

NYTIMES BOOK REVIEW: By PAUL BLOOM
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THE EVOLUTION OF GOD

By Robert Wright

567 pp. Little, Brown & Company. \$25.99

God has mellowed. The God that most Americans worship occasionally gets upset about abortion and gay marriage, but he is a softy compared with the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. That was a warrior God, savagely tribal, deeply insecure about his status and willing to commit mass murder to show off his powers. But at least Yahweh had strong moral views, occasionally enlightened ones, about how the Israelites should behave. His hunter-gatherer ancestors, by contrast, were doofus gods. Morally clueless, they were often yelled at by their people and tended toward quirky obsessions. One thunder god would get mad if people combed their hair during a storm or watched dogs mate.

In his brilliant new book, "The Evolution of God," Robert Wright tells the story of how God grew up. He starts with the deities of hunter-gatherer tribes, moves to those of chiefdoms and nations, then on to the polytheism of the early Israelites and the monotheism that followed, and then to the New Testament and the Koran, before finishing off with the modern multinational Gods of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Wright's tone is reasoned and careful, even hesitant, throughout, and it is nice to read about issues like the morality of Christ and the meaning of jihad without getting the feeling that you are being shouted at. His views, though, are provocative and controversial. There is something here to annoy almost everyone.

In sharp contrast to many contemporary secularists, Wright is bullish about monotheism. In ["Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny"](#) (2000), he argued that there is a moral direction to human history, that technological growth and expanding global interconnectedness have moved us toward ever more positive and mutually beneficial relationships with others. In "The Evolution of God," Wright tells a similar story from a religious standpoint, proposing that the increasing goodness of God reflects the increasing goodness of our species. "As the scope of social organization grows, God tends to eventually catch up, drawing a larger expanse of humanity under his protection, or at least a larger expanse of humanity under his toleration." Wright argues that each of the major Abrahamic faiths has been forced toward moral growth as it found itself interacting with other faiths on a multinational level, and that this expansion of the moral imagination reflects "a higher purpose, a transcendent moral order."

This sounds pro-religion, but don't expect [Pope Benedict XVI](#) to be quoting from Wright's book anytime soon. Wright makes it clear that he is tracking people's conception of the divine, not the divine itself. He describes this as "a good news/bad news joke for traditionalist Christians, Muslims and Jews." The bad news is that your God was born imperfect. The good news is that he doesn't really exist.

Wright also denies the specialness of any faith. In his view, there is continuous positive change over time — religious history has a moral direction — but no movement of moral revelation associated with the emergence of Moses, Jesus or Mohammed. Similarly, he argues that it is a waste of time to search for the essence of any of these monotheistic religions — it's silly, for instance, to ask whether Islam is a “religion of peace.” Like a judge who believes in a living constitution, Wright believes that what matters is the choices that the people make, how the texts are interpreted. Cultural sensibilities shift according to changes in human dynamics, and these shape the God that people worship. For Wright, it is not God who evolves. It is us — God just comes along for the ride.

It is a great ride, though. Wright gives the example of the God of Leviticus, who said, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” and he points out that this isn't as enlightened as it may sound, since, at the time, “neighbors” meant actual neighbors, fellow Israelites, not the idol-worshippers in the next town. But still, he argues, this demand encompassed all the tribes of Israel, and was a “moral watershed” that “expanded the circle of brotherhood.” And the disapproval that we now feel when we learn the limited scope of this rule is itself another reason to cheer, since it shows how our moral sensibilities have expanded.

Or consider the modern Sunday School song “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” (“Red and yellow, black and white, / They are precious in his sight.”) Actually, there is no evidence that he loved all of them; if you went back and sang this to the Jesus of the Gospels, he would think you were mad. But in the minds of many of his followers today, this kind of global love is what Christianity means. That certainly looks like moral progress.

But God still has some growing up to do, as Wright makes clear in his careful discussion of contemporary religious hatred. As you would expect, he argues that much of the problem isn't with the religious texts or teachings themselves, but with the social conditions — the “facts on the ground” — that shape the sort of God we choose to create. “When people see themselves in zero-sum relationship with other people — see their fortunes as inversely correlated with the fortunes of other people, see the dynamic as win-lose — they tend to find a scriptural basis for intolerance or belligerence.” The recipe for salvation, then, is to arrange the world so that its people find themselves (and think of themselves as) interconnected: “When they see the relationship as non-zero-sum — see their fortunes as positively correlated, see the potential for a win-win outcome — they're more likely to find the tolerant and understanding side of their scriptures.” Change the world, and you change the God.

For Wright, the next evolutionary step is for practitioners of Abrahamic faiths to give up their claim to distinctiveness, and then renounce the specialness of monotheism altogether. In fact, when it comes to expanding the circle of moral consideration, he argues, religions like Buddhism have sometimes “outperformed the Abrahamics.” But this sounds like the death of God, not his evolution. And it clashes with Wright's own proposal, drawn from work in evolutionary psychology, that we invented religion to satisfy certain intellectual and emotional needs, like the tendency to search for moral causes of natural events and the desire to conform with the people who surround us. These needs haven't gone away, and the sort of depersonalized and disinterested God that Wright anticipates would satisfy none of them. He is betting that historical forces will trump our basic psychological makeup. I'm not so sure.

Wright tentatively explores another claim, that the history of religion actually affirms “the existence of something you can meaningfully call divinity.” He emphasizes that he is not arguing that you need divine intervention to account for moral improvement, which can be explained by a “mercilessly scientific account” involving the biological evolution of the human mind and the game-theoretic nature of social interaction. But he wonders why the universe is so constituted that moral progress takes place. “If history naturally pushes people toward moral improvement, toward moral truth, and their God, as they conceive their God, grows accordingly, becoming morally richer, then maybe this growth is evidence of some higher purpose, and maybe — conceivably — the source of that purpose is worthy of the name divinity.”

It is not just moral progress that raises these sorts of issues. I don’t doubt that the explanation for consciousness will arise from the mercilessly scientific account of psychology and neuroscience, but, still, isn’t it neat that the universe is such that it gave rise to conscious beings like you and me? And that these minds — which evolved in a world of plants and birds and rocks and things — have the capacity to transcend this everyday world and generate philosophy, theology, art and science?

So I share Wright’s wonder at how nicely everything has turned out. But I don’t see how this constitutes an argument for a divine being. After all, even if we could somehow establish definitively that moral progress exists because the universe was jump-started by a God of Love, this just pushes the problem up one level. We are now stuck with the puzzle of why there exists such a caring God in the first place.

Also, it would be a terribly minimalist God. Wright himself describes it as “somewhere between illusion and imperfect conception.” It won’t answer your prayers, give you advice or smite your enemies. So even if it did exist, we would be left with another good news/bad news situation. The good news is that there would be a divine being. The bad news is that it’s not the one that anyone is looking for.

Paul Bloom, a professor of psychology at Yale, is the author of “Descartes’ Baby: How the Science of Child Development Explains What Makes Us Human.” His book “How Pleasure Works” will be published next year.

Light at the end of religion's dark tunnel

Faith is growing ever more extreme but a new book on the evolution of God gives Andrew Sullivan hope

The 21st century has not been kind to religion. It began with the mass murder of thousands of innocents by Muslim religious fanatics in New York city; it continued with the news that the Catholic hierarchy had operated and protected an international child abuse conspiracy for decades; and the Pew poll recently found that the Americans most likely to support torture of terror suspects were those who attended evangelical churches most frequently.

The intellectual onslaught has been just as severe, from Christopher Hitchens's oddly persuasive massacre of a few fish in a small barrel, to the former believer Bart Ehrman's detonation of scriptural accuracy and Sam Harris's evisceration of religious moderates. It's perhaps unsurprising that even in America, the most devout of all western nations, non-belief is soaring.

Worse, perhaps, the response of organised religion to all this has been not to take some self-confident steps in debating the validity of these critiques, but to dig in deeper and re-fundamentalise. From Pope Benedict's attempt to freeze theological debate and reassert bald papal authority, to resurgent resistance to teaching evolution in America's Bible Belt and the degeneration of Islam into the medieval madness of the Taliban, the polarisation seems to be gaining pace.

