

In our Time Programme 64
The Death of God

Melvyn Bragg : Hello. Nietzsche famously proclaimed that God was dead in 1882. Hegel in fact beat him to it apprising his Berlin students of God's demise as early as 1827. By the end of the 19th century, echoes of the death of God can be heard everywhere. In the revolutionary politics of Lenin, in the poetry of Tennyson, in the psychoanalysis of Freud. German biblical scholarship, the march of science seemed to challenge the authority of the bible at every turn and by the 20th century, almost all the great writers, artists and intellectuals had abandoned the certainty of their belief in God. So who or what was responsible for this sudden spread of religious doubt? If God could truly be said to be dead, who fired the first shot.

With me to discuss the emergence of religious uncertainty is the novelist and biographer A. N Wilson author of "God's funeral", we're also joined by Victoria Glendinning, novelist and biographer of among others, Anthony Trollope, and Johnathan Swift.

Andrew Wilson, in your book, you cite the philosopher David Hume and Edward Gibbon, author of "The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" as the leading influences in the rise of atheism, you say "These authors had planted time bombs to explode in the faces of the Victorians", can you tell us how Gibbon did that, first of all, in his "Fall of the Roman Empire"?

Andrew Wilson : Well I could try, I think that one of the clever things about Gibbon is of course that he never professes unbelief, and indeed when somebody accused him of not being a Christian believer, he published a long vindication, claiming that he was at the very least a deist and a believer in God. but what Gibbon does is manage to make you think that Christianity is base and ridiculous. There's a marvellous passage at the end of his ludicrous description of St Simian Stylities(?) who spent his life living on top of a column, and says if you compare - I'm paraphrasing Gibbon's beautiful prose - but if you compare the life of this buffoon with the dignified and philosophical life of Cicero and his contemporaries 500 years before, you see the effects which Christianity has had on human civilisation, and it hasn't been a good effect, Gibbon leads you to suppose, he doesn't need to spell that out.

Melvyn Bragg : But he also undermines by this elegant mockery, the early Christian fathers, their doctrines...

Andrew Wilson : Well he makes you realise, which is true in my opinion, how utterly contemptible and ridiculous the so-called early Christians were for the most part, and how foolish they were in their attitudes to most of the things that we would regard as civilised. I think many people.....

Melvyn Bragg : But isn't that taking them too abruptly out of context?

Andrew Wilson : Well no, but the point was that they were anarchists who were opposed to everything that was deemed civilised in their own day, and I think many people, by the time of the 18th century, who didn't know any history of course, assumed that the early Christians were all people like themselves. They were...they thought...that although they might not have long sleeves and powdered wigs, they were very much like the bishops of the Anglican church in the 18th century, ie chaps like us, well they jolly well weren't, and Gibbon shows this in page after page, and I think shows for example their total contempt for marriage, for family for the ordinary decent institutions of society. The Christians tried to, and in many cases succeeded in undermining all these things, and I think that this was very troubling to decent intelligent people when they came to read Gibbon. As I say, it was a bit like a time bomb, because Gibbon had his followers in his life time, but the reading public grew so much towards the end of the 18th century, and in the early years of the 19th century, so that Gibbon became much, much more popular only a generation after he'd written his book.

Melvyn Bragg : Just on the subject I've given, Victoria Glendinning, do you...are you surprised that a history can have the sort of effect that Andrew is ascribing to it?

Victoria Glendinning : Well I'm not sure that, I mean maybe God began to be a bit sort of terminally unwell then, but I don't think He was very well for quite a long time before, and I noticed with Deacon(?) Swift, when I was learning about Jonathan Swift, and I read his sermons. He never talked about the afterlife, he never talked about

heaven, reward and punishment, he talked about how we should behave to our neighbours in this world ie very sophisticated people would have had a kind of nominal Christianity as a form of social cohesion and social control, and it makes life better and easier for everybody, but whether they really believed in a kind of transcendental God, I am not sure.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I come back to the point though? Do you think that Andrew's contention that Gibbon in writing this history, "The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", had an influence on his contemporaries and in later generations, on disturbing their faith?

