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## God Gets Religion

*The Evolution of God* by Robert Wright

book review by Michael J. Prival

Robert Wright is a sheep in sheep's clothing. Both hard-nosed atheists and those deeply committed to traditional religion will admire the efforts of this vaguely theistic materialist to explain the development of Western religion on a purely naturalistic basis while still seeming to find some meaning and even purpose in the way that this all happened. Since I fall in the atheistic camp, I revel in Wright's deconstruction of religion in general, and of the primary scriptural texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in particular, while I find his flirtation with ideas of a perhaps divinely inspired order to be fatally flawed. Those of a more religious bent should appreciate Wright's attempts to harmonize the scientific world view with notions of ultimate purpose – an endeavor whose success is vital to keeping religion alive in the modern world. While some purists on either side of the religious divide may find fault with Wright's theological fuzziness, most thoughtful readers will find his historical explanations enlightening and his deeper philosophical musings honest and important even if one disagrees with them. So I come to praise Wright, not to bury him.

*The Evolution of God* is a detailed elaboration of a simple thesis: that the nature of religion and religion's deities adapt to the situation that people find themselves in here on earth. When it's useful to be chauvinistic and vindictive, the God that people conceive of orders killing, war, and even genocide. When it's necessary to reach out to, or even rule peacefully over, peoples of diverse backgrounds, then God pleads for us to be kind and tolerant. Wright focuses, in particular, on how religion views *the other* – whether it be those of a different religion or of a different ethnic background. He concludes, not surprisingly or controversially, that as the world gets more interdependent, religion becomes more accepting of outsiders. How could it be otherwise? Religions that fail to adapt to circumstances will, in the long run, lead their followers to ruin. For me, what is important about Wright's book is not the overall thesis but the details of his analysis of the so-called Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Wright summarizes research on pre-monotheistic religious forms – those dominated by shamans, those in societies led by chiefs, and the polytheistic outlooks of ancient civilizations. He dissects the benefits to society that accrue from adhering to such religions and also the benefits that religious leaders may get for successfully foisting their wild fables upon the people. He shows how the monotheism of the Israelites developed gradually from polytheism rather than being a cataclysmic break from the idol-worshipping past.

Throughout the book, but particularly in the appendix, Wright offers explanations as to why people accept the religious outlook of the group in which they find themselves. For those of us who reject religion, such insights are invaluable since many of us often seem mystified that otherwise intelligent people can be sincerely religious.

As I read the chapters on Abrahamic monotheism, I could only wish that religious Jews, Christians, and Muslims everywhere would read them too. Wright focuses almost exclusively on the oldest texts of each religion: the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) for Judaism, the Old and New Testaments for Christianity, and the Qur'an for Islam. He explains in detail how important parts of these texts came to be written and how their outlooks reflect the circumstances that existed at the time and place of their writing. His analyses do not generally break new intellectual ground, but they lucidly and engagingly summarize existing scholarship.

The God of *Deuteronomy*, the fifth and final book of the *Torah*, calls on the Israelites to slaughter other Israelites, including family members, who worship other gods and to totally annihilate the peoples inhabiting the land of Canaan that God promised to the Israelites. Wright explains how the genocidal God of *Deuteronomy* fit into the political agenda of King Josiah, who lived centuries after the time depicted in *Deuteronomy* and during whose reign *Deuteronomy* was “discovered.” Wright discusses at length the Hellenized first century BC Jew, Philo of Alexandria, living at a time and in a place where tolerance of, and even respect for, non-Jews was a useful strategy for survival. Philo’s writings broke new theological ground and his ideas found their way into the later, more universalistic books of the Christian New Testament.

Wright explains, however, that to the extent that one can know anything about the “historical” Jesus, he was narrowly focused on Jews and Judaism. Not only were

Jesus and his followers all Jews, but they were only interested in bringing their message to other Jews. It was Paul, after the death of Jesus, who figured out that many in the ethnically diverse and generally peaceful Roman Empire would embrace the message if only that message could be broadcast beyond the nation of the circumcised. So Paul developed the outlook that universal love is part of Christianity and this concept was later inserted into the Gospel texts claiming to quote Jesus, thus making Christianity a religion of inter-ethnic tolerance – though a tolerance that was restricted to fellow Christians.

Similarly, Wright explains how the contradictory messages of the *Qur'an* originated in the conditions in which Muhammad found himself in 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia. Those parts written early, when he was something of an upstart in a vulnerable position in his home city of Mecca, counsel a peaceful attitude toward others. After moving to Medina, his growing power, including military conquests, led to the more aggressive and intolerant-sounding passages of the *Qur'an*, though Wright discusses a non-mainstream scholarly view that these harsh writings were at least amplified retroactively by one of Muhammad's successors who came into conflict with Jews (much as *Deuteronomy* reflects the views of the much later King Josiah and numerous texts purporting to quote Jesus were actually inserted to support the views espoused by Paul after the death of Jesus).

