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## Richard Wright's *Pagan Spain*: Reading Spain through the American South

When Richard Wright arrived in Seville in the spring of 1955 to observe Holy Week there, the first thing he commented on was shop windows filled with “tiny robed figures with tall, pointed hoods that gave me a creepy feeling, for these objects reminded me of the Ku Klux Klan of the Old American South.” He surmised that “it must have been from here that the Ku Klux Klan regalia had been copied” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 280). Wright may or may not have been correct that the Seville Catholic symbolism was the source for the Klan’s symbolism, much of which came instead from the assumed mysteries of a Celtic religion. The Klan, in any event, would hardly have admitted to borrowing from Catholics. Wright’s book, *Pagan Spain*, is, nonetheless, a powerful expression of connections between Spain and the American South.

This essay will argue that Wright saw the Spain he visited in the 1950s through the lens of the American South in which he was raised and gained his purpose as a writer. That South was a Jim Crow, white supremacist society; but it was also a hegemonic evangelical Protestant culture that suffused both white and black life with certain forms of spirituality. In Spain he recognized some of those similarities with the South; others he portrayed in his text but without self-consciously naming them. A careful study of the text suggests the importance of civil religion and popular religion as the defining connections.

To raise religion rather than race as a defining issue for *Pagan Spain* seems surprising. Wright’s memoir *Black Boy* outlines the brutal and demeaning education he received as a black southerner living at the apogee of racial segregation. While we know we must be careful in using that memoir as the full story of his childhood and youth, its undeniable power comes from its single-minded focus on the tragic results of the Jim Crow system. But Wright finds that race is not an

issue in the Spain of the 1950s. After his first encounters with Spanish youth, he notes “they had no racial consciousness whatsoever” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 15).

Wright’s career in the 1950s has come under increasing scrutiny, mostly because of studies of the literature of the African diaspora. His other non-fiction writings of the 1950s, *Black Power* (1954) and *The Color Curtain* (1956), are about non-Western cultures and his explorations of race in Africa and Asia in post-colonial times, as he struggled to position his experience, and those of African Americans in general, in relation to these worlds. But little of this perspective enters *Pagan Spain*. From the beginning, religion is Wright’s key focus. On his first visit he is awakened by “the melancholy tolling of church-bells” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 5). Two young men befriend him, taking him to their cathedral. Wright is impressed by their religiosity. “To these boys it was unthinkable that there was no God and that we were not all His sons,” he writes (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 11-12). As he walks down the aisle of the cathedral, he admits to feeling “a mood of awe” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 12). That feeling turns more skeptical, if not offended, when he sees a mummified corpse of a bishop displayed in a glass coffin.

Wright’s daughter Julia once observed that “the very aspects of suffering, oppression, and religious mysticism Wright is most sensitive to in Spain are those which molded his own oppressed youth in the American South” (Wright, introduction, *Pagan Spain* xii). And yet Wright himself confesses that “I have no religion in the formal sense of the word” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 21). I want to go deeper into the religious context of the South that produced Wright to explore how he reads Spain through the South.

In *Black Boy* Wright recounts several formative religious experiences. One is exposure to the millennialist faith of his grandmother, who attended the Seventh-day Adventist Church. This denomination was not a mainstream church among either white or black Protestants in the South; it was part of a culture of apocalypse that was deeply rooted among poor and working class southerners. It was a world-denying faith that taught of the wickedness of human society and the need to retreat from it and build enclaves of faith from which to wait for the end of the world. Wright recalled that the church he attended “expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth, of

a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent, of voices speaking out of clouds, of men walking upon water, of God riding whirlwinds, of water changing into wine, of the dead rising and living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking . . ." (Wright, *Black Boy* 113). He appreciated "the vivid language of the sermons" and was "pulled toward emotional belief," but full emotional commitment and intellectual belief never came (Wright, *Black Boy* 113).

Popular religion figures prominently in both *Black Boy* and *Pagan Spain* as dramatic experiences. Popular religion rests on the belief in supernatural outcroppings that people see outside the church doors, in everyday life. In the South, devils can instigate sinful behavior, angels may appear to give hope, and doomed lives may be saved by faith. Writer Frances Mayes, who grew up in Georgia before earning fame as author of *Under the Tuscan Skies*, recalls the "Jesus Is Coming" signs tacked on trees in the South of her childhood. "Repent" said another (Mayes, *Under the Tuscan Skies* 262). These signs marked the southern landscape as a sacred one because of common folks claiming it was so with religious signs. Just as "colored" and "white" signs became a powerful part of the visual landscape of white supremacy, "Get Right with God" signs claimed the land for a rigorous and spirit-filled religion.

