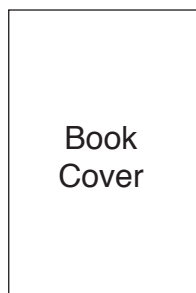


The Devolution of God

Paul R. Gross



The Evolution of God, by Robert Wright (New York: Little, Brown, & Co., 2009, ISBN 978-0-3167-3491-2) 576 pp. Cloth \$22.99.

. . . There is a special way of being
afraid
No trick dispels. Religion used to try,
That vast moth-eaten musical brocade
Created to pretend we never die
And specious stuff that says no rational
being
Can fear a thing it cannot feel, nor
seeing
That this is what we fear—no sight, no
sound,
No touch or taste or smell, nothing to
think with,
Nothing to love or link with,
The anaesthetic from which none come
round. . . .

—Philip Larkin (from *Aubade*)

The idea of God plays a small but important part in *Dreams of a Final Theory*, the weighty meditation on theories of physical reality written by Steven Weinberg. Yet the Nobel laureate, speaking of fellow physicists, observes that so far as he can tell most of them “are not sufficiently interested [in God or religion] even to qualify as practicing atheists.” For the rest of humanity, however, at least in the putatively “developed” world, he recounts a pertinent story about Bertrand Russell. While imprisoned as a conscientious objector to the First World War, the philosopher was questioned by his jailer about religion. Russell replied that he was an agnostic, to which the jailer’s apparently relieved response was, “I guess it’s all right. We all worship the same God, don’t we?”

With certain reservations, Robert Wright might endorse the jailer’s view of agnosti-

cism. Wright has reflected at length and productively upon the moral inclinations of our species, and on the question of God, Wright declares himself agnostic. It is perhaps a fool’s errand to search in his impressive new, densely documented study of the God idea, *The Evolution of God*, for some short statement to represent the key argument(s), for there is much to admire in this long, well-crafted history of the Abrahamic religions. Throughout its length, Wright constructs a subtle defense of their common product—monotheism. Choosing one statement as a key does risk misrepresenting his achievement by eccentric selection. Yet, any mere summary of this millennial history and the arguments drawn from it can hardly do justice to all the ways in which the work relates—and in places fails to relate—to current positions from others on the same issues. Still, *The Evolution of God* does have a salient standpoint, well elaborated, the destination for all its arguments. Thus, a representative paragraph can be helpful in conveying the book’s broad purposes. Several such statements are possibilities; this one, among others, seems to do the job:

Of course, there are lots of believers—most, in fact—who won’t be on board for this whole exercise anyway. They don’t want to just hear that *some* conception of god might be defensible, or that a personal god is defensible as some sort of approximation of the truth. They would like to hear that, yes, their specific conception of God is right on target. Well, if that’s what they would like to hear, this is not the book for

them. (Maybe the Bible, or the Koran?) The best we can do within the intellectual framework of this book is *to posit the existence of God in a very abstract sense and defend belief in a more personal god in pragmatic terms—as being true in the sense that some other bedrock beliefs, including some scientific ones, are true.* [Emphasis added.]

That intellectual framework includes, but is not limited to, a conscientious description of changes over centuries and millennia to the idea of God, especially in the Abrahamic monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It gives particular emphasis to the steady modification of those religions, under stresses internal and external, political and environmental, local and worldwide—modifications whose broad tendency has been from parochial to universal, from hostility and violence toward outsiders (and their gods) to at least toleration. To put the matter in the terms favored by the author himself, in prior efforts of moral analysis, this work seeks meanings in the long course of evolution of theism, from its original, tribal, unequivocal *zero-sumness* to (almost) the very opposite of *zero-sumness* (in culturally advanced quarters, anyway): insight and cooperation.

There is nothing lighthearted or superficial about Wright's borrowing terms from game theory. His long-held view is that the moral development of humankind has meant and will continue to mean increasing recognition that our predicament—our uneasy stance between consciousness and the final anesthesia of which Philip Larkin wrote—*can* be made strong by hope and can be managed well, but only when we adopt belief systems and associated morals that do not require the belief systems of others to *lose*. His plea is that when, and only when, our own beliefs do not demand the punishment, subjugation, or elimination of those who believe otherwise, our hopes become reasonable and our management of things in the long term is possible.

Such a framework is of course not new (although an insistent use of game-theoretic language is unusual). This much of Wright's framework is common to all liberalisms and accommodation-isms, whose numbers in history are large. That number, however, is surely much smaller than the

recorded number of parochialisms, including the legion murderous ones. Rejection of *zero-sumness* is a part of every form of social-political liberalism and progressivism—as it is *also* of deism, agnosticism, and most forms of atheism. (Not a great many atheists take it as moral obligation to silence, subjugate, or kill theists.)

