

**Robert Wright. *The Evolution of God*. New York: Little, Brown, 2009.**

In Robert Wright's *the Evolution of God* (2009) the reader witnesses the results of combining a breathtakingly sweeping view of religious history blended with a framework of game theory interpretations. Wright assumes a breezy and irreverent style that makes the book accessible within popular culture, even if it also offers observations of interest in academe. His natural history of "God" begins with so-called primitive hunter-gatherer religions and continues through the classical polytheistic religions and world religions all the way to the present day; by the end, Wright establishes a series of suggestions aimed towards continued religious belief in the scientific era.

The basic assumption that Wright works with is that, as with broader society, people make decisions largely influenced by whether they face a zero-sum or non-zero-sum game with other "players" (p. 413). Within this context, he suggests that religious beliefs widen to include more people groups when relations between those groups and a religion's current base becomes non-zero-sum in nature (p. 81). While at times Wright seems to approach the rituals and beliefs he describes phenomenologically, the book generally works from the specific presuppositions which Wright makes more explicit as chronology moves forward in the book and the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are described. Wright approaches religious traditions primarily from a reductionistic position of naturalism, assuming, in his words, that beliefs are influenced by conditions "on the ground" (p. 333).

Many of the conclusions Wright reaches using this framework are relatively uncontroversial. For example, the idea that Christianity appeared attractive to Constantine because it helped to smooth relations between various parts of the Roman Empire is common enough (p. 297). Constantine's conversion meshes with Wright's assumption that people make religious choices based on their conditions; Constantine was in a non-zero-sum game with those he wished to unify and hence bringing them into a broadly unified group affirming brotherly love and a common deity makes pragmatic sense, whether or not Constantine actually realized that was why he was making the choice. In doing so, the web of non-zero-sum relationships amongst his constituents grew exponentially (p. 292).

Similarly, he suggests the shifting of relations towards outsiders from zero-sum to non-zero-sum and back again plays a significant role in shaping how the Qur'an views outsiders (p. 404). In times of powerlessness when gaining outsiders' favor was essential, or, at least, largely beneficial to Muhammad's goals, he suggests the founder of Islam was willing to compromise significantly, even to the extent of briefly flirting with polytheism (p. 351).

Particularly interesting and insightful is Wright's analysis of Paul and his work spreading Christianity throughout the Roman Empire (in chapter eleven). Wright notes that Pauline Christianity spread by "maximiz[ing] those externalities" that existed in its context (p. 293). He suggests that Paul made use of the best available "information technology," epistles, to help maintain a consistent and far reaching network, which he compares to McDonald's and Pizza Hut (pp. 276, 79). Of course, if the commercial franchise network is to hold, presumably the new churches had to offer a valuable service, and Wright posits both that service – a "lubricated [...] provision of hospitality" for travelers – and how it came about – an "interethnic" view of brotherly love preached by the apostle.

The observations are unusual in a helpful way, breaking out Paul's work from its original milieu to demonstrate what, to continue Wright's metaphor, might be called Paul's highly successful management style. Through this analysis, Wright does not necessarily class Paul as a

mere opportunist on the level of a dubiously credible revivalist or shaman, that is outside of his point, though one could head in that direction (p. 287). Rather, while the book's naturalistic viewpoint necessarily rules out any more traditional answers, such as "divine favor," from the equation of Paul's success – or, later, Muhammad's success – he posits that Paul's success is potentially a mark in favor of God's existence (pp. 286-87), a point he returns to in the conclusion of the book.

The epicenter of controversy out of *the Evolution of God* is likely to be found elsewhere in the book. Wright wishes to demonstrate the compromise-focused nature of religious evolution by examining the history of Israel. Part of this study involves a significant shift in understanding about the history of the Israelites, suggesting that they are really Canaanites who slowly banded together in a confederacy supported by the merger of two distinct gods: *Elohim*, normally rendered "God" or "gods" in English, and *Yahweh*, normally rendered "LORD" in English (p. 114). To demonstrate this alleged process that sounds rather remarkably like a modern corporate buyout, Wright uses strained exegesis to try to mine out a pre-monotheistic pantheon from the Bible (p. 105).

Though the book generally is reductionistic in methodology, at these points Ockham's razor may have dulled. What appears to be occurring in Deuteronomy 32.8-9 is a fairly standard Hebrew poetic style, and like much of Hebrew poetry (and other poetry, for that matter), it makes use of more than one way to say things. Wright views the use of both "Most High" and "the LORD" to suggest that there are two deities in those verses, but the simplest explanation would seem to be that *ʿelyôn* and *Yahweh* are both the same deity, not two originally distinct deities. This is made more apparent when examining the entire pericope (32.1-43), which even makes an explicit monotheistic declaration at one point (32.39).

