

5-1-1992

Against Religion: Why We Should Try to Live Without It

Peter C. Erb

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Recommended Citation

Erb, Peter C. (1992) "Against Religion: Why We Should Try to Live Without It," *Consensus*: Vol. 18 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol18/iss1/17>

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How Can We Know?

A.N. Wilson

Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985

118 pp. Paper, \$7.95

Against Religion: Why We Should Try to Live Without It

A.N. Wilson

Chatto Counterblasts, No. 19

London: Chatto and Windus, 1991

51 pp. Paper, \$7.95

A.N. Wilson is an author of wide-ranging abilities. A novelist, essayist, journalist, and biographer, he has throughout his life "recognise[d] strong religious impulses within himself" and knows "from the inside as well as from personal observation, that religion appeals to something deep and irrational and strong within us, and that this is what makes it so dangerous" (*Against Religion*, 3). It is these impulses, one supposes, which led him to convert to Catholicism, reconvert to the Church of England, and now "deconvert" ("I have discarded any formal religious adherence. . ." [Ibid.]).

However one reacts to his novels (there are 10 to this point; I found his *Wise Virgin* wearying and his *Gentlemen in England* too clever by three-quarters), his biographies do make stimulating reading and most reflect his religious interests (see his pieces on Milton, the "old monster" Hilaire Belloc, Tolstoy and C.S. Lewis). For those interested in religious life, however, the most interesting of his compositions are the long essay, originally not meant to be published, *How Can We Know?* and his more recent *Against Religion*.

There is a great difference between the two volumes. *How Can We Know?* is a series of six meditations, written after his "reconversion" and arising out of two questions: Firstly, if there is a Christian Way, how can we know it? And secondly, "Even if it is possible (as I believe it is) to recover some picture of what the Christian Way should be, and of what all Christian people have, or should have, in common, how can we know that it is true?" (vii) Wilson takes up the problem in a series of simple and often profound, warm meditations on Call, the Way, Forgiveness, Bread of Heaven, the Upper Room and Truth, concluding with an openness to the difficulties which remain, "none greater than the problem of how the love of God allows or penetrates the pointless suffering of his creation. But the experience of God is not to be denied" (118). God breathes the beginning of this experience and when we recognize it, it is clearly known and the believer rests finally in the point toward which all human restlessness has yearned.

The tone of *Against Religion* is radically different, although every now and again, some of Wilson's warmth bubbles through in spite of his rhetorical stance. Its central theme, however, remains firm: "Religion is the

tragedy of mankind"; it may be that it verbally opposes "intolerance and cruelty and violence", yet, in fact, it brings not peace, but a sword. It condemns novelists to death, it attempts to silence the learned, it castigates homosexuals and women who wish to enter the religious life, it waves revolvers above its head as a political statement, it "does more harm than good", and therefore "responsible persons, when religious impulses seize them, should 'commune in their own chambers and be still,' and should resist the impulse to join any sect, group or church to promote their point of view" (21).

Religion stalks the earth, consoling and inflaming indignation. The only group which might be freed somewhat of the charge is the group most sinned against: Judaism. "It could be said . . . that historically the Jews have not been disruptive enough. . . . [E]xcept in a few cases of dotty Jewish extremists . . . you never come across the Jews behaving in a socially disruptive manner" (37).

But very few religions follow such a pattern, and therefore liberal "toleration" cannot be accepted, since religions are not tolerant. Leave them free to operate as they will and popes will dictate that poor women die because they are not allowed to use contraceptives, ayatollahs will issue death sentences, and Paisleys will oversee the sentencing. Religion is on the rise and we cannot stop such action. All we can do is shout "boo" at the goose: "Boo, Boo, Boo!"

The ending marks the volume as a "mere" counterblast. It is rhetorical flourish, and fails to deal with the central problems of the issues raised: Booing a death squad is hardly an appropriate response. In its close Wilson's pamphlet reflects the weakness of the liberal democracy which it often castigates. Tolerance for all is impossible when some insist of divinely-inspired intolerance. The British formulation of one single established church over and against all others, Wilson cannot accept, nor is he willing to solve the Rushdie "incident" by extending the traditional blasphemy law to include all other traditions and thereby to reformulate laws treating hate literature on a theological footing. His only solution appears to be to move from tolerance for all to intolerance for all religious persons, and thereby to create as a new established religion some form of debilitated liberalism which calls for an unannounced closure to dialogue with any forms of human concern refusing to bend before a contemporary divine omniscience.

Peter C. Erb
Wilfrid Laurier University