The possibility of a reasonable engagement between faith and reason, between doctrine and biblical scholarship, between a mature theology and a golden age of scientific research — all this seems very distant right now.

And that's why a new book gives me hope. It reminds us that if you take a few thousand steps back from our current crisis, the long-term prognosis is much better than you might imagine.

The book is *The Evolution of God* (due out in the US next month) and it is by Robert Wright, a secular writer best known in America for thoughtful defences of evolutionary psychology and free trade. The tone of the book is dry scepticism with a dash of humour; the content is supple, dense and layered. What makes it fresh and necessary is that it's a non-believer's open-minded exploration of how religious doctrine and practice have changed through human history — usually for the better.

From primitive animists to the legends of the first gods, battling like irrational cloud-inhabiting humans over the cosmos, Wright tells the story of how war and trade, technology and human interaction slowly exposed humans to the gods of others. How this awareness led to the Jewish innovation of a hidden and universal God, how the cosmopolitan early Christians, in order to market their doctrines more successfully, universalised and sanitised this Jewish God in turn, and how Islam equally included a civilising universalism despite its doctrinal rigidity and founding violence.

Fundamentalism, in this reading, is a kind of repetitive neurotic interlude in the evolution of religion towards more benign and global forms. It's not a linear process — misunderstanding, violence, stupidity, pride and anger will always propel human beings backwards just when they seem on the verge of progress. Greater proximity has often meant greater hatred — as one god has marshalled earthly forces against another. But in the very, very long run, as human beings have realised that religion is nothing if not true and that truth can be grasped or sought in many different ways, doctrines have evolved. Through science and travel, conversation and scholarship, interpretation and mysticism — our faiths have adapted throughout history, like finches on Darwin's islands.

Wright's core and vital point is that this is not a descent into total relativism or randomness. It is propelled by reason interacting with revelation, coupled with sporadic outbreaks of religious

doubt and sheer curiosity. The Evolution of God is best understood as the evolution of human understanding of truth — even to the edge of our knowledge where mystery and meditation take over.

What's subtle about the book is that while it makes a materialist case for how God evolved — as a function of trade and travel, globalisation and science — it does not reduce faith to these facts on the ground. Hovering over the book is a small sense that, far from disproving the existence of God, this evolving doctrine might point merely to humankind's slow education into the real nature of the divine.

Today's fundamentalists posit a doctrinal truth rooted in the past, in a moment of revelation we are always trying to capture, to nail down in a literal phrase. But what if the final word is not in the human past but in the human future — as we assimilate our global experiences of the divine and try to make sense of all of them? What if we are travelling towards our deepest moment of religious truth rather than away from it?

God, after all, is definitionally eternal and humans are definitionally temporal. Why should divine truth, however once revealed, be immune to human misunderstanding? Why shouldn't time and thought and experience help us uncover the truth rather than taking us further away from it? In earlier eras, theologians were eager to see how new discoveries in human knowledge could inform their faith. Now such discoveries are seen as threats. That's a function of insecurity, not faith. And why should we see ourselves as believers constantly trying to recover a pristine past instead of struggling towards a truer future?

My own view, as a struggling and doubting person of faith, is that truth matters in whatever mode we find it — but ultimate truth, because we are not ultimate beings, will always elude us. The search for this truth is the point, illuminated in my own faith by Jesus. Humans cannot live without this search, never have and never will. Our consciousness asks questions to which there will never be a complete answer; we are religious because we are human. And the challenge of our time is neither the arrogant dismissal of religious life and heritage, nor the rigid insistence that all metaphysical questions are already answered or unaskable, but a humble openness to history and science and revelation in the journey of faith.

This vision is beleaguered now both within religious life and outside it. But if we are to survive this era of technology with the potential of mass destruction, if we are to endure past the darkness of the Taliban and the religious right, this process of religious reform is not an option. It is a necessity. How relieving to have a sane, sober rationalist point this out.

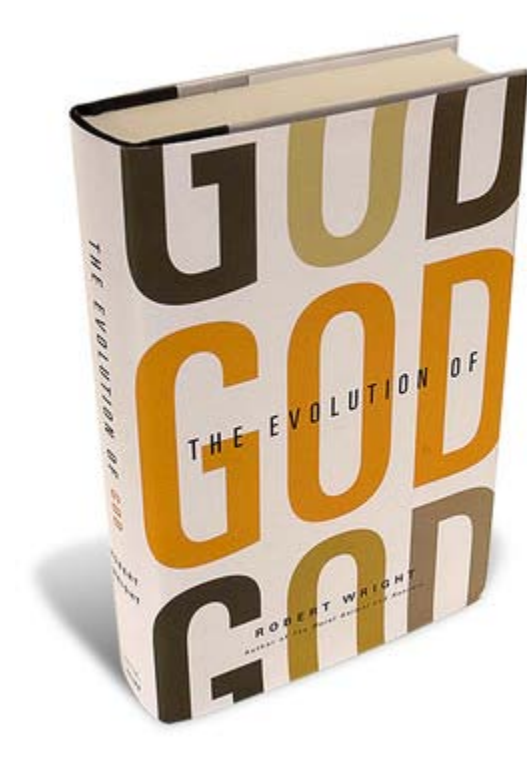
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Belief Without Borders

GREGG EASTERBROOK

On any list of nonfiction authors that many people may not know but should, Robert Wright would rank high. Among his books are "The Moral Animal" (1994), which argues that natural selection rewards principled behavior and is gradually improving human ethics; and "Nonzero" (2000), which argues that history is moving in a positive direction: Social, political and economic forces, the book said, can operate in a "nonzero" rather than a "zero sum" way. In short, it is not necessary for A to gain at the expense of B; rather, both can gain.

Now Mr. Wright completes the circle by finding roughly the same promising trend in higher affairs. "The Evolution of God" -- really about religion rather than the divine -- supposes that, for all their faults, the monotheistic faiths have prospered because they encourage people to get along.



Mr. Wright begins "The Evolution of God" by wondering not whether faiths are true but why they proliferated in early society. His conclusion is that the initial impulse of faith was the self-interest of its administrative class. "Whenever people sense the presence of a puzzling and momentous force," he writes, "they want to believe there is a way to comprehend it. If you can convince them you're the key to comprehension, you can reach great stature." Shamans pretended to understand nature, the leading mystery of ancient days. But the claim was just a way for them to earn a living, Mr. Wright asserts; surely few shamans actually believed that they knew why storms came or disease struck.

What is the contemporary equivalent to the tribal shaman? Stockbrokers. Like shamans, stockbrokers claim the ability to augur hidden forces -- and, like shamans, Mr. Wright says, their advice is almost always worthless. In general, customers (ancient farmers needing rain, modern

investors) want to believe that someone has secret, mystic knowledge of a powerful unknown (the natural world, Wall Street). Like investment advisers today, mediums of the far past claimed mystic knowledge and charged for it. In some old tribal cultures, Mr. Wright adds, the word shaman meant roughly "politician." Angling for religious power was thus essentially the same as angling for tribal leadership.

The Evolution of God

By Robert Wright

(Little, Brown, 567 pages, \$25.99)

This, Mr. Wright infers, is how most religion began. Not exactly a glorious moment of revelation upon a mountaintop. Is the theory persuasive? Mr. Wright is prone to supposing that strong conclusions regarding precivilization can be drawn from the writings of anthropologists. Maybe anthropology is correct at times, but the field is chronically speculative and inferential -- building theories of history on it may be building on sand. For instance, Mr. Wright finds it significant that the earliest Buryat and Inuit cultures, in Siberia and the Arctic, viewed shamans as we now view politicians. But the Inuit also believed that their society was descended from invincible giants. Roll such points together and you have -- I am not sure what.

