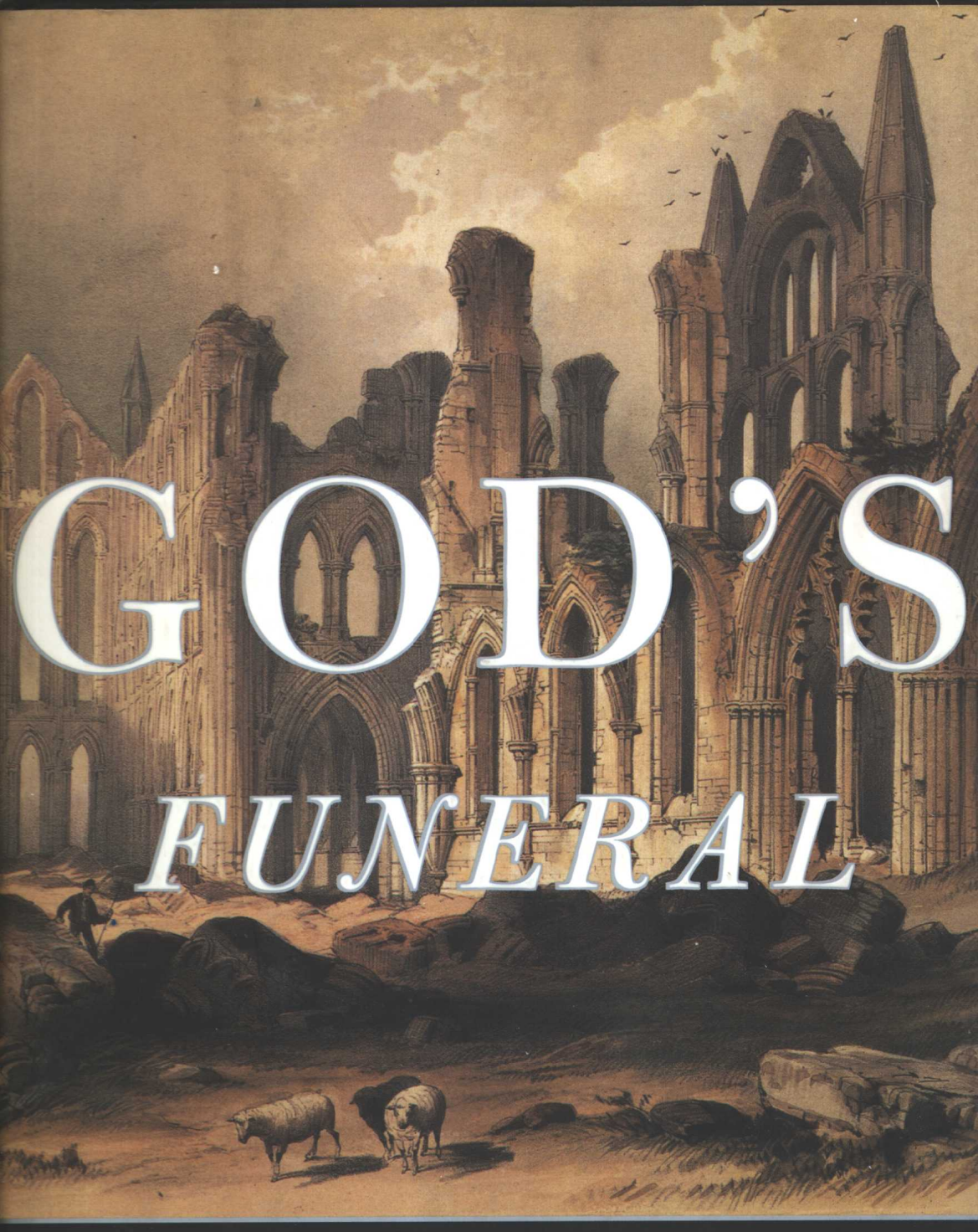

GOD'S FUNERAL

A. N. WILSON

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A.N. WILSON

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Preface

THE GOD-QUESTION does not go away. No sooner have the intelligentsia of one generation confined the Almighty to the history books than popular opinion rises against them. We see this in our own time, and the spectacle is not always pleasant: Ayatollahs call out in the name of God for holy war, or evangelical Christians make their own comparably intolerant, though less murderous, contributions to public debate on such subjects as abortion, the modern marriage and politics. The majority of people in the Western world still claim, when asked by opinion polls, that they believe in God. Politicians, anyway in the United States, invoke God when they want to reassure the electorate that they are good guys. To a European eye President Clinton's Prayer Breakfast in September 1998 at which he confessed his sins and expressed a belief in divine grace was one of the most bizarre episodes of that colourful gentleman's career. Yet at the very least he clearly supposed that it would do no harm to demonstrate to television audiences his belief in the 'old, old story of Jesus and His love.'

