

Robert Wright, *The Evolution of God* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2009), 488 pp., \$25.99 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-316-73491-2. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v4i3.248.

This vast exploration of religion from 'its moment of origin tens of thousands of years ago' (p. 17) to the present is not for the intellectually—or spiritually—meek. Nor is it for those seeking a purely historical assessment of religion or philosophical clarity about the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Although Wright's book is beholden to the social sciences, including economics, history, psychology, philosophy, and especially anthropology, it is hardly social-scientific. Despite its imposing length, it is far too selective in what it offers as 'evidence' to be considered a scientific exploration of one of the most complex topics in the history of humankind.

This is not to say that the book lacks detail or value. In fact, its specific challenges to major religious doctrines and historical 'facts' are detailed enough to ruffle the religious feathers of anyone who has them. Those who hold religious tenets as immutable truths are apt to find Wright's work irreverent at best and blasphemous at worst. When he tackles 'the invention of Christianity' (p. 245), Wright implies that Jesus did not genuinely believe in, nor did he espouse, universal love; that Jesus was highly provincial—even racist (Wright uses the euphemism that he was not 'color-blind' [p. 258]); and that the historical Jesus 'sounds rather like other healers and exorcists who roamed Palestine at the time' (p. 255), and not a very good one at that. To Wright, Jesus seems like a phony psychic exposed by the Pharisees: 'Jesus just gets in his boat and leaves in a huff...' (p. 258) when the Pharisees demand that he give them a heavenly sign.

His selectiveness in exploring the gospel records of Christianity is decidedly myopic. Wright gives all the meager credence he doles out to the Gospel of Mark. His chief basis seems to be that Mark is the oldest gospel, which is hardly sound reasoning. (Would we want to rely on the earliest reports about 'weapons of mass destruction' in Iraq simply because they are the first?) This Mark-myopia is evident throughout his discussion of Christianity, and its feeble basis becomes clear in the discussion of what Wright calls 'the Nazareth fiasco' (pp. 253–54). The Gospel of Mark, according to Wright, should be given greatest credence because it does not attempt to reconcile historical ambiguities about Jesus' birthplace and simply refers to him as 'Jesus of Nazareth'. To Wright, the other gospels are misleading or downright dishonest in claiming that Jesus was born in Bethlehem even though the historical record and prudent geography do not support such a claim. But to assert that the Gospel of Mark is most accurate because it omits his birth entirely is faulty reasoning to be sure. Jesus' debut in Mark is as a teenager on a pilgrimage from Nazareth to Jerusalem. When John baptizes Jesus in the Jordan River, he is indeed 'Jesus from Nazareth', which is not disputed by the other gospels. Indeed, religious scholars have tussled considerably with ambiguities about Jesus' birthplace, but there has been at least one reasonable argument put forward that reconciles the geographic ambiguity: Bruce Chilton (2002) argues that he was indeed born in Bethlehem—but in Bethlehem of Galilee (where Joseph lived before taking on fatherly duties for Jesus)—not in Bethlehem of Judea.

Such parsing of the gospels plays out as cognitive gymnastics aimed at undermining the historical value of the Bible, and the reason for this is painfully unclear. Wright's chief thesis is not that religious history is wrong: It is that the world's Abrahamic faiths have evolved in a manner consistent with, by and large, cultural

evolution. In truth, his thesis may be more aptly described as a capitalistic model of God: The God that endures is the one that is able to survive the marketplace of religion, the God that attracts and sustains the most consumers of religion over time. Many of the assumptions built into Wright's framework support this free marketplace notion of religion. He asserts unambiguously that the roots of religion are decidedly amoral, viz., their genesis is not in the search for cosmic truth. Instead, the seminal purpose of spirituality can be traced back to rugged hunter-gatherer societies that faced extreme hardship. People created gods with the express purpose of seeking a better quality of life: 'Hunter-gatherers evince a particular interest in why bad things happen' (p. 20), he writes. Early humans sought a means by which they could explain why good things happened and why bad things happened. Their resulting systems of colorful and unpredictable gods ruling over the natural world provided a workable answer. Despite his evolutionary descriptions, Wright is trying to part ways with most modern evolutionary theories that have attempted to explain religion, especially biological evolution. He categorically asserts that the search for a single 'God gene' will be forever fruitless (pp. 460, 540 n. 2). He finds the work of cognitive theorists like Pascal Boyer useful in helping explain how memes take hold. However, he unapologetically relegates explicit engagement of Boyer and other notable scholars, including Stewart Guthrie and David Sloan Wilson, to an appendix he titles 'How Human Nature Gave Birth to Religion' (p. 460). Such treatment suggests that Wright wants readers to know he is making a break—and a significant one—with virtually every modern scholar who has put a shoulder to the evolutionary plow. Instead, he reaches back to resurrect and forefront social anthropologist Edward Tylor, painting Wright's own work in a more primordial hue when it comes to religious and cultural evolution.

Wright's discussion of the early evolution of many gods to a monotheistic one makes some of the most fascinating and entertaining reading as he explores myriad malevolent and benevolent early gods and novel religious practices. His descriptions are rich and engaging. The book is meticulously edited, and Wright's extensive experience as an author and journalist is not lost on those who love the written word. The book, ten years in the making, is masterfully written and crafted with great care.

Some logical leaps and cognitive sidestepping by no means undermine the value of this book. Wright draws compelling parallels among the world's largest modern faiths and places them in an historical context, such as the rise of the religious elite. Wright explains how the first shamans, the original spiritual elite, arose from early cultures and eventually led to the ultimate modern 'shamans' of today, the pope and ayatollah. He parses more than the New Testament and brings plenty of criticism to bear on both the original Hebrew biblical texts and Koran.

Deep in the middle of this work, Wright appears to be 'channeling' Philo of Alexandria. If there were one religious figure in this volume that captures Wright's intellect—and perhaps even his spirit—it is Philo. For Wright, Philo's application of non-zero-sum Game Theory to both the marketplace of competing religions—and more importantly, to reconcile reason with religion—provides an 'intellectual synthesis' that is 'science-friendly' and provides 'the basis of a viable modern theology' (p. 217).

Wright's approach to delivering his main message is rather paradoxical: By exposing inconsistencies and hypocrisies in the historical and theological records of the Abrahamic religions and by tracing their roots to rather 'primitive' practices and beliefs in the ancient near East, he seeks to bring them all down to a less lofty level. In

doing so, Wright seems to hope the world's religions will develop greater tolerance for one another and cooperate in discovering a logos that is truly evolved—a logos that may lead, Wright arguably concedes, to a fully evolved and even divine God.

*References*

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