The closer Mr. Wright's analysis draws to the Common Era, the more forceful it becomes. The most striking contention in "The Evolution of God" concerns St. Paul, Christianity's first administrative leader. Ancient religions died off, Mr. Wright claims, because they were designed for specific ethnic groups and possessed no appeal outside them. Judaism spoke to those born into the faith, limiting its potential scope. Paul wanted Christianity to become a global faith, appealing to anyone from any land or ethnic group. So he offered something no faith had offered to that point -- universal brotherhood. Did Jesus intend to start a new, broader-based religion? That's hardly clear -- Christ never used the word "Christian" or instructed his disciples to promote a new faith. Paul, by contrast, actively wished to start a cross-borders, proselytizing system of belief. His innovation, according to Mr. Wright, was to realize that the promise of brotherhood could appeal to the whole world -- and as a Roman citizen, Paul thought in whole-world terms.

"The Evolution of God" goes on to analyze the spread of Christianity -- and, later, Islam -- in language that at times strains to sound of the moment: Had Pauline thinking failed, Mr. Wright observes, "another version of Christianity probably would have prevailed, a version featuring the doctrine of interethnic amity, the doctrine that realized the network externalities offered by the open platform of the Roman Empire."

But there is no doubt that Paul's core idea of brotherhood-based faith, intended to overcome delineations between people and groups, was a tremendous success in historical terms. Centuries later, Islam would emphasize some of the same qualities as early Christianity, especially the embrace of anyone from any nation. Broadly, Mr. Wright argues that religions act fierce or nationalistic when adherents feel threatened. But "when a religious group senses an auspicious non-zero-sum relationship with another group, it is more likely to create tolerant scriptures or find tolerance in existing scriptures." As the world grows ever more interdependent, this sentiment is an especially propitious one.

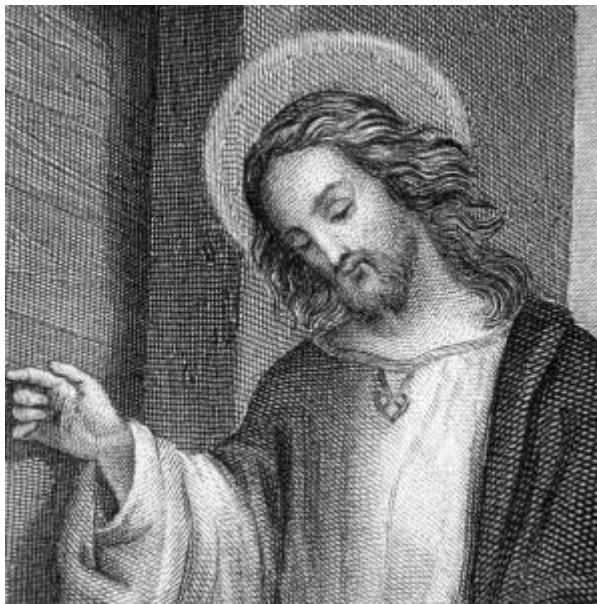
In the course of a long work ostensibly about God, Mr. Wright never tells the reader whether he believes that a supreme being exists. After extended hemming and hawing on this essential point, he proffers only that a person who accepts God as actual is "not necessarily crazy." Talk about praising with faint damnation! But taken together, "The Moral Animal," "Nonzero" and "The Evolution of God" represent a powerful addition to modern thought. If biology, culture and faith all seek a better world, maybe there is hope.

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Survival of the nicest

As they evolve, religions promote greater tolerance and peace



The author charts how the concept of God changes into a gentler persona.

By [Dan Cryer](#)

THE EVOLUTION OF GOD

By Robert Wright

Little, Brown, 576 pp., \$25.99

Count on Robert Wright to place whatever he examines under the microscope of evolutionary theory.

That was his strategy in “The Moral Animal” for illuminating such topics as friendship, monogamy, and xenophobia. In “Nonzero,” Wright linked Darwinian thought to game theory to suggest that human history is moving inexorably toward “win-win” global amity, that hatred has lost its usefulness in an increasingly interdependent world.

Wright’s new book, “The Evolution of God,” springs naturally from these explorations as well as from his debut, “Three Scientists and Their Gods: Looking for Meaning on the Age of Information.” Not a scientist or a theologian, he’s nonetheless fascinated by innate social mechanisms that nudge people toward cooperation rather than conflict, and that point toward some trans-human entity that might be called God.

As a lively writer, supple thinker, and imaginative synthesizer, Wright is bound to attract attention. His sprightly style deprives his subject of any solemnity. “Among the Aranda of central Australia,” he writes, “one of the shaman’s jobs was ensuring that solar eclipses would be temporary - nice work if you can get it.”

As a bold formulator he’s also a lightning rod for controversy. “The Evolution of God,” which explores permutations in our concepts of the deity, will please neither hard-core atheists nor fundamentalists of any faith. It’s too open to theism for the former, too rooted in scientific rationalism for the latter.

Wright assumes from the outset that religions change. And the most trustworthy means of explaining why is to trust “the facts on the ground” - that is, the economic-social-political context. In the final analysis, he emerges as an optimistic materialist. For he concludes that change will eventually tilt toward a more benign global religious environment. Now before you can shout “9/11” or “jihad,” listen to his argument.

The author traces the growth of gods from the animism of hunter-gatherers (where spirits rule over natural phenomena) to the polytheism of chiefdoms and ancient states (where multiple gods govern every aspect of life). These gods are hardly paragons of right living; they are capricious and often cruel. Over millennia, these models give way to a hierarchy of gods, with a powerful sovereign in charge, and, later yet, to monolatry, in which a city-state or nation bows to a single god considered superior to all others.

Most of the book, however, is devoted to the evolution of God concepts within more familiar precincts of monotheism: the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and the Koran. In the archeology and textual criticism of modern scholars, which Wright cites, these scriptures seldom appear in chronological order. Read in the proper sequence, however, they reveal a record of change.

Much like Jack Miles’s “God: A Biography,” Wright’s narrative shows a “Yahweh” alternatively compassionate or vengeful, mercurial or wise. The God of the Hebrews takes a while to differentiate from the El of the Canaanites and the Baal of the Phoenicians. In doing so, his story gradually sheds remnants of polytheism; the god Pestilence, for instance, becomes mere pestilence. Under Persian influence, Abrahamic monotheism eventually shifts “from a nationalistic and exclusive theology” to “a more international and inclusive one.”

In short, the Hebrew God shakes off his adolescent belligerence and assumes a kinder, gentler persona. While regarding the Jews as his favorite, this God presides benevolently over all the world's people.

Wright charts a similar evolution in the chapters grouped under the title "The Invention of Christianity." Mark, the earliest Gospel, is surprisingly devoid of the New Testament's supposed hallmark, love. There are no beatitudes, no turning of the other cheek, no "love your enemy." The neighbor you are obliged to love is defined narrowly, most likely one of your fellow followers of Jesus. Not until Matthew and Luke is love enlarged; the Good Samaritan does not appear until the last of the Gospels, Luke.

It was under St. Paul's charismatic leadership that the fledgling Jesus movement was transformed into a vehicle of interethnic brotherly love. Wright's description of Paul as an entrepreneur brilliant at expanding his Jesus "brand" throughout the polyglot Roman Empire may put off some Christians, but it provides a convincing account of why early Christianity was able to succeed among a Babel of competing deities.

As for the Koran, Wright's task is admittedly harder. The young preacher Muhammed, reaching out to Jews and Christians, comes off as far more likable than the mature politician-warlord who rids Medina of Jews - some of them by hacking off their heads. Wright has to balance all the Koran's injunctions to "kill the infidels" with its counsel of "to you your religion; to me my religion."

Can we all live together in peace? Over history's long haul, Wright believes we can. In the meantime, believers need to feel themselves not in a zero-sum game but a win-win situation. That's when scriptural bases for tolerance trump those counseling belligerence. Westerners fearful of radical Islam should therefore do all they can to encourage Muslim moderates, and the reverse.

Buddhists and Hindus, who don't figure in this provocative book, may quarrel with the idea that we are all heading toward cooperative forms of monotheism. Some of the former omit deities from their religion altogether, and the latter delight in their profusion. In any case, let the debate begin.

