DEAR ALUMNI AND FRIENDS—

This winter issue of Criterion contains a medley of Divinity School activities. It opens with the John Nuveen lecture, delivered in Swift Lecture Hall in October 2001, in which Daniel Garber offers some Pascalian reflections on the relationship between religion and reason. This is followed by a fascinating glimpse into the complex lives of Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde, delivered by the Reverend Sam Portaro at a Wednesday lunch in Swift Common Room during the fall quarter. In the middle of the issue is a winter Bond Chapel sermon by Margaret M. Mitchell that takes the reader through an illuminating exploration of the Christian liturgical cycle of epiphanies. The issue concludes with a Dean's Forum, which we hope will become a regular feature of Criterion. Each quarter at a Wednesday lunch, the Dean convenes several colleagues from different areas of study to discuss a recent faculty work. Last spring, the Forum brought historian of religions Wendy Doniger and political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain into discussion over Professor Doniger’s book The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade (University of Chicago Press, 2000). We are delighted to print this entertaining discussion in Criterion and hope that our readers will gain from it a deeper sense of current faculty research.

I hope you enjoy this issue,

JENNIFER M. QUIJANO
Editor
CONTENTS &
LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

1

RELIGION AND SCIENCE,
FAITH AND REASON
Some Pascalian Reflections
Daniel Garber

2

NONE SO BLIND
The Wilde/Douglas Affair
Sam Portaro

10

SECRET EPIPHANIES
Margaret M. Mitchell

22

THE DEAN’S FORUM ON
THE BEDTRICK
TALES OF SEX AND MASQUERADE
Commentary by Jean Bethke Elshtain
Response by Wendy Doniger

26

ALUMNI NEWS

33
In this lecture I would like to discuss the relation between religion and science—more broadly, the relation between religion and reason. The topic is hardly new. Important discussions that explicitly focus on this question can be found in the writings of all of the Abrahamic monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But, in recent years, the discussions have become particularly intense. Perhaps it is the result of recent advances in science, or of a large cash prize offered by the Templeton Foundation for work in the area, I don’t know. But the literature has been expanding at a rapid rate.

There seem to be two main approaches in the literature. The bad, old approach is exemplified by two books from the nineteenth century: John William Draper’s History of the Conflict between Religion and Science (New York, 1874, with a twenty-first edition in 1890), and Andrew Dickson White’s A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom (New York, 1896). Both are classics in the literature: the first written by a scientist in the defense of free inquiry, and the second by a historian, the first president of Cornell University, as part of his brief for a secular university grounded in the sciences. There are some subtle differences in their approaches to the subject. Draper is concerned with religion in general, while White is concerned with theology. Draper’s criticisms are directed against religion as such, while White is more focused against the Roman Catholic Church. But both are united in seeing the two institutions of science and religion as, in some sense, being fundamentally opposed to one another. Their stories derive from one particular strand of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which sees evil, dogmatic, and antirational religion standing against progress, as represented by the new scientific worldview. The key examples of this view might be the condemnation of Galileo in early seventeenth-century Rome and the battle over evolutionism and creationism that started with Darwin and his opponents and continues to this day.

The more recent literature, by contrast, has a markedly different tone in which there is no real contradiction between science and religion. This view is nicely exemplified in the work of Ian Barbour and his followers (whom one might call the Barbourians). Barbour’s thought about religion and science is centered around a four-fold schema that is supposed to encompass all the views that have been taken on the subject. The four categories are conflict, independence, dialogue, and integration. The views of Draper and White, that religion and science are inherently conflictual, obviously fit into Barbour’s first category. The view that science and religion have their separate and equal domains, and that they coexist by not interacting with one another, is what Barbour means by independence. Dialogue is the category into which Barbour puts views that stress the similarities between science and religion, while maintaining that they are distinct enterprises: “Dialogue emphasizes similarities in presuppositions, methods, and concepts, whereas Independence emphasizes differences.” Finally, integrationists attempt to merge science and theology into a single picture, a natural theology or a theology of nature, or a genuine...
CRITERION 3

HIERONYMUS BOSCH

The Conjurer
© The Bridgeman Art Library
Barbour is the messenger, bringing us the good news that the world is whole again, that science and religion are not at war . . .

synthesis of religion and science. Barbour's sympathies are explicitly with dialogue and integration. He opposes those who see science and religion in inevitable conflict and considers independence as an opportunity lost: "compartmentalization avoids conflict, but at the price of preventing any constructive interaction." Barbour then goes on to show how religion and science can dialogue with one another and come together in the domains of astronomy and creation, quantum physics, evolution, and the biological and neurological view of the human being. Barbour is the messenger, bringing us the good news that the world is whole again, that science and religion are not at war, that we are all—scientists and theologians and laymen—part of one, big, happy world.

Let me express my skepticism here. I find the current discussion unsatisfying. In his most recent book, When Science Meets Religion, in fewer than two hundred pages, Ian Barbour shows us how to reconcile science and religion in all of the major areas of modern science where we might think that they conflict. He shows us how to put science and religion in dialogue with one another. The Barbourians see themselves as laying to rest the old view that the two are in conflict. But this seems too easy to me: there is something superficial about the consistency that Barbour imposes. I feel as if someone has played the shell game with me: Put the pea under one of the cups, shuffle them around, and pick one up. The pea is not there any more, but it cannot have disappeared.

I do not mean to defend the views of Draper and White. I think that their reading of history is problematic; they present many cases of the eternal warfare between science and religion that simply do not fit. But that does not mean that Draper and White were entirely wrong. They were expressing, I think, what they and their contemporaries felt—that modern, secular science is in conflict with traditional religion. Their books are a witness to this tension, which continues today in many quarters, although obviously not in Barbour's comfortable world. Now that Barbour and his theological allies have publicly embraced science, they might hope that the conflict that so troubled Draper and White has been resolved and the tensions dissipated. I think this is wishful thinking. My suspicion is that the conflict has been displaced to another level. Pick up the right cup and we will find the pea.

My task in the rest of this talk will be to find the source of the tension between secular atheism, associated with modern science, and the theological perspective. What is it that the believer and the modern scientific nonbeliever disagree about? Why is it that I, a modern, Enlightenment nonbeliever, find myself completely unmoved by the kind of compatibilist arguments that the Barbourians present? By pursuing these questions, I think we will find not just an account of science as it relates to religion, but a whole epistemology of religious belief.

PASCAL: THE HEART KNOWS

In thinking about this problem I find myself led back to one of my favorite authors, Blaise Pascal. Some of his remarks may serve as an interesting starting place for reflection on the topic at hand, although I do not follow him all the way. (I warn you that there is not enough space in this essay to give a careful account of Pascal's subtle and deep thought. What I will offer instead is a quick and somewhat simplified account of some aspects of his thought that will serve as a springboard for some other ideas I would like to present.)

Pascal's project in what has come down to us as the Pensées was to convince the libertine to abandon his ways and become a believing, practicing Christian. Unfortunately, Pascal died before the project was completed. We were left with a series of notes that he had made for that final work, some as short as a few words, some as long as a few pages. From these words, published under the inappropriate title Pensées (Thoughts), we must attempt to reconstruct Pascal's original project.

If one were to undertake the project of convincing someone to become a Christian, presumably the first thing that one would do would be to give that person reasons, arguments, or some rational motivation to adopt the position under
consideration. Yet, Pascal claims that reason and experience can never lead us to real belief. He is deeply pessimistic about the ability of reason, taken by itself, to lead us to any real understanding of the way the world is:

. . . How absurd is reason, the sport of every wind! . . . Anyone who chose to follow reason alone would have proved himself a fool. (44)

For Pascal, experience is not much help either. While there are dim indications of the deity in nature, they are not clear enough to give us definite reason to believe in his existence:

I look around in every direction and all I see is darkness. Nature has nothing to offer me that does not give rise to doubt and anxiety. If I saw no sign there of a Divinity I should decide on a negative solution: if I saw signs of a Creator everywhere I should peacefully settle down in the faith. But, seeing too much to deny and not enough to affirm, I am in a pitiful state, where I have wished a hundred times over that, if there is a God supporting nature, she should unequivocally proclaim him, and that, if the signs in nature are deceptive, they should be completely erased . . . (429)

And so Pascal would seem to reject naturalistic proofs for the existence of God:

‘Why, do you not say yourself that the sky and the birds prove God?’ — ‘No.’ — ‘Does your religion not say so?’ ‘No. For though it is true in a sense for some souls whom God has enlightened in this way, yet it is untrue for the majority.’ (3)

(We shall come back to this passage later.) In our fallen state, we are incapable of reaching God through our natural faculties, reason and experience:

Man is nothing but a subject full of natural error that cannot be eradicated except through grace. Nothing shows him the truth, everything deceives him. The two principles of truth, reason and senses, are not only both not genuine, but are engaged in mutual deception. (45)

How, then, are we to get out of this deplorable state? Not surprisingly, only with the help of God. For Pascal, real belief comes when the heart is moved, which can only be effected by God.

‘Men,’ says [God’s] wisdom, ‘do not expect either truth or consolation from men. It is I who have made you and I alone can teach you what you are.

‘Men, it is in vain that you seek within yourselves the cure for your miseries. All your intelligence can only bring you to realize that it is not within yourselves that you will find either truth or good.’ (149)

How exactly does this work? Underlying Pascal’s position is an interesting epistemology, an account of knowledge that is grounded in the notion of knowledge of the heart. In a justly famous passage he writes:

We know the truth not only through our reason but also through our heart. It is through the latter that we know first principles, and reason, which has nothing to do with it, tries in vain to refute them. The skeptics have no other object than that, and they work at it to no purpose . . . For knowledge of first principles, like space, time, motion, number, is as solid as any derived through reason, and it is on such knowledge, coming from the heart and instinct, that reason has to depend and base all its argument. The heart feels that there are three spatial dimensions and that there is an infinite series of numbers, and reason goes on to demonstrate that there are no two square numbers of which one is double the other. Principles are felt, propositions proved, and both with certainty, though by different means. It is as pointless and absurd for reason to demand proof of first principles from the heart before agreeing to accept them as it would be absurd for the heart to demand an intuition of all the propositions demonstrated by reason before agreeing to accept them.
That is why those to whom God has given religious faith by moving their hearts are very fortunate, and feel quite legitimately convinced, but to those who do not have it we can only give such faith through reasoning, until God gives it by moving their heart, without which faith is only human and useless for salvation. (110)

Or, as he eloquently summarizes it in two consecutive passages:

The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways. (423)

It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason. That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason. (424)

In this way, real faith comes from God, and not from the unaided human faculties which he argues are deceptive and inadequate for the task:

Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. The just shall live by faith. This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument. Faith cometh by hearing. But this faith is in our hearts, and makes us say not 'I know' but 'I believe.' (7)

Faith is a gift of God. Do not imagine that we describe it as a gift of reason. Other religions do not say that about their faith. They offered nothing but reason as a way to faith, and yet it does not lead there. (588)

Pascal's position here, that faith comes from God and not from reason, is by itself not altogether surprising. While it is certainly not universally agreed upon, it can be found in a number of other thinkers. This does, of course, raise an interesting problem for someone, like Pascal, attempting to convince another person to become a Christian: if rational argument and experience are powerless to convince someone to become a Christian, then by what means can one move the libertine in that direction? Here is where Pascal's famous wager argument enters. While this is a fascinating topic, it is not mine this afternoon. Instead I would like to focus on another aspect of his religious epistemology.

