

Killing the Buddha

the medium is the messiah

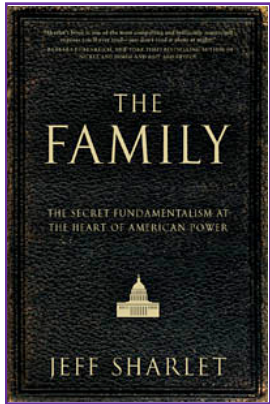
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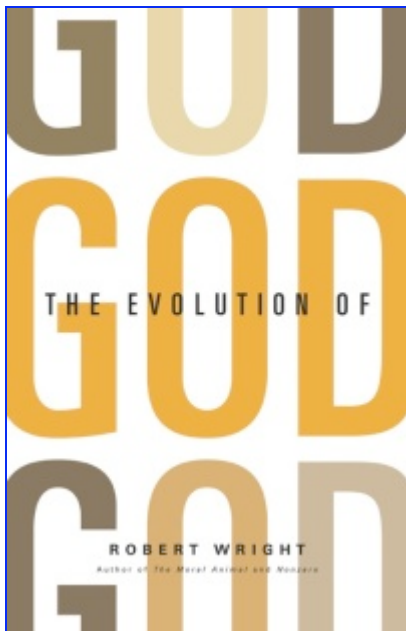
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The *What* of God?

by [Nathan Schneider](#)

A chat with Robert Wright on his new monster, [The Evolution of God](#).

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When I met Robert Wright last month, as word of *The Evolution of God* was [first beginning to percolate](#), I admitted to him that I was dreading it. Another magisterial book about all religion forever that I'd be expected to read in order to keep up this act that I "know" what is being said about "religion."

But that was before being seduced by the masterful viral marketing campaign. Targeted emails to me and to KtB, blog posts everywhere: buzz, buzz, buzz. There was even a gracious publicist, quick on the email trigger. One should expect nothing less from Wright, who, in addition to a sterling journalistic career, has become a full-on eNtrepreneur, launching sites like [meaningoflife.tv](#) and, more recently, [bloggingheads.tv](#)—each noble efforts to combine deep, dorm-room-at-3-am conversation with the latest internet contraptions. It was Wright, in fact, not the text-loving curmudgeons at KtB, on whom the idea even dawned that our interview—already being recorded—might be presented in audio form. Who would have thought?

Fully seduced, apparently, I started reading and, for all its weight, couldn't stand to put it down. The thing brought me back. It was books like Wright's earlier *The Moral Animal* that, for about a year, drew me into the catechism of evolutionary psychology, a branch of science particularly popular at U.C. Santa Barbara that comes up with pleurably clever explanations for what human nature is and how it got that way while our ancestors were romping around the savannah. *The Evolution of God* is that kind of thinking applied to religion, with all the pleasure and cleverness and data-driven inescapability of the genre. (Though, in fact, it only narrowly touches on the actual evolutionary psychology of religion—for that, I recommend Scott Atran's [In Gods We Trust](#).)

Only after leaving graduate school did the warnings of the philosopher on my thesis committee about the whole project of ev psych start to seep in, making me suspect what might have been, in the [words of Heidegger](#), my "calm, self-possessed surrender to that which is worthy of questioning."

It's easy to focus, as many reviews have, on Wright's theology of nonexistent god and triumphant moral progress that comes mainly in the concluding chapters. But the real meat and potatoes of the book is its meat and potatoes: a Wagnerian act of gnostic expose, slogging through verse after verse of ancient, holy writ, telling the story of Western religion as a political thriller—albeit enacted by deluded nothing-worshippers. The hefty 500-pager starts to feel like a breezy, concise charge through the most titillatingly inversionary historical-critical readings of Hebrew and Christian and Muslim scripture. It's stuff that many people don't know is out there and available for hanging one's cosmic hat on: a vast anti-narrative provided by the wonders of modern scholarship.

If you're not careful, if you forget that it's *science*, the book can read like another in a long tradition of vicious reinterpretations of sacred texts from the [Docetists](#) to the Mormons to the [ancient-astronaut](#) theorists: maybe true, maybe false, but a thrilling rebellion either way. Then again, what else but science was the divine inspiration for Mary Baker Eddy's *Key to the Scriptures*? Or hydraulic engineer Henry Morris's *Genesis Flood*? No, each says, *this* science is the correct one.

In our conversation, Wright and I talk about Marxist materialism, moral progress through no-zero-sum games, and the pleasure of reading religious texts. At the end I let on the appeal of Wright's work for me over the years: my serious soft spot for anybody who spends his life asking the biggest possible questions he can think of and concludes—calm and self-possessed, as you'll hear—that, yes, he has arrived at an answer.

[Listen to Nathan's conversation with Robert Wright](#)

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July 6, 2009

Nathan Schneider is an editor of *Killing the Buddha* and writes about religion for a variety of magazines. He blogs at [The Row Boat](#).

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