The spirituality Wright experienced in his grandmother's house was a hard and demanding one. "There were prayers at sunup and sundown, at the breakfast table, followed by a bible verse from each member of the family," he recalled (Wright, *Black Boy* 122). When someone in Spain is impressed with a biblical reference Wright makes, he notes that "I was weaned on it," meaning the Bible (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 49). He had to attend ritualistic all-night prayer meetings and religious revivals. Out of this experience, he came to appreciate "the hymns for their sensual caress," but this memory allows him to connect the religion of his childhood to sexuality, an interpretation of religion and sexuality that he would explore more fully and somewhat luridly in *Pagan Spain*. "It was possible," he wrote in *Black Boy*, "that the sweetly sonorous hymns stimulated me sexually, and it might have been that my fleshly fantasies, in turn, having as their foundation my already inflated sensibility, made me love the masochistic prayers." He went on to wonder if "the church's spiritual life" was "polluted by my base yearnings, by the leaping hunger of my blood for the flesh," because he gazed yearningly for hours at the elder's wife during prayer meetings. He converted his desires into "a concrete religious symbol":

it was “a black imp with horns; a long, curving, forked tail; cloven hoofs, a scaly, naked body; wet, sticky fingers, moist, sensual lips; and lascivious eyes feasting upon the face of the elder’s wife . . .” (Wright, *Black Boy* 124-25).

Wright’s sexual fantasies in church provided an unorthodox, if life-affirming, memory of his time in the southern black millennial world and softened the rigor of the demanding spirituality around him. In addition to experiencing Adventist religion, he also attended a black Methodist church, a denomination that was one of the mainstream church groups among southern blacks and, more broadly, Methodism was part of an evangelical hegemony among whites and blacks. Two points are worth noting in terms of his later observations of Spain, and both relate to a revival he attended. The congregation had targeted young men like Richard, hoping they would respond to the revival’s emotional drama of salvation seeking. “We young men had been trapped by the community, the tribe in which we lived and of which we were a part.” To say no to conversion was to reject the community’s feelings, “placing ourselves in the position of moral monsters.” The second point to highlight is the role of mothers in this ceremonial scene. The mothers ringed the young men targeted for conversion. “Now,” the minister preached, “you good sweet mothers, symbols of Mother Mary at the tomb, kneel and pray for your sons, your only sons” (Wright, *Black Boy* 166-69). Wright’s mother, the symbolic biblical mother, emerges as a central spiritual figure in the essential southern religious act of redemption.

Wright’s experience in a Jim Crow society ultimately raises an issue profoundly rooted in religion, albeit not in the church, and it also centered around his mother. Wright’s mother was debilitated during his youth, often enduring enormous pain, with young Richard holding her hand. “I merely waited upon her knowing that she was suffering.” The word *suffering* reverberates through *Black Boy* and *Pagan Spain*, as the key link between the Jim Crow South and Franco’s Spain. “My mother’s suffering grew into a symbol in my mind,” he writes, “gathering to itself all the poverty, the ignorance, the helplessness; the painful, baffling, hunger-ridden days and hours; the restless moving, the futile seeking, the uncertainty, the fear, the dread; the meaningless pain and the endless suffering” (Wright, *Black Boy* 111).

Wright admits in *Black Boy* that his mother’s life, her suffering, “set the emotional tone of my life,” determining his attitude toward events that had not yet happened, including trips to visit Spain. Wright in-

sisted that “the spirit I had caught gave me insight into the sufferings of others,” making him analyze every circumstance “and lay it open to the core of suffering” (Wright, *Black Boy* 111-12). When someone in Spain asks Wright what his book will say, he responds: “I shall tell them that the people of Spain are suffering.” In recounting a conversation with a barber, he writes about telling him “the thing that worries me about Spain is the suffering” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 92, 200). It was a logical conclusion from the trajectory he outlined for his life’s work in *Black Boy*. He portrays the poverty and backwardness of the nation, the pervasiveness of deprived young women openly serving as prostitutes, the oppression of Protestants, and the authoritarianism of General Francisco Franco. But he singles out the Roman Catholic Church as a fellow traveler with the latter, a source of suffering because of its collaboration with a tyrannical political state.