Why not? For many people, the old story still counts, and still 'works'. Religion has what an American philosopher of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century called 'cash value'. This is an unhappy phrase in some ways, but what he meant by it is that, irrespective of whether you can prove the existence of God, you can demonstrate the effectiveness of religious practice. The person who finds himself in disgrace can call for Divine Mercy, and receive the sense that it has been vouchsafed. In the actual business of life, in grief, fear and sorrow, men and women and children say their prayers and find themselves comforted. This continues, whatever the unbelievers may wish to say about the sheer irrationality of the practice.

But even a fervent religious believer must, if honest, confront problems in relation to faith which were not necessarily present for those of

earlier generations. The Renaissance popes reacted furiously to the notion that the earth was not the centre of the universe, nor man the most important being on earth. There was logic in torturing Galileo, who first began to make this known, since these beginnings of what we call a 'scientific' viewpoint shook the foundations of an old religion which believed that God had put Adam in charge of all His earthly creation, and made Man in His own image and likeness; even, when Man had disobeyed Him, this self-same God had Himself become Man, and come down to earth to redeem Him of His sins. You could not have a more anthropocentric view of things than this, and any factual discovery which began to weaken this belief had to be resisted.

The truth can't be resisted, of course. Eighteenth-century sceptical philosophers could ask what possible reason there was for supposing there to be a mind behind the Universe, but few read their words, and those who did could fall back on the argument that a Universe of such intricacy and order must have had a designer. What kind of a designer? Geologists in the opening decades of the nineteenth century began to realize, not only that the world had taken aeons to evolve, and that it was not all created in the six days of Genesis: but, much more disturbingly, that it was a pitiless universe. Whole species had been evolved, and then allowed to become extinct: that was the message of the fossils. If such a thing could happen in one generation to the brontosaurus, what was to stop it happening in a much later generation to humankind? A belief in God as a loving, benevolent and omnipotent Creator came to be seen as in fact depending upon a man-centred view of Nature which was increasingly hard to sustain.

Hence the disturbingness, for many minds in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, of discovering that Nature, with its evolving species, has no discernible purpose, certainly not a loving purpose, or an anthropocentric purpose. In other words, if you pressed the argument from Design too far you might infer a God who was curious about a multiplicity of life-forms, entirely unconcerned about the bloodiness and painfulness with which so many of these forms sustained life while on this planet, a God who was no more demonstrably interested in the human race than He was in, say, beetles, of which He created an inordinately large variety.

The nineteenth century, in other words, began to confront the human consciousness, not simply with new *ideas*, but with demonstrable new facts which challenged religious belief. Once the cold eye of modern

scholarship had been cast on the Bible itself, even that looked a less solid bulwark than had once been supposed.

In some parts of our world, particularly in the United States, the battles which raged more than one and a half centuries ago have not gone away. Against patient scholars with no axe to grind who would like to point out this fact or that about the Bible (the high improbability, for instance, that the Gospels contain the actual words of the historical Jesus) the believers can always reply with their unshakeable knowledge that the Bible is the inspired word of Truth, the voice of Almighty God Himself. The Darwinian who points to the mid twentieth-century discovery of DNA as a confirmation, beyond reasonable doubt, that the theory of natural selection was correct, can do nothing to alter the beliefs of the Creationists.

That is a story in itself – the twentieth-century religious conflict. This book, however, returns to the origins of that conflict, and attempts to make sense of it by getting to know the men and women who were caught up in it. This is not a work of science, though scientific ideas are mentioned in its pages. Its author is no philosopher, but he has made some attempts to explain the underlying philosophical background to the story. This is not a theology textbook, but it shows the qualities of strife which afflicted women and men who found themselves honourably at war with theology. Periodically in the course of the century, they proclaimed that God was dead; and that is how it appeared to many of them who lived through those times.

GOD'S FUNERAL

Thomas Hardy

I

I saw a slowly-stepping train –
Lined on the brows, scoop-eyed and bent and hoar –
Following in files across a twilit plain
A strange and mystic form the foremost bore.

II

And by contagious throbs of thought
Or latent knowledge that within me lay
And had already stirred me, I was wrought
To consciousness of sorrow even as they.

III

The fore-borne shape, to my blurred eyes,
At first seemed man-like, and anon to change
To an amorphous cloud of marvellous size,
At times endowed with wings of glorious range.

IV

And this phantasmal variousness
Ever possessed it as they drew along:
Yet throughout all it symboled none the less
Potency vast and loving-kindness strong.