Victoria Glendinning : Yes, but I think he also twitched a chord that was already there, because at the same time what you get is this extraordinary double thing, that the 19th century is the great age of missionaries , it's the great age of evangelicalism, the sort of ridiculousness of suddenly the pope is infallible in 1869. At the same time a sort of growing interest in science, not only really among educated people, but things like Mechanics Institutes and Workers Education Authority, and young urban men in the cities and the new industrialised cities, were learning about science and chemistry, when people at Eton and Harrow were still doing Greek and Latin.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes, your second pillar Andrew is David Hume, and you quote Hume from "The Dialogues"...

Andrew Wilson : Yes.

Melvyn Bragg :on the very notion of causation, you say, "For all we know, a priori, matter may contain the source or spring of order, originally within itself, as well as the mind does", and you use this as one of the key sentences in Hume which brought about the funeral of God.

Andrew Wilson : Yes. Because when Hume wrote this book called "The Dialogues" concerning natural religion, he wrote it as a private document, and he never dared to publish it in his life time, and indeed when it was published, it was published on a tiny little press and it was probably only read by a few hundred people. It was in the generation following that it became popular and was widely disseminated and read, and its basic idea was total scepticism about everything. The underling anarchy of Hume, if you wish to put it that way is that we can't be sure of anything at all, and this, as you remember, the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant, said that "reading Hume awoke him out of his dogmatic slumber". From Hume because of Kant and the enormous influence that Kant and his follower Hegel had on European thought in general, from Hume comes the quest in European thought for certainty about something. That was...that to me is really why Hume's such an important thinker, because for Hume, we can't be sure that Sun's going to come up tomorrow morning. You can't be sure, if you switch on an electric kettle that it will boil, you can't be sure of anything. He disputed the notion of science and scientific enquiry just as much as he did metaphysical and religious enquiry, and that's why I believe, in the course of the 19th century, because human beings crave certainty about so many areas of life, they invented the idea that there is such a thing as scientific certainty.

And one of the reasons that Hume was so influential, on for example, a thinker like Darwin, who we wouldn't necessarily.....suppose to be a metaphysician to start with, was that Darwin was looking fro some area of human or animal activity about which we could be certain.

Melvyn Bragg : Because Hume didn't take it as a fact, as we've just heard, that the mind itself was a model...of what we knew about our minds.....

Andrew Wilson : Absolutely not...why should there be one mind behind the universe? Why should the universe be seen as a single entity? Why can't it just be a whole lot of completely....

Victoria Glendinning : But the interesting thing about both Gibbon and Hume, is that they didn't seem to be as it were, I wouldn't say they didn't give a damn, but they took this on board in an intellectual way, and what I think came out of your book very interestingly was, how for a lot of people, decent ordinary believing folk, it really was a bereavement, a sense of loss. I was particularly sort of touched, by Philip Goss who was a geologist, who understood the meaning of the fossil record, and yet was a passionate believer in the creation myth...

Andrew Wilson : Well yes.....

Victoria Glendinning : ...who said "Perhaps, perhaps God put all these fossils in the rock, to give the world the *appearance* of ageing". Which is sort of agonisingly touching.

Melvyn Bragg : But from your...

Andrew Wilson : Well that was the scientific principle taken to the point of lunacy.

Melvyn Bragg : Yeah.

Victoria Glendinning : Yes.

Melvyn Bragg : But can I just take up this business again about the influence that people have? From your reading of Jonathan Swift and so on, it just fascinates me, and we talk about these scholars only a few hundred things published and yet actually the influence that thinkers have had over the last 200 years has been extraordinary, even though they've only published to a few people at a time...

Andrew Wilson : Well exactly.

Melvyn Bragg : ...they've actually radicalised....can you just give us some....? Can you give any follow through from the studies you've done?

Victoria Glendinning : Well I think it's very interesting how it filters through into say popular fiction even, in that a lot of people who had never have read these European philosophers, would have read "Mrs Humphrey Wood" Robert Elsmere, which is about a terrible crisis of faith, how Trollope's sister, not many people know this, Cecilia wrote this novel called "Chollerton" which was about this young man agonising about his Anglo-Catholic faith. A lot of the agonisers either moved backwards into agnosticism or forwards, if you like to put it that way into Anglo-Catholicism or Roman-Catholicism.

