God's Funeral

A conversation with A. N. Wilson

Interview by Karl Giberson and Donald Yerxa

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***N**ovelist, biographer (of Tolstoy and C. S. Lewis, among others), reviewer (one of the sharpest), literary editor, polemicist, A. N. Wilson has been a lively presence on the British literary scene since the 1970s, when he was still in his early twenties. In addition to producing a steady stream of fiction, he has written most recently Jesus (1992) and Paul: The Mind of the Apostle (1997). His new book, just published by Norton, is God's Funeral, a narrative of the loss of Christian faith particularly among intellectuals in nineteenth-century Britain. Wilson's own faith pilgrimage has taken him from the church (he was one of the few Christians among the British literati) to a highly publicized deconversion (the Saul-Paul story in reverse) to his current status as a "Christian fellow traveler." Karl and Donald Yerxa met with Wilson in Boston near the end of the June heat wave.*

DONALD YERXA: **In *God's Funeral* you write with great empathy about the loss of faith. Did you yourself receive a religious upbringing?**

My father was an agnostic; my mother is a practicing Anglican, not of a very enthusiastic kind, but she is a believing Anglican, and so she goes to church each week. For reasons which are quite strange, but trivial, I went to a Roman Catholic primary school. I was taught by the Dominican nuns until I was 7. Then from the age of 7 to 18, I went to boarding schools, which were, broadly speaking, Church of England. I would say I was a more than usually religious child and certainly had aspirations to become a priest, which did not entirely leave me until my mid- to late twenties. So that was my background: Episcopalian, but with a strong element of agnosticism on my father's side. In deed, he was positively antireligious.

YERXA: So you had both influences.

Yes, and I daresay that they both exist in my own psyche. I am

naturally pious and naturally skeptical—and probably I've learned both at my father and my mother's knee. It was the only area between them where I would say that there was serious conflict. They were married for 44 years, but it was an area of real disagreement between them.

KARL : In *God's Funeral*, you describe your youth as "morbid" and your middle age as "sunny." What were you getting at with those descriptions?

I am using the terminology of our old friend Professor James. William James had this idea of the sick soul and the healthy soul. The sick soul would be somebody like Saint Augustine or Tolstoy, who was full of a sense of sin, whose religious life begins with the idea of themselves and the world being drawn awry. Whereas a healthy soul is somebody who becomes religious out of a sense of joyful gratitude in the nature of things—whether they be come Christian or not. Emerson is a classic example of the healthy mind as far as James is concerned. The morbid ones are often much more interesting, of course. I think most teenagers are sick souls rather than healthy souls, and I certainly was a sick soul. I had a sense of guilt, probably due to sex; I can't remember—about everything, really. The sense that life was bleak and gloomy and that religion was all part of that. Very self-indulgent. Whereas, of course, I am now a much more superficial character [laughing]. And I don't suffer from depressions, I am happy to say. I am much more cheerful, as middle-aged men tend to be.

: Where does the novelist in you reside when you're working on something like *God's Funeral*? Perhaps in the often quirky details you include that make the people you discuss so palpably real?

It is probably novelistic, isn't it? As well as telling you what they thought, I tell you what they were like to meet—their funny little habits. In this book I didn't set out to write straight intellectual history, because there are many people who are better qualified than I am to do that. And after all, there have been plenty of good books about the Enlightenment, and plenty of good books about the loss of faith in the nineteenth century, and certainly

many better books than I should ever write about the history of science. But I wanted to chronicle what it was like for people on the inside—how it affected people's inner life deciding either that they had to change their religious views or lose them altogether. And to that extent, perhaps being a novelist helps. In that sense the book may be regarded as a very novelistic enterprise, but I was not trying to fictionalize a story. I was trying to tell the truth.

: Your 1985 book, *How Can We Know?*, takes a perspective on faith somewhat different from that in *God's Funeral*. Can you talk a little bit about this transformation?