V

Almost before I knew I bent
Towards the moving columns without a word;
They, growing in bulk and numbers as they went,
Struck out sick thoughts that could be overheard:-

VI

'O man-projected Figure, of late
Imaged as we, thy knell who shall survive?
Whence came it we were tempted to create
One whom we can no longer keep alive?

VII

'Framing him jealous, fierce, at first,
We gave him justice as the ages rolled,
Will to bless those by circumstance accurst,
And long suffering, and mercies manifold.

VIII

'And, tricked by our own early dream
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
Our making soon our maker did we deem,
And what we had imagined we believed.

IX

'Till, in Time's stayless stealthy swing,
Uncompromising rude reality
Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,
Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be.

X

'So, toward our myth's oblivion,
Darkling, and languid-lipped, we creep and grope
Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon,
Whose Zion was a still abiding hope.

XI

'How sweet it was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blest assurance he was there!

XII

'And who or what shall fill his place?
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes
For some fixed star to stimulate their pace
Towards the goal of their enterprise?' ...

XIII

Some in the background then I saw,
Sweet women, youths, men, all incredulous,
Who chimed: 'This is a counterfeit of straw,
This requiem mockery! Still he lives to us!'

XIV

I could not buoy their faith: and yet
Many I had known: with all I sympathized;
And though struck speechless, I did not forget
That what was mourned for, I, too, long had prized.

XV

Still, how to hear such loss I deemed
The insistent question for each animate mind,
And gazing, to my growing sight there seemed
A pale yet positive gleam low down behind,

XVI

Whereof, to lift the general night,
A certain few who stood aloof had said,
'See you upon the horizon that small light –
Swelling somewhat?' Each mourner shook his head.

XVII

And they composed a crowd of whom
Some were right good, and many nigh the best ...
Thus dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom
Mechanically I followed with the rest.

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I

God's Funeral

'Religion ... its time is up ...'
Morrison I. Swift
(nineteenth-century American anarchist)

THE ENGLISH POET Thomas Hardy, some time between 1908 and 1910, wrote a poem[1] in which he imagined himself attending God's funeral. It is one of his most extraordinary poems, and it expresses in the most cogent form some of the issues which will be explored biographically in the following pages. It starts – what a good film-sequence it would make – with the Wessex pessimist seeing the macabre procession as a 'strange mystic form' is carried to Its, or His, last rest.

> And by contagious throbs of thought
> Or latent knowledge that within me lay
> And had already stirred me, I was wrought
> To consciousness of sorrow even as they.

What was being carried away from the people was something which had 'symboled' a 'potency vast and loving kindness strong'. God is seen in this poem as a great projection of human fears and desires.

> 'Framing him jealous, fierce, at first,
> We gave him justice as the ages rolled,
> Will to bless those by circumstance accurst,
> And long suffering, and mercies manifold.
>
> 'And, tricked by our own early dream
> And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
> Our making soon our maker did we deem,
> And what we had imagined we believed.
>
> 'Till, in Time's stayless stealthy swing,
> Uncompromising rude reality
> Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,
> Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be ...'

The 'myth's oblivion' is not a cause for crowing in this poem, nor even particularly for agnostic, lofty point-scoring. Quite the contrary. When 'some in the background', 'sweet women, youths, men' exclaim 'Still he lives to us!', Hardy has nothing but sympathetic feeling for these gallant believers who persist in worshipping a dead God:

> I could not buoy their faith: and yet
> Many I had known: with all I sympathized;
> And though struck speechless, I did not forget
> That what was mourned for, I, too, long had prized.

Hardy wonders how 'to bear such loss' and 'who or what shall fill his place'. Unlike many of the high-minded liberals of the previous century, beguiled by a 'religion of humanity', Hardy knew that the first of the Ten Commandments contained an objective truth. Ersatz substitutes for God are not God. 'Thou shalt have no other Gods before me.'[2] Hardy is left merely 'dazed and puzzled' by the funeral.

Perhaps only those who have known the peace of God which passes all understanding can have any conception of what was lost between a hundred and a hundred and fifty years ago when the human race in Western Europe began to discard Christianity. The loss was not merely an intellectual change, the discarding of one proposition in favour of another. Indeed, though many intellectual justifications were offered by those who lost faith, the process would seem to have been, in many cases, just as emotional as religious conversion; and its roots were often quite as irrational. In all the inner journeys which ended with 'God's funeral' for the believer, there was potential for profound agony, whether the intellectual justifications for religious faith-loss were to be found in the fields of science, philosophy, political thought, biblical scholarship, or psychology. This is the story of bereavement as much as of adventure.