Melvyn Bragg : You talk about Kant, and we've already said that Hume awoke Kant from his dogma, and he talked about two positions on God to start with, the imminentist position and the transcendental position. Can you just describe those a little and then tell us what conclusion he came to? Because through Kant, Hume became extraordinarily influential.

Andrew Wilson : Yes, well I'm probably going to simplify to the point of distortion here, but I mean basically, if you believe that God is imminent, either in the world or in yourself, you believe that He can be inferred and found, let's say through meditation, but He isn't necessarily an external reality. The transcendent God, or indeed transcendent truth of any kind, is something which is outside our own perceptions.

Now this is entering a terribly difficult philosophical area, because how can we be sure that anything outside our own perceptions is there ? This is the point of Hume awakening Kant from his dogma, and basically speaking, Kant who is regarded, as what philosophers call an idealist, never, in my opinion, was either an empiricist -somebody who based his idea of truth entirely on experience, or an idealist - somebody who believes that we impose reality, we invent reality, that truth is a human construct.

He was constantly wrestling with these two irreconcilable but necessary polarities. What you get with Hegel is a concentration entirely on the idealist point of view, namely that reality itself is never something that we are going to be able to acquire unless you accept the idea that the human mind isn't a camera, it's something that makes the world up basically.

Melvyn Bragg : Yes, before we move to Hegel, can I just bring the Kant argument across to you Victoria Glendinning? At the end of his life he wrote, "God is not a being outside of me, but merely a thought in me, God is the morally practical self legislative reason. ". Does that ring any bells with your reading of the way that God was perceived in Victorian literature?

Victoria Glendinning : To a certain extent in that a very strong Victorian idea is the idea of duty, and I think perhaps Kant, the trickle down from Kant is that our sense of right and wrong, if you like, is God....

Melvyn Bragg : If we feel laws, there must be a law giver?

Andrew Wilson : Yes.

Victoria Glendinning : Well exactly.

Andrew Wilson : This is the....

Victoria Glendinning : Another very good point you make is that it's religious experience that gives rise to theology, rather than vice versa....

Andrew Wilson : No the other way round. Yep.

Victoria Glendinning : ...and that the actuality that people had felt religious experience has to be dealt with somehow, and one of the most interesting things to me about the trickle down effect is what people did to substitute for a literal belief in a transcendent god, which included weird things like, spiritualism, where you got very respectable prominent intellectuals such as a FD Morris, going to these weird seances and table turnings and you see that going right through into our own day. The substitutions include sort of, hero worship, which is the Nietzsche and Carlisle situation....

Andrew Wilson : Yes certainly.

Victoria Glendinning : ...and hero worship in our own day, even of figures like Princess Diana...

Andrew Wilson : Yes.

Victoria Glendinning : ...or in your own case the Queen of Denmark! (laughs)

Andrew Wilson : Yes. I certainly worship the Queen of Denmark, but that's another....that's another movie. But when you're talking about these very, very Victorian as I would think, notions, such as spiritualism, such as Catholic visions, the actual appearance on the Earth of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette and other people during the last century, and she appeared to an Anglican to, to father Ignatius in the Welsh Mountains.

These, which felt at the time like wonderful religious counterblasts to science, are of course like poor Philip Goss and his fossils, there in fact pseudoscientific experiences. What the religious people are saying is that "No we entirely accept...we entirely accept the scientific view, but here is an empirical factual evidence of religion. Whereas in the past, I think someone like St Thomas Aquinas, would say, "Well don't be so silly, there is never going to be an empirical factual definition of faith. Faith is the belief in things unseen".

Melvyn Bragg : Can I just take a ...almost take a time out from this historical romp, just to talk about the idea which Victoria raised of there being let us say a need for experience which hitherto has been called religious? Is that in itself some sort of validation of religion, do you think? Victoria first.

Victoria Glendinning : Well I don't know, Andrew is very interesting about this because it seems to slip with you between the lines of your intellectual argument. You talk about how -and I agree with you - how human beings are natural adorers, and that the human race can get rid of Christianity, but it can't lose its capacity for worship, and you have a wonderful phrase how the gym crack shrines contained truths, and what do we mean by this?