Dan Cryer is writing a biography of the Rev. Forrest Church, the leading voice of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. ■

The Evolution of God

Review by John C. Snider

Did God make man in His image, or was it the other way around? Despite millennia of religious tradition, most scholars are convinced it was the latter—but exactly how and why man's conception of God has developed is a matter of hot debate.

The most simplistic model for competition amongst the gods is that whichever god's followers are the most numerous and/or the most violent wins. In *The Evolution of God*, Robert Wright (*The Moral Animal*, *Nonzero*) argues for a subtler, more complex model—one that offers a much more hopeful outlook for humanity's future than, say, the kind of “religion spoils everything” absolutism of Christopher Hitchens.

Wright painstakingly builds his case, starting with what researchers know about modern-day shamanistic tribes and extrapolating backward into prehistory, speculating as to what the tribal religion(s) of the ancient Israelites might have been like. Then, like a biologist unraveling DNA, he deconstructs the Old Testament, looking at the history of Israel and how God's personality changes to reflect the nation's mood (e.g. a kind and tolerant Yahweh when Israel is secure; a vengeful, jealous Yahweh when populist/nationalist forces are at play).

Wright moves on to the New Testament, convinced that Jesus was an itinerant rabbi who wanted Jews to get right with God by getting right, not with everybody, but only with *fellow Jews*. The loving, all-embracing Christ, Wright believes, is a construct cobbled together by early Christian writers—with the idea of Christianity as a universal religion embracing both Jew and Gentile thanks to a brilliant marketing campaign by the Apostle Paul.

Finally, Wright analyzes the 6th/7th century Arabian milieu that shaped the religious and political career of Muhammad and led to the rise of Islam. Scholars have long recognized that the earlier portions of the Koran (written while Muhammad lived in Mecca) are more peaceful and tolerant than the later portions (written while Muhammad was in exile in Medina), which are harsher and more warlike. This fits in well with Wright's theory; in fact, Wright gushes, “All the Abrahamic scriptures attest to the correlation between circumstance and moral consciousness, but none so richly as the Koran. In that sense, at least, the Koran is unrivaled as a revelation.”

Sadly, the believing community—fundamentalists especially—will never bother to read Wright's book. Those that start will probably burn it whether they finish it or not. The freethought community will likely agree—even welcome—95% of Wright's book. It's the remaining 5% that will stick in their craw. As he began fleshing out in *Nonzero*, Wright argues for a sort of inevitability bordering on divine destiny in human affairs. While he is clear that he believes the evolution of religion is driven solely by natural forces, he nonetheless asserts that, given this inevitability, “then it is more likely that this ‘growth of God’ signifies the existence of God, or at least the existence of something you might call divine, however unlike ancient conceptions of God.” Wright repeatedly hedges his bets, with puzzling statements like this:

Occasionally I've suggested that there might be a kind of god that is real. This prospect was raised by the manifest existence of a moral order—that is, by the stubborn, if erratic, expansion of humankind's moral imagination over the millennia, and the fact that the ongoing maintenance of social order depends on the further expansion of the moral imagination, on movement toward moral truth.

And this:

This sounds fishy, I know. It sounds like a strained, even desperate, intellectual maneuver, a last-ditch attempt to rescue a prescientific conception of God from the onslaught of modern science. But, oddly, an argument that it's not comes from modern science; physicists commonly do something that is in some ways analogous to believing in a personal god.

Wright then launches into an analogy of electrons as a model for an underlying material reality, with the concept of "God" as a model for an underlying moral reality. He concludes:

Though we can no more conceive of God than we can conceive of an electron, believers can ascribe properties to God, somewhat as physicists ascribe properties to electrons. One of the more plausible such properties is love. And maybe, in this light, the argument for God is strengthened by love's organic association with truth.

Where Wright goes off the rails, perhaps, is in claiming that historical inevitability automatically implies a transcendent purpose. His is almost an intelligent design argument, and one that is reminiscent of the gut-feeling that, given that the universe exists, it must exist for some purpose. [Note: Wright objects to my comparison of his argument with the ID argument, pointing out that the commonality of ID arguments is "the belief that natural selection can't account for organic creation. That isn't a property shared with my analysis. And the commonalities you point to--references to 'God' 'divinity,' etc.--actually *aren't* found in all (or even most) ID arguments (if only because they're concealing their agenda). What's more, these commonalities *are* found with vast swaths of thought outside of ID--like religion writ large." Readers are encouraged to take his objection under advisement.] Why, one wonders, can we not simply accept the fact that one system (e.g. a monotheism that recognizes our common humanity) can out-compete other systems (e.g. the soap-opera polytheism of ancient Greece and Rome) without insisting that it must be for some additional underlying reason?

If nothing else, Wright provides us with a book that will trigger passionate debate, although it does far more than that. *The Evolution of God* is a brilliant explanation of why the Abrahamic faiths are the way they are. The book is also peppered with Wright's dry, deadpan wit (which one can hear on a weekly basis by listening to Wright's weekly sessions at bloggingheads.tv).

The Evolution of God (pub. by Little Brown and Company, June 2009, 576 pp hcdvr, \$25.99) is available at Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk.

Robert Wright's Evolution of God

Wednesday July 29, 2009

Categories: [Hebrew Bible & Oral Torah](#)

It's hard for a religious believer not to appreciate, at least in part, the spirit in which Robert Wright presents his new book [The Evolution of God](#). On one hand, he regards the history of religion as the history of an illusion. On the other hand, he argues that the evolution of that illusion represents humanity's groping toward a truth about the universe that may include the existence of a force operating in human lives, a force that it may even be fair to call God.

He writes admittedly as a materialist -- for whom the most basic postulate holds that reality can be explained in purely material terms. He sees an "evolution" in the Bible where relatively primitive even polytheistic concepts are gradually replaced by more enlightened ones. His case for religion, such as it is, is about as compelling as you can expect, given the postulation of materialism.

I like the person I see in Wright's writing. Other materialists, on the basis of their own faith in such an arbitrarily constricted picture of the world, leap to demand the dismantling of religion, the mockery of religion's defenders, and their exclusion from public office. We have the example of bestselling atheist author Sam Harris attacking poor old Francis Collins, Obama's pick for the National Institutes of Health, on the [New York Times](#) op-ed page. Why? Because Collins is an enthusiastic Evangelical Christian. And we have Jerry Coyne in the [New Republic](#) belittling Wright himself as peddling "creationism for liberals." Wright must find such insults unsurprising.

In his Afterword, he notes that following the Islam-inspired attacks of 9/11, faith as a whole acquired a foul odor. Many who previously would have been content to keep quiet about their atheism chose to go on the offensive. Today voicing even the mildly religion-friendly view that Wright does would invite mockery at, "say, an Ivy League faculty gathering unless you want people to look at you as if you'd just started speaking in tongues."

Luckily, Wright is not a professional academic but a scholarly journalist. He has also taught at Penn and Princeton, so he knows that terrain. What I like about him, apart from the fact that he writes wonderfully readable yet learned prose, is his generosity to people of faith. I'm not being ironic. He writes that he finds it "nice" (and I think there he is being ironic) that some people can lead morally exemplary lives without God. Yet he also finds this surprising: "the natural human condition is to ground your moral life in the existence of other beings, and the more ubiquitous the beings, the firmer the ground." It's for that reason that he wants to find, again given his materialist premise, the most compelling case for faith that he can.

That case takes the form of a wryly told history of religion beginning with its presumed primitive origins, and has as its centerpiece the first century Jewish theologian Philo. I heartily endorse rediscovering neglected theologians of the past, dusting them off, and positioning them as vital prophets for our time. [David Goldman at *First Things*](#), another writer I admire, has been doing this with Franz Rosenzweig. I've been trying to do the same thing here with Samson Raphael Hirsch.

Philo makes an interesting choice. He was long held at arm's length in the Jewish world (NB: Wright is not Jewish), on the grounds that his theology inspired much of early Christian thinking about God and His Logos. Yet there's been a move lately in some Orthodox circles to reclaim him as an authentically Jewish thinker.