But even the dedicated, and even some priestly, theists nowadays reject the ancient, solidarity-enhancing, *zero-sum* confidence that success of *their* faith in God requires the defeat of all *other* faiths. John Shelby Spong, Episcopal bishop of Newark (before his retirement in 2000), published *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (Harper San Francisco, 2005), a scholarly, and in places an alternately moving and chilling, study of the Hebrew-Christian Bible's "texts of hate." A salient feature of this book is its firm and explicit rejection of religious exclusionisms (such as those displayed in John 14:6, "No one comes to the Father but by me," or Matthew 12:30, "He who is not with me is against me"). It took the enthusiasms of radical politics in the twentieth century, in fact, to dress exclusionist religious fundamentalism in progressive, secular clothes, e.g., "You are either a part of the solution or a part of the problem." (Note "the" solution; not "a" solution. For fundamentalists there is only one solution.)

Bishop Spong's book is as sincere and eloquent a statement of secular humanism as can be found in any work of the New Atheists. The bishop's views and judgments differ from those of the atheists only in his full confidence that—despite all those exclusionary acts and scriptural statements, despite the sentence of eternal torment for nonbelievers, and despite the consequent brutalities, from early centuries of the Common Era onward—the religious message of Christianity is and always was about a God of love, of brotherhood, of the universality of humankind. The Christianity Spong promotes evolved, in short, in the fires and the survival strategies of Christians under Imperial Rome. And so it is quite respectable today, at least in some influential human communities, to attach to an unapologetically liberal secular

humanism the name “Christianity” or, for that matter, “reformed Judaism,” or the like. For Robert Wright, this imaginative re-naming should make sense not only to religionists but also to secularists.

Much more provocative than his story of change in theism as an evolutionary process is his iconic claim cited above: that the results of said evolution now make it possible “to posit the existence of God in a very abstract sense and defend belief in a more personal god . . . as being true in the sense that some other bedrock beliefs, including some scientific ones, are true.”

Now, positing the existence of God “in an abstract sense” is easy enough. One simply . . . posits. Unless God is further defined, anyone can posit and nobody can disprove the proposition, because for each new objection offered, a new definition of “God” can easily be provided, with no limit. This is a version of the Duhem-Quine principle of the infinite salvageability of scientific theories. And, to defend belief in a *personal* God, “in pragmatic terms,” is also easy enough—so long as the defender is willing to equate without proof of identity some kinds of mental comfort with some kind of “truth.”

A real difficulty arises in Wright’s suggestion that belief in a (more) personal God may be true in the same sense as certain “bedrock beliefs, including some scientific ones” are true. That is a bold claim and it needs justification. Coming from Robert Wright, the claim must be examined with respect. He is not one of those commentators on culture or moral philosophy who knows, and cares, little about the actually and potentially relevant science. He is a staunch advocate of evolutionary biology and even of evolutionary psychology—that discipline once, three decades ago, called “sociobiology.” It is often scorned by right-minded leftists, including a few evolutionists, *and* by rightists and religionists, too. Yet evolutionary psychology is making progress in documenting the critical relevance of biological—not just cultural—evolution to human cognition and behavior. Author Wright is not, in short, one of the new breed of commentators on religion who criticize with a grave condescension the less-new breed of new atheists (Dawkins, Dennett,

Grayling, Harris, Hitchens . . .).

The condescenders are distributed along the common, current political spectrum. Those of relic Marxist tendency dismiss evolutionary (hence genetic!) influence on post-agricultural human behavior with assurances that the stimuli and structures of belief are “not in our genes”; or that only a defunct “pan-adaptationist” “ultra-Darwinism” posits such influence; or, as S. J. Gould argued (wrongly), simply because religion and science have non-overlapping goals and methods. This review is not the venue for analysis of those amusing assertions. Suffice it to say that they have something to do with Karl Marx’s insistence that society makes consciousness, not the reverse. And they have much to do with the reasonable fear that scientific credence given to a strong genetics of cognitive function risks justifying brute social and racial prejudices.

Then, condescension from the right ridicules what is limned as the cultural insensitivity of the New Atheists, their blindness to the social benefits of faith, and their supposedly crude scientism. Thus, the often-brilliant cultural critic Theodore Dalrymple is by profession a doctor and scientific thinker, and a confessed nonbeliever, but he does not hesitate to produce an essay rich in sneers at the new atheists. To Christopher Hitchens, for example, who declares repeatedly in his *God Is Not Great* (Twelve [Warner Books], 2007) that “Religion spoils Everything,” Dalrymple replies (tellingly?): “What? The *Saint Matthew Passion*? The Cathedral at Chartres?” (*Not With a Bang But a Whimper: The Politics and Culture of Decline*, Ivan R. Dee, 2008).

Yes. The contrapuntal perfections of J. S. Bach’s music and the soaring beauty of Chartres surely *are* products of imagination fired at in part by religious belief. But the inquisition and the *auto-da-fé* were similarly fired, and on the whole so were the Crusades; so are most of the bloody wars in progress now. The issue is *not* the extent to which religious ideas inspire creativity along with emotion. They do. The issue is a functional calculus of harm and help, from Abrahamic religion, to life on Earth—a calculus often attempted but so far never completed. (Therefore, all are allowed to

have opinions about it.)

