



Book Review of *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, David Bentley Hart, New Haven & London: Yale Divinity Press, 2009, 253pp.

Surprisingly enough, this book is not really preoccupied with atheists (neo-atheists): a singularly boring lot when it comes to their commentaries on religion.

The author explains: “What I have written is at most a ‘historical essay,’ at no point free of bias, and intended principally as an apologia for a particular understanding of the effect of Christianity upon the development of civilization (p. ix).” The author says his own “beliefs” are immaterial in what he presents, though he unabashedly is Christian. With candour he says,

To be honest, my affection for institutional Christianity as a whole is rarely more than tepid; and there are numerous forms of Christian belief and practice for which I would be hard pressed to muster a kind word from the depths of my heart, and the rejection of which by the atheist or sceptic strikes me as perfectly laudable (p. x).”

The book looks centrally at the first four or five centuries of the church “and the story of how Christendom was born out of the culture of late antiquity (p. x).” He continues:

My chief ambition in writing it is to call attention to the peculiar and radical nature of the new faith in that setting: how enormous a transformation of thought, sensibility, culture, morality, and spiritual imagination Christianity constituted in the age of pagan Rome; the liberation it offered from fatalism, cosmic despair, and the terror of occult agencies; the immense dignity it conferred upon the human person; its subversion of the cruelest aspects of pagan society; its (alas, only partial) demystification of political power; its ability to create moral community where none had existed before; and its elevation of active charity above all other virtues (p. xi).

The author calls such nothing short of a complete “revolution”:

a truly massive and epochal revision of humanity’s prevailing vision of reality, so pervasive in its influence and so vast in its consequences as actually to have created a new conception of the world, of history, of human nature, of time, and of the moral good (p. xi).

This revolution far outstrips anything else in the history of the West, yet was so unlikely an achievement.

The negative side of Hart’s argument, he acknowledges, is the rejection of the ideology of modernity in particular “of the myth of ‘the Enlightenment’ (p. xi).” He explains such ideology as the rejection of “irrational” religion in favour of critical reason. Quite the contrary: “the ‘Age of Reason’ was in many significant ways the beginning of the eclipse of reason’s authority as a cultural value (p. xii).” He indicts modernity for its inflexible dogmatism in every sphere of human endeavour including the sciences, seeing a flight to numerous fundamentalisms. Furthermore, the modern secular state has manifested in its very nature excessive barbarisms far worse than any of Christendom.

Hart does not hold back:

What, however, animates this project is a powerful sense of how great a distance of historical forgetfulness and cultural alienation separates us from the early centuries of the Christian era, and how often our familiarity with the Christianity we know today can render us insensible to the novelty and uncanniness of the gospel as it was first proclaimed – or even as it was received by succeeding generations of ancient and mediaeval Christians (p. xii).

The author underscores that this is an “essay” more than a scholarly work (of which he is brilliantly capable, amply demonstrated in other publications). The book consists in four “movements”:

I begin in part 1, from the current state of popular antireligious and anti-Christian polemic, and attempt to identify certain of the common assumptions informing it; in part 2, I consider, in a somewhat desultory fashion, the view of the Christian past that the ideology of modernity has taught us to embrace; in part 3, the heart of the book, I attempt to illuminate (thematically, as I say) what happened during the early centuries of the church and the slow conversion of the Roman Empire to the new faith; and in part 4 I return to the present to consider the consequences of the decline of Christendom (p. xiii).

Part I begins with a quick overview of best-selling atheistic diatribes. The author is not truculent about atheism *per se*, liking some forms far more than some forms of religion. “But atheism that consists entirely in vacuous arguments afloat on oceans of historical ignorance, made turbulent by storms of strident self-righteousness, is as contemptible as any other form of dreary fundamentalism (p. 4).”

Hart adduces reasons for his displeasure by contrasting neo-atheists with far more robust and credible previous detractors, principal of whom was Friedrich Nietzsche. He sees most neo-atheistic writing as so much drivel and nonsense. These writers broadly hold to two unexamined prejudices:

first, that all religious belief is in essence baseless; and, second, that religion is principally a cause of violence, division, and oppression, and hence should be abandoned for the sake of peace and tolerance (p. 10).

Of course religion does kill. Politics also kills, Hart points out. But *peaceful* religion and *peaceful* politics do not kill. “Polytheists, monotheists, and atheists kill – indeed, this last class is especially prolifically homicidal, if the evidence of the twentieth century is to be consulted (p. 12).”

Further:

Does religious conviction provide a powerful reason for killing? Undeniably it often does. It also often provides the sole compelling reason for refusing to kill, or for being merciful, or for seeking peace; only the profoundest ignorance of history could prevent one from recognizing this. For the truth is that religion and irreligion are cultural variables, but killing is a human constant (p. 13).

