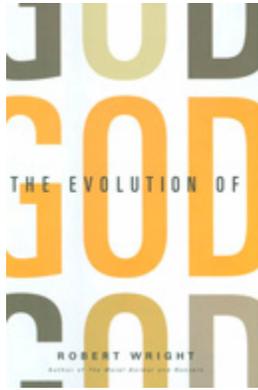




## The Evolution of God

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### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to welcome our members and guests, and thank you all for joining us.

The evolution of God is the subject of our discussion today. If there is anyone that is capable of tackling this complex subject, and can also provide a revolutionary new perspective on religion, it is our speaker, the world-renowned author Robert Wright. This provocative book was a Pulitzer Prize finalist this year and ranked among *The New York Times* Top 100 Notable Books of 2009.

[The Evolution of God](#) is a natural progression of thought which flows from two of Professor Wright's widely acclaimed earlier works, [The Moral Animal](#) and [Nonzero](#). In *The Moral Animal*, Professor Wright introduces us to evolutionary psychology and examines the ways in which the morality of individuals might be hardwired by nature, rather than influenced by culture. And in *Nonzero*, he argues that ideas from the mathematical field of game theory reveal how much of history was driven by the mutual benefits that accrue from human cooperation.

In his latest opus, Professor Wright takes on an even grander subject—religion. Beginning with a survey of the role of religion in hunter-gatherer societies, Professor Wright guides us through several thousand years of religious history to describe how religions and religious practices have evolved over time. This narrative of how the three monotheistic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—developed and exhibited moral growth through the centuries, follows a historical trajectory from polytheism to monotheism. Our speaker focuses primarily on the evolving vision of God in the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, and the Qur'an, and ends with a discussion of religion's place in human evolution.

What Professor Wright finds is that religious traditions are not static, but made up of many layers to which believers associate, attributing different meanings to these practices over time. Indeed, in all three religions, if you read the scriptures, you become aware that God has belligerent and benevolent faces, which we humans create to speak to our circumstances at the time. Professor Wright argues that it is this fluctuation which the survival of religion depends upon. In other words, it is the power of ideas, images, emotions, arguments, and charismatic or saintly examples which galvanize spiritual energies. As human civilizations have changed and progressed, humanity's concept of God has also changed.

The 21st century has not been kind to religion. We have seen how religion is capable of dividing us. But in its more mature forms, it's also capable of reminding us of what we have in common.

Although you may not agree with everything our speaker says this morning, his scholarly writings will forever change your views. Moreover, his optimistic belief that religion can play a role in allowing us to transcend our sense of self as separate creatures and, instead, tap into our shared welfare, leading towards a more benign global religious environment, is hard to disagree with.

Please join me in giving a warm welcome to an original thinker, our very special guest Robert Wright.

Thank you for coming.

### Remarks

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Thank you, Joanne. Thanks, everybody, for being here. I'm grateful for two reasons. One is that you invited me to be here, and the other is, I traveled in from Princeton, and whenever New Jersey Transit delivers you anywhere on time, you're grateful. It's almost enough to give you religious faith.

I should say at the beginning that evolution is not meant here in the sense of biological evolution, of course, but it refers to what anthropologists call cultural evolution—that is to say, changes in ideas, technologies, rituals. That includes changes in our ideas about God.

One thing I do in the book is chart changes in humanity's ideas about God over time. I start at the very beginning, back when, so far as we can tell, the world was populated by hunter-gatherer societies, all of which believed in more than one God. Polytheism seems to have been the original condition of religion.

Actually, interestingly, it did not have what we would call today a moral dimension. Religion seems not to have initially been about discouraging people from cheating and lying and so on. It did not have an ethical component originally.

That seems to be because in a hunter-gatherer society you don't really need that, especially. You have a small group of people. They know each other, interacting regularly, and they can pretty much keep each other honest. Whereas when you start getting more complex societies, with the invention of agriculture, more and more people, then you do start seeing religion play a role in ethics, which it didn't do originally. And now that's one of the main things we associate with religion.

I should emphasize that as the story moves forward, I focus on the Abrahamic religions, the evolution of monotheism and the subsequent development of the Abrahamic religions—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—but I should say that the ethical component enters religion broadly, polytheistic religions, as well as monotheistic religions, when societies reach a certain complexity.

The book is largely about the past, but the point of writing it is really about the present. There are two contemporary questions I was trying to look at with the book and answer by reference to the ancient world. They are both kind of reconciliation questions, you could say.

