

Advent 3
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THE EVOLUTION OF GOD

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I confess that I have asked for a specific Christmas gift this year. It is a book, naturally: *The Evolution of God* by Robert Wright. I admit to having skimmed, but not read carefully an earlier work, *Non-Zero: The Logic of Human Destiny*, in which Wright utilizes game-theory, non-zero sum game theory, to argue that “biological and cultural evolution move in a direction – toward broader and deeper complexity.” And, although it is clear that Wright had long since abandoned belief in a “benign and omnipotent God,” there are hints that a very thoughtful, intelligent person, deeply aware of the many things that can and do go wrong in this world – immense suffering, tragedy, evil-empires, and dead-ends – sees, nevertheless, a “growth of goodness,” the gradual overcoming of antipathy, and the possibility of a “cosmic architect” of a meaningful universe.

And now comes *The Evolution of God*. This is, indeed, hopeful in this the season of Hope. Yet I also admit to having taken a peek at the Table of Contents (thanks to Amazon), and there I find what appears to be the story of the evolution or development of the “idea of God,” rather than the idea of the “evolution of God,” the idea of a God who, as the personal Whole of reality, evolves towards ever deeper complexity as God interacts with an evolving, changing, world.

In the Table of Contents I see chapter titles from “Primordial Faith” and “The Shaman,” to “Polytheism,” and “From Monolatry to Monotheism”; I see “Logos: the Divine Algorithm.” And finally I see chapters in the last part from “What Did Jesus Do?”

to “How Jesus Became Savior,” and my heart skips a beat! What more hopeful sign could there be in this season of Hope than to acknowledge Jesus as Savior?

Yet I do not sense here – and I may be wrong – the realization that the God for whom Jesus is the primal sacrament of freedom and love is, and must be, the God who changes, who evolves in ever great complexity. The faith of some of the Hebrew prophets and our faith in Jesus as the Christ, implies and demands the clear recognition that the God for whom we all make a difference, the God of steadfast and ever-renewing love, is a God who changes, who evolves in complexity.

This was not understood clearly by early Christian thinkers, and increasingly theologians, especially Christian and Muslim, but also Jewish, conceived God as static, as over-against the world, as able to act on the world, to manipulate events, persons, and things, but never to be acted upon, affected, changed by the world. The God of some of the Hebrew prophets who heard the cries of the people and was compassionate, the God and Father of Jesus who heard and responded to prayers, and who felt the pangs of the Cross, and who said, “inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me” – the God, therefore, who is affected, who changes, who is compassionate, was painted over by the image of a stern, unyielding God who cannot change, will not be affected. The theologians had no idea of how God could be perfect unless God were complete and unalterable, and so they brushed aside the God of pure unbounded love – not unconditioned love, for love is by its very nature conditioned by those it loves – unbounded, inexhaustible love.

God is steadfast, to be sure, but not changeless or immutable. The fact that God exists is unalterable, but God is not; the fact that God steadfastly loves and wills the best

for God's creatures, remains constant, but the God who loves is affected and changed by those loved, and also the content of God's will for good changes with the change of time and situation: "New occasions teach new duties, time makes ancient good uncouth."

This concept of a God who changes and evolves is largely the product of the modern world.. It was, of course, implied by the biblical God, but it was not seen clearly until the 16th century, and not then by the Protestant Reformers, but by an Italian priest by the name of Socinius, who had to flee Italy to Poland because of heretical ideas, but who said that God was, in some ways, temporal with an open future. Socinius was followed in the 19th century by several minor figures and some major ones (Lequier, Schelling, Gustav Fechner, C. S. Peirce, William James, and others). But it was not until the 20th century that Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne, two philosophers, developed clearly and rigorously and fully the concept of God that is implied by the God re-presented by Jesus, the personal biblical God of love.

I do not sense an awareness of the modern idea that God actually, continuously evolves from the Table of Contents of Wright's new book. I may be wrong and I hope I am, because the idea is already well developed. It is a powerful tool for rendering our faith credible and, after all, faith should always be in search of understanding; it is also an antidote to the mad musings of Fundamentalists.

I have frequently talked about this idea of God: "God as the World-Soul in whom we live and move and have our being"; "God as both Absolute and Relative"; God "who "makes things make themselves ("Waterbabies"). In fact, my dearest, most beloved critic says, "You always only want to preach about God and the Browns!" . . . Well??? I haven't recently said a word about the Browns! They haven't given us a reason to hope.

Nancy Sherwin would like me to preach more about the Indians, but do they? The Cavaliers? But God: Ah yes, there is the ground and end of our hope.

God, I suspect, was the main focus of John's preaching even though he made a few references to sin and to doing good. God – the kingdom of God, the reign of God's pure unbounded love – was not only what Jesus proclaimed in his parables, but what he incarnated in his life, his ministry, his death and resurrection, God brought near.

This God, who enters into the deepest relationship with all creatures great and small, evokes our response. And our response must be to love God's creatures and God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This, essentially, is worship. But, if worship is to love God and God's creation, we see that we make a difference to God; we act in God's life in significant ways. Thus, God is not, as most of our forebears insisted, utterly immutable, but in fact changes, evolves. And, of course, God the supremely loving being, is infinitely sensitive to all our needs. God is compassionate, God is affected, God changes.

We can appreciate the desire of our predecessors to insist upon God's constancy and the truth that God always is. But God, the actual being, who is the object of our faith and worship and who encompasses all reality, is shaped in part by what we do and think and feel. Therefore, God is temporal, relative, dependent, and changing; God evolves. God has a future as well as a past, and God actualizes new life from moment to moment.

This is Good News. This is the ground and end of our hope. The ever-evolving personal Whole of all reality in whom we live and move and have our being, touches our lives and is touched by our lives. This we now know through Jesus Christ our Lord.