Hart thinks the desire to abolish religion is as simpleminded as a desire to abolish politics. (In a way, that is the human condition: commitment to ultimate concerns – religion; life within power arrangements – politics.) One neo-atheist expresses his commitment to democracy. Hart obligingly points out the litany of evils done by democracies, in the name of democracy. He continues by indicating his incomprehension of “the strange presupposition that a truly secular society would of its nature be more tolerant and less prone to violence than any society shaped by any form of faith (p. 14).” Clearly the most savage period of human history is the 20th-century, under largely secular governments, with body counts of several magnitudes greater than any previous era.

Hart points out that the simple withdrawal of aggregate charitable aid by the disappearance of religion, “from which the gospel had been banished would surely be one in which millions more of our fellows would go unfed, unnursed, unsheltered, and uneducated (p. 15).” Further, neo-atheists simply miss the fact that “they are inheritors of a social conscience whose ethical grammar would have been very different had it not been shaped by Christianity’s moral premises:...(p. 16)”. I’m part of an extended family of unbelievers who simply miss this obvious fact!

But the history of Christian morals is mixed at best in the West in its demonstrably changed lives and institutions. Notwithstanding,

The Christian view of human nature is wise precisely because it is so very extreme: it sees humanity, at once, as an image of the divine, fashioned for infinite love and imperishable glory, and as an almost inexhaustible wellspring of vindictiveness, cupidity and brutality (pp. 17 & 18).

That Christ was murdered “by the combined authority and moral prudence of the political, religious and legal powers of human society... is, incidentally, the most subversive claim ever made in the history of the human race (p. 18).”

Hart wonders at such extraordinary bad argumentation by neo-atheists, positing the cultural air we breathe, “precritical and irrational impulses of the purest kind of fideism (p. 20).” Or unexamined assumptions as explanation. Hart asserts: “To be entirely modern (which very few of us are) is to believe in nothing (p. 20)”. He explains further: “In the most unadorned terms possible, the ethos of modernity is – to be perfectly precise – nihilism (p. 21)”. He does not employ the term negatively. He means simply,

To be truly nihilist, in this sense of the word, is simply to have been set free from subservience to creeds, or to religious fantasy, or to any form of moral or cultural absolutism, and so ideally to have relinquished every desire to control one’s fellows (p. 21).

Such is modernity’s freedom. But,

A perfectly consistent ethics of choice would ultimately erase any meaningful distinction between good and evil, compassion and cruelty, love and hatred, reverence and transgression, and few of us could bear to inhabit the world on those terms (p. 23).

As a personal aside, this reviewer has found that those most vociferously subscribing to such an ethic are simultaneously the most intolerant, judgmental and impositional of their ethic on others! I have in-laws... Enough said.

And so,

[Such] ethics, especially, tends to be something of a continuous improvisation or bricolage: we assemble fragments of tradition we half remember, gather ethical maxims almost at random from the surrounding culture, attempt to find an inner equilibrium between tolerance and conviction, and so on, until we have knit together something like a code, suited to our needs, temperaments, capacities, and imaginations (p. 23).

Hart juxtaposes a medievalist's judgmentalism towards Christian care of lepers with the overwhelming reality of Christian care of the poor and destitute. The Benedictines for example alone ran 2,000 hospitals in Western medieval Europe!

But we are truly modern meaning explicitly post-Christian. So Hart observes:

Even the most ardent secularists among us generally cling to notions of human rights, economic and social justice, providence for the indigent, legal equality, or basic human dignity that pre-Christian Western culture would have found not so much foolish as unintelligible... they would never have occurred to [them]... (pp. 32 & 33)".

Hart states further, "Hence modernity's first great attempt to define itself: an 'age of reason' emerging from and overthrowing an 'age of faith.' (p. 33)." An enchanting tale is told in great detail of how this came about, Hart avers and tells on page 33, adding: "its sole defect is that it happens to be false in every identifiable detail (p. 34)."

Hart spends some time in a chapter (Four) entitled "The Night of Reason" dealing with gross historical misattributions to Christianity. He states baldly that "these Christians brought something new into the ancient world: a vision of the good without precedent in pagan society... the wonder of this new nation within the empire... [is that] anyone could have imagined such ideals in the first place (p. 45)." So often neo-atheists protest that they can be good without God. What Hart asserts is the very *idea* of the good is entirely of Christian provenance. Put differently, for atheists to embrace the good is already to stand on the shoulders of Christians who first conceptualized "the good" in such a way that atheists affirm today. Ivan Illich and Hannah Arendt both point to Christianity's introducing to the world the uniqueness of compassion for the "stranger", Illich highlighting the Good Samaritan story. Such a story to pagan society just did not make sense: it was *nonsense*. Christianity alone, "in long retrospect" as Hart expresses it, invented the very idea of "the good" that today is commonplace in Western culture.