One is, can religion be reconciled with science? I'm not going to talk about that much today, although I'm happy to answer questions about it. The other is, can the Abrahamic religions be reconciled with one another? Can they get along? It's kind of the 9/11 question.

The way I address that question is to ask the kind of generic question of what it is that brings out the best in religions, what it is that brings out the tolerant side of religions, as opposed to the belligerent side of religions and the intolerant side of religions. The premise is that if you find out what factors were conducive to tolerance in the ancient world, maybe those same kinds of factors are conducive to tolerance now.

I look at that question largely by reference to the ancient world and ancient scriptures. One way you could frame the question, as I address it in the book, is, how do you account for the kind of mood

fluctuations of God that you see in the Abrahamic scriptures, in both the Qur'an and the Bible?

In the Qur'an, at one minute you will find God, speaking through Muhammad, advising Muslims that they should say to members of other faiths, "Look, you've got your religion; we've got ours. Can't we get along?"

At other moments, you will have God advising Muslims to kill unbelievers—although the verses that you see on the Internet prescribing that are sometimes taken out of context and are framed misleadingly. I may talk about that a little. But still, there's no doubt that there is a belligerent and a tolerant side of God in the Qur'an.

And so too in the Bible. In, say, Deuteronomy you have God advising the Israelites that the way to handle neighboring cities that worship the wrong gods is to kill every man, woman, and child in the city, as well as the livestock. As the Bible puts it, "leave nothing alive that breathes."

At other times, though, you see the Israelites not only suggesting peaceful coexistence with a neighboring people, but actually validating that suggestion by referring to the other people's gods. So they say, "You've got your god, [Chemosh](#); we've got our god, [Yahweh](#). Your god gave you your land; our god gave us our land. Can't we get along?"

So in both the Bible and the Qur'an you do see these two sides of God. The question I asked was, what is it that brings out the best and the worst in a religion? Why is it that people are sometimes inclined to think that their god wants them to kill other people and at other times are inclined to think that that very same god wants them to be very tolerant toward members of other faiths? That's very much the question we face today.

Before I get into my answer, before I tell you what circumstances I think bring out the best in religion, I want to emphasize that I do believe that the circumstances are fundamental, that there's no such thing as an intrinsically belligerent religion or an intrinsically tolerant one, that all religions have shown the ability to be either, depending on the circumstances. That's my bias. That's my belief. Not everyone agrees.

One way to make that point is to think back to 9/11. After 9/11 happened, people tried to make sense of it, and a lot of them went out and bought books. Some of them bought books about recent world events, the history of Arabian societies, and so on, and the sociological context in which some of the terrorists had grown up. Other people bought copies of the Qur'an to figure out what had happened, because they wanted to investigate Islam.

My bias is that you are going to get more illumination by reading the first set of books; by understanding the circumstances, the context in which these people live—the historical context, the social and economic context they had grown up in—than you would by just reading the Qur'an.

It's certainly true that there are belligerent verses in the Qur'an, and people can fasten onto them. But the way I would look at it, the Qur'an or the Bible, is that it's a menu of options. And the question is, why do people choose to focus on one kind of verse rather than another at any given time?

The answer I came up with is really, I think, pretty commonsensical—I hope. The people who agree with it think it's commonsensical; the people who don't think it's crazy. The idea is basically that if members of one religion see members of another religion as people that they can, in some sense, do business with, can profit through interaction with, and they don't find them a threat to their material interests, then you are much more likely to see the tolerant side of the religion, whereas—and I dress this up in game theoretical terminology; I won't bore you with much of that. It's not, in a sense, essential. But that's called a non-zero-sum game.

When two people can both win through interaction, that's a non-zero-sum game. A zero-sum game is when one of them has to win and one of them has to lose. When you play tennis with somebody, that's a

zero-sum game. Every point is good for one of you, bad for the other; whereas if you are playing doubles, your relationship with your teammate is non-zero-sum. Every point is good for both of you or bad for the other. So the sum of your fortunes doesn't add up to zero. They are either positive or negative.

In real life, non-zero-sum games are seldom that simple, but you see them all the time—people doing economic exchange because they think they can both benefit or getting together to form a club because they have a common interest. There are all kinds of ways for mutual benefit to occur.

My argument is that if one religious group thinks that a relationship is fundamentally zero-sum, then you are more likely to see the belligerent side, if they think, "The only way we can win is for them to lose." So fights over land are zero-sum. I think sometimes, when you look at what is described as a religious conflict, underlying it is a more fundamental kind of struggle over land or something.

