

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

What's It All About?

Reviewed by Edward Tenner

AMID THE GRAND EVENTS of politics and warfare, the powerful trends of economics and demography, and the spread of religious and philosophical ideas, there is a more elusive aspect of history: the search for a meaningful life, the pursuit of common happiness. It takes an exceptional scholar, drawing on years of reading in original sources as well as today's social science, to do the subject justice. Fortunately, Keith Thomas's intimate knowledge of English life in the years between the Reformation and the American Revolution makes *The Ends of Life* the rare historical work that is as absorbing as it is deep.

The book begins with a paradox of early modern English thought. On the one hand, a consensus of the powerful and learned called for maintaining people in their stations and their immediate districts. Yet the same John Milton who, while advocating universal free education, appeared to oppose social and geographic mobility, elsewhere defended "the civil rights and advancements of every person according to his merit." An undercurrent of individualism and ambition, fed by the constant movement of younger sons of nobility into the professions and business, could hardly be contained. The new grammar schools seated pupils by academic merit, not social rank.

The gentry's status was changing on the battlefield as well as in the classroom. The early 17th century was still an age of "quasi-chivalric" glory, when officers vied for recognition through conspicuous feats of arms. The rise of gunpowder did not end the upper class's identification with martial valor—even George II was a field commander—but it

THE ENDS OF LIFE:

Roads to Fulfillment in Early Modern England.

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replaced knights with a professional officer corps of more diverse origins. "Civilianization of the population" exempted most adult males from military service and left martial prowess to specialists. After the English Civil Wars (1642–51), the nobility and gentry abandoned the fortified castle and soldierly exploits for a civilian existence. By the late 17th century, English intellectuals saw their country as a securely defensible island power no longer in need of a great army like those maintained by countries on the Continent.

England's elites invoked theological and social reasons for keeping the laboring classes at work as long and as hard as possible, and gave little thought to how satisfied these men and women might be with their lives. Yet artisans and tradesmen found meaning in their work more often than might be supposed. Derbyshire lead miners styled themselves "the ancient and skilful miners," and, according to the diarist John Evelyn, proud English workmen rebuffed employers' criticisms with expressions such as "Sir, I do not come hither to be taught my trade." Today's workers may well bristle at Thomas's conclusion that "most of the modern British population have a more instrumental attitude to work," emerging from the anonymity of the shop floor or the cubicle to find meaning as "ballroom dancers or bungee jumpers or builders of Salisbury Cathedral in matchsticks."

In the early modern period, Thomas suggests, a taste for what would later be called conspicuous consumption united the great and the humble. The highborn were censured by their peers when their thrift defied norms of aristocratic largesse, and the working class sacrificed necessities to have at least one set of clothing for special occasions. Competitive display, within one's own rank in society, was a source of honor and esteem. And this worldly pride, so often condemned by clerics and other moralists, came to be seen by early political economists, including Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith, as a positive force for the com-

munity's prosperity. Preserving honor and acquiring luxuries fed a sense of self-worth that crossed class lines. Thomas reaches no conclusion about the continuing power of belief in heaven and hell in shaping belief and behavior. But he does illustrate how concern with renown in the here and now came to supplant the hope of posthumous glory evident in the often grandiose funeral monuments erected by earlier generations of the rich.

The Ends of Life is one of those rare history books that let us appreciate both the strangeness of early modern people and our own roots in their emerging individualism and consumerism. The author has an appealingly pragmatic outlook and a penchant for sardonic humor—he compares theologians' visions of the damned being tormented by the glory of heaven to economy-class passengers glimpsing the Champagne and hot towels of first class. If Thomas never really explains how values were transformed from Sir Philip Sidney to Adam Smith, neither has any other historian, social scientist, or philosopher. Since Americans share the Elizabethan heritage even as we pursue happiness in the 18th-century tradition, our cultural ancestors' quest for life satisfaction can be at once amusing, poignant, and inspiring.

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A God of the Times

Reviewed by Jeffrey Burton Russell

THE EVOLUTION OF GOD IS not an account of how God himself evolved (though a few theologians find that not impossible). Instead, Robert Wright's personable, often witty, and occasionally persuasive book traces human perceptions of the divine from "primi-

tive" religions through the three monotheistic faiths. Traditional Jews, Christians, and Muslims will find their beliefs challenged on virtually every page. Yet Wright is not one of the currently fashionable antitheists. It may well be, he avers, that there *is* an overarching metaphysical Purpose for (or of) the cosmos, though he will only go so far as to allow that "there might be a kind of god that is real."

Still, Wright, author of *Nonzero* (2000) and *The Moral Animal* (1994), does not take religious ideas seriously in themselves. He concedes that they may serve the social function of promoting cohesion, but he proposes that they exist only as "memes" (an unfortunate term coined by Richard Dawkins). Much as genes mutate and develop through biological time, memes are hypothesized to mutate and develop through the history of human culture. Hence the "evolution" of God. Perhaps. But, as is so often the case, Wright's beguiling rhetoric sweeps him along from "this might have been the case" to "this was so."

Materialism supplies the assumptions and the arguments of the book. Wright mainly draws on soft Marxism, neo-Darwinist evolutionary psychology, anthropological functionalism, and the current fashion to consider *power* the motor of history. He offers no comfort to antitheists such as Christopher Hitchens who want to blame the world's ills on religion, for he argues that religions develop mainly in response to political and economic events, and so can hardly be their main cause.

Wright predicates his argument on the assumption that "history" creates progress, and here is one of the many instances in which his rhetorical powers lead him to skate on thin ice. Historians will assure him that "history" doesn't *do* anything. So let's take his repeated references to "history" as metonymy for the development of human thought. Certainly human thought changes, but whether it develops in any particular direction is doubt-

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