It is interesting to see how Pascal maneuvers the libertine into the position where God moves his heart and he acquires real faith. But it is also interesting to consider what happens after the heart is moved. It is important to understand that Pascal is not a straightforward fideist: he does not think that belief is simply a matter of receiving God's gift. After our hearts are moved, the story continues. Speaking in the voice of God, Pascal writes:

'I do not demand of you blind faith.'

'I do not mean you to believe me submissively and without reason; I do not claim to subdue you by tyranny, Nor do I claim to account to you for everything. To reconcile these contradictions I mean to show you clearly, by convincing proofs, marks of divinity within me which will convince you of what I am, and establish my authority by miracles and proofs that you cannot reject, so that you will then believe the things I teach, finding no reason to reject them except for the fact that you cannot by yourselves [i.e., with reason unaided by faith] know whether or not they are true. (149)

Here things become unclear to me. Sometimes Pascal speaks as if the evidence is open to those who genuinely seek to find God. The last passage I read continues as follows:

'God's will has been to redeem men and open the way of salvation to those who seek it, but men have shown themselves so unworthy that it is right for God to refuse to some, for their hardness of heart, what he grants to others by a mercy they have not earned.'

. . . Thus wishing to appear openly to those who seek him with all their heart and hidden from those who shun him with all their heart, he has qualified our knowledge of him by giving signs which can be seen by those who seek him and not by those who do not.

'There is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition.' (149; cf. 427)
Elsewhere, though, Pascal suggests that the evidence is available only to those whose hearts have been moved by the grace of God—that is, those who have been given faith by having their hearts moved:

The prophecies, even the miracles and proofs of our religion, are not of such a kind that they can be said to be absolutely convincing, but they are at the same time such that it cannot be said to be unreasonable to believe in them. There is thus evidence and obscurity, to enlighten some and obfuscate others. But the evidence is such as to exceed, or at least equal, the evidence to the contrary, so that it cannot be reason that decides us against following it, and can therefore only be concupiscence and wickedness of heart. Thus, there is enough evidence to condemn and not enough to convince, so that it should be apparent that those who follow it are prompted to do so by grace and not by reason, and those who evade it are prompted by concupiscence and not by reason. (835)

This is what Pascal seems to have had in mind in a passage I read at the very beginning of my discussion:

‘Why, do you not say yourself that the sky and the birds prove God?’ — ‘No.’ — ‘Does your religion not say so?’ ‘No. For though it is true in a sense for some souls whom God has enlightened in this way, yet it is untrue for the majority.’ (3)

This is an interesting and powerful idea. Pascal’s God does not ask for a blind faith; it is a faith supported by reasons. But these reasons can only be appreciated after we are in a particular state of mind: after we have already dedicated ourselves to the search for God, only after God has moved our hearts. Without divine grace, reason and experience are impotent, they are unable to give us real knowledge. But after God’s grace has moved our hearts, we are in a position to recognize the validity of the arguments for God’s existence, the miracles and prophesies, the experience of nature itself. Only after the conversion can the believer appreciate the rational grounds for his or her faith.

Pascal’s account suggests to me an interesting generalization, a kind of epistemological framework within which to look at a number of interesting phenomena, a larger context in which we can understand the grounds of religious faith.

BELIEF AND MIND-SET

Pascal is concerned exclusively with God and the grounds of our belief in him. Let me begin generalizing this idea by calling your attention to some other phenomena that bear some resemblances, however distant, to Pascal’s concerns.

In the late seventeenth century, not long after Pascal’s death in 1662, the Englishmen Henry More and Joseph Glanvill become interested in the phenomena of ghosts, witches, and visitation by demonic spirits. Both believed that orthodox Christianity required belief in such phenomena, but not merely as a requirement of religious faith. They believed that, if subjected to the scrutiny of modern (i.e., seventeenth-century) science, the phenomena would be as well attested to as any other scientific phenomena. And when they looked out into the world, they found numerous confirmations of this view. Glanvill made his case in the book Saducismus triumphatus; or, Full and plain evidence concerning witches and apparitions, first published in 1681 with More’s copious additions, and published in many further expanded editions in the years following. Today, though, we are inclined to dismiss their views as superstitious, as did some (but not all) of their contemporaries.

Adherents of astrology find the world filled with confirmations of More and Glanvill’s view and have no problems advancing what they consider to be rational arguments in support of their position. One such person is the seventeenth-century astrologer Jean-Baptiste Morin, whose Astrologica Gallica (1661) was a massive such compendium, bringing astrology up to date by integrating all of the new observations of the skies made since the ancients, including telescopic observations and observations of the southern skies, which had been unknown to the original practitioners of the subject. Morin, too, found confirmations of his view wherever he looked. Again, we are now inclined to dismiss such work as superstitious.
Moving closer to the present, certain people refused to believe the report of the Warren Commission on the Kennedy Assassination. While they may not agree with one another, such skeptics do concur that there is more to the story than meets the eye. Some of these people may also be inclined to see conspiracies in public (or private) life where others do not, and they are often dismissed as paranoid.

Another case, this one imaginary, though plausible, I think: A university research group publishes a study that purports to show that the death penalty does not deter crime, or that gun control does. Political liberals hail the new evidence for their views; political conservatives challenge the methodology of the studies and are skeptical of their conclusions.

Finally, back to theism. Some theists see God everywhere in nature and have no problem reconciling their faith with the latest science. Some claim to experience God directly, to walk with him every day or at special times of their lives. Others find arguments for the existence of God that they consider compelling, and see those who reject such arguments as rejecting the evidence of reason itself. Still others are unmoved by these experiences; even when they cannot find logical flaws in the arguments for the existence of God, they are not inclined to give them much weight.

The last case, of course, is the kind with which Pascal is directly concerned: those whose hearts God has moved can see evidences for God’s existence that others cannot. But there is a way in which this kind of case is not so different from the others I have presented. Glanvill and More, convinced in the existence of spirits and demons, can see evidence for them that others will dismiss. Morin, the committed astrologer, can see patterns in the relations between the celestial and the terrestrial realms that we do not. The conspiracy theorist (or the paranoid) can see patterns in world events that the rest of us might miss. Our political commitments shape the way we receive supposedly empirical evidence about the world and evaluate supposedly scientific studies.

What these cases have in common, along with many others, is the idea that there is a kind of cognitive state that inclines one toward certain kinds of beliefs and structures the way in which one sees the world. This is, I think, the kind of state that Pascal has in mind when he talks about knowledge of the heart. But, so as not to associate it too closely with the precise view that Pascal put forward, let me call it a ‘mind-set’. Mind-sets are common in everyday language, but because I would like to make it into something of a technical term, I will ask you to suspend any ordinary associations you might have with it.

What can we say about these cognitive states that I would like to call mind-sets? As I have suggested, mind-sets structure the world. What does this mean? First of all, mind-sets structure experience in an important way. Because of his particular mind-set, the theist can see God in nature—in the birds, in the trees, even at the quantum level. Because of their particular mind-set, the astrologer and the conspiracy theorist can see patterns that we cannot. Because of their mind-set, Glanvill and More could see spiritual phenomena in places that others could not. But not just experience and observation are influenced by mind-sets; reason is also influenced. There are some arguments that are obviously invalid, and they cannot be rescued. But outside of this, there is a lot of room for disagreement. One might wonder if an apparently valid argument is not really false; the history of philosophy is filled with cases in which arguments that are accepted by one generation of thinkers are routinely rejected by the next. Even with arguments that are accepted as valid, there is still disagreement about how much weight should be given to them. Again, in the history of philosophy there are many cases in which two camps are separated simply by the weight they are given in different arguments. (For instance: the disagreement between empiricism and rationalism over the origin of ideas.) Mind-sets are the glasses through which people look at the world: they make certain facts and reasons more salient than others, and enable us to see some things and ignore others.

Mind-sets come in a number of different varieties. In some cases, it is appropriate to think of a mind-set as a commitment to a particular proposition. For example, consider the case of a parent who refuses to admit that his child may have deceived him. Here the mind-set might be expressed propositional as a belief that the child is, indeed, trustworthy
and honest. In this case, the mind-set might be thought of as a well-entrenched belief, one that would be given up only under extreme duress. In other cases, mind-sets are not really propositional at all. Consider the conspiracy theorist, or the political liberal or conservative. In the case of the conspiracy theorist, one might be able to find a particular proposition to ground the mind-set, something like “there are conspiracies in the world,” or “people are conspiring against me,” or the like. But that would be somewhat artificial. In the case of the political liberal or conservative, it is even more difficult to find a simple proposition, or set of propositions, that unifies the attitudes expressed by any particular liberal or conservative. In the end, what is important about a mind-set is not the underlying belief to which it might be connected, but its tendency to form beliefs of a certain sort. Having a mind-set is defined by the beliefs toward which we are led. They are glasses through which people look at the world.

Another difference among mind-sets concerns their scopes. Our faith in a child, for example, only concerns rather narrow issues, such as those relating to his or her activities. Others are broader. The astrologer’s mind-set, for example, involves a commitment to seeing a wide variety of terrestrial phenomena in terms of heavenly causes; the political liberal’s mind-set may involve seeing society as a whole, in one way or another. Perhaps broadest of all is the theist’s mind-set, which may induce him or her to see all of creation as a reflection of God. Furthermore, different mind-sets operate at different levels. The theistic mind-set is much deeper than the mind-set that may underlie one’s trust in a child, in the sense that it may take less experience to change one’s trust in a child than it may take to abandon one’s inclination to trust God. Normally one could be expected to have a variety of different mind-sets, operating at different levels and with different scopes.

Mind-sets give rise to beliefs, but to do so there needs to be some sort of experience or argument. The conspiracy theorist is inclined toward conspiracies, but the particular conspiracies posited will depend upon the particular experience he or she has. The same goes for More and Glanvill: they discover the particular way in which ghosts and the like are actually manifested in the world through their experiences. These men may be inclined toward seeing evidence of ghosts and demons in their experience, but the particular form they take is a purely empirical matter. (Of course, should they desire, More and Glanvill could reject particular sightings as bogus.) In the same way, the theist might be inclined to accept evidence for God’s existence; but experience, argument, tradition, and other factors may well shape the details of one’s theology. Not all theists agree on everything, as history has shown in ample detail. (This poses an interesting challenge for Pascal, by the way. Even after God has moved our hearts, Pascal is concerned to direct them toward one particular kind of theology—namely, a Christian theology. A great deal of the Pensées is concerned with why we should reject the particular theological doctrines of the Jews and the Muslims.)

As I understand them, mind-sets are not voluntary: one can no more decide to have a particular mind-set than one can decide to have a particular belief. It is because of this that Pascal talks about God moving our hearts. In the theistic mind-set, the agent that puts us in that epistemic position is God himself. In other cases, other factors may put us in one mind-set or another. In the case of becoming a political liberal or conservative, it may be upbringing: what one was taught by one’s parents. In the case of becoming an astrologer or believing in ghosts or demons, it might be something broader, something connected with broader cultural factors: what one is taught from an early age and which is reinforced in the schools. In the case of certain kinds of people who are inclined toward conspiracies, the origin may be cultural (think of the fear of Communist conspiracies in the McCarthy era), while in others it may be biochemical (conspiracies that verge on the clinically paranoid, which in their extreme form count as a kind of mental illness).