Wright focuses on two points about Philo. First, his rereading of a verse in Exodus, "You shall not revile God," in pluralist terms: You should refrain from reviling even the gods of others. (The Hebrew word, *elokim*, is ambiguous.) For the Torah "muzzles and restrains its own disciples, not permitting them to revile these [gods] with a loose tongue, for it believes that well-spoken praise is better."

Wright feels that Philo is setting an example for us not only of tolerance but of how the meaning of the Scriptural text evolves and, with it, God: "when prevailing interpretations of a god change, the very character of the god changes." Rethinking the Bible in light of the need he perceived to encourage friendly relationships with his Alexandrian Greek-speaking neighbors, Philo exemplifies and justifies a trend in religious thinking to a certain generous, open-spirited wisdom. That wisdom amounts to a greater appreciation that our own interests are best served by seeing human interactions as a non-zero sum game, where your gain is also an opportunity for my own advancement, to be celebrated rather than resented.

The second point about Philo is related. In the directionality of history toward "non-zero-sumness" (the phrase is awkward, but Wright can't think of a better one and I can't either), Wright wants to see the possibility of an "initial design" in the world "that would lead human beings toward wisdom." Of course he feels compelled to disavow any dangerous association of such an "initial design" with an "intelligent design." Instead Wright links it with Philo's teaching about a divine Logos, identifiable with God's wisdom, that unfolds in history and educates human beings.

I'm not doing justice to a long, subtle, and ambivalent book. A frustrating one, too. You keep wanting to shake Wright out of his assumption that materialist science has things all sewn up. In fact, the more science reveals -- about the genome or the brain, for example -- the clearer it becomes that the ultimate

reality is spiritual, not material. Wright's job lately has been as editor-in-chief of Bloggingheads.tv, where brainy journalists and academics get to debate erudite issues at luxurious length in split-screen format on the Web. How I would love to see Robert Wright discuss the scientific merits of materialism for an hour with [Stephen Meyer](#), whose *Signature in the Cell* represents a frontal assault on the materialist prejudice. Perhaps he'll read this and consider the idea.

At the same time, for all that *The Evolution of God* will not satisfy a traditional believer, it's startling to see how much in the way of traditional belief Wright was able to arrive at without accepting the authority of any faith.

He assumes that there is something radical and modern in Philo's reading Scripture in light of concerns that were contemporary in his time. But Jews have been doing that for millennia. In Deuteronomy, Moses emphasized that God made the covenant with every generation -- partly, on that generation's own terms. A medieval midrash, *Yalkut Shimoni*, envisions God as appearing to the people as "a picture which is visible from all angles. A thousand people may gaze on it and it gazes on all of them...When [God] spoke, every individual Israelite maintained: To me the word spoke!"

A modern scholar, Nehama Leibowitz, showed how "Each generation must view the Torah as personally addressed to it and directly applicable to the contemporary situation." While Torah laws remain the same, insights gained from the text unfold -- one might say, evolve -- as the situation changes. She gives examples of how rabbinic interpreters found such new meanings in the context of historical situations like the Inquisition and the challenge of secular Enlightenment.

The directionality of history, guided by God's wisdom in a process whereby human beings are led through stages of increasing illumination, is an idea as old as the Bible. The prophet Zechariah describes the culmination point: "Then the Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His name One."

The Logos is only Philo's Hellenized formulation of another Biblical idea. The idea originated in the book of Proverbs, where according to traditional understanding, divine wisdom is equated with the Torah -- not the five books of Moses per se but the stream of teaching and illumination crystallized with special intensity in those books.

Wright's evolutionary story is one of rediscovery -- rediscovering ancient truths and reformulating them in secular terms. In his view, people grow and, thereby, so does God. The other possibility is that God was always there, the same and unchanging, represented enigmatically in the Bible, waiting always to be rediscovered by each generation and each person.

Book Review | The Evolution of God

Philosopher sees hope in major faiths

Sunday, July 26, 2009 3:14 AM

By Margaret Quamme

For The Columbus Dispatch

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It's not God, of course, who evolves in Robert Wright's provocative new book -- it's our ideas about him.

After beginning with a survey of the role of religion in hunter-gatherer societies, *The Evolution of God* launches into its main subject: the surprisingly compelling narrative of how the three Abrahamic religions developed.

Wright, a former professor of philosophy, isn't a religious scholar, but he ably synthesizes the work of other scholars into an original and highly readable account of the origins and historical changes in Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Wright's account isn't likely to win favor among believers, or at least not fundamentalists. In looking at Judaism, he starts with the assumption that Yahweh was at first only one among many gods -- then the best among several gods and only eventually the "one God." He traces the social and psychological pressures that made the move toward monotheism irresistible.

In regard to Christianity, Wright makes the argument that Jesus was simply one minor apocalyptic prophet among many and that it wasn't until Paul (whom Wright compares convincingly to Bill Gates) decided to set up Christian franchises around the Roman Empire that the religion took off. Setting the pieces of the Quran into chronological order, he suggests that Mohammed moved from being a prophet to a politician.

The tone of Wright's volume is lively, at times even snarky: Chapter titles such as "Well, aren't we special," "Yahweh's sex life (and other myths)," and "God as Programmer" suggest its flavor. But the author isn't simply out to slay sacred cows.

He's looking at these religions from the point of view of game theory. Simply put, he advances the idea that religion is very gradually moving from a zero-sum game (in which one side loses and the other wins) to a non-zero-sum game (a win-win or lose-lose situation).

The drama or tension within a religion, or between religions, as he sees it, comes down to a struggle between "the forces conducive to amity and tolerance as opposed to the forces conducive to belligerence and intolerance."

And he believes that moral evolution is actually taking place.

"History has brought much progress and cause for real hope," he says. "And if you don't feel hopeful, just go back and read your Hebrew Bible."

At its root, Wright's argument places its faith in the development of moral imagination, the ability to see "the interior of more and more other people for what the interior of other people is - namely, remarkably like our own interior." As the world grows smaller, and the connections among us more obvious, it's harder and harder to see a difference between "us" and "them."

Religion might be capable of dividing us, but in its more mature forms, it's also capable of reminding us of what we have in common, and it plays a role, Wright argues, in allowing us to transcend our sense of ourselves as separate creatures and tap into our shared welfare.

AMAZON REVIEWS:

243 of 267 people found the following review helpful:

★★★★★ **Well-Researched, Judicious, and Enlightening**, June 10, 2009

By [John W. Loftus](#)  (Indiana) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

This new book from acclaimed author Robert Wright is a well-researched one covering a great deal of territory. It should be read in its entirety to be properly understood. In it he discusses the history of religion with a focus on western Abrahamic faiths, although not entirely neglecting eastern religions. He tells us in the Introduction that he's giving us a human "materialistic" account of it, although he thinks doing so "actually affirms the validity of a religious worldview," though not a traditionalist one, but one nonetheless. Wright argues the gods arose as illusions and that "the subsequent history of the idea of god is...the evolution of an illusion." This evolution points to the existence of a "divinity," he argues, even though this god is not one that most believers currently accept. As it evolved it has "moved closer

to plausibility." (p.4).

Wright begins with the five types of primitive hunter-gatherer supernatural beings: elemental spirits, puppeteers, organic spirits, ancestral spirits, and the high gods. These primitive gods were not always worshipped but treated as we would treat other human beings. In these societies the Shaman was the "first step toward an archbishop or ayatollah" who had contact with these otherwise hidden forces and could help focus their powers to heal, protect, and provide.

As small tribes grew into larger societies the chieftdom was the next evolutionary stage where there was a need for a "structural reliance on the supernatural." Chiefs in these agricultural societies were conduits through which divine power entered the social scale down to the lesser folk. If things went well for a society then the chief was doing a good job. Superstition reigned in these days.

