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Essay by Steven Wingate

Rethinking the Literature of Faith



"We don't want editors thinking it's *that* kind of book," said my then-agent.

This was in 2015, as she explained why she wanted to eliminate the word *souls* from my novel's title. It made the book sound too religious, she said, which would limit the number and kind of editors she could approach. Then she took it a step farther, suggesting that I should also remove *souls* and *soul* from the entire text as well.

Like a fool desperate to sell a novel, I complied. I took *souls* out of my title and removed almost every instance from the manuscript, transforming a tale that recognized and explored the spiritual dimensions of human life into a self-censored and utterly secular one. She never sold the novel. I can't blame that on the extreme surgery I performed, but with hindsight, I know taking the soul out of that novel is why I've never returned to it.

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At the time, I did it willingly. I shared my agent's disdain for *that* kind of book, because "*that* kind" meant the Christian kind, and the mainstream literary world frowns mightily on writing that calls itself Christian. It's fine to write from a Christian perspective, provided you're not too obvious about it and don't try to convert people. It's a "don't ask, don't tell" kind of world in the publishing industry, and many writers of faith have taken on that attitude themselves.

"Don't announce your faith, but let people discover it" was a dictum I heard multiple times at a conference dedicated to faith-based writing that I went to a few years back. Another version was "Be a writer who's Christian, not a Christian writer."

This echoed a quote from Thomas Merton—the '60s-era monk who built bridges between Christianity and Eastern faith traditions in books like *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*—that I once had taped to my computer. Merton advised in his 1961 essay collection *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

A Catholic poet should be an apostle by being first of all a poet, not try to be a poet by being first of all an apostle. For if he presents himself to people as a poet, he is going to be judged as a poet and if he is not a good one his apostolate will be ridiculed.

For nearly a decade, I looked at this quote every day to remind myself that I should be "a writer who's Christian, not a Christian writer." The Anglican C.S. Lewis said as much in "Christian Apologetics" from his posthumously published collection *God in the Dock*: "What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity *latent*."

The idea is that you can so slyly incorporate your Christianity into mainstream literature that people don't have to notice it. They could read a whole novel—one from which the word *souls* had been scrubbed, for instance—and not even be aware of its Christian underpinnings unless they themselves were oriented in that direction. This approach encourages writers of faith to bury what they believe in their books like a secret code that only the initiated will understand.

But here's what I've come to realize about myself: Writing such a book is an attempt at passing—pretending to be mainstream and secular while actually being religious at heart—and I want nothing to do with passing of any kind. There's a long history of racial passing in America, written about brilliantly by Charles Chesnutt, Langston Hughes, Philip Roth, and many others. And as a Christian human being, I accomplish nothing whatsoever by pretending to downplay my faith.

Burying my religion to sell a novel? That's bad faith—or no faith at all.

Of course, the publishing industry's perspective reflects deepening cultural divisions—between evangelical and progressive pundits, say, or traditional religions and spiritualism. We are far from the 1950s heyday of the great "Catholic Renaissance" authors I admire and emulate. Flannery O'Connor, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, J.F. Powers, Walker Percy, and James Agee (an Episcopalian, but Catholic enough) all had mainstream success as writers with a specifically Christian identity and unabashedly Christian concerns. They could use the word *souls* with impunity and without irony. Western literary critics and media pundits had not yet come to see religion as a completely private matter, so applying religious perspectives to broader social issues didn't seem strange or an affront to secular readers. The wall separating personal faith and public expression of it was not as high as it is today.

"When there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only," wrote Flannery O'Connor, "the spiritual is apt gradually to be lost." This often-quoted line is from "The Church and the Fiction Writer" in her posthumous 1969 collection *Mystery and Manners*. Replace "certain type of life" with "certain type of book," and O'Connor's words convey just how much is at stake when the literature of faith is segregated from the mainstream.

When authors like me accept such a divide, we undercut our most deeply held feelings about the world. We may do it

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unconsciously, just as many editors and publishing executives have internalized their own biases against faith-based writing. Regardless of who's to blame, no writer should be hobbled in this way.

The *souls* incident of 2015 wasn't the first time I'd run into resistance from an agent about material that was deemed too religious. Near the end of an earlier novel (which I also revised for secular audiences five years before), one character has a vision of God—a strange deity she sees as a cross between John F. Kennedy and Mahatma Gandhi, but a vision of God nonetheless. A different agent told me this ending was “insufficiently redemptive for your female protagonist.”