This last example might seem to suggest that mind-sets are, in some sense, pathological. I do not mean to suggest this at all. My suspicion is that mind-sets of one sort or another are a necessary part of our proper cognitive functioning: we all need some way of structuring our experience, of making

Continued on page 36
Over my years here at the University I have addressed this luncheon assembly several times, most often with the intent to amuse; any enlightenment is accounted a happy residual. When I agreed again this year to come before you, I sought a subject holding out hope for humor. I chose Oscar Wilde. Hagiography is untrustworthy history. No chronicle is without bias; the histories of those held in venerated memory begin in special intention, which is to offer evidence compelling adoration. Oscar Wilde and, to a lesser extent, Lord Alfred Douglas are often invoked as heroic figures in a community once limited to male homosexuals, but expanded by a more recent ecumenism to include the lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered—and the occasional literary.

My impressions of Wilde were largely shaped by the appreciative biographies and anthologies that showcase his undeniable talent for wit and brilliant riposte. For example, consider this excerpt from Montgomery Hyde's biography of Wilde:

...he once greeted a new arrival at a reception given by his friend Lady de Grey with the words: “Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come! There are a hundred things I want not to say to you.” On another occasion at a lunch party given by the same hostess, an argument arose between him and Lord Ribblesdale about after-dinner speeches. Lady Randolph Churchill was also present and she later recalled how Wilde declared that there was no subject on which he could not speak at a moment’s notice.

Taking him at his word, Lord Ribblesdale raised his glass and said, “The Queen.”

“She is not a subject,” answered Wilde, quick as lightning.

The year 2000 marked the centenary of Wilde’s death and the predictable publication of several books recounting his life and that of his infamous paramour, Lord Alfred Douglas, known by the affectionate name Bosie. As if any of us needed an excuse for buying and reading more books, these facts and my promise made last year to speak to you today quieted my conscience and spurred a summer of research into these characters. What I found, of course, was sufficient to generate another volume. But I’ll attempt to summarize.

Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills Wilde was born in Ireland in 1854, reared in relative affluence and privilege. His mother was a wildly inventive and imaginative poetess who enjoyed some fame for her poetry and her politics, the latter being decidedly and flamboyantly feminist even for her day: “What Lady Wilde contributed to the Irish scene was a talent for magnifying parochial matters. For her, poetry meant oratory.”

His father was a noted Dublin eye and ear surgeon, appointed and knighted Surgeon Oculist to the Queen in Ireland.

A noticeable tendency toward the effete and exaggerated in his student years at Trinity in Dublin suggests that in his young adulthood Wilde began to intuit, if only subliminally,

This talk was delivered on October 24, 2001, at a Wednesday lunch in Swift Common Room.
Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas at Oxford, 1893
Wilde lived and loomed so large on the public scene as to become a caricature of himself, and quite early in his career.

the distinctive traits of his sexuality. Even given youth and university culture, contexts tolerant and even indulgent of eccentricity, Wilde was excessive. His behaviors and affections seem a defense calculated to secure his advantage. His exotic tastes in dress, his exaggerated gestures and theatrical poses incarnate the maxim that the best defense is a good offense. His considerable height and substantial frame made him a flaming queen of magnificent proportion, and afforded advantage in the more usual arts of manly self-defense. Joseph Pearce records:

In his memoirs, Sir Frank Benson recalls . . . Wilde's response to a group of students who arrived at his rooms intent on giving him a beating. Four undergraduates were deputed to burst into Wilde's rooms while the rest watched from the stairs. The assailants received more than they expected. According to Benson, Wilde booted out the first, doubled up the second with a punch, threw out the third through the air, and taking hold of the fourth—a man as big as himself—carried him down to his rooms and buried him beneath his own furniture. As a final coup de théâtre Wilde helped himself to his assailant's wines and spirits and invited the astounded spectators to join him.3 Such exploits—coupled to his undeniable intelligence, his gifts for repartee, and a reputation for gentle, generous kindness that adhered to him throughout his tumultuous life—made Wilde a remarkable figure. As one biographer notes, “He read Herbert Spencer and the philosopher of science William Kingdon Clifford; he was on easy terms not only with Plato and Aristotle, as required by his course, but with Kant, Hegel, Jacobi, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, and Mill. He alludes knowledgeably to Alfieri and quotes Baudelaire.”4 A combination of best-little-boy and wicked show-off, Wilde attracted attention, and a following. Hated or beloved, he was the kind of person who elicited strong opinion, and that was as he would have it, for Wilde was an early exponent of self-franchise.

Wilde lived and loomed so large on the public scene as to become a caricature of himself, and quite early in his career. While still a student he amassed a formidable balance of celebrity capital against which he learned to draw with skill. Loosed upon London, he set about in earnest to make his reputation. “He had . . . a large acquaintance, in which royalty was not lacking. The Prince of Wales asked to meet him, fetching up an epigram for the purpose, ‘I do not know Mr Wilde, and not to know Mr Wilde is not to be known!’”5 Wilde stood at the vanguard of a group of artists known as the Aesthetic Movement. These artists were caricatured by Gilbert and Sullivan in their operetta Patience. When the prominent theatrical producers, the D'Oyly Carte, sought to export Patience to American audiences, their American representative wondered “‘how the New York public could be brought to understand the aesthetic craze’ and so better appreciate the subtle humour of Patience.”6 The solution was to book Wilde on a promotional lecture tour. Decked out in velvet jacket and knee britches, silk hose, and outlandishly foppish hat, this towering man with flowing tresses and a lily in his hand lectured on stage from coast to coast. Whatever the benefit to D'Oyly Carte and their theatrical production, Wilde managed to turn the tour to his own personal advantage, cultivating his identity as a brand, a nineteenth-century precursor of Martha Stewart:

[ Wilde toured numerous cities delivering a lecture on] ‘The English Renaissance’ until his arrival in Chicago in February. There he had eventually to speak twice, and when he learned from the report in the Buffalo Courier that the Chicago papers already had ‘The English Renaissance’ in type, he hastily put together two new lectures, which he gave from that time on. One, delivered on his second visit, in March, became known as ‘The House Beautiful’ . . . The other, first given on 13 February, was ‘The Decorative Arts.’ Both these lectures differed from the first, since instead of being historical, they offered practical applications of aesthetic doctrine. [Hence the comparison to Martha Stewart.]

. . . He moved fluently from point to point, not worrying much about organization, trusting to what quickly
became dependable patter . . . [including the judgment that] modern wallpaper is so bad that a boy brought up under its influence could allege it as a justification for turning to a life of crime.

. . . Wilde increasingly depended upon disseminating his personality rather than his principles. He became adroit at incorporating refreshing responses to local features. In Chicago he complained that the newly built water tower was 'a castellated monstrosity, with pepper box turrets and absurd portcullises' (but he appeased Chicagoans a little by acknowledging that 'the mighty symmetrical, harmonious wheel' inside the tower came up to the highest aesthetic standards.

. . . The whole tour was an achievement of courage and grace, along with ineptitude and self-advertisement. . . . However effeminate his doctrines were thought to be, they constituted the most determined and sustained attack upon materialistic vulgarity that America had seen. That the attack was itself a bit vulgar did not diminish its effect.7

Returning from his American tour, Wilde moved from London to Paris, and with a talent since perfected by Madonna, he set about to remake himself. He took up a style of dress self-consciously imitative of Balzac. He secured an audience with an aged Victor Hugo, met Mallarmé and Verlaine, and failed to impress Émile Zola. While not working on poetry and the literary connections he sought to bolster his reputation, he worked the social scene, becoming a familiar visitor to actress Sarah Bernhardt, whose friendship he cultivated in hopes of securing her as producer and lead in his first play, _The Duchess of Padua_. When his play was denied production and his money had run out, he returned to England and took up lecturing again. Despite Samuel Johnson’s aphorism that marriage represents “the triumph of hope over experience,” Wilde also took a wife. Gallivanting around two continents in knee britches and silk hose and prissy aesthetic pontification took their toll. Rumors of unwholesome sexual proclivities were widely circulated. Despite his outspoken disdain for the strictures of Victorian society, Wilde was deeply concerned with public image and hungry for acceptance. A wife of means would greatly ease his financial burdens. He courted and lost Florence Balcombe to Bram Stoker (of _Dracula_ fame). He pursued the actress Lillie Langtry but wisely relented since she was already married and was as poor as he was. Ultimately, the marriage bid went to Constance Lloyd.

While some treat the marriage as one of convenience and suggest that the role of husband, and eventually father, were parts Wilde took up as the lead in the drama that was his life, there was genuine affection between Oscar and Constance. Of course, Constance might have been a bit more suspicious when Oscar chose her wedding dress and enthusiastically took up the staging of the wedding, which took place on the afternoon of May 29, 1884, at St. James’s Church in Sussex Gardens. The artist James McNeil Whistler, no less a self-promoter than Wilde, enjoyed and capitalized upon a public rivalry with Wilde—a rivalry that would at times prove vicious, but not without humor. “Whistler, unprepared to be upstaged by Wilde even on his wedding day, sent a telegram. ‘Fear I may not be able to reach you in time for the ceremony. Don’t wait.’”8

With the responsibilities of marriage added to his portfolio, Wilde supplemented his lecturing income with review writing for several publications. He reviewed poetry, theater, and covered the general artistic scene in London. Gradually, journalism opened to him. It was only a short step from his lectures on “The House Beautiful” to the editorship of _Ladies’ World_. To his credit, he convinced the owners to change the name of the publication to _Women’s World_ and he successfully ratcheted up the quality. He conceived it to be a forum for female intellect and managed to secure and publish a wide variety of thoughtful and substantive articles from leading women of the day. He was gutsy enough to solicit contributions from the likes of Julia Ward Howe, who refused, and even Queen Victoria herself, who was characteristically not amused.

A settled and secure life did not long appeal. Bridled by the conventionalities of marriage and career, Wilde’s latent homosexuality exacerbated whatever happiness he knew. The marriage faltered. Constance became pregnant and,
He indulged a life in the shades of gay subcultures in London and Paris that ranged from friendship with notable artists and public figures to trysts with rent boys . . .

initially, Oscar was delighted at the prospect of fatherhood. But the stark contrast between fantasy and reality intervened. The aesthetic of beauty that had attracted Oscar to Constance proved an idealization that vaporized as her body changed its contours. The full import of paternity crushed a relationship that had been based, in large measure, upon the notion of wife as accessory—a romantic fiction that often resolved itself when the husband took a mistress and the wife adopted an independent life, funded by her own family resources or her husband's guilt, or a combination of both.

The first son was born in 1885, a second son was delivered a year later, in 1886. Nearly simultaneous with these events, Wilde began to act out his homosexuality. The decade following his marriage to Constance was frenetic and productive. He became a master of compartmentalization and contradiction. Oscar withdrew more and more from Constance, though in the rare times they spent together he seems to have been a very caring father to his sons, spinning stories for them that were a hybrid of fairy tale and fable. He indulged a life in the shades of gay subcultures in London and Paris ranging from friendships with notable artists and public figures to trysts with rent boys, the name given opportunistic roustabouts and runaways who turned to prostitution for a living, or at least a meal.

Meanwhile, in spite of—or perhaps because of—this hyperactivity, his pen was prolific. Quitting his editorship of Women's World in 1899, in the next six years he turned out nearly every literary work for which he is now known. The children's stories concocted for his boys were gathered into a volume entitled The Happy Prince and Other Tales. A volume of critical essays entitled Intentions followed and included The Decay of Lying and The Critic as Artist. There followed The Soul of Man under Socialism. Then came The Picture of Dorian Gray, his masterwork that shares the best qualities of Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and a touch of Edgar Allan Poe.