With the arrival of the city-states, kings needed divine legitimization and used the gods to solidify their rule over the people. The king was now the conduit of divine power. The character of the gods could differ between city-states, but many of them demanded human sacrifices or else there was chaos. Along with this development came moral obligations, which if they were not met caused sickness and death. In these city-states there was competition between rival cities and along with them rival gods. This had a tendency for these polytheistic people to elevate their god above others, which was a step toward monotheism.

When Wright turns to a discussion of the emergence of Abrahamic monotheism it appears to me he is at his very best. In decoding the biblical texts from how we normally read them beginning with Genesis, he finds good evidence that behind what we see on the surface is a different story of Yahweh who was just one god in a pantheon of early gods. Yahweh starts out with a body, for instance, and was given the people of Israel to rule over by Elyon, the highest god in the pantheon. Originally Yahweh was probably one of the Canaanite deities, he argues. When it comes to the Israelites themselves, Wright argues from archeological evidence that they look more and more like Canaanites who originally worshipped Baal and Asherah, rather than some people who invaded Palestine after leaving Egypt.

In a fascinating discussion Wright argues that this Hebrew god evolved into a monolatry, which was a "way station on the road to full-fledge monotheism." Monolatry didn't deny the existence of other gods, it just affirmed that Yahweh was the highest of those gods in the pantheon. This was achieved mostly by King Josiah, who sought to solidify his reign and centralize worship in Jerusalem. Josiah even had his reforms written in much of the book of Deuteronomy.

When Judah was carried away into captivity by the Babylonians the exiled Jewish theologians made the most of their disaster. Based on good reasoning and scholarship Wright shows how they thought about such a complete and utter disaster and why they came to the conclusion that Yahweh was the one and only God. If it was Yahweh's will to bring the mightiest empire of their day to so utterly destroy them for their sins, as they did, then Yahweh was bigger than they had ever thought. "A god who governs the actions of the greatest known empire is a god who can govern history itself." (p. 171).

But this God of theirs was not yet thought of as a good God. That was the next evolutionary stage to take place, and Wright sees this coming from the writings of Philo of Alexandria, who urged a tolerance for other gods at about the same time Jesus was preaching.

But even Jesus did not think of his God as a loving God, Wright argues. In Mark's first gospel Jesus is portrayed as one who "believes you should love your neighbors, but that isn't to be confused with loving all humankind. He believes you should love God, but there's no mention of God loving you." (p. 258).

The Apostle Paul, however, is described by Wright as the "apostle of love," not only because he penned I Corinthians 13, known as the "Chapter of Love," but also from other things he wrote. It was Paul's version of Christianity that eventually won the day in Constantine's multiethnic empire because it favored ethnic harmony, Wright argues.

Wright sees the same evolutionary trend in Islam. First Allah "transcended tribal distinctions," as Yahweh did before him. Then he acquired the "multinational perspective of an empire," even to the point when in places the Koran grants the possibility of salvation to people "outside the fold." (p. 436)

Wright concludes that in our day "we've reached a stage in history where the movement toward moral truth has to become globally momentous." In short, God has some "some growing to do," (p. 436), and Wright seems confident this will happen, given what he wrote in his previous book, [Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny](#). Whether he can be this optimistic depends on the case he made there.

In the end, traditionalists will not like this book, and he admits this. Wright's god seems to be an abstract god as "the source of the moral order" (p. 446), and in such a belief he finds his god, although he holds out hope this god is also a personal one.

Other thinkers have argued God will become unnecessary and will evolve out of existence in the human mind, but whether or not that will happen is yet to be seen. In any case this is a judicious treatment that will surely provoke controversy. It's also enlightening. Hopefully his book will contribute to the ongoing evolution of the idea of God. And maybe it'll contribute to his evolution out of existence, too.

I'm the author of "Why I Became an Atheist," and the forthcoming edited book, "The Christian Delusion."

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★★★★☆ **Can Wright be wrong?**, July 13, 2009

By [Jay C. Smith](#)  (Portland, OR USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

[The Evolution of God](#)

In 2000 Robert Wright published *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* to some acclaim. In it he argued that there is a favorable direction to human history attributable to increasing opportunities for non-zero-sum interaction where both parties gain something, versus zero-sum situations where one party may gain, but only at the expense of the other. Social structures grow to take advantage of these situations, he contended, and build incrementally toward supranational governance. He concluded that "...it is hard, after pondering the full sweep of history, to resist the conclusion that -- in some important ways, at least -- the world now stands at its moral zenith to date."

Now comes *The Evolution of God*, where Wright further elaborates his contention that moral progress is ingrained in the course of history. In it Wright offers a materialist analysis of changing portrayals of gods and God, sure to aggravate conventional believers of many faiths. But he also asserts that history shows there might be something like a God force behind moral improvement, a position that many religious skeptics are likely to reject.

Wright's thesis entails three basic propositions. The first is that God evolves. By this Wright means not an actual God, whom he generally treats as illusory, but rather peoples' conceptions of gods and God. The "evolution" he writes about is mostly cultural evolution, although he includes an appendix on the possible biological roots of religion.

The bulk of the book is devoted to his tracing the history of gods from hunter-gatherer societies through chiefdoms, polytheistic kingdoms, the evolution of monolatry and monotheism, and then the scriptural presentation of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Wright is interested mainly in how gods may have felt about cultural outsiders, about "others" not part of one's own group. He emphasizes how gods have alternated between coaxing their followers to destroy designated others and urging accommodation and acceptance of people with different beliefs.

Wright proposes that whether gods were seen as belligerent toward out-groups or not often depended on the political needs of societal leaders at the time. When leaders perceived zero-sum conflict situations in relations with other groups it was useful to have one's own gods offer some encouragement to rally the troops. But if there were non-zero-sum opportunities in possible alliances, say through trade or military coalitions, then it became useful to be more ecumenical, to accept to some degree others' gods as well as one's own. For instance, one way of accommodating polytheistic gods when political coalitions were built was to make them into a clan of gods, related to each other.

His historical analysis of the cultural evolution is not as strong as it could be, not least because he leaves out a big chunk of time. While he relies on relatively modern evidence from hunter-gatherer and chiefdom societies, draws on certain contemporary events, and offers limited comments on the intervening centuries, he focuses mostly on the developmental period preceding about 700 AD. After Constantine, for instance, we hear very little of how the evolution of God may have played out in Christianity through the administration of churches and states.

Wright's second basic proposition is that there is a moral trajectory in history, expanding opportunities to realize the good. "The march of history challenges people to expand their range of sympathy and understanding, to enlarge their moral imaginations, to share the perspective of people ever farther away," he claims. He concedes that it is not inevitable that we will get closer to moral truth, but he believes that growing non-zero-sumness is forcing us to face up to it or to otherwise descend into chaos.

He allows that there has not been simple linear progress, but contends that there has been an advance through fits and starts, some forward, some backward. Yet since again he barely skims the past 1300 years, his assertion that history demonstrates moral progress remains highly questionable, unproven at best.

Wright's third basic proposition relies on the first two. He says that if there is a moral order (Proposition #2) and if conceptions of God have evolved to support it (Proposition #1), it does not necessarily mean there is a God; but, he asserts, these conditions are evidence in favor of the God hypothesis (Proposition #3).

Even if gods arose from illusions, he suggests, the evolution of the illusions "points to the existence of something you can meaningfully call divinity." He is not arguing the God hypothesis is true -- he is merely offering it up for consideration as plausible.

Wright's reasoning is dubious. From his questionable assertion that there has been moral progress it is a big leap to claim, as he does, that it reflects a purposeful historical goal. Patterns do not necessarily imply purposes. And only after he has smuggled in the idea of purposeful history is it possible for him to speak of a source of the purpose. A "purpose" by its very nature has an agent, some sentient entity capable of intent, at least in our common understanding. Where we see purposes we see agents, just as Wright does here. There are further flaws in his logic, including reliance on a false analogy between propositions about God as the source of moral order and physicists' postulation of electrons to help explain the behavior of matter.