I don't know if many of you know who the so-called New Atheists are. There is a group of people thought of as the [New Atheists](#), for reasons I won't get into, [Richard Dawkins](#) and so on. But one of the things that characterizes them is that they think religion is pretty much the root of all evil, or a lot of it.

I have gotten into some kinds of arguments with them, because I believe that religious conflicts are really not fundamentally about religion, but they have these underlying causes. For example, one of the so-called New Atheists, Richard Dawkins, wrote in his bestselling book [The God Delusion](#) that if it weren't for religion, there would be no Israel-Palestine conflict. I just think that shows not a very thorough historical understanding of the conflict.

The original Zionists were not especially religious; they were secular. The original Palestinian reaction against the existence of Israel was not a religious thing; it was more ethnic and nationalistic. As time goes on, as it simmers, it can begin drawing on kind of religious resources, you might say, to fuel the conflict. But that doesn't mean that's its underlying problem.

Anyway, the view in the book is that this is what brings out the best and the worst in religion, these often unconscious perceptions of whether somebody is like zero-sum—that is, an enemy or a rival—whether there is some irreconcilable conflict between the two of you over some resource or something, or whether you just sense that they don't respect you enough to do business with you.

So respect is an example of a cue that I think the human mind is designed to pick up on as evidence of whether a relationship can be potentially non-zero-sum. I think it depends very much on whether you see the relationship as one of potential mutual benefit or not.

I hope that if you look into your own minds and your own everyday behavior, you may see the underlying source of the dynamic I'm talking about. My belief is that the mind is designed by natural selection to discriminate between potential win-win games with people, people you can do business with—they can become your allies, your collaborators, your business partners, your friends—and people who just don't seem, in that regard, auspicious, who seem like your enemies or your rivals.

I submit that if you are competing with someone for a job or a mate or whatever, that tends to put them into a cognitive category where you just start sizing them up in an unflattering way. Your mind generates reasons to dislike them and to say bad things about them.

I really do think, as simple a mechanism as that is, that's the way the human mind works. It's designed by natural selection to navigate this landscape of zero-sum and non-zero-sum opportunities, and a lot of conflicts are just that mechanism playing out on the field of human endeavor. You see this, I think, very much in the Qur'an and the Bible.

In the Qur'an, when Muhammad thinks he can do business, so to speak, with Christians and Jews—there are Christians and Jews in his environment, and it's very clear that there are times when he hopes to bring them into a common coalition, even a common religion—when he's optimistic about that, you see

him saying things like, "God, in his prescience, in his wisdom, chose the Hebrew people above all others." Muhammad says that. He has Muslims celebrating Yom Kippur, signing on to that Jewish ritual that was prevalent in his environment. Muslims originally prayed toward Jerusalem. Now they pray toward Mecca. But originally they prayed toward Jerusalem. This is in the Qur'an.

All of this is when Muhammad is optimistic about bringing them on board in a common coalition. When that project seems to fall apart, for whatever reason, that's when he says all the negative things that you can read on the website of your choice. Generally, websites of a kind of rightward leaning emphasize those. But the point is, the other verses are in there, and they do reflect, I think, the facts on the ground. I think the facts on the ground are what shape the part of a religion that is going to come out.

In the Bible you see the same dynamic, where religious doctrine is associated with whether it's kind of in your interests to be tolerant, I maintain. I guess the part of the book I'm probably proudest of is my account of early Israelite religion, which, I submit, begins with well-entrenched polytheism, and I argue that monotheism doesn't show up until later than most people say, not until the Babylonian exile of the sixth century BCE. But there are just lots of ways that this same dynamic plays out in the Bible.

The Bible says that [Solomon](#) had 700 wives. Here's the interesting thing: The Bible depicts the polytheism of various kings as a temporary departure from the norm. I don't think that's what's happening, really. I think for a long time polytheism was the fundamental rule in ancient Israel. Solomon plainly was having altars to foreign gods built. The Bible blames this on his wives. It's because he had these foreign wives. They convinced him to worship these foreign gods.

I think the dynamic is exactly the opposite, almost. In the ancient world, when a king married a lot of foreign women, it was an instrument of foreign policy. It was a way to consolidate relations with these countries. It's also the case that acknowledging the gods of other countries, respecting them, permitting their worship, was another way of consolidating ties with these nations.

So what you're seeing is that Solomon was somebody who had what we would call today an internationalist foreign policy. That is, he saw Israel's neighbors as people you could do business with. He wanted to be allies with them. What do you do? You marry their wives; you worship their gods. So that's a case where, I would argue, his respect for their gods, his tolerance of their religions, is an expression of his initial perception that he can do business with these people.