Andrew Wilson : Well I mean I think that all the great religions of the world contain deep truths both about ourselves and about the nature of things. Otherwise they couldn't possibly have survived and indeed nurtured not merely virtuous lives but great intellects.

I mean I mentioned Thomas Aquinas, but I mean the whole history of Christianity is a history of intellectuals far greater than any of us sitting round this table. And we're not saying they were fools who hadn't read Darwin's "Origin of Species" or something of that kind, and therefore were stuck in the dark ages. They were tapping into something which was very deep about human nature itself.....one of the reasons....

Melvyn Bragg : So what does it tell you....? What conclusions do you draw from...not only from the intellectuals, but from non-intellectuals who....

Andrew Wilson : No but that's why I love William James, which was at the end of the 19th century, when people were saying, you know, science or biblical (indistinct), has blown religion out of the water, he says "Hold on a bit, not only are there all these great people, St Augustine etc, who have defended religion, but also your average man and woman, for the most part, at some stage in his life, has had an experience which we might deem to be religious", and these experiences if you're an empirical philosopher have to be taken account of. We are religious beings, and when you get rid of religion you don't necessarily get rid of the need to adore and worship and then you have hero worship, leading to National Socialism, and all sorts of undesirable things very often.

Melvyn Bragg : But let's come back to this.....

Andrew Wilson : Yeh.

Melvyn Bragg : From Kant we go to Hegel, and Hegel seemed to establish the idea that history, time, religion were all human constructs, and as it were, we didn't need a god to put those in place.

Andrew Wilson : Well he writes in such a vague woolly way, that it's very hard sometimes to know what Hegel means. But one of the most important of his ideas, which is very easy to grasp, is that at different ages, I mean the famous phrase the "Zeitgeist", we think and feel and respond to things in particular ways inevitably. We're now in the 21st century, we can't, however much we might like to, go round thinking in the way the Victorians thought, or the way that the 18th century thought.

And what he believed was that in the time of his own lifetime, the world had changed, and the modern had come into being, you'd had the French revolution and everything else, and this had materially and completely changed the way that we look at the world, and it had made God himself seem like a human construct, but nonetheless of course, Hegel took a tremendously mystical and as we would think, a rather religious view of the movement of time.

Victoria Glendinning : But no belief becomes living belief, until lots and lots people believe it, I mean in the early days, say of evolution theory, it would have been sort of held dear, by a very few people. Now we were discussing a little bit how things move along, now it would be the...apart from a sort of...long lasting battles, especially in the United States between creationists and evolutionists, now that would be part of the common psyche .

Andrew Wilson : Yes, my belief actually is that Darwinism itself, I'm not saying whether I believe it or not I think if we were having this discussion in 20 years time, people will look back and say "Wasn't it strange in those days when everybody thought that Richard Dawkins...was...was...was

Victoria Glendinning : Or not about that, but something else, we don't know.

Andrew Wilson : ...was completely believable because we can now see that it wasn't necessarily true. Or something else as you say.

Victoria Glendinning : Yes.

Andrew Wilson : Just as now we have Freud is...I mean he was taken to be a completely accurate scientific picture of human nature, and now people have the gravest doubts about Freud.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I come to another point though? We've talked about well, just skimmed the surface of various individual thinkers, but might it have been the forces of industrialisation in Victorian times, Marx's idea about the economy making everything, the ...Engles observation that the workers are not religious and do not attend church talking about the English workers in 1844, might it not have been those groundswell of forces which were more responsible for the indifference, the growing indifference to God, or *as* responsible as anything that trickled down from the top?

Victoria Glendinning : Yes, I think there are always two things going on at once, I mean with the new cities growing up and the rings and rings of new industrial suburbs round the old cities, it was in fact the greatest era of church building probably since the medieval time. Every new suburb, every new street corner had its church.....

Andrew Wilson : Yes but Victoria, who went?

Victoria Glendinning :exactly they weren't going , the respectful middle classes went.