Robert Wright's arguments in *The Evolution of God* are opposed to positions of the New Atheists when they characterize theistic religion as delusion, fostered by warlords and priesthoods, dangerous especially to the young. But he does not attack those positions from any simple, obvious political stance. Indeed, he is as firm an exponent of evolutionary biology and psychology as any New Atheist. He is convinced, however, that while theistic religion is another product of human evolution, *biological as well as cultural*, it is much more than a mere individual, and very ancient, survival tool.

The means of its transmission may have been largely cultural rather than genetic, but the forms taken by religious belief and its associated actions are like all other universals of human behavior: evolved through the evolution of the brain and of psychology, through descent with modifications driven by differential reproductive success, in changing environments, physical and social. And the claim implies group selection, unabashed. To that extent we still do not have an entirely new argument, although Wright builds his version of it with care and confident expository skill. That alone makes the book recommended serious reading for every serious skeptic.

Making of the history of God a (large) one-volume work is, in short, a challenge of scholarship, historiography, and writing, and it has been well met by this author. One piece of the argument, however, differs from the arguments of others currently engaged with these questions of theistic religion in what is clearly an age of natural science (still in exponential growth). This is the very important claim that we can "defend belief in a more personal God . . . as being true in the sense that some other bedrock beliefs, including some scientific ones, are true." In order to judge such a defense, we need an example of one or more "bedrock scientific beliefs," the truths of which are overwhelmingly the consensus among all those qualified to test them. We must then be convinced that such scientific beliefs are no better justified and warranted than is belief in the existence of God, to be sure, however, "in a very abstract sense"

(pp. 455–56). But nothing in this volume identifies such a scientific belief.

The author has traced the history of God and shown that it includes descent with modifications and that the modifications are good. The labors of the thinkers through millennia have not eliminated the will to believe, the impulse toward recognizing transcendence, and the finding of comfort in it. But that in which the comfort is found has changed over time: the evolution of God has a definite direction; it is no random walk, and Wright thinks it is no accident either. The direction Wright sees is toward mutuality and universalism. And mutuality and universalism—empathy with The Other, to put it in still-fashionable academic language—is the ultimate survival strategy for humankind. That direction, says Wright, is the Logos; either it was put in place by God or it *is* God. This is the author's conscious echo of, and homage to, the great Philo of Alexandria, reconciler of Judaism with Greek philosophy.

Finally, then: can we really conceive of God in this way? The book says, "No, not really." *But*, it says further, neither can we really conceive of the electron as modern physics knows it! Physical thought, except in the borderland of theory in particle and high-energy physics, treats the electron as a thing—a particle or a wave or, in extremis, both. But where that thing meets contemporary theory, it is no longer anything like a thing: it is at best some sort of disturbance in a "field"—a property of space. Therefore, the argument proposes, we are no better acquainted with the electron than we are with God. Yet we are content to believe in electrons because the belief is useful; it works; and we are (or should be) pragmatists. Why, then, deny to those who believe in God the right to attribute to Him the same reality that science attributes to the electron? This book argues that there is no good reason to deny them. Humanity is therefore justified in holding at least "a very abstract sense" of God because it works, and the holding of such a sense is a pragmatic triumph.

One would like not to rain on this parade, but rain is real and it happens. However abstract and impalpable are the fundamental descriptions of the elemen-

tary particles in modern physics, and however elusive (to minds constructed like human minds) is any sense of what the electron is *really* like—taking *really* for the moment to be a legitimate construction—every part of the standard description of the electron's properties has been tested, tested at vast pains and expense, continuously, and quantitatively. Every prediction and retrodiction of results, in processes in which "electrons" participate, is fulfilled, quantitatively, to accuracy and agreement with theory better than can be achieved by any other way, open to the human mind, of knowing reality.

Therefore, although it is not easy to *conceive* of the electron, there is no doubt whatever that such an entity *exists*. And its description is agreed upon throughout the world of science, independently of geography and local tradition. The same cannot be said about God three millennia after the idea of Him was first bruited. There are no stable properties associated with the idea of God that have been measured and tested, with results thereof commanding universal agreement among all qualified students of religion and science. In fact the idea of God has *devolved*, has lost most of its original complexity and its internal disparities, rather than evolved.

The idea of God rests therefore upon unstable properties, some of whose changes over time do show a direction that certainly could be useful for humanity and for all life on Earth—if there were general agreement among most believers in the stability of that direction and in its value. That such agreement might some day be approached by our species is a grand hope: fostering the agreement is worthy work for theists, deists, agnostics, and atheists, without exception. But there is no equating the "truth" of God, however abstract and *impersonal* His description must be made to satisfy the thousands of beliefs comprising theism, with the "truth" of the best natural science. I suspect that when and *if* a convincing case for the truth or even the truth-indicateness of the idea of God is *ever* made, by Himself (in a readable sign to us) or by some of our descendents, those who are the New Atheists of that day will include some of the first to recognize the case as sound, and to

begin fleshing it out. 

PULL QUOTES

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