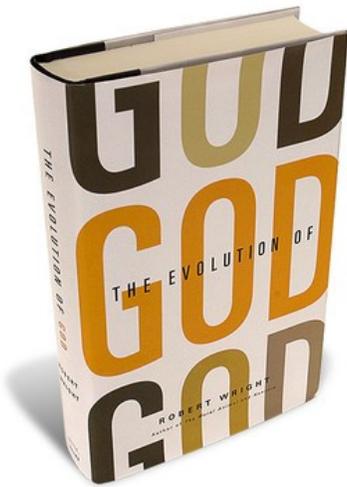


Notes from Fr. Nick

The Evolution of God

Now that I have your attention, note the italics. The statement above is actually the title of a book. I'm not making a theological statement or committing heresy, and I don't think Robert Wright, the author, intends heresy either. I suspect the title was intended to be controversial in order to get invited on talk shows and to sell more books. After reading the book, it is clear that Wright actually means the evolution of *our idea* of God. The book is really biblical and theological anthropology.



Wright traces the development of human beings' idea of God from the earliest hunter-gatherer societies through Judaism, Christianity and Islam to present postmodern times. At every turn he avoids the temptation to assume that Jews, Christians and Moslems acted primarily on belief, and looks at practical reasons for religious behavior. For example, he notes that while late New Testament Jews resolutely believed in only one God, they were not above entering into treaties with other people who acknowledged their beliefs. The reason was that both sides had something to gain by the compromise. Christians and Moslems have made similar agreements.

The author doesn't think these treaties necessarily compromised beliefs — frequently these interactions led the monotheistic religions to a deeper sense of their own faiths. An example (not in the book) from modern times might be the way the Christian tradition of meditation has been validated by Buddhist practice.

An unforeseen side effect of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, has been hostility to religion by many of the world's thinking people, who see much of the world's violence originating from believers. While we recognize the distinction between religious fanatics and prayerful people at large, many agnostic and atheists lump us all together and see religion as a negative force. Wright believes that it is better to get to know these people (and for that matter thinking Moslems and Jews) to understand our common ground. This could ultimately bring the positive developments he outlines from the Bible.

In this area, the Church sees Wright on solid ground. In the document, *The Church in the Modern World*, the Second Vatican Council directed Catholics to take seriously even the views of people with whom we deeply disagree.

There are some significant points where I have major disagreements with Wright. Among them is discounting our traditional understanding of Jesus as distinct from what we can know of the historical Jesus. But on the whole I found *The Evolution of God* to be a thorough, insightful, and often witty treatment of our notion of the nature of God. It might be tough going for some (and not all of it agrees with Catholic teaching), but it is sure to provoke much thought and discussion.