Wright's exegetical issues continue with the use of etymology to argue the meaning of terms. The Hebrew words for pestilence (*dāber*) and plague (*rešep*) from Hab. 3.5 are key examples. Wright interpolates that since the Canaanite deities for the pestilence and plague went by those names that it follows that prophet Habakkuk's usage indicates they are still deities submissive to *Yahweh*. This is a potentially anachronistic reading, if Wright's assumption of monotheism arriving late to Israel is incorrect, an assumption he justifies circularly by using passages such as this one. To put this in perspective, Wright's argument concerning Hab. 3.5 would be rather analogous to suggesting that Paul waxed henotheistically about the goddess Gaia and her husband Ouranos when he refers to γῆ ("earth") or οὐρανός ("heaven"), respectively.

His interpretations also largely ignore the polemic thrust that appears throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. If a polemical standpoint is granted in these passages, allusions and references to other deities, when they do appear, seem to arise not from a basis of belief in their existence so much as "to set the record straight" about their non-existence or irrelevance.

As part of the position Wright takes on the origins of Israel, he rejects the Exodus event *en masse* from a historical standpoint. Though he certainly is not alone in this argument, for a matter that is so critical to his overall argument concerning Israelite monotheism, he does so with very broad, oversimplified strokes. In particular, Wright ignores various early dating theories concerning the Exodus, wherein the archeological record is more supportive of the sort of mass exodus and subsequent conquest described in the Pentateuch, during the waning years of the Middle Bronze Age II, or, for that matter, even the more interesting arguments for the later dating he rejects out of hand. That is, "the evidence on the ground," to use Wright's phrase, while not attesting with certainty to the biblical Exodus also does not necessarily affirm Wright's assumption that the case is closed on the matter. If his anti-exodus theory is brought into

question, so too is much of his effort to show how *Elohim* and *Yahweh* merged, how they also “acquired” *Baal* (p. 126) and even how King Josiah was a cruel oppressor of native religion (p. 155) is made much less comprehensible.

Wright’s curious Biblical analysis continues in his work on the historical Jesus as well. Although the debate is heated and fluid, he seems to adopt a stance that strips from the historical Jesus even some of his most commonly attributed teachings. For example, Wright suggests that the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10.30-35) is unlikely to have been uttered by the historical Jesus since it appears in neither Q nor Mark (p. 260). This is dubious logic for casting such strong doubt on the legitimacy of the passage. Though it is helpful in Wright’s argumentation and later comparisons between Jesus and Muhammad (p. 396), it goes against normal Biblical scholarship with little justification, approaching the text with a level of skepticism far greater than the famously skeptical Jesus Seminar (cf. Funk, Hoover, & the Jesus Seminar, 1993, pp. 323-24).

This present critique is by no means an exhaustive interaction with Wright’s biblical exegesis and archeological analysis, but the issues highlighted above suggest at minimum a lack of sound evidence to support critical portions of his historical reconstruction during the period spanning the founding of Israel through the historical Jesus.

This aside, Wright’s final chapters do provide an insightful presentation of a reductionistic justification for the continued existence of religion (p. 456) – a refreshingly different tactic than argumentation from writers such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. Of course, the “God” that comes out of Wright’s suggestions will be hardly recognizable to any traditional believer, something he acknowledges occasionally throughout the book (e.g. p. 455).

His suggestions use game theory to argue for mitigating differences between the Abrahamic religions in a quest to bring about peace, asserting that the sorts of processes that he alleges have edited beliefs subconsciously in the past can be applied more directly now in this era of global connections among civilizations (pp. 404, 437). Whether believers could actively edit their beliefs to be “more moral” as Wright proposes and still feel they were believing in something true and not just in a mythological sense is suspect. His final destination for religion appears to be essentially Hinduism’s view of all deities being of one Ultimate Reality (p. 442). Though Wright treads with laudable humility in this section as the outsider to religious experience that he is, he still proposes a system that fundamentally changes traditional monotheistic belief into a pluralistic exclusivism in which very little is knowable – and very little comfort is able to be drawn – with relation to the divine, not unlike the results of philosopher John Hick’s “Copernican Revolution.”

Wright has created a significant contribution to the understanding of how religion and societies interact provided in an eminently readable and, on more than a few occasions, witty form is certainly significant. Nonetheless, the attempt to span so many fields of study and do so within one book has clearly taken its toll on *the Evolution of God*. The work on game theory’s influence on the continuum between religion and culture, as well as his agnostic defense of religious beliefs are thought provoking and of interest to a wide variety of audiences. The weaker sections, however, necessitate the reader bringing a good deal of skepticism to Wright’s arguments and assumptions.

**References**

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