The Picture of Dorian Gray marked a significant turning point. It began with Wilde's deep infatuation with another aspiring young poet of unusually striking beauty named John Gray whom Oscar took to calling Dorian. Clearly there was a profound bond between the two. It was perhaps Wilde's first glimpse of what might be possible in a loving relationship between two men, a relationship founded upon more than sex. But it was only a prelude. Gray, who eventually entered the Roman priesthood, was soon eclipsed by the love that would alter Wilde's life forever.

In 1891 Wilde was briefly introduced to Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas, who was at the time a student at Oxford and an aspiring young poet. Noting Douglas's distinguished English pedigree, and ever the astute politician, Wilde invited the young man to dine with him at his club. Shortly thereafter, they enjoyed a meal together and Wilde presented an inscribed copy of Dorian Gray to the student, who confessed he
had already read the book at least nine times. The older man is believed to have made a pass at the younger, which was apparently rebuffed.

Wilde then went to Paris, where he was busy with a variety of projects, including a disappointing meeting with Marcel Proust and an ill-fated plan to stage a dramatization of Salomé. He returned to London and triumphed with a production of Lady Windermere’s Fan. In this and a succession of similar comedic masterpieces, Wilde successfully transposed his gift for witty repartee to the stage and presaged the modern situation comedy. In many respects his stage comedies anticipate television shows like Seinfeld, comedies that parody social convention as commentary and critique of society.

In the full flush of this theatrical success, Wilde received a request for help. Lord Alfred Douglas was being blackmailed by a rent boy whose favors Bosie had solicited. Bosie was estranged from his father, the infamous Marquess of Queensberry (who gave boxing the Queensberry Rules); quite apart from being fiercely heterosexual, Queensberry was certifiably mad. Bosie adored his mother, who had suffered much from her husband’s tyrannical brutality and sexual infidelities, and was loathe to involve her in this sordid mess. So he turned to Wilde, whom he perceived to be a prominent and well-connected member of influential gay circles. Wilde, in turn, referred Bosie to a capable lawyer skilled at quietly negotiating potentially scandalous matters. Little did Wilde know that it was the first step on a course leading to his own destruction.

If ever Lord Alfred Douglas experienced a moment of happiness no photograph records it. Every portrait of him captures a pensive moodiness captive in a languorously slouching body. His fine fair features, slight build, and expensively cut clothes leave the impression of effete privilege, his facial expressions those of spoiled petulance subdued by boredom. As one of his biographers notes, his youthful photos project “an image of himself which he cultivated as the wistful and unhappy beauty as assiduously as Wilde posed as a dandy and an exquisite.”

In this regard, Wilde and Douglas were well mated. Each found a symbiotic symmetry in the other. Not that I place any stock in simplistic explanations of sexual orientation, but as a matter of record, each man lived in the shadow of dominant, philandering fathers whose reputations adhered to the family name, for good and for ill. And each man shared affinities with his mother, Wilde deriving from his the literary gifts and flamboyance of self-promotion that marked his singular career. Douglas seems to have drawn from his mother the hurt and anger of his father’s abuse and in his own way became the instrument of her revenge. That is not to say that she consciously or intentionally manipulated him, but rather that in the complex system of their family, this seems to have been Bosie’s role; Bosie inherited, intuited, and cultivated a talent for
Wilde fell deeply and inextricably in love with Bosie and, in his own equally complex way, Bosie loved Wilde.

From that simple legal referral, a favor of an older, sympathetic, and supposedly wiser man to a younger one in difficulty, proceeded the personal and professional equivalent of a nuclear meltdown. To make a very long and sordid story more compact and presentable, suffice it to say that Wilde fell deeply and inextricably in love with Bosie and, in his own equally complex way, Bosie loved Wilde. A lifelong relationship commenced with a prolonged affair described by one writer as “alternating scenes of ‘Greek’ sensuality-cum-spirituality and squalid nastiness.” It began with clandestine assignations between the two, when Bosie was a student at Oxford and Wilde was a newly successful playwright in London, a professional circumstance that afforded excuse for Wilde’s protracted absence from home. The two met either in Oxford or in the hotels in London where Wilde took rooms ostensibly to write undistracted by family and for proximity to the productions of his plays. When necessity demanded his attentions as a husband and father, the two men sustained the “relationship by post, under the noses of his loving wife and children. This was a fine early example of what, in The Importance of Being Earnest, is named a ‘bunbury.’”

As their relationship became more public, it became increasingly and intentionally difficult to ignore. After an initial and somewhat favorable introduction to Wilde orchestrated by Douglas to impress his father, Queensberry
reconsidered his son’s relationship to this older man. Observing them in public at a restaurant table, the father realized that their behaviors gave the impression of something other than the friendship of mentor and disciple. His disgust aroused and his anger inflamed by his son’s attempts to dissemble, Queensberry determined to confront the elder Wilde and warn him off. Not finding Wilde as expected at his club, Queensberry left his calling card with a crude note penned on the reverse that read, “For Oscar Wilde—Posing as a sodomite.” Queensberry’s misspelling of “sodomite” may have been the result of ignorance or rage, but in subsequent events—when the card itself became a primary exhibit in Wilde’s trials—the error became only one more embarrassment to a man both enraged and energized by social sniggering and academic pretension.

Such a relationship as Oscar and Bosie’s might have gone unnoticed, or been tactfully ignored, had those caught up within its particular systems not colluded with danger and destruction. Had Wilde consulted the same legal advisor to whom he had earlier steered Bosie, he would have been advised to ignore Queensberry’s card. But Wilde, egged on by Bosie, chose to sue for libel. In this choice, Wilde pitted himself against a pro. Queensberry was infamous for his tendency to sue at the drop of a hat. Wilde’s may have been the superior wit and intelligence, but in the legal ring this was a match between a featherweight and a heavyweight.

The original matter and subsequent charges eventuated in three trials, each well documented. The first was Wilde’s libel suit against Queensberry, which he lost, opening the door to Wilde’s arrest and two trials for immorality. In all the trials, Wilde displayed his wit, but with diminishing skill and effect. What started out as amusement ended in debasement. When facing Queensberry in court at his first trial, Wilde was a celebrity. His plays were playing to packed houses in London and his reputation was at its apex. By the end, his every private act subjected to public scrutiny, Wilde was contemptuously consigned to Reading Goal where he was so completely broken he never recovered.

Douglas fared somewhat better. Protected by his lesser public profile and his money, he retreated into relative obscurity from which sanctuary he continued to write his Petrarchan sonnets. Published and admired in academic and artistic circles, he eventually took a wife and outlived Wilde. His life punctuated by the occasional lawsuit, he maintained the family legacy of litigation and its reputation for thin-skinned malevolence. But in litigation he was merely a pale shadow of his father and, in literature, of his lover. Unless the world should suddenly affect a profound hunger for the Petrarchan sonnet, Douglas seems doomed to be known in the future, as he was throughout his life, as the lover of Oscar Wilde. Ironically, only one of his poems, “Two Loves,” is widely remembered, and that one only for its famous final lines:

’Sweet youth,
Tell me why, sad and sighing, thou dost rove
These pleasant realms? I pray thee speak me sooth
What is thy name?” He said, ‘My name is Love.’
Then straight the first did turn himself to me
And cried, ‘He lieth, for his name is Shame,
But I am Love, and I was wont to be
Alone in this fair garden, till he came
Unasked by night; I am true Love, I fill
The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame.’
Then sighing said the other, ‘Have thy will,
I am the Love that dare not speak its name.’

Wilde and Douglas evidence an inherent inability to accept good fortune, or at least to safeguard one’s own welfare. Both exhibit a neurotic paranoia: a tendency toward grandeur and flamboyant self-importance paired with an abiding sense of persecution, of being misunderstood and underappreciated. That they were gay is almost incidental, except that sexuality and sexual behavior—or misbehavior—became the instrument of neurosis. It was their weapon, the sword with which they flailed at their families and their society, and upon which they ultimately impaled themselves.

Despite a late-Victorian tightening of England’s sodomy statutes, social convention and their personal circumstances might well have protected Wilde and Douglas from ultimate harm. But each man seems to have been blind to
it is hard to work up sympathy for Douglas. Whatever slights he experienced, none was comparable to those he inflicted.

the other, and blind to the narrowly selfish agendas and interests that motivated their acts. Each proclaimed a love for the other while acting otherwise; even at the summit of their passionate physical affair, one or the other or both of them were indulging rent boys on the side. In fact, while it was the charge of sodomy lodged against Wilde by Douglas's father that precipitated the legal trials that eventually sent Wilde to prison, it was testimony and evidence attesting to Wilde's assignations with rent boys that secured his prosecution. Neither their own attempts to dignify this mess, nor subsequent efforts to ennoble them can excuse the rank squalor the facts reveal.

As for Douglas, only so much of his part in this drama can be attributed to his genetic predisposition to craziness; whatever he inherited he seems assiduously to have cultivated.

All those brooding photographs of languid beauty suggest that there was something in Bosie that loved playing the victim.

The only problem with that role is that, played long enough, all the wretchedness he imagined was eventually fulfilled.

Though Bosie failed to be as despicable as his father, he seems to have given it his all. His childish self-absorption is evident throughout the relationship with Wilde, who—like Bosie's mother—seems incapable of resisting indulgence of the worst characteristics of his personality. He was an indolent rich boy who squandered several fortunes including money, talent, and reputation. His biographers are helpless to make him likable; just when one is prepared to cut him some slack, he maneuvers himself into a noose.

After Wilde's death in 1900, Douglas discovered women. His interest was neither purely sexual nor romantic. Surmising the right choice of wife could rehabilitate both his dwindling bank account and his reputation, he took up the pursuit. He fell in love with Olive Custance, whom he had actually met thirteen years prior, when Olive stood as bridesmaid at the wedding of Bosie's cousin Rachel Montgomery. Now a published poet, Olive wrote a letter to Douglas that flattered his vanity and precipitated a steady correspondence. Of good family with substantial means, intelligent, boyish in appearance, and reputed to be lesbian in her leanings, Olive seemed the right candidate for marriage. But her family was wise to Bosie's circumstances and disapproved.

Bosie traveled to America on a ticket purchased before their ardor had ignited, on what was to have been a prospecting voyage for a well-heeled American heiress. He went through with the trip as much to divert Olive's parents as to carry out his original purpose. Still, he squired and sized up several potential brides, each of whom was competing unbeknownst with his growing affection for Olive, to whom he was writing frequent, confiding letters.

Olive, whose mercurial affections and selfish stratagems seem a match to Bosie's, wrote him in late 1901 to tell him of her engagement to his old school friend George Montagu. He made a hasty return to England. Olive and Bosie were married in March 1902 in a church service they had contrived through elaborate machinations greatly facilitated by their social advantage and the collusion of Bosie's mother, Lady Queensberry.

The marriage produced a son, but Olive eventually initiated divorce under pressure from her own father, who wished to remove his grandson from Bosie. Never reconciled to the marriage, Olive's father—who in this regard seems uncannily like Bosie's father—seems to have been motivated as much by spite as by any other reason.

