

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-

THE EVOLUTION OF GOD.

By Robert Wright.
Little, Brown.
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ful. Progress with a capital P is the great superstition of our age. Scanning the last hundred years, it is hard to accept that overall progress has occurred in the course of the genocides, the Holocaust, the wars, the development of atomic weaponry—brutality generalized to a degree unimaginable in 1909. Only in one sphere of human endeavor can progress sensibly be argued: technology. Wright believes that technology, which has paved the way for globalization, will make people more humane as we come to understand and respect one another more. But technology is value neutral, enhancing the human power for both good and evil by a staggering vast amount.

Wright believes that religion begins with animism (the belief that everything in nature has a spirit). He offers a history of humanity's procession from polytheism to monolatry (worship of only one god among many) to monotheism to (he hopes) a more loving religion. In this he is faithful to the ideas of Auguste Comte and the anthropologist Edward Tylor; he even shares some thinking with the Scottish social anthropologist James Frazer, Saint Augustine, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. No one since Frazer has made "primitive" religion as colorful as Wright does. Wright argues that the Israelites' monotheism became fully fixed only from the time of the Babylonian Exile (the banishment of most of the Jewish people to Babylonia during 586–538 BC). Most Jewish and Christian scholars would agree, though they hold that the change was brought about more through revelation and theological reflection than politics and economics.

Wright flatly denies that any scriptures—Jewish, Christian, Muslim—are inspired. This stance is inevitable in a materialist take on the subject, but Wright tends to subscribe to radical reinterpretations of history, suggesting, for example, that there was no Moses. Wright's treatment of Jesus is particularly weak. He relies exclusively on the theories of the "historical Jesus" tradition, which

contrasts a putative "real" Jesus—a relatively obscure prophet who was executed by the Romans for being a public nuisance—with a mythical Christ that emerged sometime around the end of the first century through an anonymous and mainly oral tradition. The thousands of scholars who subscribe to this hypothesis pay little attention to critics such as Richard Bauckham, who has argued that the Gospels most likely grew from eyewitness accounts. It turns out that the "historical Jesus" is, *on the historical evidence*, more like the Jesus of the New Testament and the early church than he is like the Jesus of Robert Wright.

The Evolution of God is peppered with intriguing ideas. It is worth reading, with a skeptical eye peeled.

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HISTORY

Ancient Passions

Reviewed by F. S. Naiden

THE GREEKS AND GREEK LOVE

is less ambitious than its title. One kind of Greek love, love of god, does not figure in these pages. Neither does another, patriotism. Nor does a third kind, love of argument, for though Davidson has a thesis,

he expatiates rather than argues. By "love" James Davidson means only "Greek homosexuality," on which he has written a lengthy survey that ranges over Greek culture and society from the Archaic Period, beginning around 700 BC, to the Hellenistic Period, which terminated with the conquest of Greece by the Romans in 146 BC.

For nearly 2,000 years, Greek homosexuality was a neglected topic. Classical scholars knew of customary homosexual relations between older

THE GREEKS AND GREEK LOVE:
A Bold New
Exploration of the
Ancient World.

By James Davidson.
Random House.
789 pp. \$45