Here we meet Wright’s major insight in *Pagan Spain*: Spain sees itself as a sacred state. He does not use the term, but he in fact analyzes a conservative Spanish civil religion that saw transcendent meaning in national experience. Early in the book he tells of meeting a young woman named Carmen who shares with him a political catechism from the Falangists, the fascist political authority that gave ideological meaning to Franco’s regime. It was intended to inculcate the principles of fascism in girls from age nine upward. Wright effectively used excerpts from the catechism to show the sacred sanction given to the state. The catechism begins with references to Spain’s destiny to influence the world. Spain is “our Motherland,” the catechism intoned, “because we feel ourselves incorporated in its destiny in the world” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 23). What was that destiny? The Falangist answer was “to include all men in a common movement for salvation.” Spain would achieve its destiny through “the influence it exercises over other nations and also by conquest” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 68-69). This is messianic Christianity, and Wright shows readers evidence of its reach into Spanish society. The civil guard openly displays machine guns in all public places, and Wright seems especially bothered that armed guards surround the statue of the Virgin in Seville’s Holy Week processions. He sees churches across Spain with the names of fascist leaders etched in stone on them. The Valley of the Fallen displays the monumental tributes that express a civil religion’s ability to project religious-political connections on a grand scale. Loyalist prisoners during the Spanish Civil War built this huge granite shrine on a mountainside, with a large crypt topped by a 500-foot

cross. Christian icons, statues, and artwork are displayed in a triumphal mix. The basilica here was built to be Franco's burial spot.

Wright understood the power of blurred lines between the state and the sacred and did not always see them as so negative as in Spain. He went to the Gold Coast in Africa in the 1950s, at the invitation of Kwame Nkrumah. Wright observed that Nkrumah's popular nationalist movement had "fused tribalism with modern politics," creating "a new kind of religion." He saw this new form as necessary as Africa went through the transition from traditionalism, as represented by pre-modern tribal structures, to modernity. His writings on Africa advised Nkrumah that "It's a secular religion that you must slowly create" (Wright, *Black Power* 61, 65; King 238, 240). That might be another name for civil religion.

Spain in the 1950s seemed to Wright trapped in traditionalism rather than on a road to modernity. As Richard King has recently noted, Wright saw little future for folk cultures, but was "a confirmed member of the party of enlightenment" (King 229). The Spanish Civil War had ended less than two decades before *Pagan Spain* appeared and is the context of the civil religion and popular religiosity that Wright sees as a Spanish burden. He meets one woman who suffers from having seen soldiers in the Civil War kill her father. Wright notes that the Catholic Church used such traumas to teach acquiescence to the Spanish masses. "It's the same everywhere," said a relative of the woman. "Father Rubio was telling us that only last week. It's the same all over the world." Wright's insight is that "to negate this horror, the church had to make it the normal lot of man. If this horror were the heritage of all men, then rebellion was senseless, was sinful" (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 62).

Despite making some analogies between the totalitarianism of Jim Crow segregation and Franco's tyranny, Wright does not note an important point: the American Civil War was the background to a southern civil religion just as the Spanish Civil War was the context for Franco's society. Southern whites had sacralized their history after the Civil War, making Robert E. Lee a saint and Stonewall Jackson a martyr. Ministers were at the forefront of explaining a theology of defeat in a holy war. God had punished His chosen people to prepare them for a redemptive future. In 1917, Southern Baptist Convention leader Victor I. Masters published *The Call of the South*, which explained, in words that Falangists would have understood, that the South had a special mission. Having suffered through Confederate

defeat and wandered symbolically in the Lost Cause wilderness afterward, white southerners by the early decades of the twentieth century saw themselves as the last bastion in the Western world of an evangelical Zion, with a mission under God's providence to embody traditional Christian spirituality and, in fact, go out to convert the world.

Wright was born around the time of Masters' call to southern missionary arms, and he grew up in a southern world of civil religion's messianic Christianity. Monument dedications to Confederate heroes were key community events; Confederate Memorial Day reminded southerners, black and white, of a cult of the dead that empowered the Confederate ghosts with moral and spiritual authority; the song "Dixie" was heard at public events, no matter what the occasion; and waving Confederate battle flags were visual reminders of the Confederate sacrificial ethos that fought to redeem the South from Yankee rule. Wright's sensitivity to issues of civil religion that he saw in Spain and in Africa surely reflected walking through, seeing, and listening to the symbolic representations on the southern landscape in which he grew of age.<sup>1</sup>

Expressions of popular religion – those supernatural outcroppings in every day life that blurred lines between the sacred and the secular – often embodied sacralization of the state in Spain and the South and showed ways that this religiosity, for Wright, expressed a primitive sensibility. Wright's close observation of a bullfight and the famous shrine to the Virgin at Montserrat reveal these connections.