Then, when you start seeing, a couple of centuries after Solomon, clear signs that there are prophets who are insisting on worshipping Yahweh alone—some scholars call this the "Yahweh-alone" movement. This is a movement toward monotheism, although it's not monotheism per se, because they are not necessarily saying that only the god of Israel exists, but they are saying you should only worship him. That's not monotheism. It's called monolatry. That's their position.

Interestingly, if you look at what the prophets who were advancing this view say, they have a very skeptical view on the value of relations with other nations. [Hosea](#), for example, who is the first kind of clear-cut monolatrism in the Bible, to the extent that the dating of texts by scholars is reliable—this is in the eighth century—he's saying you should only worship the god of Israel. Here are some things he's saying about Israel's predicament.

He says, "Israel mixes himself with the peoples. Foreigners devour his strength, but he does not know it."

He's a populist-nationalist. He's a little bit of a [Pat Buchanan](#)—not in every respect. But in terms of the political constituency he's appealing to, you would call him a populist-nationalist.

He writes, "The standing grain has no heads"—that is, there's famine—"it shall yield no meal. If it were to yield, foreigners would devour it."

He says Israel's officials "bargain with the nations. They shall soon writhe under the burden of foreign kings and princes."

I argue that the initial rejection of foreign gods, that act of intolerance that is a prerequisite for the evolution of monotheism, is grounded in this idea that "these people are a threat to us, these surrounding nations, and we shouldn't worship their gods."

I'll stop in a minute. I won't go through my whole account of how monotheism does emerge during the exile. But I will say that I think initially monotheism actually is this kind of expression of intolerance of other gods that is grounded in a perception of enmity with these other nations. The Israelites aren't imagining it. They live in a bad neighborhood, and they have had some very bad interactions with a lot of nations, culminating in the disaster of the exile.

So I would say that monotheism was, in that sense, born as a fundamentally intolerant thing. But it can change, and I do chart how readily it can change and try to show the emergence of a monotheistic god of tolerance and broader compassion.

I'm not referring, as some Christians might think, to the New Testament. The New Testament has a lot of that, but I'm not saying that you have to wait until Christianity to get a tolerant monotheism. I argue that right after the exile—the Jews are returned from Babylon.

What happened is, the Babylonians have conquered and humiliated the Israelites. They have taken all the elites, the educated Israelites, and brought them to Babylon. Then the Babylonians are conquered by the Persians. [Cyrus the Great](#) seems to be a more enlightened imperialist, who realizes that maybe it's easier to handle your various subjects by giving them some autonomy, letting them worship their religion. He returns the Jews to Israel, let's them worship their religion.

I argue that, if the mainstream dating of biblical texts is to be trusted—although it's a very contentious field, how you date biblical texts—but if the mainstream views are to be trusted, I argue that you can see, in texts written right after the exile, a different kind of god, that is different from the god at the birth of monotheism.

There are a few examples. One is the Book of Ruth. I don't know how many of you know your Book of Ruth. The whole upshot of the Book of Ruth is, in a way, the revelation that there is [Moabite](#) blood running in the Israelite family, because a Moabite was an ancestor of [King David](#). If you look at pre-exilic texts, the Moabites are the enemies. They are these horrible people you would never want in your family. That's an example.

The Book of Jonah is an example, which ends on a note with God trying to convince [Jonah](#) to show compassion and forgiveness to the [Ninevehns](#). Jonah is resisting. What's interesting is that the Ninevehns are the Assyrians. This was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. God is now saying, "These are good people. Forgive them. They were confused." In fact, the closing verse of the Book of Jonah is God saying to Jonah, "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city in which there are more than 120,000 thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left."

Knowing your right hand from your left, that was an idiom meaning they were morally confused. They were just confused. They didn't know their right hand from their left. Can't we forgive them?

If you look at pre-exilic texts, I assure you that confusion is not considered an adequate excuse for the behavior of the Assyrians, in the pre-exilic period, when the Assyrians are enemies.

So what has changed? Well, now Israel is firmly ensconced in an empire. They are surrounded by allies, fellow members of the Persian Empire. So these former enemies are now allies. The relationship has flipped from zero-sum to non-zero-sum. I think you see it in the texts. You see that kind of adaptation.

I'll just close by saying—unless there are no questions, in which case I'll either release you or continue to talk—that I'm certainly not predicting that things will work out well in the world. Looking around, I see a

lot of grounds for pessimism, to be perfectly honest with you. But the good news is the following.