Still, it is hard to work up sympathy for Douglas. Whatever slights he experienced, none was comparable to those he inflicted. For example, he is curiously absent, or at best far removed, from Wilde's headlong fall from favor. Only years later, in his autobiography, did Douglas admit “in no uncertain terms, that he had indeed indulged in homosexual activity. . . . Douglas's idea was that if he told the whole and real truth, as unpleasant and embarrassing as at times it was, he would at least not be accused of whitewashing himself.” Instead all he reveals is his own cowardice in encouraging a lover to wage battle against his father, then standing aside and sending his knight to sure defeat by denying his own complicity in the affairs that brought his defender to ruin.

Douglas grasps for expiation. He considered his book Oscar Wilde: A Summing Up a righting of the imbalance of the public literary record and his last word on Wilde. “I am glad I've written it,” he told a friend. ‘It will set things right
for ever.’ In the book he recaptured Wilde the man, the companion, the raconteur, and the atmosphere of gaiety the two men had enjoyed half a century earlier. ‘. . . we were laughing most of the time—often at one another. There were whole days we laughed our way through. I remember once at Torquay going into a hotel for breakfast—I forget why now—and being told by the waiter that there was some nice fish. ‘If you knew the breeding habits of fish you would scarcely call them nice,’ said Oscar. Not a remark to treasure perhaps, but it led us into endless absurdities . . . That’s what people, simple unintellectual people, loved about Oscar—he could make them laugh. Even the wretched young men who gave evidence against him. Far more than cigarette-cases and meals at Kettner’s. He made the dullest of them gay and amusing. He brought out oddity and humour in them which they never knew they possessed.’17

Similarly, in private conversation nearly a decade later with Rupert Croft-Cooke, his biographer, Douglas echoed these sentiments: ‘What I have never sufficiently brought out,’ he said that day, ‘was the fun of being with Oscar. Not his epigrams or more studied humour but his continuous light-heartedness and love of laughter. Everyone felt gay and carefree in his company. He wasn’t a ‘funny man’ looking for chances to make jokes, he bubbled all the time with frivolous, happy humour, and he encouraged it in those with him. Everyone talked a little better with Oscar than with anyone else.’18

Douglas eventually embraced Roman Catholicism, seeking absolution in zealous devotion. In a confessional address to the Catholic Poetry Society in 1931, Douglas offered this summary of his friendship with Wilde:

In the matter of Wilde I am conscious that I have not been consistent. I began in my very early youth by admiring his work inordinately, at a time when it was not generally admired at all. I thought him a man of transcendent genius. This was largely because I knew him personally and was dazzled by his marvellous and unequalled gifts as a talker. One of the tragedies of Oscar Wilde is that he talked so much better than he wrote. I have never heard anyone come anywhere near his charm and brilliance as a talker. In that line he was supreme. He was the greatest improvisatore that ever existed.

Many years later, after he had been dead twelve years and after I had become a Catholic, I reacted violently against him and against all his works. I actually described him in the witness box on one occasion about fourteen years ago as ‘the greatest force for evil that has appeared in Europe for more than three hundred years.’ I was thinking then more of his life than his writings, but even allowing for this, I consider now that what I said was really absurd. Converts are very apt to be censorious and to make a fatal attempt to be more Catholic than Catholics. I have been a Catholic now for more than twenty years and I hope I am now much more charitable and broad-minded than I was just before my conversion or a good many years after it. After swinging to two extremes in my estimate of Wilde I have now got into what I believe to be the happy mean.19

Whatever absolution Douglas sought would not be forthcoming, a reality he seems finally to have grasped. His poetry is probably a more reliable lens into his soul than his prosaic justifications. Wilde died in 1900 in a rundown hotel in Paris. He was only forty-six years old, estranged from his wife and sons, reduced to penury. His memorial was a pathetic funeral mass with only fifty-six attendees for a man once beloved by so many more. Some time after his return from the funeral, Douglas wrote the touching sonnet,

THE DEAD POET

I dreamed of him last night, I saw his face
All radiant and unshadowed of distress,
And as of old, in music measureless,
I heard his golden voice and marked him trace
Under the common thing the hidden grace,
And conjure wonder out of emptiness,
Till mean things put on beauty like a dress
And all the world was an enchanted place.
In sifting the rubble of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas
rationality is a useless tool.

And then methought outside a fast locked gate
I mourned the loss of unrecorded words,
Forgotten tales and mysteries half said,
Wonders that might have been articulate,
And voiceless thoughts like murdered singing birds.
And so I woke and knew that he was dead.20

Douglas seems at last to have understood, if too late,
the fundamental principles of forgiveness—that true reconcili-
cation can only be affected by genuine contrition and
reconciliation with the one wronged. That becomes clear
in a sonnet transparently addressed to Oscar, entitled

THE WASTES OF TIME

If you came back, perhaps you would not find
The old enchantment, nor again discern
The altered face of love. The wheels yet turn
That clocked the wasted hours, the spirit’s wind
Still fans the embers in the hidden mind.
But if I cried to you, ‘Return! return!’
How could you come? How could you ever learn
The old ways you have left so far behind?

How sweetly, forged in sleep, come dreams that make
Swift wings and ships that sail the estranging sea,
Less roughly than blown rose leaves in a bowl,
To harboured bliss. But oh! the pain to wake
In empty night seeking what may not be
Till the dead flesh set free the living soul.21

“Bosie had the most beautiful manners. I hope you will
mention them,” wrote John Betjeman to Rupert Croft-
Cooke when the latter was writing his biography of Douglas.
Croft-Cooke concurred in this judgment of Bosie’s person-
ality in maturity that “He was a splendid example of the
truth of the tag that a gentleman is one who is never rude,
except on purpose. He could be, in his earlier days particu-
larly, most effectively rude, as his satires prove. But he could
not be rude to the merely importunate, the tactless or the
dull-witted.”22

It is a damnable assessment of a person to reduce a life to
the judgment that he or she was, in the end, “nice.” That
simplistic reduction is balanced by Aubrey Beardsley’s con-
temporary assessment of Oscar and Bosie that “both of them
are really very dreadful people.”23 All of which is only to say
that Douglas and Wilde, like each of us, are complex.

When I first set out to engage their stories I had in mind
to revisit and reassess their biographies. I had a hunch that
their life stories, like most, invite us to reflect upon our own
lives. That is one reason why biography, self-inflicted or
otherwise, remains the powerful genre that it is.

What struck me about both Wilde and Douglas was a
blindness that was, and still is, hard to plumb. Each man, at
so many points, was blind to the effects of his actions upon
himself, upon the other, upon all the others in their lives and
societies. Each man was the product of complex family and
social systems, yet each also possessed such strong will and
sufficient ability as to dilute any excuse of victimization. Each
man deeply wounded himself, the other, and all the others
whom they touched; their wives and children were especially
badly treated. Each was obviously capable of deep affection
even for those they hurt. But the most difficult mystery was a
profound blindness to consequence. Each seemed genuinely
surprised at his fate. Was it true innocence, naïveté, invincible
ignorance? Was it egotistical selfishness, social privilege,
intellectual arrogance? I don’t yet know.

In sifting the rubble of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred
Douglas rationality is a useless tool. Mystery defies reason. If
their lives serve any use, it is perhaps as a morality tale for
our own time. From the wreckage of their lives rise the first
plaintive questions to ascend from the rubble of the World
Trade Center and the Pentagon: Who could hate us so much,
and why? How could so loving and generous a people as
we are occasion such anger and suffer such loss? Having
scratched around in the ruins of Wilde and Douglas, I know
that even if we sift every ash in lower Manhattan, the mystery
will remain. After all the clues are gathered, the evidence
examined, the mystery will endure, the ancient mystery of sin.

Try as we might, and try as we surely will, to deny it,
excuse it, or justify it, ours is still a fallen world, and we with
it. Every generation of our ancestors in faith has confessed as wisdom and truth the essential sinfulness that is the shadow side of free will. Every generation of believers has had to embrace and bear this burden before the throne of God's grace: that all our actions are tainted, that none is perfect. Now it has fallen to us, a generation that does not know this word, “sin,” or what it means.

This much we have in common with Oscar and Bosie: that our self-absorption and presumptions of our own goodness and rightness blinded us to the real perceptions and sentiments of those of the larger human community who viewed us from their own perspectives. Addressing a convocation at Virginia Theological Seminary in autumn 2000, Lynn Davis, Senior Fellow of the RAND Corporation and former Under Secretary of State for Arms Control in International Security Affairs made the, now prescient, observation that “However inspired our actions, and even with the best of intentions, we face, as Americans, the prospect that in this new century, some very serious dangers will be directed at us. We have benefited greatly from globalization. We are associated very closely with its manifestations: the policies, the values, the culture, but most importantly, with responsibility for the fact that globalization produces losers. Resentments of all of this are growing, and those resentments are increasingly directed at Americans . . . The very real possibility exists that terrorists will find ways to attack us here at home.”

We have seen how sin is manifest in violence against us; but we are learning, if slowly and reluctantly, how sin is manifest in us, in our own blindness.

---

ENDNOTES

4. Ellmann, 41.
5. Ellmann, 128.
8. Pearce, 117.
10. Pearce, 205.
12. Murray, 134.
15. Murray, 36.
17. Murray, 311.
20. Murray, 121.
ne of the peculiarities of Christian logic, almost of as grand proportion as the doctrine that God though one is a trinity, is to be found in the breathtaking speed with which the early church, as first attested in the writings of that master of logic-defying locution—the apostle Paul—moved from its sure claim that the messiah has come to the equally, or even proportionally more, forceful proclamation that he is still to come (again, that is). That lightning-quick temporal maneuver has been replicated for Christians down the ages and still today in the liturgical calendar, a way of marking time that continually orchestrates the believer into a choreographed life of epiphanic waiting, preparation, disclosure, and continual repetition of the process. This cycle is the subject of my sermon this morning: epiphanies now, and then, and again.

But Christians have no exclusive patent on the concept of epiphany. An ἐπίφανεία is a manifestation, a making public or visible. As a Greek religious term it refers to the desired effect of a range of ritual and liturgical acts (including sacrifice, invocation, procession, and others) that call a god to a “self-exposé”; it may also refer to a voluntary self-revelation by a divine being on the human landscape (usually as told in epic poetry or narrative or hymnody). The term ἐπίφανεία itself implies its opposite—the assumption that the gods are not readily, customarily, or conveniently visible and available to the humans who seek them. One might say that “religion,” or sacred activity (ancient and modern), whatever else it is, is about systems which effect the management of divine presence and absence for a clientele understood (by implication, at least) as perpetually hungry for epiphanies but unable (and sometimes unwilling) to encounter their deities face to face on a 24/7 basis.

The Christian feast of the Epiphany, which now follows so closely upon Christmas, was one of the first feast days to be celebrated in the early church—far earlier, it may surprise you to know, than its more commercially successful cousin. A marvelous irony is that our first historical attestation of the feast is among the heretics, not the orthodox, of the second century: the followers of the gnostic Basilides, for whom Epiphany marked the baptism of Jesus—the moment at which Jesus received the sonship of light from the ineffable God (Clement of Alexandria, stromateis 1.21). Adding to this incongruous history is the fact that our first evidence for so-called “orthodox” Christians celebrating the feast is preserved in an anecdote about the emperor Julian “the apostate” (Ammianus Marcellinus, hist. 21.2). Furthering this convoluted record, the feast of the Epiphany in various locales commemorated five different things before it was regularized in the mid-fourth century: the birth of Jesus (January 6), the baptism of Jesus, the arrival of the magi, the wedding feast at Cana, and the feeding of the five thousand. The readings we have chosen to focus upon for today direct our attention to the magi and the baptism of Jesus, events which are now temporally linked in the common liturgical calendar, where they stand in succession on the first

This sermon was delivered on January 16, 2002, in Bond Chapel.
two Sundays in January, right after Christmas (this year, January 6 and 13), causing a kind of “liturgical whiplash” as we rebound from Christmas toward an almost imminent Lent.