On the so-thought conflict between Christianity and science, Hart states that it simply never existed. Nor can it in any way be claimed that Islamic culture outpaced Christian culture.

As to intolerance and persecution, Hart says they are hugely overblown. He summarizes the overall reality thus:

The long history of Christendom is astonishingly plentiful in magnificent moral, intellectual, and cultural achievements; and many of these would never have been possible but for the conversion of the Roman Empire to a new faith (p. 86).”

As to so-named “wars of religion”, they ought really to be remembered as the first wars of the modern nation-state, whose principal purpose was to establish the supremacy of secular state authority over every rival power, most especially the power of the church (p. 88).” They were not a continuation of the Crusades, the only “holy wars” in Christian history. They began as a response to Islamic expansionism in the 7th century. Whereas the wars of the 16th and 17th centuries had “little to do with faith or confessional loyalties (p. 89).” And the secular state did not “rescue” Europe from wars of religion, rather prosecuted such wars. This story is told well by William T. Cavanaugh in *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

Hart states:

Christianity has been the single most creative cultural, ethical, esthetic, social, political, or spiritual force in the history of the West, to be sure; but it has also been a profoundly destructive force; and one should perhaps praise it as much for the latter attribute as for the former, for there are many things worthy of destruction (p. 100).

He continues on the next page:

The real reproach that should be brought against the victorious church is not that it drove out the old gods but that it did not succeed in driving them or their ways sufficiently far off (p. 101).

Apart from, Hart avers, the fact that Christianity from the outset was characterized by high rationality, more to the point is the degree of “faith” needed “in the operations of even the most disinterested rationality (p. 101).” There are “irreducible convictions present wherever one attempts to apply logic to experience (p. 101).” This obtains for the confirmed materialist as well as for the Christian. Some materialist rationalities – blood and soil, the master race, socialist Utopia produce “prodigies of evil precisely to the degree that they are ‘rationally’ pursued (p. 101).”

In a chapter (Nine) entitled “An Age of Darkness”, Hart argues:

If ever an age deserved to be thought an age of darkness, it is surely ours. One might be almost tempted to conclude that secular government is the one form of government that has shown itself too violent, capricious, and unprincipled to be trusted (p. 196).

And a bit later:

Looking back at the twentieth century, it is difficult not to conclude that the rise of modernity has resulted in an age of at once unparalleled banality and unprecedented monstrosity, and that these are two sides of the same cultural reality (p. 107).

In the chapter (Ten) entitled “The Great Rebellion”, Hart underscores the profound rebellious nature of early Christianity:

No creed could have been more subversive of the ancient wisdom of the world, and no movement more worthy of the hatred of those for whom that wisdom was the truth of the ages (p. 116).”

In fact, over against pagan religious practice, “Christianity was, quite unambiguously, a cosmic sedition (p. 124).” It succeeded “in the invention of an entirely new universe of human possibilities, moral, social, intellectual, cultural, and religious... The old and the new faiths represented two essentially incompatible visions of sacred order and of the human good. They could not coexist indefinitely, and only a moral imbecile could unreservedly regret which of the two it was that survived (p. 124).” What Christianity inspired, above all acts of compassion and the affirmation of a dignity intrinsic to every human soul, was simply not stock and trade with the gods of antiquity as they were with Christianity. Quite the opposite in fact in Roman society under the ancient gods “in which the law of charity was not only an impossibility but an offense against good taste (p. 125).”

There was further no philosophy of antiquity that even approached moving beyond *pathos*, that “could imagine a divine source of the world, freely creating and sustaining all things out of love (p. 133).” Both the arena and the theatre where enemies were despatched for the entertainment of the populace point to a culture that “suffered from a fairly extreme degree of spiritual ennui or decadence (p. 134).”

Further,

Not only is it wrong, in fact, to say that Christianity imparted a prejudice against the senses into the pagan world; one should really say that, if the Christianity of the early centuries was marked by any excessive anxiety regarding the material world or life in the body, this was an attitude that had migrated from pagan culture into the church (p. 134).

Hart summarizes:

Whatever else Christianity brought into the late antique world, the principal gift it offered to pagan culture was a liberation from spiritual anxiety, from the desperation born of a hopeless longing for escape, from the sadness of having to forsake all love of the world absolutely in order to find salvation, from a morbid terror of the body, from the fear that the cosmic powers on high might prevent the spirit from reaching its heavenly home (pp. 144 & 145).