That boggled my mind. What *would* have been more redemptive? Leaving her brand-new husband and going to work on Wall Street? I mentioned this incident to a writer friend who then told me one of her own stories. A secular agent had read her manuscript and suggested that, because one of her characters tries to talk another out of an abortion, she should work with a Christian agent instead. This writer was an atheist with no sneaky Christian message whatsoever. The agent made an assumption she was writing *that* kind of book based on a single aspect of it.

No one benefits by pretending that the cultural chasm isn't growing wider, yet the more I write, the less sense it makes for me to try pretending to be what I'm not—or to try pretending not to be what I am. I've not only decided to keep the soul in my work, but also found myself newly energized by something I didn't expect. In the middle of writing this essay—between sending it to *Talking Writing* and learning it would be published—I discovered that I could participate in the spirit of the Catholic literary renaissance after all. The only thing stopping me was myself.

Last summer, I revisited a novel I'd been sitting on, one I'd been hesitant about sending to New York agents because I knew they'd find it far too Jesus-y. Many of my characters feel Jesus and look for him and (perhaps) see him. His name isn't uttered ironically, and those who believe in Him aren't quaint reminders of a yesterday when people believed in something.

I'd been willing to change other novels to satisfy the publishing business, but I wasn't changing this one. If I die and can take only one thing I've written to my grave, I reasoned, this would be it. So, I put aside my dreams of New York publishing and sent the novel to a university press with a fiction series that seemed an ideal fit. It was the first submission I'd made since I began writing the essay you're reading—and when the press recently accepted the novel, a dam of resentment broke inside me.

Now, instead of lamenting a lost connection between the literature of faith and the mainstream, I want to reinvent that connection on my own terms. Authors of faith can talk about things that matter to all of society without being shunted into a smaller, self-contained conversation. The spirit that led James Agee to write *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his madly structured portrait of Depression-era Southern sharecroppers with photographer Walker Evans, doesn't have to die because the publishing industry finds it convenient to separate the religious from the secular. Agee's desire to “perceive simply the cruel radiation of what is,” as he put it, extends to *all* human lives, not only those who share his faith.

This is the same spirit that allowed Flannery O'Connor to present such a kaleidoscopic view of believers and unbelievers in the South, and Jon Hassler—a more recent Catholic writer who died in 2008—to do the same with his Staggerford novels set in Minnesota. It allows Ron Hansen to write about nuns in *Mariette in Ecstasy* and jazz-age hedonists in *A Wild Surge of Guilty Passion*. It's why the stories of Andre Dubus II rattle with frustration at our inability to transcend or even comprehend the needy world before us.

Agee's “cruel radiation” falls on everyone, from saint to atheist, and writers of faith have the right and obligation to portray the effects of that radiation on the body, mind, and—dare I say it—soul. As a writer of faith, I not only can but must insist that the way I see the human predicament isn't limited to believers alone. The perceived divide between secular literature and literature informed by faith must be overcome—personally, idiosyncratically, and continuously—by authors who refuse to accept it.

To C.S. Lewis, writing nearly three-quarters of a century ago, keeping his faith “latent” was preferable. Today, faith is already so latent in Western culture that to make it any more so merely denies it, ceding all conversation about how we live to secular voices. In order to maintain both my faith and my commitment to literature, I must feel free to write *that*

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kind of book—the kind that shows us who we are without covering up the belief that shapes our collective world.

Publishing Information

- "Sentences" in *New Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton (New Directions, 1961).
- "Christian Apologetics" in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* by C.S. Lewis (Eerdmans, 1970).
- "The Church and the Fiction Writer" in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* by Flannery O'Connor (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).
- *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans (Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

Art Information

- [Photo of C.S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man*](#) [5] © Caleb Woods; public domain.



Steven Wingate is a multi-genre author whose work ranges from poetry to gaming. His books include the short story collection *Wifeshopping* (2008) and the novel *Of Fathers and Fire*, forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press as part of its Flyover Fiction series. His digital works include the memoir *daddy labyrinth* and the interactive novel *Boulderpeople*, forthcoming from Choice of Games in 2018. He has taught at the University of Colorado, the College of the Holy Cross, and South Dakota State University, where he's currently associate professor of English.

For more information, see [Steven Wingate's website](#) [6] and follow him on Twitter [@stwingate](#) [7].

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