A building outside the bullfight arena displayed a giant Falangist emblem, a representation of the Yoke and Arrows that had been a historical Spanish symbol dating back to Ferdinand and Isabella. This image provides a sacred-state framing as Wright contemplates the drama of the bullfight. He quotes Juan Belmonte, one of the most famous Spanish bullfighters, who said that bullfighting was "fundamentally a spiritual exercise and not merely a sport" (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 131). The Falangist catechism claimed that the Spanish republic had collapsed because it scoffed at religion, and this "cut the Spaniards to the quick" (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 133). The bullfight becomes a primal expression of Spanish religiosity in Franco's postwar sacred state. Matadors kneel before images of the Virgin before the contest, pray and cross themselves. The cruelty of the fight scene itself "hinted at terrible torments of the heart," and the ceremonial slaying of the bull brought resolution (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 118).



Sacrifice is another key word in the popular religiosity of the bullfight. An American who went to Spain to become a bullfighter tells Wright that the bullfight “has the intensity of religious emotion,” and the bullfighter must “offer to sacrifice his life to the bull” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 209). Wright does not explicitly evoke the lynching of southern blacks while discussing the ritual slaying of the bull and the bullfighter’s confrontation with death in this spectacle, but the analogy is clear. He sees the bull as “a creature of our common fantasy, a projected puppet of our collective hearts and brains, a savage proxy offered by us to ourselves to appease the warring claims that our instincts were heir to” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 112). Wright is deeply troubled by the cruelty of the crowd, which wanted the bull “slain in a manner that would be unforgettable” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 112). After the bull is dead, crowd members attack the bull’s testicles, kick and stomp them, “while their eyes held a glazed and excited look of sadism” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 134). They attacked the part of the dead bull’s body that somehow “symbolized for them and poured out the hate and frustration and bewilderment of their troubled and confused consciousness” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 156). This could have been a description of one of the lynchings of blacks in the South, which often involved mutilation of victims. Wright’s short story, “Big Boy Leaves Home,” portrayed such a lynching, with the victim hanging from a tree and burned alive as a white mob chants in an emotional frenzy and takes souvenirs from the body. Religious historian Donald Mathews has recently argued that inherent in southern Protestantism has been a dynamic of atonement, seeking to purge society of sin, which expressed itself not only in such church rituals as individual conversion and baptism but also in the violent sacrifice of blacks considered the dark embodiments of sin for the southern body politic.<sup>2</sup> As Wright says of the sacrifice of the bull in the bullfight, “death must serve as a secular baptism of emotion to wash the heart clean of its illegal dirt” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 114).

Wright is grounded in Freudian psychology throughout *Pagan Spain*, as he was in *Black Boy* a decade earlier. His emphasis on sexuality and gender often reflects this interest, which we see clearly in his account of another site of popular religiosity – visiting the Black Virgin shrine at Montserrat. He admits to feeling “a hint of the mystical” in the rugged physical landscape, pointing toward the heavens (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 67-68). Religiosity and sexuality become tied together in the following description of the setting of the shrine:



More and more nations of seriated granite phalluses, tumefied and turgid, heaved into sight, each rocky republic of erections rising higher than its predecessor, the whole stone empire of them frozen into stances of eternal distensions, until at last they became a kind of universe haunted by phallic images . . . (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 68)

Wright emphasizes the paganism of Spanish culture, suggesting that traditional male-female gender roles hark back to a primitive faith that invests women with a special authority but an authority with complex implications. Here again he makes explicit connections between the American South and Spain. Just as the southern white woman is idealized and placed on a pedestal, so the young Spanish virgin is worshipped as untouchable by Spanish men. Just as southern black women could be sexually exploited by white men, so Spanish prostitutes, often poor and with few alternatives and deeply religious, were a public presence everywhere Wright went. The Catholic Church, he writes, with its stress on the inevitability of sinfulness, was "a religion whose outlook upon the universe almost legitimizes prostitution" (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 151).

