more himself. Pleasure is Nature’s test, her sign of approval. When man is happy, he is in harmony with himself and his environment. . . . The new Individualism is the new Hellenism” (Wilde 2001, 159–60).

It is easy to see the relationship between Wilde’s social theory (on individualism and socialism) and his understanding of art and the artist. Wilde situates the Wordsworthian Romantic visionary potential in the every-human, with a strategic Victorian Christian compulsion to understand it as a function of incarnational theology. One’s true nature is the soul. The contemplative practice toward perfection can be politicized as a kind of coming-out: a soul-realization more than a self-realization. If the homosexual readings of this argument are understood in terms of individual difference (written as it was in the era of sexology’s apologetics), its breadth moves beyond “gay” to “queer.” The unwillingness to limit, with the divine authorization that liberation cannot be understood in binary terms, proclaims a universalism that seeks to realize all potentials, not just particular ones. This is the value of Wilde’s work. We may choose to read it biographically to understand subtexts of certain

liberations, yet the radical nature of his thought makes the call for authenticity of experience (in becoming and being) applicable to all.

We see this point developed further in the prison letter *De Profundis*. While addressed to and critiquing Bosie Douglas, Wilde's voice is really an examination of conscience spoken to his own soul, as the circumstances of its production demonstrate. *De Profundis* is a work of contemplative literature. Here Art and Life are contrasted as soul and body, spirit and flesh. Wilde positions himself as right lover to Bosie, as God is to the soul, even as he critiques Bosie's failure to love well and his own inability to distinguish surface from substance. The text's *mea culpa* contemplation and Catholic acceptance of the brokenness of sin would make this work ideal material for orthodox religious readers were it not for Wilde's gesture of creating himself as a Christ-figure. Wilde does not lament his vanity as much as he regrets his poor judgment. Yet the text does suspect desire and does seek meaning, even as Wilde calls himself "one of those who are made for exceptions, not for laws . . . there is nothing wrong in what one does" (1986, 154). Wilde states that neither morality nor religion helps him. "The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at" (1986, 154). Still, he writes a moral theology as only an artist can. Now that Wilde has lived it, suffering as embodied in Christ is an aesthetic, one justified by love. The human Jesus who becomes the artist Christ remains the teacher of individualism. In *De Profundis* Wilde writes his own autobiographical homosexual hagiography, an *imitatio Christi* that is as much *apologia* as it is the invert's case study.

But like *Soul of Man*, the life of the individual does not exist in a vacuum. Like *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Wilde's Christian theology here has a social message:

With a width and wonder of imagination that fills one almost with awe, [Christ] took the entire world of the inarticulate, the voiceless world of pain, as his kingdom, and made of himself its eternal mouthpiece. Those . . . who are dumb under oppression and "whose silence is heard only of God," he chose as his brothers. He sought to become eyes to the blind, ears to the deaf, and a cry in the lips of those whose tongues had been tied. His desire was to be to the myriads who had found no utterance a very trumpet through which they might call to heaven. (Wilde 1986, 171)

If this sermon could be applied to criminals guilty of "gross indecency," it can also speak to every-human. Wilde states that Christ's "morality is all sympathy, just what morality should be" (1986, 176). Jesus "regarded sin and suffering as being in themselves beautiful holy things and modes of perfection" (1986, 178). One can deploy Wilde's deeply Catholic sense of transformation with or without judgment. Unlike the Christ of his fundamentalist readers, Wilde's God views humanity (in Julian of Norwich's sense) with compassion, not with blame.

Although there is much more that one could say about the theology of *De Profundis*, I end this essay with the same question with which I began: Given the radical nature of Wilde's religious thought, why have liberal theologians not paid more

attention to him? Why leave him to us literary theorists? Art incarnates through faithful manifestations of Wilde's aesthetic theory. May embodiments of his theology likewise transform according to their potential. The result would be a Wildean, and surely divine, sacrament: a true realization of perfection.

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