Modern and postmodern forms of unbelief: Gods Funeral.ByA. N. Wilson. Norton, 402 pp., $27.95.

by Philip Hefner in the January 26, 2000 issue

God's Funeral, by A. N. Wilson

From the vantage point of this postmodern time, A. N. Wilson surveys the modern, or Enlightenment, era. In a long series of captivating thumbnail biographical sketches, he documents both the force of the modern mind's attack on religion and the grief that accompanied it as people lamented losing the aesthetic and moral dimensions of faith. Wilson provides vignettes of almost 40 skeptics or atheists, most of whom were unable to exorcise religion completely from their minds and psyches.

Consider George Eliot (1819-1880), the great novelist who wrote *Middlemarch* and *Adam Bede* and who espoused both free thought and free love in Victorian London. She distanced herself from her pious family when, as a precocious teenager, she renounced the church on the grounds that its scriptures were fictitious and its doctrines "most dishonorable to God and most pernicious in their influence." Yet the impact of David Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (which she translated) sickened Eliot. Her friend Cara Bray reports, "It made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion, and only the sight of her Christ-image and picture [a cast of Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen's risen Christ, and an engraving] made her endure it." She went on to imbibe (and translate into English) Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophical view that the idea of God is nothing but the projection of true humanity.

When Eliot's life-partner, publisher George Henry Lewes, died in 1878, Eliot immersed herself in "In Memoriam," the poem by her friend Alfred Lord Tennyson. Apparently she was comforted by the poet's testimony to a faith that was strong enough to weather the onslaughts of religious doubt and death itself. In Eliot, and in figures such as John Stuart Mill, Thomas Carlyle and Algernon Charles Swinburne,

Wilson discovers something akin to what Schubert Ogden called the “strange witness of unbelief.”

Wilson’s book about the Enlightenment assault on belief appears at a time when, in the world of academic theology, the Enlightenment is in eclipse. The Enlightenment is white, male, European and rationalist, and is regarded as a key agent in perpetrating imperialism, colonialism, racism and the exploitation of the natural environment. The Enlightenment view assumes that we can possess knowledge based on publicly recognized fundamental principles that enable us to engage the world as an object of investigation.

Today’s theological circles reject this viewpoint, arguing that we know ourselves to be diverse people with diverse ways of seeing. Since we are whole persons, embodied minds, we do not refer to ourselves as rationalists, and since we are clearly “socially located” persons, we cannot claim that our principles are either fundamental or universal. Furthermore, we believe that to espouse the so-called subject-object dichotomy, a hallmark of Enlightenment thinking, is to distort and pervert the quest for knowledge and truth. Because the world and its people are plural, whatever knowledge we claim is pluralistic—some even call it relativistic. We are postmodern, postfoundational and postliberal.

Though we are often unclear about our own identities, these arguments help us to distinguish ourselves from the modernism that shaped the figures Wilson examines. And theologians are not the only ones who see things this way: humanities teachers, especially of literature and philosophy, have led the way in theorizing about our post-Enlightenment identity.

I know the theological world I’ve just described. But I also know the world of science. I edit a religion-and-science journal which brings many manuscripts and reviews across my desk. In that capacity I encounter quite different attitudes toward the Enlightenment—ones that would be more recognizable to Wilson’s protagonists. Scholars in this arena tend to hold up the Enlightenment as a model, as the beginning of a new era of history that has changed forever our understanding of our world and of ourselves. The Enlightenment was the first episode of a movement that constitutes one of the greatest achievements of the human spirit. For many scientists there is no greater accolade than being recognized as one who stands in the Enlightenment tradition.

Unlike other theologians and philosophers, those who work in the area of religion and science regard “postmodern” studies as worthwhile only as a sign of modernity’s maturing critical spirit, not as an alternative to modernity. Most often, however, they dismiss anti-Enlightenment ideas that come out of humanities departments as erudite lunacy—the enemy of the quest for truth.

Those on each side of the debate view themselves as participating in a movement of liberation. The postmoderns consider the Enlightenment as the progenitor of nearly every intellectual and moral defect of our time. They think of emancipation from its subject-object dualisms and the hegemonies these spawn (humans over nature, men over women, and the West over the rest of the world) as liberation indeed.

But those who take opposing views also count themselves as agents of liberation. Listen to Steven Weinberg, National Medal of Science recipient and Nobel laureate in physics, speaking to the American Association for the Advancement of Science last year: “One of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious. We should not retreat from this accomplishment” (*New York Review of Books*, October 21, 1999). Weinberg echoes almost word for word the 18th- and 19th-century views documented in Wilson’s book.