First of all, all these religions—and I get into Christianity, too, in the book—have shown their ability to adapt constructively to a non-zero-sum environment. In other words, if you can arrange things so that they see it as being in their interests, in their material interests and in their less tangible interests, to get along with people, the doctrines will change accordingly and the interpretation of doctrines will change accordingly.

You can see that happening in recent times as well. It may not happen as fast as you would like. That's one problem we have to deal with. But the fact is that people show tremendous flexibility in the way they interpret their scriptures.

The other part of the good news, I would say—if the first part is that they can react constructively to non-zero-sum dynamics—is that the world is full non-zero-sum dynamics these days—that is to say, potential win-win relationships or, you could say, relationships of interdependence, where your well-being depends on the well-being of another person. That's what a non-zero-sum relationship is.

In a previous book, *Nonzero*, I argue that the basic driving force of history, technological evolution, or the basic thing that changes the structure of societies over time has all along been having this property, ever since the Stone Age, of expanding the range of non-zero-sum games.

Beginning with roads and writing and culminating with the Internet, the drift of technological evolution has been to bring more and more people into non-zero-sum relationships with more and more people at further and further remove.

Globalization is a kind of culmination of that process, so that now our relations are bound up with the relations of people all around the world. You see this when the economy goes down. It goes down globally. Contagious diseases can go global. Environmental problems can be global.

To get back to this context of a non-zero-sum game, I think if you look at what is sometimes called the Muslim world, it's very much in the interests of what is sometimes called the Western world for things to go well in that part of the world. In other words, if more and more Muslims, on the one hand, feel they are not getting a fair shake or they feel alienated or threatened or whatever, that's going to be bad for the West. That's not going to be a good thing in what is called the war on terror, if there are more and more unhappy Muslims.

Whereas if more and more of them feel happy with their lives, fulfilled, and feel that they are part of a global community, that's going to be good for the West. So that is a non-zero-sum relationship.

So in the most fundamental sense, there's a non-zero-sum relationship between the West and the Muslim world. If people perceive this accurately—there is a lot of work to be done. This isn't going to happen easily or, necessarily, automatically, because it depends so much on the way people perceive things, not just the underlying reality.

But there is reason to believe that this at least provides the foundation for potential reconciliation among those members of the different faiths who do not feel reconciled right now. And it provides a foundation for the development of doctrines in all the religions that will actually consolidate bonds among the religions rather than dissolve them.

I guess I'll stop there and see if there are any questions.

### Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** Number one, you started talking about the Abrahamic religions. For most of us, monotheism began with Abraham. How do you deal with that?

Number two, in our own day, with Muslims, there are different interpretations. The [Sufis](#) are quite tolerant. But how do you deal with the [Wahhabi](#) approach, which began with isolated groups in the desert, but is now underwritten by Saudi oil money and others? How can the Wahhabi be induced to become more tolerant?

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** As for Abraham, I don't agree that monotheism started with Abraham. Part of my argument is that monotheism doesn't show up until much later.

As for the Wahhabis, I guess part of my argument is that I would be careful about even generalizing to that extent. It's true that there are a lot of Sufis who emphasize peace and love, and you can find Wahhabis who don't. But having traveled in Saudi Arabia at least once for a couple of weeks, I can tell you that whether people subscribe to the Saudi strain of Islam, which has this Wahhabi heritage, to me doesn't seem to be the determining factor of whether they are friendly.

I met a lot of Saudis who were really interested in us working this thing out, and they belong to the strain of Islam that you are talking about. If you ask why they are interested in working this thing out, I think it's because they perceive it to be in their interests for it to work out. Some of them are well-educated businesspeople. They literally want to do business with the West.

I don't want to dismiss the importance of the tradition that a person is brought up in. There are radical strains, radically intolerant strains, of Wahhabi Islam, where, if a person is brought up in them, that will complicate the job. So interpretation matters.

But what I would ask myself is to just look at Saudi Arabia. You are getting closer to my view of things when you start talking about the oil. What does oil do for countries? One thing it does is that it allows them to not get organically integrated into the global economy. Saudi Arabia—just the possession of oil brings its prosperity, and then they just pay everybody off. The government gives money to Saudis, without them having to do what we assume is part of life in America: You go out and you figure out where you can fit in in the economy. Not that none of them have jobs or anything.

I think oil has prevented Saudi Arabia from becoming as organically integrated into the global economy, from having as many people who feel connected to the outside world. It also allows a government to remain authoritarian and to restrict access of people to information about the outside world and so on.