Epiphany in western churches since the mid-fourth century (the time Rome began to impose the December 25 date for Christmas on the east) commemorates the Christian midrashic account found in Matthew 2 of the magi from the east arriving in Bethlehem of Judea. These Μάγοι (technically trained specialists in the epiphanic arts) have come because they have seen (ἐίδομεν) “his star in the east” (2:2). But coming to meet a baby king whose birth is publicized by a heavenly light show, they instead meet his antitype, a king who acts λατρεύω, “in secret,” and tries to defeat the purposes of “the star that is made to appear”—οἱ σαρκόμενοι άστήρ (2:7). But, as the passive voice here alludes, King Herod is not in charge of this epiphany, and it proceeds without his consultation or consent in the night sky above his kingdom, where the magi continue to track it with their eyes. Interestingly, in the text it is upon “seeing the star” (ἰδόν τόν άστέρα [2:10]) standing still above the child’s humble habitat—and not the child himself!—that they “rejoiced with a very great rejoicing” (ἐχάρησαν τῷ παιδίῳ [2:11]). Then they react as one should to an epiphany (biblical and otherwise): they fall to the ground and assume a prostrate position of reverence and obeisance to the god revealed (not coincidentally also a posture from which vision of the divine apparition is rendered well nigh impossible)—πεσόντες προσεύχοντας κύτῳ (2:11). They also offer the gifts Isaiah promised right-minded Gentiles would one day bring to Jerusalem when they wake up and smell the philosophical monotheist coffee (“the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn . . . They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord!” [Is 60:2–3, 6 RSV]). The reader of Matthew’s gospel is led to conclude that the divine will to self-disclosure has once again triumphed over the nefarious forces of “secrecy” personified by Herod.

Traditions earlier than Matthew’s infancy prelude associated the moment of Jesus’ ἐπιφάνεια on the earthly scene not with his birth, but with his baptism at the wet hands of John, as in Mark’s wonderfully stark incipit (Mk 1:9–11). In three terse verses Mark tells of a Jesus on the move, who undertakes the journey to the epiphanic locale to have that most paradoxical (and religiously problem-posing) experience—a private epiphany. Whereas in Matthew’s and Luke’s revised versions of Mark’s narrative the baptism is depicted more as a moment of public proclamation of Jesus’ identity to John’s cohort of fans, in Mark’s it is a “secret epiphany”—Jesus alone sees the heavens split open (the curtain must be opened for one to peer into God’s dwelling), and the spirit descend. It is to him alone that the deity, visible both through the split veil and the ornithomorphic realm-traversing spirit, declares “you are my son, the beloved; in you I have been well pleased” (1:11). This narrative neatly unites one divine ἐπιφάνεια with another—God appears to affirm that the Jesus who has just shown up in public is divine, a son of a divine being (hence one epiphany is attested to by another). The completion of an epiphany narrative should be the act of προσκύνησι—prostrating homage and worship—but the Gospel according to Mark has a different plot structure in mind, whereby that act will be delayed for fourteen chapters. Mark’s literary peek-a-boo plot was aptly captured by Martin Dibelius’s description of the work as the “book of secret epiphanies”—a deliberate oxymoron meant to describe an architectonically oxymoronic text. Mark transfers the epiphany from a crowd scene (which he himself has set up in 1:5, where he describes the literally incredible cast of folks who flocked to John at the Jordan) to Jesus alone (as we have noted), because he wishes his text, and not the historical event of baptism by John, to be epiphanic, a revelation directed not to the damp crowd on the banks of the Jordan, but to Mark’s readers, who will watch in privileged amusement when in the scenes that follow human beings will continue to engage in a different form of manifestation—of their own ignorance in the face of the son of God. None will understand the message of the baptismal epiphany shared in winked collusion by the reader and Mark, and all—even
Jesus’ closest friends, the disciples—will misidentify him. But intercalated into narratives of missed and occluded epiphanies of Jesus as God’s son are successful epiphanies to demons and unclean spirits, who echo the divine epiphanic acclamation (“οἶδα σὲ τις εἶ, ὁ ἄγιος τοῦ θεοῦ!” “I know who you are—the holy one of God!” [1:24]), and even assume the proper post-epiphanic position of prostration, such as the man with the “legion” of unclean spirits who runs up in order to fall down (καὶ ἵνα τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἔδραμεν καὶ προσεκύνησεν αὐτῷ καὶ κράξας φωνῆς μεγάλης λέγει: ‘τί ἐμοί καὶ σοί, Ἰησοῦ υἱὸ τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ υἱόστου;’ “And after seeing Jesus from afar he ran and prostrated himself in worship to him, and crying out in a loud voice said: ‘what business do you have with me, Jesus, son of the highest God?’” [5:6]).

Mark sets up a perfect scene for the resolution of the unresolved epiphany Jesus poses on the landscape of the gospel in the passage we call the Transfiguration. Taking place on a mountain, with heavenly assistants and luminescent robes, the same divine voice from the baptism addresses his identity-disclosure message to Jesus’ best friends: Peter, James, and John. But our epiphanic expectation is thwarted, for what occurs instead is another colossal missed opportunity (9:7). No, the proper response in Mark’s gospel to the unacknowledged epiphany of Jesus, God’s Son, takes place in the most unlikely place of the mocking of Jesus, where the Roman cohort dress him in a preposterous parody of royal regalia and offer this object of their scorn the completely inadvertent but actually proper, even exaggerated, προσκύνησις, “act of prostration” (τιθέντες τα γόνατα προσεκύνησεν αὐτῷ [15:19]). The final denouement of this mini-epic of epiphanic eclipse is the famous statement of the centurion at the death of Jesus: “And the king in reply will say to them ‘truly I say to you, inasmuch as you did this for one of these the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me’” (Mt 25:37–40).

In a lovely ironic reversal of religious expectations, this passage, with which we may conclude, defines the Christian life as one of calculated yet highly profitable missed epiphanies that lead to an active προσκύνησις of love and service for the one who remains tantalizingly hidden from view. ☐

**THE SONG OF GOD AMONG US**

Lest the word be far from us,
God prepared his coming.
One who longed to share our fate
made with us his dwelling.
There among you is one you do not know.
Who is everywhere at hand,
who is wholly human,
one who goes unrecognized,
silent, never spoken.
There among you is one you do not know.

Continued on page 38
Each quarter at a Wednesday luncheon, the Dean convenes several colleagues from different areas of study to discuss a recent faculty work. Last spring, the Forum brought historian of religions Wendy Doniger and political philosopher Jean Elshtain into discussion over Professor Doniger’s book The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

COMMENTARY
Jean Bethke Elshtain

Like its author, The Bedtrick: Tales of Sex and Masquerade is complex, fascinating, and full of pizzazz. I confess that I am relieved Professor Doniger’s friend Professor David Grene convinced her that no one would read a two-thousand-page book! Having just completed a behemoth volume of my own, I am now advised by my publisher that no one nowadays wants to read an eight-hundred-page book, so I am going through the agony of slicing and dicing off at least two hundred pages. I mention this because it is a preliminary to a confession, namely, that I accepted Professor Doniger’s gracious invitation to do some skipping about. She writes: “Readers impatient with this agenda”—which I will note in a moment—“and those who want to cut to the chase to find out why they should bother to read the stories at all, can always skip to the conclusions of each chapter, then to the sections on approaches, and finally to the summary conclusion of the book.” My problem was not impatience, but time, so I did do quite a bit of skipping, then backtracking, then moving forward again. But the stories are so wonderful and so wonderfully told by Professor Doniger that The Bedtrick in its entirety is primus inter pares on my list of summer reading. The devil is in the details here and the details are delightful.

Professor Doniger explains her subject matter and approach in her preface. She tells us that The Bedtrick is about sex—not gender, specifically lying about sex and telling the difference, or not, as the case may be. This I found refreshing because most of the literature I read has so subsumed sex into gender that it loses sight of embodiment. One is presented with an overly socialized human subject—one entirely constructed as if our bodies are mere appendages (à la Descartes) or nuisances (à la my mother).

Doniger’s book is about mythology, not social theory—though there is some of that; not theology—though there is some of that; not literary theory—though there is some of that; not psychoanalysis—though there is some of that, and so on. She is interested in doubles, shadows, and masquerades; in poems, novels, and treatises; in jingles, operas, and serenades; in cartoons and Hollywood B movies, which further endeared her to my heart as I, too, am a fan of wonderful, bad Hollywood stuff. In her words: “...this book regards the entire world as its oyster and utilizes the irritating grains of sand consisting of a number of different methods to extract the string of narrative pearls.” This puts me in mind of the great Hannah Arendt, who when asked to describe her approach or method—a word she rather disliked—charmingly dubbed it “pearl fishing.” One dives in, she said, not knowing quite what one will come up with. The important point is to remain open to one’s subject matter, to see where it is going.

This Dean’s Forum took place on May 23, 2001, at a Wednesday lunch in Swift Common Room.
A bedtrick, just to be sure everyone’s in on the joke, is “sex with a partner who pretends to be someone else. . . .”
Mythologies are one way human beings have conjured with the human/not-human.
... in some cases, the real trickster is not the person deceiving but the person being deceived.
or some parts of ourselves, seem to want to play one part at a time and to keep the separate selves separate, validated by different people. This involves us in another paradox: though we may want to find a single person to perceive all of us at once, rather than being seen in fragments, one part at a time, yet we reserve the right to be as many separate people as we are.” That may be the condition of modernity, or whatever period we are currently in. Perhaps that search for a singularity of a being who will do all of those things for us denies the multiplicity of parts that we are: Sanskritist, woman, insomniac—Professor Doniger begins to describe herself. Can a single relationship encompass all of these? We want to believe it can. But we have long doubted it and even mocked it. Here I think of Thomas Carlyle’s famously acerbic commentary on the entwined marriage of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, which he describes as “two typewriters beating as one.”

That said, let me add the following: From the woman side of things, much of the yearning for an encompassing singularity flows from the destructive ways in which woman has been defined and split mythologically and culturally. There is the woman one marries and the woman one sleeps with, or would prefer to sleep with. Madonna and whore puts this in a way that does not begin to capture the subtleties and permutations, but perhaps crudely grabs the point and the problem.

In Edith Wharton’s great novel The Age of Innocence, her protagonist, Newland Archer, who is engaged to a girl who is neither very bright nor very exciting but a good girl acceptable to Society, finds himself smitten, head over heels in fact, by the mysterious and somewhat ‘damaged’ Countess Olenska, who has fled a destructive marriage to a European count. In a colloquy between the two in a carriage—they steal a few precious moments here and there—she seeks to clarify what it is he wants: “So you would have me for your mistress, then?” she asks. And Archer, who is the true Romantic of the two, cries out agonizedly: “I want a world in which these words—wife, mistress—no longer exist.” And the far harder-headed Countess Olenska replies: “Oh, my dear, and what world would that be?”