At least this much seems clear about the movement that led—at least for some European intellectuals—to God’s funeral: Modernity is not as dead as its foes would assert. For millions of educated people throughout the world, its basic tenets serve as the most viable philosophy for living and thinking. The agnosticism and atheism of Wilson’s key figures—David Hume, Edward Gibbons, Algernon Swinburne, Samuel Butler and Karl Marx—still shape our worldviews. Many people would echo Weinberg’s judgment: “With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil—that takes religion.”

Some Christians also identify with the critical modern spirit and its intellectual trajectory. They offer no comfort to church leaders or to many of their fellow Christians. Many of them propose significant reforms and reformulations of traditional Christianity—reforms that find few followers. They urge a radical reassessment of the authority of scripture and the submission of doctrine to the canons of scientific reason. For these theological moderns, the credibility of faith is at stake. However, their calls to render traditional faith consonant with the spirit of modernity appear to their critics as intolerable reductions of the faith.

Many of modernity's leading postmodern critics are no less agnostic than are its supporters, nor are they necessarily any more well disposed toward religion. The essence of their analysis of religion has been set forth many times. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz termed religion a construction that "clothes" its symbols with "such an aura of factuality that they seem realistic." Marjorie Garber, in her Freudian interpretation of culture, includes religion as a dream that "encodes wishes and fears, projections and identification." Cultural critic Neal Gabler notes that religion, like every other aspect of our culture, is part of a "collectively scripted text" that has transformed itself into entertainment.

Though these commentators do not launch a diatribe against religion, they insist that religion's truth claims must be reduced. For different reasons and with different meanings, both the postmoderns and the moderns agree with archatheist Richard Dawkins that "religion and theology are not about anything that is real." The believer is reduced to a role similar to that played by Jim Carrey in the film *The Truman Show*, in which all of life is transmuted into the postreality of entertainment.

Some Christians, among them some theologians, breathe this air of postreality. Like those who hold Enlightenment views, they offer proposals for reforming and reformulating the traditional faith. Most church leaders, however, do not agree that scripture and creed are collectively scripted texts that offer a "manufactured reality" (to use Daniel Boorstin's phrase), nor are most regular churchgoers prepared to engage such a notion. The revision of church doctrine along deconstructionist lines is hardly imminent, though some academics in the field of religion might wish it.

Wilson has provided an engaging account of a major intellectual and spiritual conflict that has dominated the Western world for more than 200 years. His story throws light on our own entry into a fourth century of Enlightenment-influenced struggle—a struggle that has changed significantly in our time. Although modernity flourishes among the intelligentsia, there now is a strong, equally secular postmodern—or even antimodern—counterforce that was not present in the previous "enlightened" centuries. In addition, the influence of popular antimodern forces is growing, particularly in the evangelical world, whose orientation is better described as pre- rather than postmodern.

Though religion faces intellectual attack from both moderns and postmoderns, some avenues for belief remain open. Wilson himself focuses on two options that thrived during the modern period: liberal Protestantism and Catholic modernism. Protestants

attempted to bring the Enlightenment into the Christian citadel. Catholic modernists, believing that religion is a greater mystery than reason can comprehend, accepted the Enlightenment's intellectual indictments of religious dogma, traditional interpretations of scripture, and church history but held onto the church's ritual and symbols.

Liberal Protestants are still with us as a small but solid constituency. And though Catholic modernism arose in response to the Enlightenment, it may prove to be even more appropriate for postmodern believers. Both of these responses are intellectually rigorous, both in their grappling with the spirit of our age and in their counterproposals.

Wilson himself, in a coda that may strike the reader as either poignant or sentimental, points to a third position that neither the liberal Protestants nor the Catholic modernists will find acceptable. He suggests that "the intelligent churchgoing population" can survive with a kind of English "muddle through" strategy. How many churchgoers really believe, as matter of historical fact, that Jesus instituted the mass?, he asks. "Or would they stop going to church if they thought He hadn't? How many really believe in hell?"

Wilson points to the influence of contemporary religious believers: Simone Weil, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Luther King Jr. and John Paul II. Such people have set the tone for a viable religious faith by simply deciding "to ignore the death of God." Wilson may be corroborating sociologist Peter Berger's contention, made some months ago in these pages, that a vital religious life can indeed be "built on modern [and postmodern?] skepticism" and characterized by intellectual uncertainty, weak institutions, and the Reformation principle of "faith alone" ("Protestantism and the quest for certainty," August 26-September 2, 1998).

I wonder. "Muddling through" is not a reasoned response to intellectual challenges. On the contrary, its abdication from the realm of the mind can make it seem another form of fideism. But these reservations apparently cannot deny the viability of such a faith—hesitant and unsure of itself, but nevertheless faith.

Perhaps a genuine, unflinching intellectual engagement between faith and its modern and postmodern alternatives is possible. If it is not, Christians may indeed simply have to follow the lead of our recent saints and decide to ignore the death of God.