But I would say that I really think that in the current government of Saudi Arabia there are a lot of people who are progressively minded and understand what the problem is. They are actually fostering the dissemination of Internet technology, and more education for women. I honestly came away from Saudi Arabia thinking maybe the bigger question was whether things will change so fast there that there will be a backlash from the religious conservatives, of whom there are many, especially in the central part of Saudi Arabia.

That's, I guess, what I would say about it.

**QUESTION:** Hunter-gatherers had religion without ethics. Ethics came into religion as a greater need for rules arrived. However, we are into a world of greater interdependency and non-zero-sum games. In other words, we may be going back to the kind of situation that existed in the beginning with the hunter-gatherers, where people globally, with the Internet and everything else that you were discussing, know each other. That's phenomenon number one.

Phenomenon number two: We have seen in postwar Western Europe, for example, before the arrival of Muslims into Western European society, a rising social safety net—that is, less to worry about—and a high degree of secularization, virtually no role of religion in private or public life—

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** In the West.

**QUESTIONER:** Among Christians mainly in Western Europe.

The question is, taking those two things combined, rather than waiting for the doctrines to change—you said you were looking at the past as an explanation of the present. But looking from the present to the future, in fact, isn't one of the answers not to wait for the doctrine to change, but to try to secularize the problem so that you are right back to where you were on non-zero-sum games—in other words, take religion out of it, remove the doctrine from it?

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Let me pick up, first of all, on the phrase "waiting for the doctrines to change." When I talk about things changing, in one sense, it can take a long time for doctrines to formally change. On the other hand, it's happening every moment, in the following sense.

We just had this Times Square bombing attempt. I have an online-only column that I write for *The New York Times*, and yesterday I wrote a [column](#) about this, arguing—and this will betray my dangerously left-wing beliefs—that our foreign policy has made it easy.

You all know about this radical imam in Yemen [[Anwar al-Awlaki](#)], who was taken as inspiration by—if you look at the three attempted terrorist attacks in America in the last year, the Times Square bomber, the Christmas Day underwear bomber, the Fort Hood shooter, all of them were paying attention to this guy. Look at his talking points. He is trying to convince them that America is at war with Islam, and therefore jihad is justified. His database is, "They invaded Iraq. They're sending more troops into Afghanistan. They're doing these drone strikes in Pakistan."

I submit that if he did not have those things to draw on—and it's not just him saying it; these people have noticed it. It is on the record that all three of these guys were having this reaction to American foreign policy.

I'm saying, right now, today, certain policies can make it easier for a guy like the guy in Yemen, who is preaching intolerance and jihad, and certain policies can make it easier on the moderate Muslim leaders, who are trying to convince their followers. You could view it as a battle for the mind of this Times Square bomber, starting seven, eight years ago, before he had apparently taken this decisive turn. Who do you want to give strength to, the imam in Yemen or the moderate at his local mosque who is trying to keep him from becoming a jihadist?

So in real time, you can do things that matter.

Now, it would be one thing if I thought the invasion of Iraq had been some smashing success on some other front. And the drone strikes are a little more complicated, because they probably do have a short-term upside in terms of disrupting al Qaeda and so on. That's a more complicated case.

I just want to emphasize that we are making decisions right now that either empower a radical imam or empower a moderate imam.

The question is, wouldn't it be easier just to get rid of religion? If you could snap your fingers—I don't know what I would say if you gave me that thought experiment. I think religion does a lot of good, has done a lot of good; it does a lot of bad and has done a lot of bad. So I don't know what I would say to that. But it's a moot point, I think, because you can't snap your fingers. I mean, you can snap your fingers; it's just that religion won't disappear. I'm sure you can snap your fingers. Seeing how you handled the struggle over the microphone, there's no doubt that you have that much manual dexterity.

**QUESTIONER:** Thank you. I'm nodding my head.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** But [Sam Harris](#), one of these New Atheists, really believes that the solution to this problem is, "If we could just get rid of Islam, it wouldn't be a problem."

And I say, "Sam, if you think that having you, this well-educated American, go over to them and say, 'Don't you realize your god doesn't exist?'—if you think that's an asset in the war on terror, I think you're on drugs." That's crazy. I'm going to debate him in California in a few months.

Yesterday, when this column of mine came out in *The New York Times*—he has a website [Project Reason](#). It has a Hall of Shame, and I made the Hall of Shame yesterday for that column.