So Wright's conclusion that the evolution of the concept of God and moral progress in history constitute evidence for the God hypothesis is unconvincing. Nevertheless, *The Evolution of God* is likely to sell well, and perhaps it should. Certainly the title and subject matter are fashionable, in both their evolution and God dimensions. Wright deserves credit for the ambition of this work, for its sweep and

boldness. The Evolution of God will make readers think, if only to marshal their responses to the parts where they believe Wright is wrong.

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★★★★★ **Religion: explained purely naturally, or not?**, June 23, 2009

By [Stephen Esser "steve_esser"](#)  (Villanova, PA USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

Amazon Verified Purchase([What's this?](#))

Robert Wright is an intellectually curious journalist and a fine writer whose previous books (The Moral Animal & Nonzero) I enjoyed. Wright's new book explores the character of religion through history, and, marshalling scholarly research, shows how religious ideas developed in response to changing social and political circumstances. The explanations make no appeal to the supernatural. But Wright sees progress (however haphazard and intermittent) in the moral dimension of religion through time, which leads him to speculate that this phenomenon actually points to the existence of something worthy of being named divine.

The bulk of the book is an interesting run through research findings from anthropology, archaeology and textual analysis on the topic of historical religious ideas and practices. The tour begins with a look at hunter-gatherer style animism and the role of gods and religion in tribal cultures, continues with an examination of the development of the various pantheons of gods in ancient civilizations, and then tackles the Abrahamic traditions. In all cases there seems to be a plausible explanation of prevailing religious ideas and the character of God or gods changing in concert with the "facts on the ground". As nations make war, their gods intone contempt for non-believers. As empires digest conquests, they co-opt the gods of their new subjects. More positively, as societies enter into non-zero sum relationships with a wider circle of neighbors, their gods become more universal and more supportive of a broader moral vision.

Wright also presents his own thoughts on what it all means. First off (repeating the theme from Nonzero), Wright argues that with the passage of time, humans have expanded their circle of moral consideration, and that this constitutes an arrow of moral progress through history. However, it seems hard to point to the evolution of our ideas regarding gods or God (more loving, less vengeful), and say that this adds anything to the story of moral progress. His analysis doesn't provide evidence that religion drives moral progress - it seems to mainly reflect it.

Nevertheless, in the final section, Wright proposes that the existence of an historical arrow of moral progress might be evidence for an objective moral order which transcends nature. He argues that even if the traditional idea of a personal God seems highly implausible given naturalism, it might nonetheless point (however imperfectly) towards truth. His arguments for this position aren't strong, however, consisting as they do of analogies and a repeated appeal that something special must be going; I don't think many traditional materialist-atheists will be convinced.

This is unfortunate because I think his intuition is sound. I think that any naturalist worldview needs to be expansive enough to account for first person experience and the meaning and values which arise from our engagement with the world. In any case, I admire Wright's contribution in these books. And in particular I find his vision of moral progress to be inspiring. We can all hope that the forces of globalization in today's world might promote peace, as we expand our circle of moral concern to finally cover the planet.


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★★★★☆ **just another story of religion**, June 7, 2009

By [Mariusz Ozminowski](#)  (Pasadena, CA USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

If you are looking for another story of how religions developed throughout human history, probably you will gain a great deal from the book. However, you should be skeptical about publisher's claims. For example, the book description states that "Robert Wright unveils an astonishing discovery: there is a hidden pattern that the great monotheistic faiths have followed as they have evolved." That "astonishing discovery" is simply that 'Man created God' and is not new and is not especially interesting anymore. Unless you are "born again" and need to be awoken from your slumber. Overall, an interesting book, but not especially original. P.S. I would recommend another book by Wright: The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life.


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★★★★☆ **Wrongly titled book, with one-trick angle**, June 24, 2009

By [Stephen J. Snyder "Socratic Gadfly"](#)  (Lancaster, Texas United States) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™ VINE™ VOICE

This book could, and should, have one of two alternative titles.

It's either "Nonzero: The Religion Primer" or "The Evolution of Western Religious Thought."

Why would either one of those be better?

First, what I recommend instead of this book. People looking for good scholarly insight into the evolution of human religious thought, from a well-grounded (and not overblown) evolutionary psychology perspective, should head to Scott Atran's "In Gods We Trust." He covers the ground on evolution of human thought in greater depth than does Wright.

On the first alternative title, in my opinion, Wright is a one-trick pony. He attempts to apply the idea of non-zero-sum game theory, as articulated in Nonzero, to every book he writes. First, it's debatable whether game theory at all, whether non-zero-sum or zero-sum, is even applicable to religion.

Second, even if it is applicable to some aspects of, say, psychology of religion, psychology of religion is NOT the same as religion from an evolutionary psychology perspective.

Third, behavioral psychology undercuts the alleged rationality of much human behavior upon which game theory is based.

Fourth, Wright once claims "interdependence" equals "non-zero-sumness." Not necessarily, first of all, and secondly, he offers no proof for that.

The second alternative title?

This book is about the evolution of the three Western monotheisms. Because they are monotheisms, and emerged either from a polytheistic milieu (Islam) or from an earlier polytheistic stage (Judaism, and hence Christianity), the evolution of god within these religions is part and parcel of the evolution of the religion.

But, Wright never touches polytheistic Hinduism, still vibrant today, except for an offhand aside or two. Ditto on either the atheistic or nonatheistic sides of Buddhism.

So, in a more serious way than my comments on him as a one-trick pony, the book simply doesn't live up to its title.

Beyond what I said above, there's a couple of other issues. More below the jump link.

Wright says:

****However, after the (Israelite exile to Babylon), monotheism evolves into something much more laudable and inclusive. Now the exiles have returned to Jerusalem and Israel is in a secure neighborhood. It's part of the Persian empire and so are its neighbors. So you see a much sunnier side of God, with expressions of tolerance and compassion toward other nations. ****

Really? So that was Ezra, servant of the "sunnier side of God," telling Jews to, tolerantly and compassionately, divorce their non-Jewish wives? And, let's not forget the split in the middle of the Maccabean war against those who just wanted religious freedom and those who wanted a nation, and internecine fighting.

That, in turn, relates to a larger issue.

Wright appears to see "progress" as part and parcel of evolution, whether neo-Darwinian biological evolution, or the evolution of religion/god. He even goes so far as to accept Dan Dennett's claim (tremendously overstates, wholly unsubstantiated as of this time) that evolution is algorithmic. I suggest some Steve Gould and the word "contingency" for both Wright and Dennett.

This is clear in the biblical record, namely the revolt of the Maccabees? What if they don't get lucky in their early battles against the Seleucids? Then NONE of the three western monotheisms is likely to exist today.

However, Wright makes comments about the inevitability of religious progress on 201 and the moral growth of god on 206. Everybody in Sheol, or people who can't accept twaddle in eternal hellfire? That's "moral growth"? I think not. Of course, that's another unproven claim from the one-trick pony of non-zero-sumness, first claimed in Nonzero.

The capper? He's a materialist who won't rule out a "higher purpose."

I was originally going to two-star this book. It doesn't deserve that.

I especially do not get AT ALL why many secularists fawn over this book in particular or Wright in general.

If you want a serious read on the evolution of the religious mindset among Homo sapiens, incorporating evolutionary psychology in a better and more in-depth way than does Wright, read Scott Atran's "In Gods We Trust." Not this.


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★★★★☆ **Considering what it doesn't consider...**, September 14, 2009

By [Wudwaen "of Toddybrook"](#)  (Chilhowee, Mo, USA) - [See all my reviews](#)

The title of the book errantly describes the author as interested in discussing the evolution of God. Instead, he is discussing the evolution of social perception of God - a profoundly different topic. Robert Write does an excellent analysis of the events as proposed under the questionable timeline of Egyptian archaeology. His social context is beautifully presented within the confines of the social framework the monotheism to which the West has limited itself since the domination of the Roman Empire by the policies of Constantine. These presumptions of time and context remove considerations key to an accurate picture of Middle Eastern social development. I am not surprised.