That is a reasonable question be cause, obviously, in *How Can We Know?* I am being—though hesitantly—very specifically Christian. I think that is a position that in subsequent years I have revised or moved from. I couldn't exactly explain to you how or why. But when I was commissioned by a publisher to write the life of C. S. Lewis, I thought, "Oh, good, I am going to enjoy this very, very much." And I did enjoy it, but I found, in the course of writing that book, something had happened to me. I wouldn't put it as strongly as to say that I had lost my religious faith because I don't think I have, exactly speaking, but I realized what Lewis called "mere Christianity"—in the way that he de fines it—was not a position which I had entertained in some years. I think I realized that I needed to place myself a little bit outside the Christian fold for a while to think things through after finishing the C. S. Lewis book. Now, here in 1999, I feel much closer to the Christian fold. I feel more like a Christian fellow traveler and indeed do go to church and worship in church on an occasional basis. But I found the C. S. Lewis thing to be troubling, to tell you the truth, because I thought that his attitudes and his arguments for Christianity were so inadequate on many levels. And I also felt that his arguments were dishonest, not in the sense that he was lying, but in that they only came from part of himself. I didn't feel that they were part of the rounded C. S. Lewis who had written the literary criticism.

YERXA: Could you describe in broad terms the Victorian anguish over the loss of faith?

That was certainly something that I wanted to convey. Perhaps

this is very novelistic, but I think I can get at it best by anecdote. A few years ago in England there was a book published called *The Myth of God Incarnate*, written by a group of Anglican theologians, philosophers, and so on. The message of the book is self-evident from the title: that Christianity as popularly understood by a vast majority of the Christian world is not true. So they gave a press conference, and they all had these grins on their faces. They sat there smiling, quite so confidently, wearing their priestly collars. When I watched this on the television (and they are admirable and excellent people; I'm not criticizing them in any way), I couldn't help but think of George Eliot as a young woman in the 1840s, before the novels were written, when she was still Marian Evans, translating David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus*. Although by then she had al ready lost her religious beliefs in many respects, when she reached the passage describing the crucifixion, the analytical German coldness with which Strauss described the scene was too much for her. She sobbed as she translated it and stared for comfort at a sculptured relief of the crucifixion by the Scandinavian sculptor Thorvaldsen.

What Eliot and many others recognized is that they were giving up the consolations of a collective view of human experience which, once lost, could never be recovered. They all saw that—limiting ourselves for the time being to Christianity—if Christianity was not true, then society had enormous questions to face in terms of how it cohered.

YERXA: Is there anything peculiarly English about this Victorian loss of faith?

Well, obviously, I am English, and it was necessary to draw some lines around it, otherwise it would have turned into an encyclopedic project. I don't think there is anything fundamental about the nineteenth-century experience of the loss of faith that's peculiar to England. It all very much began in Germany. The chief figure in all this is Hegel. Hegel is the most important figure in the nineteenth century as far as religious philosophy goes, as is evidenced by the fact that whichever side of the argument you think you come out on, by the end of the century—whether you are pro or anti—you are likely to be quoting Hegel—until you get to William James, who represents

one of the great reactions against Hegel.

What was perhaps unique to England in the European context was the feeling of—I use this phrase advisedly, because it is obviously not completely true—a greater political freedom in England than there was in the continental countries, freedom of speech in particular. There was the feeling that hand-in-hand with the extension of the political freedom there should be a loosening up of church-and-state ties, to the point where you get people like John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham—who really were the most influential figures in nineteenth-century English political life—believing that genuine political freedom was not possible in a world where the old religions were insisted upon. Indeed, all these people were very opposed to Christianity. So, yes, to that extent England was a bit special.

It's true, of course, that the most famous English liberal prime minister was infinitely more religious than any other political leader I can think of. Gladstone was a very devout, high Anglican churchman, going to church at least twice, sometimes three times, a day. But by the 1880s, you have the Bradlaugh case. Charles Bradlaugh was a working-class man, self-educated, who was elected eventually as a Member of Parliament from Northampton—though he was a Londonite himself. When he was presented at the Bar of the House of Commons, where it is customary to take an oath by Almighty God to be loyal to Her Majesty the Queen, Bradlaugh refused to do so. He said he would make an affirmation, but he wouldn't take an oath because he did not believe in God. He was quite specific about this. They threw him out of the House of Commons and sent him back to the people of Northampton and said, "You've got to elect a religious believer."