**QUESTION:** It almost was a zero-sum game.

You talk about some very encouraging things about which there's not likely to be much disagreement—people's grassroots sentiments and the commonality of certain doctrines and so on. But in between there are civic and religious governance systems inside of these three religions. The Catholic Church is on the verge of a hostile takeover of the Church of England; in the Jewish faith, the secularist Zionists versus the religious Zionists. Arguably, even some of the terrorist attacks are aimed not just at the United States, but at the governments of the countries from which these people came.

If these people can't get along inside of their own institutional frameworks, how are they going to get along with one another?

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** One thing I would say that isn't exactly responsive to your question is I think we are making a policy mistake if we take these genuine conflicts within the Islamic world and turn them into conflicts with America. And I think that is, to a very large extent, what we have done. The whole intellectual tradition that [Osama bin Laden](#) bought into begins with [Sayyid Qutb](#), who wrote a book called [Milestones](#). He was an Egyptian and he was ultimately executed by the Egyptian government.

I would say two things about him. One is this: If you read *Milestones*, he starts off by complaining that mainstream Muslims are totally misunderstanding jihad because they think it's just a defensive doctrine, that you should only attack people if you're attacked. That is the prevailing interpretation of jihad at that point, according to him. So, first of all, that's an example that things change. Apparently, he couldn't, for a while, get anybody to pay attention to the possibility that jihad might be something other than a defensive doctrine.

Secondly, it's true that he traveled to America and found the West in some ways abhorrent. But his fundamental conflict was with his government.

Osama bin Laden's initial conflict was also with his government. He did conclude that governing an Islamic society with, in many ways, a secular government or insufficiently religious government was not good enough for him. But it was apparently when he came back to Saudi Arabia and found American troops in Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War that this really kind of set him off, and he started seeing it more and more as a truly international conflict.

This isn't exactly what you asked, and maybe you should get a second run at your question, in fact. But I think we made a big mistake. Take the so-called al Qaeda in Iraq or al Qaeda in Mesopotamia. First of all, they weren't al Qaeda before we invaded Iraq. They didn't have that brand. Secondly, their main issue was with the Jordanian government. We went in there and turned them into an enemy of the United States.

The Taliban was not, ten years ago—it's true that they were harboring bin Laden—they were not planning to attack the United States or deploy any Americans to bomb Times Square ten years ago. They were ambivalent about bin Laden. They were ambivalent about his attack on the World Trade Center. But what we're doing now in Afghanistan and Pakistan is increasingly uniting the Taliban and al Qaeda in the common goal of defeating the United States.

I think your question was, if they can't even get along with each other, how can they get along with us? Maybe I'm flipping it around and saying, let's just keep them not getting along with each other.

Now, I don't mean that too cynically. I don't want them killing each other. But I just think our foreign policy has been almost disastrous in making this fundamental mistake of turning local conflicts into international conflicts.

**QUESTIONER:** The other two have not developed a sufficiently common and integrated approach to deal effectively—

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Which two are these?

**QUESTIONER:** That would be Christianity and Judaism.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** You're saying they're the problem?

**QUESTIONER:** I'm not saying—

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Anyway, that's a refreshing view. More commonly I hear the opposite.

**QUESTIONER:** They're a part of the problem.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Oh, I agree. I don't agree that religion per se is the fundamental problem in any of these cases. Yes, there are big tensions, certainly in Israel, between the fundamentalist religious and—

**QUESTIONER:** And I would say within Christianity as well.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Yes.

**QUESTIONER:** And that makes a common approach rather difficult, even though the potential for it exists at the doctrinal and grassroots level.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** I think what's interesting about that is—I think the tension exists within Islam, too. In all of these religions you might find that the fundamentalists of the different religions, in some ways, have more in common with each other than they have with other members of their religion. Again, religion per se is not the determinative thing.

When my daughters were in elementary school, in the public school system, I sometimes—the question is, why isn't there more political bonding between conservative Muslims and conservative Christians over issues in the public school system?

I went to a Friday night event at this elementary school. Because one of the parents had taken an interest in belly dancing, for some reason, they had her do belly dancing. I can imagine a parent who thinks this is not really appropriate. It's kind of erotic dancing, and you have kindergartners there. It's just kind of weird. I didn't bother me especially, but I thought, I bet there are conservative Christians who don't like this. I bet there are conservative Muslims who don't like this. Then I thought, why don't they unite over more of these issues? Then I realized that in my neighborhood there aren't many conservative Christians. There are more Muslims than conservative Christians.