Key to his position for following the development of social perceptions of God in the Levant is the non-existence of the Israeli invasion of Canaan to establish an Iron Age Davidic Empire. Compelling challenges to that timeline which place the Davidic Empire in the late bronze age eliminate those inconsistencies from which the author shows the bible story to be in part untrue.

The central ritual of Zoroastrianism, a religion and people who are markedly non-literate until the time of Darius, 549 BCE, reenacts an astrological event that could only be observed between 4016 through 2008 BCE. A non-literate people do not ritualize actual events they never observed. The roots of Zoroastrianism, and its developing monotheism come from before 2000 BCE. Its religion, complete with social criticism, calls for social justice, a struggle between right and wrong, a resulting Armageddon, a judgment of the dead, a unification with a supreme God of Light, etc. are not considered in the author's analysis. With such analysis being decided on the phraseology of cryptic passages, I am curious why the redaction of Esdras/Ezra under the influence of the ethical monotheism of the Persian Empire is conspicuously absent from it. At no point does the author include the implications of the First Declaration of Human Rights issued by the Zoroastrian King of Kings, Cyrus. He does not link the concepts of universal justice with the Persian influence upon exilic prophets (Daniel, Esra, the latter Isaiah). The Pharsi (Persians) seemingly gave the Pharisees their theology in exchange for monotheistic orthodoxy. The relationship of Persian theology as possibly a parental influence on Phariseic-Christian-Islamic tradition was intolerable to Constantine, whose empire had been at war with Persia for Centuries. Like most Western scholars influenced by decisions made at the Council of Nicea, things those Romans didn't want to admit are excluded from the facts.

Keeping in mind: 1) A thing is real beyond the limited perception of it (God is something other than only what people perceive Him as), 2) the sequence of events may not have occurred in the chronology used in the analysis, and 3) the redaction made by Ezra is completely unobserved, the book is very nicely

written and contains excellent insights.

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★★★★★ **Artfuly Done**, October 27, 2009

By [The Tao of Netflix](#)  (Washington, DC) - [See all my reviews](#)

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This book attempts to explain the evolution of god, particularly insofar as god is defined by the human perception of god. The author begins at the hunter/gatherer stage of human evolution and explains their world, their social and political circumstances, world views, etc. and connects all those dots to explain how they perceived of the concept of god. The author then works his way chronologically through history, working through the Jews and the old testament, the Christians and the new testament, then through the Koran/Islam. As his work relates to the bible, for example, the author does a great job of explain the non-chronological linearity of the bible and how the varying depictions of god throughout (e.g., at times, shown as vengeful, at times shown as loving and anthropomorphic) seem contradictory on their face, but when read in light of the actual order of book writing and contemporaneous history, make perfect sense. The author brilliantly weaves how social circumstances affect a society's perception of god and other gods for that matter, and makes frequent use of the concept of "non-zero-sumness". In explaining the evolution from polytheism to exclusionary monotheism, the author demonstrates how peoples looking to expand their relationships (i.e., commerce) with neighboring groups tend to be more inclusive and accepting of other gods, as opposed to people in crisis and needing to define an exclusionary god to foster a sense of nationalism. Its clear the author did an immense amount of research to complete this work. Also, I view this work as a secular study of religion. If you are a person who tenaciously holds onto a biblically driven concept of god, you might not enjoy this work. The author, at times (if not continuously) attempts to establish that the absolute belief in god is an irrational action. If you are not interested in alternative theories on religious evolution, this will not be a satisfactory read for you. If, on the other hand, you are curious about current scholarly belief about who exactly Jesus and Mohammad were and are willing to take a dispassionate (i.e., not religiously charged) view, you'll enjoy. And..I'm not saying that I agree with all of the author's conclusions. Some, in fact, are fairly bitter and belie an obvious illuminati-like disdain for concepts like hope. But, notwithstanding that, the author tends to be frank about his assessments, and does provide ample justification for his conclusions, so you can understand why he believes a certain thing, and how he came to that conclusion.

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★★★★☆ **Unusually informative, if proposing doubtful theories**, October 9, 2009

By [Paul Vjecsnr](#)  (New York, NY United States) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

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The author informs the nonprofessional excellently about biblical and other religious research, in a book anyone who wants to pleurably gain more than average knowledge of the history of this subject would welcome.

The book is laden though with hypotheses, which are certainly to be expected when concerning particular events in the past, but may be more questionable when dealing with generalities like how conceptions of gods came about, whether they lead into certain directions, or, especially, whether they imply the reality of a form of God.

The author advances the theory that the nature of gods in societies was determined from the ground up, by the leaders in accordance with what best suited their aims. There may be plausibility to the idea that it was people on the ground who created divinities, rather than that divinities revealed themselves. Less plausible seems that it was leaders, perhaps excepting some accepted prophets, who supplied the people with visions of gods, but that such visions arose from the yearnings of the populace itself.

The author advances what seems a still more questionable theory that there is a moral direction to the "evolution of God", that peoples increasingly progress toward mutual cooperation, for the benefit of all mankind. He appears "politically correct" in this utopian idea, as well as elsewhere. He repeatedly speaks of ideal inter-ethnic toleration, and supposed primitive confinement to one's tribe of the age-old exhortation to love one's neighbor. Yet he calls attention (pp.438-41) to this ideal of "social salvation" in finding "moral truth" as present millennia ago in ancient Egypt before entering other territories. And he takes little account of the unprecedented human slaughter in the 20th century.

Correspondingly, our author does not inquire into what may have led to those monstrous tragedies, although he is attentive to harms caused by religious intolerance. Those tragedies were not the result of religious fervor, but the fervor of ideologies, which may be the stronger because they hold themselves based on rationality instead of the supernatural. Much of this mistaken rationality is understandably attributed to a Darwinian worldview of aimless natural forces, in which the stronger survive and the weaker perish, and which, specifically the process of natural selection, the book's author ironically unconditionally accepts.

He writes (p.401) about theologian William Paley's argument two centuries ago: "If you're walking across a field and you find a pocket watch, Paley said, you know immediately that...it is manifestly a product of design, featuring a complex functionality that doesn't just happen by accident. Well, he continued, organisms are like pocket watches: they're too complexly functional to just happen by accident". Our author then writes: "Thanks to Darwin, we now know that Paley was wrong... The explanation is natural selection". Is it? It is sadly our author who is wrong. The acceptance of natural selection, the purported AIMLESS process responsible for shaping organisms, completely overlooks the AIM of self-preservation, the overriding phenomenon distinguishing all living things and responsible for all their processes.

This evidenced aim of survival is a principal purpose in life, obviating the author's search for a hidden purpose, one, to boot, behind faultily posited natural selection.

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★★★★☆ **Excellent research material**, September 11, 2009

By [Richard G. Hartnett "Quantum Spirit"](#) (Denver, Colorado) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

As a Minister, I have found this work to highly intelligent yet, totally readable without any academic posturing. Anyone who is a serious student of spirituality should read this book. It is important that we investigate our history in order to separate facts from fable. All of our great Religious tombs had wonderful sources of spiritual information in them but we must avoid the traps of literalism. This work helps us to see the historical roots in the development of religions and by understanding the human influences we can come to understand that Spirituality IS constantly EVOLVING and thus is a work in progress that requires continual thought and questioning rather than blind faith. Thank you Robert Wright for being a voice of reason in a Dark age.


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★★★★☆ **Interesting but not great**, September 2, 2009

By [Yu Shi "David"](#)  (Sydney, Australia) - [See all my reviews](#)

REAL NAME™

I have read lots of books on the similar theme. "The Evolution of God" by Robert Wright provides some interesting information and knowledge about how God, especially the Abrahamic God, the One God, came into being and how it has evolved. The author has an interesting view that the Abrahamic God needs to evolve now so that the three Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) can co-exist in peace. While I'm happy that I bought and read the book, I did not feel satisfied when I finished it, because in my view the book lacks some "edge", or "sharpness" in its analysis of each of the Abrahamic religion. It lacks passion as found in some other recent books on God, but maybe too much passion is not necessarily good. However as a keen reader, I would have liked it more if the author was a bit more articulate and assertive.