Andrew Wilson : We know from abundant records kept by the Victorians, of the behaviour and customs and beliefs of the working class that with very few exceptions in Calvinistic Methodism is some places and Roman Catholicism in others, the working class, as Engles noticed, didn't go to church. Far from religion being the opium of the people, it was (laughs)...it just meant nothing at all. Read Mayhew's accounts of the costermongers and the street sellers in London, they didn't even know what went on in St Paul's Cathedral!

Victoria Glendinning : What's interesting is that people also always find an opium, in that nowadays prosperity is the opium of the people. In that if you have enough....

Andrew Wilson : Well this is the great paradox of my story, really the death of God or the death of religion whichever you think it is, that in the 19th century people were too tired and too ill and too persecuted as industrial proles to have any time at all for the sort of discussion we're having now, and now most of us are too prosperous, for us to worry about it. Whereas I think Melvyn, your friend, William Wordsworth, in ...up in the Fells, was close to God with his mountains and his sky and lakes.

And probably agricultural workers are more likely to have been religious, and people just ground down from the sheer misery horror and tiringness of industrial life , and I think that's such a big subject that I mean it almost makes one weep to think of it , but the idea of having a religious discussion with people like that is almost ridiculous.

Victoria Glendinning : But that is the very ground where Wesley and evangelical Christianity found its roots.

Andrew Wilson : Yes and we like to say "Oh yes Wesley stopped us having a revolution in this country, and the working classes were all madly religious really". The truth is that only a tiny proportion of people believed or went to church or had any interest in religion, then or now.

Melvyn Bragg : As you went up to the Lake District Andrew, for which I'm very grateful, we'll stick there with John Ruskin, who was worried.....made anxious by geologists, and when we think of science undermining religion today, we don't reach out first for geology , and yet that was a very.....

Andrew Wilson : It was a great worry, he wrote to his friend Dr Ackland, that those dreadful hammers, he thought that they were hammering away at every verse of the bible. Ruskin had been brought up to be an absolute died-in-the-wool conservative evangelical by his mother , and they read verse by verse, they read the bible, aloud to one another when they got to the end of Revelation , and St John The Divine, they went back to read the book of Genesis, all the way through his life, not just his childhood, and I think he more or less, until he was about 30, believed it all, in the way that, perhaps somebody in the Baptist, Southern Baptist might believe it now . Then little by little, partly through his passion for geology, partly through simply reading and thinking

He did lose his faith, but he then went on further, which is why Ruskin is one of my great heroes, to see that, as we've said already, human beings can't live without faith, and he began to understand in his own idiosyncratic and slightly

mad way, what faith is, I think, and he managed to explain it, in wonderful ways and he managed...the reason I like him, not only did he hang on in a slightly batty way to some form of faith, though of course it isn't Christianity, but he managed to undermine people's faith in science.

And he was one of the great crusaders against Darwin.

Victoria Glendinning : Something else that undermined people's faith in science again back to fiction, was books like Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein", which gave a great sort of stereotype of the mad, bad, evil scientist, and that touched something in the psyche of the terrified readership, which they didn't know was there, and it still does.

Andrew Wilson : Yeah.

Victoria Glendinning : But the thing about Ruskin, seems to me, that it reminds us how - you talked about how he read the bible, with his mother - how very much the story we're telling this morning is a Protestant story, because for Roman Catholics the bible was not something that had to be read all the time, in fact it was rather discouraged, I believe.

Andrew Wilson : It was on the index (Victoria laughs)!

Victoria Glendinning : So what we're discussing is a crisis in a kind of rather mild sect of Christianity.

Andrew Wilson : That's true to a certain extent, but unbelief was sweeping across Europe in a huge way, and the Protestant biblical scholarship, got into the mind of Ernest Rannel (?) for example and his "Life of Jesus" -La Vie de Jesu was one of the greatest bestsellers of all time, and did lead to a tremendous crisis of faith among Catholics.

Melvyn Bragg : Andrew says at the beginning of his book, "This is a story of bereavement, as much as adventure. Do you see the bereavement in Victorian culture Victoria?"