We will never be in a world without categories. The question is what sorts of categories and to what ends? Do they call us to the ill use of others? Do they provide a way to distinguish ill from good or ethically responsible use, if you will? These are basic Augustinian questions. Bedtricks are tricky in this regard. Some of the stories in Professor Doniger’s book seem to me to constitute instances of ill use, in which cruelty or cruel trickery dominates as a motif. In others this is by no means obvious. The tricks, instead, are life-saving and affirming. For example: The pretend Martin Guerre of the book and film helps to bring his own brand of joie de vivre as a responsible husband and father to a wife who had been frustrated and thought herself a lonely widow. Indeed, he brings this to the entire village, all of whom, including the priest, are quite prepared to be gulled. For the new Martin Guerre is a big improvement on the old one who was severe, loveless, and, we are led to believe, cruel. And what—or where—is the big sin in that? There is none that I can see. I think Martin Luther would agree.

I hope I have said enough to indicate what a beguiling book Professor Doniger has written.

RESPONSE

Wendy Doniger

I am so grateful to Professor Elshtain for her generous reading, taking my book to all sorts of places I never dreamed it could go—such as the philosophy of Pope John Paul II, whom I never thought of as a conversation partner in this book, or Charles Taylor, with his (I only now recognize) highly relevant politics of religion. Professor Elshtain and I talked together once about sexual lying apropos Bill Clinton, whose impeachment then seemed imminent. I argued, as I did in The Bedtrick, that everyone lies about sex, and she argued that the president should not lie about anything. I thought then that I would love to have her reaction to the more extensive argument, and now at last she has agreed to supply it. She knows a lot of great stories that I don’t know, and some great lines, too, of which “two typewriters that beat as one” is perhaps my favorite.
. . . when each woman fights her way out of that male-imposed dichotomy, some of them will find that they do not in fact want to be one thing, but many things . . .

I particularly like the several aspects of the issue of multiplicity that she has raised. On the methodological level, the ten different approaches do, as she notes, raise different questions; but together they also implicitly argue for what her colleague Chris Gamwell keeps trying to persuade me to regard as a single method: the eclectic method. This argument finds a nice parallel in Professor Elshtain's suggestion that many women's desire to be viewed as one thing is in part a reaction against their perception of being split (by men) into many things, such as virgin/whore, against their will. And I wonder if, when each woman fights her way out of that male-imposed dichotomy, some of them will find that they do not in fact want to be one thing, but many things, as many women now do—or, in Gamwellian terms, to be the one thing that is many things, eclecticism again.

Professor Elshtain's closing remarks about the ethics of the bedtrick, her insight that some of the tricks are cruel but others are life-saving—a vindication of Clinton's lies, perhaps! Not life-saving but presidency-saving, even nation-saving!—inspired me to think more than I had about the ethical arguments embedded in the book, of which the four most directly relevant are that a great deal of human suffering is caused when people do one of the following:

1. tell self-serving lies
2. legislate different social privileges for men and for women
3. disenfranchise homosexuals
4. attempt to enforce monogamy universally

And there are permutations. (2) and (4) combine in the judgment that it is unfair to insist that women be monogamous, men polygamous. In fact some people of both genders are, and some are not, monogamous by nature, and type A should not marry type B; indeed, type B should not marry at all. (1) and (4) combine in the judgment that monogamy makes sexual liars. (1) and (2) combine in the judgment that sexism forces women to lie (what James Scott calls “the weapons of the weak”) and torments men who fear that their women are lying about the paternity of their children. (1) and (3) combine to force homosexuals in many situations to lie (or at least to remain in the closet). And so forth. The stories in The Bedtrick document both the human suffering that has resulted from some of these lies and the human ingenuity that, through creative lying, has righted the wrongs inflicted by some cultures upon some individuals. I really did not see that until Professor Elshtain pointed it out, but it is there in the book if you look for it.

The Bedtrick
TALES OF SEX & MASQUERADE

WENDY DONIGER

University of Chicago Press, 2000
CRITERION 33

ALUMNI NEWS

REV. STEVEN H. WARE BAILEY, past Brauer Fellow, has been elected moderator-elect of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches for 2002–03.


T. L. BRINK, M.A. 1974, Ph.D. 1978, Professor at Crafton Hills College in Yucaipa, California, has recently coauthored the fifth edition of Ways to the Center: A Textbook for a Course in World Religions. Review copies can be ordered from Wadsworth Publishing (religion@wadsworth.com).

LISA SOWLE CAHILL, M.A. 1973, Ph.D. 1976, J. Donald Monan Professor in the Department of Theology at Boston College, received the 2001 St. Elizabeth Seton Medal from the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, Ohio, on November 14, 2001. The medal is given each year to honor an outstanding woman scholar of theology.

JEFFREY CARLSON, M.A. 1980, Ph.D. 1988, has accepted the position of Professor of Theology and Dean of Rosary College of Arts and Sciences at Dominican University in River Forest, Illinois. Since 1999 he has served as Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at DePaul University in Chicago, where he is currently Associate Professor of Religious Studies.

REV. EDWARD E. CHIPMAN, who took classes at the Divinity School in the 1930s, turned one hundred years old on March 28, 2001. He preached for the occasion at a worship service at the American Baptist Church of Beatitudes in St. Petersburg, Florida. During the service, the Reverend Chipman was presented with a plaque from his friends at Roger Williams Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island.


EUGENE V. GALLAGHER, M.A. 1974, Ph.D. 1980, Rosemary Park Professor of Religious Studies at Connecticut College in New London, received the 2001 AAR Teaching Award. The award, in its second year, honors outstanding performance as a classroom teacher, development of effective teaching methods, ability to interest students in the field of religion, and a commitment to professional identity as a teacher of religion.

DAVID HEIN, M.A. 1977, Department Chair and Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland, has published a new article entitled “Hugh Lister (1901–44): Priest, Labor Leader, Combatant Officer” Anglican and Episcopal History 70 (September 2001): 353–74.

STEWART W. HERMAN, Ph.D. 1988, Assistant Professor at Concordia College in Morehead, Minnesota, has published Spiritual Goods: Faith Traditions and the Practice of Business (Society for Business Ethics, Philosophy Documentation Center, 2001). The work includes a set of essays recruited from scholars within Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism about the connection between belief, history, and normative business practice.

RICHARD HUTCH, M.A. 1971, Ph.D. 1974, Professor in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland in Australia, has been appointed Director of Studies in the Faculty of Arts at that institution for a term of two years, effective July 1, 2001.

DIANE JONTE-PACE, M.A. 1975, Ph.D. 1984, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Associate Vice Provost at Santa Clara University in California, has published a new book entitled Speaking the Unspeakable: Religion, Misogyny, and the Uncanny Mother in Freud’s Cultural Texts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).


JOHN H. MARTIN, Ph.D. 1953, was presented with the Brooklyn College Alumni Association Lifetime Achievement Award on September 30, 2001. After serving as a cryptographer for the U.S. Army Air Corps during and after Word War II, Mr. Martin began his teaching career as an instructor at the University of Richmond in Virginia, going on to serve as Associate Professor of English at Wilmington College in Ohio. In 1958 he was appointed Professor of Humanities at Corning Community College in New York, where in 1968 he became director of that institution’s Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., Library. He also served as library director at the Corning Museum of Glass from 1973–88, as well as Adjunct Professor of Japanese and Chinese Civilization in the graduate division of Elmira College in New York. In addition to serving in numerous leadership positions on nonprofit boards and committees, Mr. Martin has served for sixteen years as the editor of the Journal of Glass Studies. He has also published three books on the cultural aspects of Japan’s major cities, and a study on the restoration of the Corning Glass Museum after the 1972 flood in that city. Currently, Mr. Martin is an Elderhostel lecturer at the Thomas Watson Conference Center.

RICHARD E. MILLER, Ph.D. 1995, Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, has accepted, with Eric Meslin, coeditorship of the series Bioethics and the Humanities, forthcoming from Indiana University Press. His article “Aquinas and the Presumption against Killing and War” will appear in the Journal of Religion in April 2002.

PAUL PRIBBENOW, M.A. 1979, Ph.D. 1993, has been appointed President of Rockford College in Illinois.

MARK PHILIP REASONER, Ph.D. (New Testament/Early Christianity) 1990, Associate Professor at Bethel College in St. Paul, Minnesota, writes to tell us that he and four other Chicago alumni: Larry Bouchard, M.A. 1975, Ph.D. 1984, Associate Professor at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville; Joel Kaminsky, M.A. 1984, Ph.D. 1993, Assistant Professor of Religion and Biblical Literature at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts; Peter Paris, Ph.D. 1975, Elmer G. Homrichhausen Professor of Christian Social Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey; and Travis Kroeker, Ph.D. 1989, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, constituted five out of the twelve members of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, in autumn 2001.

JOHN G. STACKHOUSE, JR., Ph.D. 1987, Sangwoo Youjong Chee Professor of Theology and Culture at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, has edited No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals Encounter the World’s Religions (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001). This volume includes a response by Paul J. Griffiths, former professor in the Divinity School, as well as essays by two other Chicago alumni, Gerald McDermott and Richard Mouw.

VERNON K. ROBBINS, M.A. 1966, Ph.D. 1969, has been awarded the Winship Research Professorship in the Humanities at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, for 2001–04. He also traveled to South Africa to teach for a 1999–2002 Visiting Professorship at the University of Stellenbosch.

JAMES K. WELLMAN, JR., Ph.D. 1995, is Visiting Lecturer in the Comparative Religion Program at the University of Washington in Seattle and former director of the Young Adult Education Program at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. His book The Gold Coast Church and the Ghetto: Christ and Culture in Mainline Protestantism (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999), with a forward by Martin E. Marty, has been selected as the winner of the 2001 Francis Makemie Award by the Committee for the Presbyterian Historical Society. This award is given each year to the author of an outstanding published book in American Presbyterian or Reformed history.
RICHARD JOHN WIEBE, M.A. 1976, has been named Director of the Philosophy Program at Fresno Pacific University in California. Mr. Wiebe is also a research affiliate of the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff and of the Center for Diné Studies at Diné College in Tsaile, Arizona. Mr. Wiebe’s research is focused on American pragmatism, Zen Buddhism, Anabaptist Christianity, Navajo metaphysics, and American wilderness literature. With Linda Wallace of Bozeman, Montana, he is coexecutive director of the Biophilia Society, a nonprofit organization advocating biodiversity and grassroots environmentalism. Mr. Wiebe was the recipient of the 2001 Sierra Club, Tehipite Chapter, Outstanding Education Award for his environmental writing and work.


LOSSES

JOSEPH WILLIAM LETSON, B.D. 1956, engineer, passed away on September 18, 2001, in Springfield, Illinois. He is survived by his wife, Mary E. Osborne; his brother, Robert; two daughters, Joan P. Letson and Ruth Letson and her husband, François Dongo; three sons, Phillip, William and his wife, Amy, and Thomas and his wife, Joanne; and seven grandchildren.

DONOVAN SMUCKER, M.A. 1954, Ph.D. 1957, died on December 13, 2001, at the age of eighty-six. He served until 1981 as Professor of Social Sciences at Conrad Grebel College at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada. He balanced his career between social activism and scholarship. He is survived by his wife, Barbara; his daughter, Rebecca Smucker; two sons, Timothy and Thomas; seven grandchildren; and four great-grandchildren.