Wright admits that his interpretation of the Spain he saw was shaped by the Protestantism he grew up with in the South. "I was born a Protestant," he notes at one point. "I lived a Protestant childhood" (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 162). At another point he wants "to be clear about" his own deep non-Catholic sensibility, "my undeniable and inescapable Protestant background and conditioning" (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 231). Of course, by the 1950s he was far beyond this childhood Protestant raising and confessed no religion; but he was right that his southern Protestant background clearly influenced his reading of Spain. For one thing, it made him especially sensitive to the plight of Protestants. He lamented "the needless, unnatural and utterly barbarous nature of the psychological suffering that the Spanish Protestant was doomed to undergo at the hands of the Church and State officials and his Catholic neighbors" (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 162). He notes that such "psychological suffering" was his experience "stemming from my previous position as a member of a persecuted racial minority," linking again his southern experiences and his Spanish observations (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 240). Wright's Protestant background, moreover, surely partly explains some of his revulsion at specifically Catholic practices. His disgust at the public display of the mummified bishop, noted earlier, was typical. He could have been a Protestant reformer in his sometimes violent physical reactions to seeing the crucifix. And he com-

plained of all the gold displayed in religious icons, again like a Protestant reformer wanting to topple the Catholic altars.

Wright captures Spanish popular religion, noting that “the boundaries of Spanish religiosity went beyond the church,” and we see its shrines, rituals, processions, pilgrimages, festivals, icons, relics, sacred virgins, weeping angels, suffering saints, magic symbols, and catechisms (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 197-98). He does not always tell us, though, what these experience mean to the faithful. He is disturbed by the Holy Week processions in Seville, for example, but does not explain their purpose of recreating the Via Dolorosa of Christ’s path to his destiny. We don’t find out what the “tortured Christs and weeping Virgins” mean to the crowds of passionate worshippers. For Wright, popular religion is a diversion for these suffering people. He portrays their popular religiosity in the context of a culture of poverty and backwardness by Western standards. He dismisses, moreover, not only this religiosity but other renowned aspects of Spanish culture as well. He ridicules Granada’s Alhambra as “this monstrous pile of dead glory” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 190). His lurid account of Flamenco dancing among Andalusian gypsies evokes images of what he calls “sexual animality,” not acknowledging the ancient heritage, craft, and beauty of this art (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 196-97). Similarly, Wright seldom commented positively on the South’s cultural achievements, other than the blues. The social realist in him, the skeptic and iconoclast, kept him focused on the social problems that humans faced and the need to address the suffering that resulted.

Near the end of *Pagan Spain*, Wright concludes that he had learned that Spain was “a holy nation, a sacred state” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 229). The Falangist catechism reinforced the conservative Spanish civil religion, and popular religiosity worked to distract Spaniards from confronting the need for change. “All was religion in Spain” (Wright, *Pagan Spain* 229). Wright’s spirituality, formed in southern black churches, attuned him to a basically religious insight on life that he kept with him as he left the South for new experiences, including his time in Spain. Wright admits in *Black Boy* that “the religious symbols” of the southern black churches “appealed to my sensibilities,” giving him a grounding in spirituality that remained with him. Evangelical Protestantism instills an unusual awareness of mortality, which stayed with him all his life. He responded to “the dramatic vision of life held by the church, feeling that to live day by day with death as one’s sole thought was to be so compassionately sensitive toward all

life as to view all men as slowly dying, and the trembling sense of fate that welled up, sweet and melancholy, from the hymns blended with the sense of fate that I had already caught from life" (Wright, *Black Boy* 123-24). Significantly, the first two sections of *Pagan Spain* are "Life after Death" and "Death and Exaltation." The evangelical Protestant image of a dying Christ that he sang about in churches and the centrality in evangelical Protestant religion of overcoming death through salvation remained an active memory for Wright, and his stress on suffering – a central religious concern – made him indeed "compassionately sensitive" toward the Spanish people he met and about whom he wrote.

In *Black Boy*, Wright comes to realize, in the end, that despite "that southern swamp of despair and violence," he had gained in his "personality and consciousness . . . the culture of the South." He projected the hope that he was "taking a part of the south to transplant in alien soil" where it would hopefully bloom (Wright, *Black Boy* 284). Perhaps his hard won and skeptical spirituality, on vivid display in *Pagan Spain*, was his own distinctive take on southern culture: a take that indeed survived so as to allow him to compassionately survey the Spanish people and their sufferings under a sacred state. The book is consequently a valuable reminder of the importance of religion, as well as of race, in transatlantic exchanges.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the post-Civil War Lost Cause as the South's civil religion, see Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980). See also Victor I. Masters, *The Call of the South* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1918) 17-18.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home," *Uncle Tom's Children* (New York: Harper and Row, 1940) 17-53; Donald G. Mathews, "The Southern Rite of Human Sacrifice," *Journal of Southern Religion* 3 (2000) <<http://jsr.fsu.edu/mathews.htm>>.

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