



God's Funeral: The Decline of Faith in Western Civilization

By A. N. Wilson

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A magisterial, colorful narrative illuminating the central tragedy of the nineteenth century: that God (or man's faith in him) died, but the need to worship remained as a torment to those who thought they had buried Him. By the end of the nineteenth century, almost all the great writers, artists, and intellectuals had abandoned Christianity, and many abandoned belief in God altogether. This was partly the result of scientific discovery, particularly the work of Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species*. (No reader here will soon forget the venomous Oxford debate between Thomas Huxley, brilliant defender of Darwin, and Bishop Wilberforce in 1860.) But as Wilson demonstrates in such fascinatingly diverse lives as those of Gibbon, Kant, Marx, Carlyle, George Eliot, and Sigmund Freud, the doubt about religion had many sources. By 1900, the Church of England, so vastly rich, so politically and socially powerful, could be pronounced spiritually empty, however full its pews might be on a Sunday. Echoes of the "Death of God" could be found practically everywhere: in the revolutionary politics of Garibaldi and Lenin; in the poetry of Tennyson and the novels of Hardy; in the work of Freud, connecting this "death" to our deepest wishes; and in the decline of hierarchical (male) authority and the first stirrings of feminism. Wilson's exquisitely detailed argument reveals the growth of a new imaginative order of unbelief that supplanted organized religion, and left in its wake a devastating sense of loss extending to our own times.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

God's Funeral is A.N. Wilson's account of the decline of orthodox Christianity in Victorian Britain. The most popular explanation for this widely-recognized phenomenon is the acceptance by intellectuals of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. To disprove the notion that Darwin singlehandedly committed deicide, Wilson describes a host of secularizing predecessors and accomplices such as Hume, Gibbon, John Stuart Mill, Hegel, Marx, and Carlyle. All play major roles in Wilson's brilliantly staged reconstruction of the so-called death of God. *God's Funeral* also takes account of the pain and confusion these intellectuals brought upon themselves when their great achievements helped erode the social and intellectual foundations of their lives. Furthermore, Wilson shows how their crises of faith relate to our own. Like our Victorian forebears, contemporary readers still must ask, "Is our personal religion that which links us to the ultimate reality, or is it the final human fantasy...?" and, "Is there a world of value outside ourselves, or do we, collectively and individually, invent what we call The Good?" *God's Funeral* helps readers learn to ask these questions in smarter and sharper ways by giving them a clearer sense of how Western society reached its current state of confusion.

From Publishers Weekly

At the end of the 19th century, Christian theologian Ernst Troeltsch proclaimed that the sun was setting on Christianity, and poet Matthew Arnold declared that in the future poetry would replace religion. As Wilson (*The Vicar of Sorrows*) points out in this splendid book, the 19th century provided the context not only for theories of God's demise but also for the numerous challenges that political thinkers, scientists and artists posed to Christian belief. Yet, as he notes, while the battles between faith and doubt were raging, church attendance did not decline but remained constant. The famous debates between Thomas Huxley, Darwin's "bulldog," and Bishop Wilberforce contributed to an atmosphere of optimism about the perfectibility of humankind and the world. Wilson traces the development of this rise of unbelief from the 18th century to the early 20th century. He contends that Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, with its contempt of Christianity's "highest ideals," and David Hume's skeptical *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which challenges the very possibility of the existence of the supernatural, provide the groundwork for the demise of belief in the 19th century. Wilson explores some of the most explicit instances of the century's intellectual challenges to faith: George Eliot's translations of Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* and David Friedrich Strauss's *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*; Darwin's evolutionary formulations calling into question the idea of a special creation; Marx and Engels's charge that bourgeois institutions used religion to enslave people and make them weak; William James's reading of various religious states in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as psychological states of mind. Eliot's translations alone introduced into England both Strauss's contentions that the life of Jesus was clothed in myth pictures like the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection and Feuerbach's claim that God was nothing more than a projection of humanity's wishes. Wilson examines also how the Catholic Church responded to the Modernist thought of Alfred Loisy, who imported much of the skepticism of the 19th century into his religious writings and challenged conventional Catholic teachings on the Church and the Bible. With passionate prose and a lively style, Wilson narrates a first-rate intellectual and religious history.

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From Library Journal

Wilson (*Jesus*, LJ 9/15/92; *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*, LJ 4/1/97) chose this vehicle to "revisit the Victorian experience of faith and doubt," noting that our late-20th-century questions regarding religion seem

as uninformed and polemical as did such inquiries in Darwin's and Eliot's time. Taking his title from a Thomas Hardy poem, Wilson considers the ways Victorians reconciled advancing modern thought with human religious instincts. Looking at intellectual giants (e.g., Carlyle, William James, Marx, and Tyrrell, among many others), Wilson makes a profoundly lucid case for the agonizing diminishment of a transcendent, objective truth. Presenting European biography as a means to do intellectual history, this is a stunning and provocative work, not necessarily in its scope but in its readability and its well-developed analysis, culminating in Wilson's equivocal sigh: "It is more remarkable that the intellectual human mind, knowing all it knows about the arguments against God's existence, should continue to practice religious observance." Highly recommended for all collections. ASandra Collins, Univ. of Pittsburgh
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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Terry White:

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