

No Smiting

By Paul Bloom

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God has mellowed. The God that most Americans worship occasionally gets upset about abortion and gay marriage, but he is a softy compared with the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible. That was a warrior God, savagely tribal, deeply insecure about his status and willing to commit mass murder to show off his powers. But at least Yahweh had strong moral views, occasionally enlightened ones, about how the Israelites should behave. His hunter-gatherer ancestors, by contrast, were doofus gods. Morally clueless, they were often yelled at by their people and tended toward quirky obsessions. One thunder god would get mad if people combed their hair during a storm or watched dogs mate.

In his brilliant new book, “The Evolution of God,” Robert Wright tells the story of how God grew up. He starts with the deities of hunter-gatherer tribes, moves to those of chiefdoms and nations, then on to the polytheism of the early Israelites and the 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’s tone is reasoned and careful, even hesitant, throughout, and it is nice to read about issues like the morality of Christ and the meaning of jihad without getting the feeling that you are being shouted at. His views, though, are provocative and controversial. There is something here to annoy almost everyone.

In sharp contrast to many contemporary secularists, Wright is bullish about monotheism. In “Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny” (2000), he argued that there is a moral direction to human history, that technological growth and expanding global interconnectedness have moved us toward ever more positive and mutually beneficial relationships with others. In “The Evolution of God,” Wright tells a similar story from a religious standpoint, proposing that the increasing goodness of God reflects the increasing goodness of our species. “As the scope of social organization grows, God tends to eventually catch up, drawing a larger expanse of humanity under his protection, or at least a larger expanse of humanity under his toleration.” Wright argues that each of the major Abrahamic faiths has been forced toward moral growth as it found itself interacting with other faiths on a multinational level, and that this expansion of the moral imagination reflects “a higher purpose, a transcendent moral order.”



Illustration by Chip Kidd

This sounds pro-religion, but don't expect Pope Benedict XVI to be quoting from Wright's book anytime soon. Wright makes it clear that he is tracking people's conception of the divine, not the divine itself. He describes this as "a good news/bad news joke for traditionalist Christians, Muslims and Jews." The bad news is that your God was born imperfect. The good news is that he doesn't really exist.

Wright also denies the specialness of any faith. In his view, there is continuous positive change over time — religious history has a moral direction — but no movement of moral revelation associated with the emergence of Moses, Jesus or Mohammed. Similarly, he argues that it is a waste of time to search for the essence of any of these monotheistic religions — it's silly, for instance, to ask whether Islam is a "religion of peace." Like a judge who believes in a living constitution, Wright believes that what matters is the choices that the people make, how the texts are interpreted. Cultural sensibilities shift according to changes in human dynamics, and these shape the God that people worship. For Wright, it is not God who evolves. It is us — God just comes along for the ride.

It is a great ride, though. Wright gives the example of the God of Leviticus, who said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," and he points out that this isn't as enlightened as it may sound, since, at the

time, “neighbors” meant actual neighbors, fellow Israelites, not the idol-worshippers in the next town. But still, he argues, this demand encompassed all the tribes of Israel, and was a “moral watershed” that “expanded the circle of brotherhood.” And the disapproval that we now feel when we learn the limited scope of this rule is itself another reason to cheer, since it shows how our moral sensibilities have expanded.

Or consider the modern Sunday School song “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” (“Red and yellow, black and white, / They are precious in his sight.”) Actually, there is no evidence that he loved *all* of them; if you went back and sang this to the Jesus of the Gospels, he would think you were mad. But in the minds of many of his followers today, this kind of global love is what Christianity means. That certainly looks like moral progress.

But God still has some growing up to do, as Wright makes clear in his careful discussion of contemporary religious hatred. As you would expect, he argues that much of the problem isn’t with the religious texts or teachings themselves, but with the social conditions — the “facts on the ground” — that shape the sort of God we choose to create. “When people see themselves in zero-sum relationship with other people — see their fortunes as inversely correlated with the fortunes of other people, see the dynamic as win-lose — they tend to find a scriptural basis for intolerance or belligerence.” The recipe for salvation, then, is to arrange the world so that its people find themselves (and think of themselves as) interconnected: “When they see the relationship as non-zero-sum — see their fortunes as positively correlated, see the potential for a win-win outcome — they’re more likely to find the tolerant and understanding side of their scriptures.” Change the world, and you change the God.



Robert Wright Barry Munger

For Wright, the next evolutionary step is for practitioners of Abrahamic faiths to give up their claim to distinctiveness, and then renounce the specialness of monotheism altogether. In fact, when it comes to expanding the circle of moral consideration, he argues, religions like Buddhism have sometimes “outperformed the Abrahamics.” But this sounds like the death of God, not his evolution. And it clashes with Wright’s own proposal, drawn from work in evolutionary psychology, that we invented religion to satisfy certain intellectual and emotional needs, like the tendency to search for moral causes of natural events and the desire to conform with the people who surround us. These needs haven’t gone away, and the sort of depersonalized and disinterested God that Wright anticipates would satisfy none of them. He is betting that historical forces will trump our basic psychological makeup. I’m not so sure.

Wright tentatively explores another claim, that the history of religion actually affirms “the existence of something you can meaningfully call divinity.” He emphasizes that he is not arguing that you need divine intervention to account for moral improvement, which can be explained by a “mercilessly scientific account” involving the biological evolution of the human mind and the game-theoretic nature of social interaction. But he wonders why the universe is so constituted that moral progress takes place. “If history naturally pushes people toward moral improvement, toward moral truth, and their God, as they conceive their God, grows accordingly, becoming morally richer, then maybe this growth is evidence of some higher purpose, and maybe — conceivably — the source of that purpose is worthy of the name divinity.”

It is not just moral progress that raises these sorts of issues. I don't doubt that the explanation for consciousness will arise from the mercilessly scientific account of psychology and neuroscience, but, still, isn't it neat that the universe is such that it gave rise to conscious beings like you and me? And that these minds — which evolved in a world of plants and birds and rocks and things — have the capacity to transcend this everyday world and generate philosophy, theology, art and science?

So I share Wright's wonder at how nicely everything has turned out. But I don't see how this constitutes an argument for a divine being. After all, even if we could somehow establish definitively that moral progress exists because the universe was jump-started by a God of Love, this just pushes the problem up one level. We are now stuck with the puzzle of why there exists such a caring God in the first place.

Also, it would be a terribly minimalist God. Wright himself describes it as “somewhere between illusion and imperfect conception.” It won't answer your prayers, give you advice or smite your enemies. So even if it did exist, we would be left with another good news/bad news situation. The good news is that there would be a divine being. The bad news is that it's not the one that anyone is looking for.