

# Belief

## Without Borders

### The Evolution of God

By Robert Wright  
(*Little, Brown, 567 pages, \$25.99*)

On any list of nonfiction authors that many people may not know but should, Robert Wright would rank high. Among his books are "The Moral Animal" (1994), which argues that natural selection rewards principled behavior and is gradually improving human ethics; and "Nonzero" (2000), which argues that history is moving in a positive direction: Social, political and economic forces, the book said, can operate in a "nonzero" rather than a "zero sum" way. In short, it is not necessary for A to gain at the expense of B; rather, both can gain.

Now Mr. Wright completes the circle by finding roughly the same promising trend in higher affairs. "The Evolution of God"—really about religion rather than the divine—supposes that, for all their faults, the monotheistic faiths have prospered because they encourage people to get along.

Mr. Wright begins "The Evolution of God" by wondering not whether faiths are true but why they proliferated in early society. His conclusion is that the initial impulse of faith was the self-interest of its administrative class. "Whenever people sense the presence of a puzzling and momentous force," he writes, "they want to believe there is a way to comprehend it. If you can convince them you're the key to comprehension, you can reach great stature."

Shamans pretended to understand nature, the leading mystery of ancient days. But the claim was just a way for them to earn a living, Mr. Wright asserts; surely few shamans actually believed that they knew why storms came or disease struck.

What is the contemporary equivalent to the tribal shaman? Stockbrokers. Like shamans, stockbrokers

claim the ability to augur hidden forces—and, like shamans,

Mr. Wright says, their advice is almost always worthless. In general, customers (ancient farmers needing rain, modern investors) want to believe that someone has secret, mystic knowledge of a powerful unknown (the natural world, Wall Street). Like investment advisers today, mediums of the far past claimed mystic knowledge and charged for it. In some old tribal cultures, Mr. Wright adds, the word shaman meant roughly "politician." Angling for religious power was thus essentially the same as angling for tribal leadership.



This, Mr. Wright infers, is how most religion began. Not exactly a glorious moment of revelation upon a mountaintop. Is the theory persuasive? Mr. Wright is prone to supposing that strong conclusions regarding precivilization can be drawn from the writings of anthropologists. Maybe anthropology is correct at times, but the field is chronically speculative and inferential—building theories of history on it may be building on sand. For instance, Mr. Wright finds it significant that the earliest Buryat and Inuit cultures, in Siberia and the Arctic, viewed shamans as we now view politicians. But the Inuit also believed that their society was descended from invincible giants. Roll such points together and you have—I am not sure what.

### A religion that reaches beyond a single group, by promising (say) universal brotherhood, helps its chances of success.

The closer Mr. Wright's analysis draws to the Common Era, the more forceful it becomes. The most striking contention in "The Evolution of God" concerns St. Paul, Christianity's first administrative leader. Ancient religions died off, Mr. Wright claims, because they were designed for specific ethnic groups and possessed no appeal outside them. Judaism spoke to those born into the faith, limiting its potential scope. Paul wanted Christianity to become a global faith, appealing to anyone from any land or ethnic group. So he offered something no faith had offered to that point—universal brotherhood. Did Jesus intend to start a new, broader-based religion? That's hardly clear—Christ never used the word "Christian" or instructed his disciples to promote a new faith. Paul, by contrast, actively wished to start a cross-borders, proselytizing system of belief. His innovation, according to Mr. Wright, was to realize that the promise of brotherhood could appeal to the whole world—and as a Roman citizen, Paul thought in whole-world terms.

"The Evolution of God" goes on to analyze the spread of Christianity—and, later, Islam—in language that at times strains to sound of the moment: Had Pauline thinking failed, Mr. Wright observes, "another version of Christianity probably would have prevailed, a version featuring the doctrine of interethnic amity, the doctrine that realized the network externalities offered by the open platform of the Roman Empire."

But there is no doubt that Paul's core idea of brotherhood-based faith, intended to overcome delineations between people and groups, was a tremendous success in historical terms. Centuries later, Islam would emphasize some of the same qualities as early Christianity, especially the embrace of anyone from any nation. Broadly, Mr. Wright argues that religions act fierce or nationalistic when adherents feel threatened. But "when a religious group senses an auspicious non-zero-sum relationship with another group, it is more likely to create tolerant scriptures or find tolerance in existing scriptures." As the world grows ever more interdependent, this sentiment is an especially propitious one.

In the course of a long work ostensibly about God, Mr. Wright never tells the reader whether he believes that a supreme being exists. After extended hemming and hawing on this essential point, he proffers only that a person who accepts God as actual is "not necessarily crazy." Talk about praising with faint damnation! But taken together, "The Moral Animal," "Nonzero" and "The Evolution of God" represent a powerful addition to modern thought. If biology, culture and faith all seek a better world, maybe there is hope.

Mr. Easterbrook is the author of "The Progress Paradox" and the forthcoming "Sonic Boom," about the acceleration of economic growth.