Wright's analyses of the Abrahamic texts are on the mark. However, they are focused almost exclusively on primary scriptures and ignore or downplay the theological development of each of the religions. There may be several reasons for this. First, there is a limit to what one can put in a single, readable book. Wright suffers also from the problem of any generalist intellectual who is not a real expert in the field he is writing about; all such generalists, no matter how brilliant, must be selective and superficial in many areas – and work hard not to make too many errors that will be spotted by the specialists. It may also be that Wright's background as a former Texas Baptist cause him to over-emphasize the importance of scripture. His Protestant upbringing may have helped lead him to ignore the comprehensive legal systems created by rabbinic Judaism and Islamic jurisprudence which, rather than the Hebrew scriptures or the *Qur'an*, have been the real essence of these religions through the centuries.

Wright's discussion of Philo's tolerant outlook is important and illuminating, but Philo was far outside mainstream Jewish religious thinking. Wright makes a quick, and I think misleading, reference to Hillel, implying that the most famous

progenitor of the Pharisaic-rabbinic tradition was somehow a proponent of universalism. The fact is that the Judaism of the rabbis, though it grew out of the same Roman imperial milieu that spawned Philo and Paul, remained uncompromisingly intolerant of others until the rise of Reform Judaism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Wright discusses how the doctrine of violent *jihad* came to be accepted as interpreters gave precedence to the harsher, later, Medinan Qur'anic verses over the more tolerant, earlier, Meccan ones and cited the *hadith* (the many collected stories about what Muhammad said and did) along with the Qur'an. He implies that the aggressive doctrine of *jihad* is unjustified because, if the Qur'an is believed to be the direct revelation of an infallible God, there is no reason to assume that early statements are less reliable than later ones. Furthermore, Wright points out that the *hadith* were transmitted orally for generations before being written down and they could easily have been changed, consciously or otherwise, to conform to the views of the transmitter. Wright fails, however, to explain that the abrogation of early Qur'anic verses by later ones and reliance upon *hadith* deemed authentic were part of the process by which the many tenets of normative Islam were developed by the 10<sup>th</sup> century. All the doctrines of Islam were handled in this way, not just those concerning *jihad*. To go back to Qur'an-only Islam on the issue of *jihad* would require abandoning the rulings of the five major legal schools (four Sunni and one Shia) that have dominated most of the Islamic world for a millennium – not just on *jihad*, but on everything else including the details of prayer, permitted and forbidden foods, etc. Islam limited to the Qur'an, without the jurisprudence of the major schools, would be very different from the religion as it has been taught for centuries by Islamic leaders worldwide, though it might not be as much of a break as Torah-only Judaism devoid of rabbinic teachings would be with traditional Judaism. (Since Torah-only Jews, the Karaites, exist as do Qur'an-only Muslims, we know what these doctrines would be like.)

Traditional rabbinic Judaism (what we would now call Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Judaism) and the Islam of the major schools are comprehensive legal systems based in large part on texts other than the scripture of Torah and Qur'an. Christianity, however, is something quite different since it lacks the all-embracing ritual, civil, and criminal legal codes of its Abrahamic cousins. Nevertheless, centuries of Christian theological development have led to doctrines, particularly within the Catholic Church, that are often difficult to discern directly from reading the Bible. By limiting his discussion of the moral development of the Judaism and

Christianity to the Bible, and by implying that Islam lost its way when it went to source texts beyond the Qur'an, Wright misses what these religions have been largely about for many, many centuries.

Wright leads the reader to believe that he sees a moral purpose manifesting itself in history as universalism grows over time. He isn't willing to say that there is a deity behind this design, but only that perhaps it reflects some type of divinity influencing creation. He has been attacked for these hints of creeping theism, and I find them both pointless and wrong-headed. However, if Wright's refusal to embrace doctrinaire atheism increases the readership of his book by adherents of traditional religion, then this is all to the good.

It's important to understand that Wright is not saying that the god who spoke to Abraham (and, according to your religious preference, also to Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad) caused the historical moral development he speaks of. He is clear that the Abrahamic deity is a product of human imagination and therefore reflects the human mind rather than shaping it. Wright understands that humans have been made more interdependent by such factors as empire, trade, and technology, symbolized most recently by the Internet. Why he feels the need to keep open the idea of some possible divine purpose behind all that escapes me, but I find this flaw in his thinking to be far less important than the masterful, if incomplete, exposition he has put forth on how monotheistic Western religion, and specifically its attitude toward *the other*, has developed.

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