But the point I'm making is, there is the possibility of different kinds of bonding among members of the different religions based on the fact—you are seeing some of this at the level of moderates. You are seeing elite moderate leaders of the different faiths get together and have these conferences: How can we spread moderation to all our faiths? That's good. But, oddly, there is a potential for some actual bonding among the conservatives themselves.

**QUESTION:** I'm interested in the fact that religion has no real function. As you said, would we do better without religion? I'm not saying that. We can't do without religion. But does religion have any positive

function, other than to follow along with what the substratum of economic and social factors have?

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** First of all, as I try to show in the book, historically it kind of got us to where we are. If you look at the beginnings of law, international law, they were fundamentally intertwined with religion and they were respected because people were convinced that the gods wanted them to be respected. In terms of getting us to where we are in a globalized society, I think religions have been essential.

They do lots of good on a day-to-day basis. If you look at missionaries abroad, I think some missionaries are not helping us, those who aggressively proselytize. Christians who aggressively try to recruit Muslims in Africa and other places I think are exacerbating tensions. But there are also, for the less proselytizing Christian religions—notably, Catholicism—there are tons of people over there who are just trying to help. They are not aggressively proselytizing. They are trying to alleviate poverty and suffering, and they're doing it because they feel that they're doing God's work.

So I am certainly not convinced that religion has done more harm than good or that it does more harm than good now. We can raise the ratio of good to harm that it does, I think. I think that's the near-term goal, regardless of whether you think a totally secular world would be a better place or not.

**QUESTION:** Do you think that the world's religions, other than the Abrahamic ones, including Buddhism and Hinduism—do you think that all of them in the batch are developing toward a shared moral code? If you think that is the tendency—and it will take a while, obviously, for that to happen—if you think, yes, they are developing together toward a shared code, might that code be human rights, which are rapidly expanding all over the world, as you know? Would these two movements join hands? What's going to happen?

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** That's a good closing question.

In both this book and my last book I talk a little bit about the moral progress the world has seen to date. The kind of growing consensus about human rights I think reflects that.

I got interested in this by reading a book by [Peter Singer](#), the philosopher, called [The Expanding Circle](#), where he noted that humanity has by and large made moral progress. If you go back to 2,500 years ago, members of one Greek city-state considered members of another Greek city-state subhuman. They finally decided, no, Greeks are humans; it's just the Persians who aren't—which, by the way, is a classic zero-sum/non-zero-sum thing. What put them into warm contact with other Greeks was the war with Persia, which meant they had a relationship of potential alliance with other Greeks, and so they made that adaptation.

Anyway, today I like to think that pretty much everybody in this room and a lot of people all over the world would say that everyone, regardless of race, creed, or color, is entitled to a certain level of decent treatment and they have human rights. This is a belief that has spread. I think religion has often played a constructive role in abetting that.

As for your question—can this spread through all religions?—I would say, at what sociologists call the elite level—that's not a value judgment, but the people who are well educated and travel internationally, and so on—you can find leaders in all of these religions who are moving there.

If you go to the [Parliament of the World's Religions](#), you'll see people from all the religions, and they have very much a kind of shared belief system. Now, you might wish that some of them had more success in trying to convert other members of their religions. So it hasn't filtered down in all cases. But I would say that you do have the skeletal kind of infrastructure for a consensus among a lot of the leaders in all of these religions. They travel. They are playing these non-zero-sum games with people from other countries. It's working out for them to get along with people.

I guess I'm guardedly optimistic that, yes, this consensus could kind of filter down, so to speak. In all

these religions—I don't really take them up much in the book—I think you would see the same kind of dynamic, where there is the potential for a valuable change of doctrine.

It's really Hinduism that is most prominently associated with this idea of the godhead—that is to say, all the different gods of the world are actually manifestations of a single underlying divine unity. That's a very constructive doctrine that people can build on as a way of acknowledging the value of other faiths without denying the value of their own or without surrendering their own beliefs, if they say, "Yes, our God is your God."

Now, in the case of the Abrahamic religions, there is kind of a stronger argument for that. Christians clearly were talking about the God of Jews. Muhammad clearly was, without any doubt, talking about the God of Christians and Jews. "Allah" is a word used for God by Jews and Christians even today in Arab-speaking countries.

But as for your question, yes, I think there is cause for hope. I think you see it happening. As depressing as things may seem now sometimes, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that there has been tremendous moral progress. It has always taken leadership. Religion has often played a role, and it still can.

Thank you.

**JOANNE MYERS:** Thank you for a win-win morning.

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