Unlike so many European atheists, Thomas Hardy had no hatred of the faith which he discarded. His continued fondness for ritual, music and even for the teachings of the Church, long after faith itself had departed, would have puzzled many a hard-line Continental atheist. When he was elected to an honorary fellowship at Magdalene College, Cambridge he discussed with the dons there the ceremony by which he would be sworn in. The diarist A.C. Benson was one of the Fellows.

> The Master was afraid [Benson wrote] that Hardy might dislike a religious service. But Hardy said that he wasn't afraid of a service or a surplice; he used to go to church three times on a Sunday; it turned out that he often went to St Paul's and other London churches, like Kilburn, and knew a lot about ecclesiastical music and double chants. He had ordered a complete set of robes, too – bonnet, gown and hood. This restored the Master's confidence. We sate and talked and smoked; and the old man wasn't a bit shy – he prattled away very pleasantly about books and people. He looks a very tired man at times, with his hook nose, his weary eyes, his wisps of hair; then he changes and looks lively again. He rather spoiled the effect of his ecclesiastical knowledge by saying blithely, 'Of course, it's only sentiment to me now!'[3]

It is in some ways paradoxical that so intensely churchy a man as Hardy, whose profession before he wrote novels was that of ecclesiastical architect and whose written work betrays not merely a knowledge but also a love of church services, church music, church gossip, should have suffered a fate which might more fittingly have been reserved for the belligerent blasphemer. His last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, was burned by a bishop, no less a man than the Bishop of Wakefield, William Walsham How, who wrote the popular hymn 'For all the saints, who from their labours rest'. One of the details about the incident which particularly hurt Hardy (ever the parsimonious countryman) was that, since the Bishop chose the height of summer for his gesture of casting *Jude the Obscure* into his grate, he must have had to order a fire to be specially (and wastefully) lit for the purpose.

Hardy suggests in his own account of the matter that it was the Bishop's intolerance which drove him out of the Church; that he would have been only too happy to continue with occasional church while keeping his own counsel about the verifiability of doctrine. This position, which came to be known loosely (in the Roman Catholic Church especially) as Modernism, was one which was most vigorously detested, both by the ultra-orthodox and by the bigots of the sceptical view. If one stretches the net wide, it would seem to have been the view of Carlyle, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold, Tennyson ... But those professional seekers after truth who attempted to justify such positions within the churches were vilified (F.D. Maurice, George Macdonald) or in the Roman Church actually suppressed (Abbé Loisy, Father Tyrrell). No wonder, then, that when Hardy confronted 'that terrible dogmatic ecclesiasticism'[4] of the Bishop of Wakefield, he should have decided to

define his own religious position in terms of negatives – 'only a sentiment'. God's funeral pyre, as far as Hardy was concerned, had been stacked by the Church. 'The only sad feature in the matter to Hardy was that if the Bishop could have known him as he was, he would have found a man whose personal conduct, views of morality, and of the vital facts of religion, hardly differed from his own.'[5]

Like many who lost faith (like many who retained it), Hardy was not completely consistent. He was a human being, not an automaton. Anyone who has read his work (think of that other poem of his, 'God's Education') would know what his old friend Edmund Gosse meant when he asked why Mr Hardy should have 'shaken his fist at Providence'.* The cumulative effect of watching the characters of his novels being buffeted by misfortune makes some readers weary of Hardy's manipulative pessimism. More sympathetic readers of the Wessex novels, however, would wish to say that, though Hardy's plots are melodramatic, the stories are fundamentally truthful. The lives of many human beings on this planet are indeed scarred by the repeated onslaughts of disease, financial anxiety, unhappy matrimonial entanglements, or a miserable combination of these and other misfortunes. Most readers of Hardy's best-known novel will end the story in love with Tess: and that will affect their feelings about God – anyway, about Hardy's God. '"Justice" was done', the narrator tells us, 'and the President of the Immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess.'[6]

It is the simple unfairness of life which makes this phrase powerful and novelistically appropriate. Hardy depicts suffering which is not so much 'innocent' as pointless. He is more Homeric than Hebraic, closer to the *Iliad* than to Job. The reader finishes a novel of Hardy's knowing that stoicism is not its own reward; nor will it be rewarded by some sympathetic external agency. Many church Christians, particularly the clergy, must have tried to hide this from themselves when they read Hardy's novels, and seen his 'pessimism' as a distorting lens; they had to wait until they were exposed to the shrapnel and gunfire on the Western Front before their imaginations were exposed to such pitiless Homeric reality, which Hardy could see relentlessly at work in the country villages of Dorset.

* They would not necessarily share Gosse's bizarre view that *Jude the Obscure* was 'the most indecent novel ever written'. Presumably the works of Cleland, Diderot and the marquis de Sade were not on the shelves at the House of Lords, where Gosse worked as the librarian.