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July 2, 2009: Divinity in a Secular World

Bruce Ledewitz

Duquesne University, ledewitz@duq.edu

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Title: Divinity in a Secular World

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7/2/2009—Last Sunday, June 28, in the New York Times book review section, Paul Bloom reviewed “The Evolution of God” by Robert Wright. Wright’s thesis is that the concept of God has evolved and changed over the millennia. Wright had previously told the story of a moral direction in human history, in “Nonzero” (2000). Now he tells that story in terms of the moral evolution of the concept of God, ever expanding in the circle of empathy. This does not mean that God actually exists and Wright is careful to distinguish the concept of God from God. Wright does consider the question of God’s existence as well, however: “Wright tentatively explores another claim, that the history of religion actually affirms ‘the existence of something you can meaningfully call divinity.’” Wright comes to a provocative possibility: “he wonders why the universe is so constituted that moral progress takes place. ‘If history naturally pushes people toward moral improvement, toward moral truth, and their God, as they conceive their God, grows accordingly, becoming morally richer, then maybe this growth is evidence of some higher purpose, and maybe — conceivably — the source of that purpose is worthy of the name divinity.’” This God is not a being. Divinity would be the moral arc of the universe itself, bending toward justice, in the words of MLK, Jr. Bloom says this is a minimalist God, not one that “anyone is looking for”. But this is not true. The idea that there is such a thing as moral progress, or moral backsliding, says that not every value is a personal opinion. That resolves the fundamental question of higher or natural law. Now we can say that genocide or slavery, or blowing up schools for girls is actually wrong and there is more to morality than self-interest. Now we secularists can stand as much for ultimate truth as any religious believer. What’s minimalist about all that? Bloom, apparently, has never really encountered the post-modern spirit.