

The Evolution of God. By Robert Wright. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009. 567 pages. \$25.99.

This is a fascinating book, but one that may leave many readers frustrated and annoyed. It did me. Begin with the title. Wright's book is not about the evolution of God; it does not offer up a process theology. Rather, it is a book about the evolution of peoples' conception of God, especially in the Abrahamic tradition.

Much of Wright's discussion of this evolution is enormously interesting. He starts with the deities of hunter-gatherer tribes, moves to those of chiefdoms and nations, on to the polytheism of the early Israelites and the monolatry and 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 writes very well, in a style that is both accessible and engaging. Although the text runs to some five hundred pages, it is never ponderous or boring. *The Evolution of God* is no dry theological tome but a briskly paced history of the evolution of Western religions.

That having been said, how could anyone find the book frustrating and annoying? Because of the questions that quickly arise if we ask about Wright's take on the evolution he ably describes. Is Wright a theist? No, at least not in any traditional sense. Is he then a naturalist who thinks that all references to God or the divine can be explained in terms of biological and cultural (political, economic, and technological) evolution? Well, no, not exactly. Wright claims to be agnostic on the existence of God (p. 444), but his defense of this position, perhaps calculated to please everyone, is likely to please almost no one. On the one hand, he thinks that gods arose as illusions and that the subsequent history of the idea of God is in some sense the evolution of an illusion. On the other hand, he thinks that the story of this evolution just might point to the existence of something that could meaningfully be called divine. "Does that make sense?" he asks in the Introduction. "Probably not," he replies, but adds that he hopes it will by the end of the book (p. 4).

It doesn't. Wright thinks that there is a moral direction to history—that we are getting better—but insists that his account of that evolution is thoroughly materialist. "There is no mystical force that has to enter the system to explain this [evolution], and there's no need to look for one" (p. 448). At the same time, he suggests that maybe the moral growth of "God" signifies the existence of God. That is, if history naturally pushes people toward moral improvement, which Wright thinks it has, and their conception of God grows accordingly, becoming morally richer, "maybe this growth is evidence of some higher purpose, and maybe—conceivably—the source of that purpose is worthy of the name divinity" (p. 286). Indeed, he thinks, you might want to say that love and truth are the two primary manifestations of divinity in which we can partake, and that "by partaking in them we become truer manifestations of the divine. Then again, you might not want to say that" (p. 459).

If Wright is ambivalent about the existence of God, is he nevertheless quite clear about other things? He is. As already noted, he believes that humans have evolved morally and that there are opportunities for further positive evolution. Our thinking about God reflects that evolution and can guide its future development. How so? Anyone who reads scripture (the Bible or the Koran, for example)

knows that there are passages that evidently conflict. Sometimes God is portrayed as jealous, belligerent, and vindictive, sometimes as caring, peace-loving, tolerant, and forgiving. How to reconcile such conflicts regarding the character of the divine? Wright's suggestion—certainly not a novel one, but one that he develops in great detail—is to look at the context in which the passages were written. Specifically, he argues that belligerent, isolationist passages were written at times when peoples felt threatened and that more tolerant, inclusionist passages were written when they didn't. More precisely, he thinks that belligerent passages emanate, whether consciously or not, from a zero-sum mentality—a win-lose mentality, with the winner taking all and the loser losing everything—while tolerant passages emanate from a non-zero-sum mentality—one that is secure enough to realize that decisions and courses of action can be win-win (everyone benefits) or lose-lose (everyone loses).

Although it is richly documented, I cannot testify to the veracity of this account. I am not a biblical scholar, much less a scholar of the Koran. But if it is true, I am hugely attracted to the possibility it opens up: (1) Look to the time and circumstances in which passages were written; (2) focus on the non-zero-sum ones; and (3) work to create the conditions that make a win-win outcome a reality. Given the religious issues between Jews and Muslims in the Near East conflict, this approach may point the way to peace.

ROBERT J. DELTETE

Professor of Philosophy, Seattle University
901 12th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98122-1090
RDELTE@seattleu.edu