Victoria Glendinning : Yes I do, and I think it's one of the hardest things for us to empathise, this real terror of having the ground taken away from under your feet, and I think that we haven't got quite anything like it now. I think the loss of the father the loss of the father figure structure, can be seen in a sort of very ghostly echo in the conservative with a small "c" clinging to the family values, and that kind of thing, because it's always part of the parcel. I think what they find very difficult, which only exceptional people could do, I'm thinking of Keats now, he said that human task was what he called "negative capability", that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainty and doubt and mystery without any irritable reaching after fact to reason.

Andrew Wilson : That's a very rare quality to have, and I think most of us...I mean I certainly share the Victorian aching sense of loss for the disappearance of God.

I mean for many people, too numerous to name, it did mean the loss of everything, it meant the loss of careers and so on, these brave clergymen giving up their livings. When you think of George Eliot translating "Life of Jesus" which undermined faith, with tears streaming down her cheeks

and when she reached his debunking scenes of the crucifixion she couldn't bear it. I mean she sobbed in front of her relief of the scene of the passion.

Melvyn Bragg : Can I just bring it- for the last few minutes to today? There's still the question that Christians, religious Christians ask, is that "Well science can solve the how questions, but not the why questions. Why are we here? Why are we like this?"

And those questions are interesting, and not easily swept aside, Andrew Wilson?

Andrew Wilson : I wouldn't wish to sweep them aside, but what I think is dangerous for Christians, is for them to think that they are in the possession of the same kind of hard scientific truths which I for one and John Ruskin for

another, would think were impossible, and the trouble with Christianity, is it held on to quite falsifiable and false historical claims. It claimed that Jesus started the church and instituted the sacraments and so on, and you can demonstrate that this is highly improbable, at the very least.

Melvyn Bragg : What's your reaction to it can answer...the science can answer the how but not the why questions? Richard Dawkins for instance says "Well there need be no 'Why?' questions".....

Andrew Wilson : Well I quite agree with him about that.

Victoria Glendinning : Well I think that you talked about "hard science". I think science has been shown all ..to be unhard almost as theology, in that theories are overturned with regularity, and I think what may happen, we said we don't know what will seem ridiculous 100 years on, that science and metaphysics may come to be much more close, maybe almost the same thing when we know enough. As they were hundreds and hundreds of years ago when we knew absolutely nothing, and it was condemned as "magical thinking" to

Andrew Wilson : But we don't know anything, that's the other illusion about science. Most of us can't understand what scientists are talking about.

Victoria Glendinning : Absolutely not.

Andrew Wilson : And when Lord Tennyson said "What am I, an infant crying in the night, an infant crying for the light, and with no language but a cry", that's what we are. And the idea that we've understood Steven Hawking's book, or indeed anything at all is complete illusion.

Melvyn Bragg : I agree with that.

Andrew Wilson : We take science on trust, just as people used to take religion on trust. And for all we know it's a load of baloney, I suspect much of it is.

Melvyn Bragg : So you would say that were the Christian religion to put aside its insistence on its story..

Andrew Wilson : As a historical reality....

Melvyn Bragg : ...as a historical reality, then inside that, or apart from, you tell me which, there is something of value and perhaps of permanent value?

Andrew Wilson : Well it's hardly for little me to judge the whole of Christian tradition , but I would say yes, very definitely so. The idea that sort of denying self you find life, is a deep truth about human nature. And it's embodied in the whole Christian story, but as soon as you start saying there really was a woman who had a baby without the usual procedures before it, or the man who was raised from the dead in a literal historical sense, then it seems to me that you've lost almost everybody, nowadays. Because people don't believe that took place.

Melvyn Bragg : Finally Victoria Glendinning, Andrew said earlier that -coming back to this discussion in 20-30 years time-we might have a completely different perspective of Darwin, do you think we would still come back to this discussion and have the same questions to ask about the God question.

Victoria Glendinning : Well it might be phrased differently, but I think we will, because the size of our brains aren't going to get any bigger , and our understanding of the universe is going to go on changing. I like very much the quote you had from Goethe in your book, "Let us reserve those things which are unfathomable for reverence and quietude".

Melvyn Bragg : Well thank you very much Victoria Glendinning, and Andrew Wilson, and thank you very much for listening.