J. MELBURN SONESON, B.D. 1956, M.A. 1960, Ph.D. 1968, Professor Emeritus at North Park University, passed away on March 31, 2001, at the age of seventy-nine. Mr. Soneson was Professor of Philosophy and Religion at North Park College (now University) in Chicago from 1956 until his retirement in 1988. He is survived by his wife, Dagmar Soneson; two sons, Jerome and David; two daughters, Karen Coss and Janet Brook; and five grandchildren.

GERRIT JAN TENZYTHOFF, Ph.D. 1967, died on March 24, 2001. A native of the Netherlands, Mr. tenZythoff has been recognized as a righteous gentile as a result of his and his family’s heroic actions during World War II. His parents used their home to shelter Dutch Jews during the Nazi occupation of Holland, and he was later interned in a forced labor camp for his refusal to sign an agreement of solidarity with the Nazi party. In 1951, Mr. tenZythoff received a theological degree from the University of Utrecht. For the following nine years he and his wife lived among Dutch immigrant communities in Canada, working in a variety of social service and pastoral capacities. He received an additional master’s degree in theology from Union College at the University of British Columbia in 1957 and completed his Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in 1967. Mr. tenZythoff was hired in 1969 to head the new Department of Religious Studies at Southwest Missouri State University, which owes much of its present character to his guidance and vision. Mr. tenZythoff authored works on the Dutch reformed church and Dutch culture and life. His interests ranged widely, touching on a variety of aspects of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

AZUBA RUTH (SEAVER) WARD, M.A. 1928, died at the age of ninety-seven on October 14, 2001. As a young mother, Ms. Ward worked as head of school savings at the Springfield Institute for Savings in Massachusetts. Later she accepted a position as librarian at the Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York, which she held until her retirement in 1970. A woman of diverse interests and activities, retirement gave Ms. Ward time to devote to several genealogical research projects. Her completed books include The Ayers Family: Descendants of William Eayers of Londonderry, New Hampshire (1980); The Hatch Family: Descendants of Lewis Hatch of Lee, Massachusetts (1985); and The Descendants of Ephraim Durham of Guilford, Connecticut (2000). She is survived by two daughters, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.
sense of things. The world is too complex a place to try to decipher cold, as it were. Mind-sets point us in one direction or another. Because they determine what constitute good reasons and allow us to recognize the strength of arguments, perhaps one does not want to say that they themselves are rational. They are arational and stand outside of reason insofar as they determine in part what we find reasonable and what we do not. Or, better, perhaps we should say that mind-sets are prerational. Even so, not all mind-sets are on an equal plane. In some circumstances, for example, it is appropriate to be suspicious of conspiracies, in which case the paranoid may turn out to be right. The conspiratorial mind-set might also be appropriate for a CIA agent or police detective, allowing him or her to see things that the rest of us might miss—things that are really there. In this way, to compare the theistic mind-set with other mind-sets is by no means to patronize it, but to observe, with Pascal, that it is not an epistemic position at which we can arrive by simple argument. Perhaps one could judge mind-sets by their consequences—by the truth or falsity of the beliefs to which they give rise. But this would presuppose that we have some independent way of judging the truth-value of the consequences. Sometimes we may; sometimes we may not. (In any case, I do not want to suggest that there are not truth-values for these states of affairs independent of our mind-sets and the beliefs that they engender. The paranoid may be wrong or he may be right, but I do not want to say that his world is right for him, and ours for us.)

SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

I began with the problem of science and religion. For some, the two are incompatible and completely irreconcilable. But other, more recent thinkers see the two as fully compatible and argue for a close relation between them. As I said earlier, I am somewhat suspicious of these recent attempts to put science and religion together. The tools I developed earlier offer us a way to understand the tension between the two.

In order to illuminate the conflict between science and religion, let me begin by saying a bit more about science. I am skeptical of talking about science in general terms; it is a complex notion and there are significant differences from one science to another and from one time period to another. In particular, the question of the relation between science and religion differs enormously if one is talking about Bacon or Descartes or Newton, as opposed to a more recent figure. But if we acknowledge that we are talking about our own times, then it may be possible to give an account of at least one important strand of what science means for us today, a strand that one can probably trace back to the Enlightenment.

The conception of science I have in mind is nicely summarized in the course of a trial, McLean v. Arkansas, decided on January 5, 1982. This trial concerned Act 590 of 1981 of the General Assembly of the State of Arkansas, which mandated that “public schools within the State shall give balanced treatment to creation-science and to evolution-science.” Opponents of the law argued that creation-science is not science, but religion. The question of what constitutes science and how it differs from religion thus became one of the trial’s central issues and the main question addressed by Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science who testified as an expert witness for the plaintiffs. His testimony was reflected in the final decision of Judge William R. Overton; it included the following list of what he called “the essential characteristics of science”:

1. it is guided by natural law
2. it has to be explanatory by reference to natural law
3. it is testable against the empirical world
4. its conclusions are tentative, i.e., are not necessarily the final word
5. it is falsifiable

Implicit in this characterization of science are two different distinctions between science and religion—one that we might call metaphysical, the other more epistemological. The metaphysical distinction concerns allowable mechanisms in explaining phenomena in the physical world. In his testimony, Ruse made the following statement:

. . . The most important characteristic of modern science is that it depends entirely on the operation of blind, unchanging regularities in nature. . . . Therefore, any reliance on a supernatural force, a Creator intervening in a natural world by supernatural processes, is necessarily not science.”

A scientific explanation thus excludes God; it is cast entirely in terms of natural law. This calls to mind Laplace’s famous remark when asked where God appeared in his astronomy: “I have no need of that hypothesis in my system.”

A second, and perhaps related, feature of science—one that distinguishes it from religion—is the kind of evidence to
which it appeals. In explicating the testability of scientific theories, Judge Overton makes the following statement:

The creationists’ methods do not take data, weigh it against the opposing scientific data, and thereforer reach [their] conclusions. . . . Instead, they take the literal wording of the Book of Genesis and attempt to find scientific support for it.7

Here Judge Overton is saying that insofar as so-called creation scientists recognize revelation as a source of knowledge — indeed a source of knowledge that is prior to and, in a way, superior to reason and the senses — they are not doing science. By implication, real science does not recognize revelation as a source of knowledge. I do not want to say that science was always this way — that one cannot find scientists, such as Newton, who have a very different view of the subject — nor do I want to claim that all current scientists subscribe to this conception, but it certainly does have a significant following among many contemporary practitioners.

These, then, are two features of what might be called the secular scientific attitude: the explanation of phenomena in the world independent of any appeal to a divinity, and the rejection of revelation or its subordination to reason. There is an evident conflict between this way of looking at the world and the way the theist does. The latter sees God at work in the world, accepting revelation as a way of knowing what God is and how he works.

These two points of view — the secular scientific and the theistic — exhibit all the characteristics of what I have called mind-sets, cognitive states that structure experience and the space of reasons, states that determine the way one sees the world. The same holds true for the secular scientific worldview in contrast with the theistic worldview. Different and incompatible mind-sets cause people to see the world in different and incompatible ways.

The person with the theistic mind-set recognizes revelation to be a real source of knowledge. Different religions (and even different people within the same religious tradition) may differ about particular claims to revealed knowledge, or the interpretation of particular claims to revealed knowledge, but they will still agree that revelation is a source of real knowledge. (Perhaps this is not true of all conceivable religions, but it does seem to be true empirically about the major Abrahamic religions. This is good enough for my argument, which is concerned with the conflicts that are there, not the harmonies that there might be.) The person who does not share the theistic mind-set, on the other hand, will simply not recognize the authority of revelation, or will subordinate revelation to reason. The person with the theistic mind-set sees God in the world and evidences for God even in the natural world. (Again, this is an empirical claim about theists in our culture.) According to the secular scientific mind-set, the very same things that the theist sees as evidence for God are seen as evidences of a world independent of God. The evolution of life in the world through natural selection can be seen by the secular scientist as a purely natural process that excludes God from the world, and by the theist as the ingenious way God works in the world. The Big Bang can be seen by the secular scientist as a purely naturalistic way of explaining the origin of the cosmos, and by the theist as the echo of the biblical creation story. The theist and the secular scientist structure their experience and the space of logical argument in fundamentally different and incompatible ways. (Again, I am talking about theists and secular scientists as they exist now, in our world.)

Because we are talking about mind-sets, there is no easy way to argue for the validity of one position over the other. As I noted above, mind-sets are prerational: they are the glasses through which we view the world, glasses which determine the evidence we see and the arguments we accept. Because of this, the theist cannot directly address the rationality of the secular scientist’s position. The arguments that the theist can offer simply can gain no foothold on the secular scientist’s views. The theist can recognize the evidence for God’s existence and his presence in the world. His faith is not necessarily a blind faith, but a faith based on experience, argument, revelation. But because the cogency of this evidence depends on viewing it from the vantage point of his own theistic mind-set, these arguments simply do not move his secular opponent. At the same time, the secular scientist cannot make his own arguments convince the theist either. While the vision of a world without God is compelling to him from within his own mind-set, there is no way of getting his theistic opponent to see the wisdom of his view. In a very real sense, the secular scientific view is as much a question of faith as is the theistic mind-set insofar as it cannot be established at the most fundamental level by rational argument alone.

What, then, are we left with? The theist can certainly make his peace with modern science, enter into dialogue with it, and even collaborate with it, as Ian Barbour and his Barbourians urge us all to do. But there remains a tension between the scientific spirit and the religious. Perhaps there is not genuine warfare between science and religion, as Draper and White predicted, but there is at the very least a deep gap between the two.

Can we bridge the gap? It will not be easy; argumentation by itself will not suffice. What is required is a kind of conversion experience, whereby the heart is moved and either the scientist comes to see God and his revelations in the universe, or the theist comes to see the stark and godless beauty that the scientist sees in his world.
But even if we could, should we even try to bridge the gap? Perhaps it is better to leave the two sides as they are, uneasily regarding one another across the chasm. Perhaps it is better for each side to have the other around in order to limit its own certainty and self-satisfaction. In a world in which conspiracies do happen, it is probably good for those of us who see a world of reason and light to have others around who see a world of dark conspiracies to remind us that we may be wrong, just as it is good for those with a conspiratorial worldview to have the rest of us around to remind them that their view might be mere paranoia. In the complex social world in which we live, it is probably good to have both political liberals and conservatives to challenge each other's most basic assumptions, and to prevent either from becoming too lazy and complacent in their views. Similarly, it is probably good for both those who subscribe to a secular scientific worldview and for theists to have one another around to remind themselves that, for all they know, the world might be a very different place than they imagine.

ENDNOTES


2. Barbour, 2.

3. References to the *Pensés* are by section number, which I will give in the text. I am quoting from the translation of A. J. Krailsheimer (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1966), who follows the ordering established by Louis Lafuma. The reader should be warned that not all editions of the *Pensés*, in French or in English, follow this ordering.


5. Ruse, 318.

6. Ruse, 301.

7. Ruse, 320.
CRITERION solicits your participation in keeping the Divinity School up to date on alumni professional accomplishments. We also invite letters to the editor. Please use the form below, or write to us separately, and mail to the address listed below.

Name

Divinity School degree(s) and year(s) received

Address

Is this a new address?

Email address

School (and Department) or Organization

Professional Title

Recent professional news you would like noted in the next issue of Criterion, e.g., new position, promotion, book, article, grant. (Please include bibliographic information on publications.)