It all seems fantastical to us now. The people of Northampton did not much like being told what to do by the MP's in London, and as a consequence, many people who were religious believers voted for Bradlaugh again. This went on for eight years; his coming and presenting himself and actual fisticuffs breaking out. Eventually, there was a debate going on throughout the country about it; it extended even beyond England, through out Europe, this Bradlaugh case. The debate, roughly speaking, is one that

we see resonating and being repeated, for example, in the United States at the moment by conservative-minded people who think that religion is the foundation of civilized society, and if you depart from it, or openly allow public expressions of unbelief, then you are asking for not merely unbelief but anarchy to follow.

YERXA: You have provided gripping narratives of Victorian intellectuals who lost their faith or struggled with it. If you were to write a companion volume about the great theists of the nineteenth century, who would you portray in that book?

Of course, it would be possible to do just that. There's one fact which I don't think I recall including in this book—and I should have done—namely, that of the, let's say, one million books published in the nineteenth century (and I can't remember how many there were, as a matter of fact), 999,000 were religious books. Reading this book of mine, you might be under the impression that nobody believed anything when, in fact, for example, there was an evangelical revival going on that was extremely powerful both in England and America.

But the great theists of the nineteenth century—well, one of them was George MacDonald. I've told you that I've written a book about C. S. Lewis and that I didn't see eye-to-eye with him religiously speaking. If I had to explain why I found it difficult to come to terms with Lewis, it has to do with George MacDonald. MacDonald was Lewis's hero; he has been my hero, too, and I fault Lewis here only for failing to take MacDonald's example seriously enough. MacDonald saw that religious belief is an imaginative act. When you respond to the Christian story—and doubtless this is so in other religious traditions too—you are engaged, among other things, in an act of imagination. MacDonald, particularly in Phantastes, which was the book that changed Lewis's life, shows this brilliantly. So, I would certainly want to put MacDonald very high up.

He, like another great Victorian Englishman, Frederick Denison Maurice, tried to come to terms with the modern age without being a modernist. He was a much more orthodox Christian in

that sense. Both MacDonald and Maurice lost their jobs, because they wouldn't believe in the eternity of punishment for anyone who didn't share their own particular opinions.

And now to give you a third, cheeky reply: I would want to include among the great nineteenth-century theists a man I've already included in this book, William James. Today on every hand there are bigoted scientific materialists who never tire of explaining that you have no right to say that you believe in anything which cannot be verified on scientific grounds—which would, of course, give you no right to say why you like Beethoven's last quartet; no right to say that you are in love with anybody, or anything else; why you miss somebody when they die; no right to say most of the interesting things that human beings have ever said. James came along when this scientific atheism was still gathering steam. Having been a very attentive and scientifically minded psychologist— in many senses he pioneered the whole field of psychology—and having had great difficulties with orthodox religious belief—he asserted, contra the programmatic atheists, that even if we ourselves haven't had authenticated or authenticating experiences which lead us to believe in a deity, this is no reason why we should deny the right to others. I think that is an absolutely essential part of the story.

YERXA: Why do you conclude your book with the Catholic modernists?

I think perhaps the reason I ended it with the modernists, rather than with James and The Will to Believe, is that James, in his own terms, is a noncontroversial character. I know that there are many people who remain scandalized—I have evangelical friends who remain scandalized—by James's casual approach to these various matters. But I wanted to end the book with some people who had tried within the mainstream of practicing Christianity to come to terms with the tension between, on the one hand, a total dedication to the pursuit of truth from an intellectual point of view, whatever your discipline may be—whether it is scientific, historical, or literary—and, on the other hand, the need to be tender and affectionate and gentle with the side of our natures which is religious and which responds, not merely to religious experience as individuals—which interested James very

much—but to the Christian tradition, which is why the Catholic modernists as people are very interesting.

In particular, the French ones—Alfred Loisy and Henri Bremond—genuinely, with absurd idealism, thought they could persuade the pope, or at least some parts of the Catholic church, to go along with this. They were trying to persuade people who thought democracy was a plague. You had encyclicals condemning the electric light. So it was a fairly hopeless task. And yet, you can see in the seeds to that quarrel that it was not just a quarrel between some idealistic French priests and the pope at the time—it is a quarrel that goes on now.

In fact, it is a quarrel that we all recognize as going on. If you are a religious person and a modern person, you're aware of this tension within yourself. Now if you are a religious person who is not modern, or if you are a modern person who is not religious, you might not see the point of the people in between. I think it's the people in between who are going to keep the show on the road. And this may seem a very paradoxical thing to say, but I don't see any hope for conservative religion.