In Chapter Twelve, “A Liberating Message”, Hart asks first whether “it is demonstrably the case that the gospel did in fact spread through the world of late antiquity on account of the novelty of its message... or whether it prospered simply because it was the mystery cult that happened to have the most engaging myths... (p. 146). He asks second “whether any actual social effects followed from the triumph of Christianity that would corroborate the claim that the gospel substantially transformed the moral and spiritual consciousness of Western humanity (p. 146).”

In answering yes to both, Hart discusses at some length a naysayer in the person of a classicist named Ramsey MacMullen. In brief, he finds MacMullen hopelessly prejudiced and dishonest in the face of the evidence. Yet “his books [are] the deep background of a surprisingly large number of anti-Christian polemics...” (p. 147).

“Christian teaching, from the first, placed charity at the center of the spiritual life as no pagan cult ever had, and raised the care of widows, orphans, the sick, the imprisoned, and the poor to the level of the highest religious obligations... From the first century through the fourth, I think I can fairly say, no single aspect of Christian moral teaching was more consistent or more urgent than this law of charity (p. 164).

In Chapter Thirteen, “The Face of the Faceless”, Hart underscores that under Christianity’s tutelage, for the first time, “the human person as such, [was] invested with an intrinsic and inviolable dignity, and possessed of an infinite value (p. 167).” In fact, “Conscience, after all, at least in regard to its particular contents, is to a great extent a cultural artifact, a historical contingency, and all of us today in the West, to some degree or another, have inherited a conscience formed by Christian moral ideals (p. 169).” Bluntly, “The scandal of the pagans, however, was the glory of the church (p. 170).” That said, as well, after Constantine, “The enfranchised church has never been more than half Christian even at the best of times; often enough, it has been much less than that (p. 171).”

In Nietzsche’s term, Hart states, Christianity was a “transvaluation of all values” of ancient society, a general subversion, though not a political revolution as such, though no less political for all that. It was, again a Nietzsche term (though with a sneer), “a slave revolt in morality” – but from on high, namely from God who took the form of a slave in the person of Jesus. Today, in the shadow of Christendom, we are incapable of looking on another’s suffering with indifference or contempt – and not do harm to our own consciences. “We have lost the capacity for innocent callousness (p. 173)” Jesus as paradigmatic victim taught us to notice the victim. René Girard says this was revolutionary and unprecedented. So does Hart. He writes:

God, it seems, far from approving the verdict of his alleged earthly representatives – Gentiles or Jews, priests or procurators, emperors, generals, or judges – entirely reverses their judgment, and in fact vindicates and restores to life the very man they have ‘justly’ condemned in the interest of public tranquility. This is an astonishing realignment of every perspective, an epochal reversal of all values, a rebellion against reality... and whatever this inverted or reversed perspective was, it was clearly a powerful act of creativity, a grand reimagining of the possibilities of human existence. It would not have been possible had it not been sustained by a genuine and generous happiness (pp. 173 & 174).”

A new “anarchic” order breaks in through Christ, one that sees “the glory of God revealed in a crucified slave, and in which (consequently) we are enjoined to see the forsaken of the earth as the very children of heaven (p. 174).” Hart describes this vision as one of “total humanism”. “And, once the world has been seen in this way, it can never again be what it formerly was (p. 174).”

Still, Hart acknowledges, the church generally failed to follow this vision, “only certain extraordinary individuals – certain saints – were willing to press the principles of the faith to their most unsettling conclusions (p. 175).” What is amazing however “is that such beliefs had ever come into existence in the first place... the rise of Christianity was surely an upheaval of unprecedented and still unequalled immensity (p. 175).” Gregory of Nyssa for instance during Lent in 379 preached a passionate sermon against slavery as an institution, for Christ forever had

become “the face of the faceless” (p. 180).” There is no enlightened rationality that discovers, would have discovered, human equality apart from “the proclamation of Easter (p. 180).”

Chapter Fourteen, “The Death and Birth of Worlds” claims that Julian the Apostate, precisely in his spiritual yearnings that were so “Christian”, only sustained a vision for a revived paganism because of imitation of Christianity: it was “possible only through the agency in time of the religion he so frantically despised. And nothing, I think, gives better evidence of how great and how total a victory the true Christian revolution had by his time achieved (p. 198).”

In Chapter Fifteen, “Divine Humanity”, Hart states:

It is to say, rather, that the Christian account of reality introduced into our world an understanding of the divine, the cosmic, and the human that had no exact or even proximate equivalent elsewhere and that made possible a moral vision of the human person that has haunted us ever since, century upon century (p. 203).

He further argues:

In short, the rise of Christianity produced consequences so immense that it can almost be said to have begun the world anew: to have “invented” the human, to have bequeathed us our most basic concept of nature, to have determined our vision of the cosmos and our place in it, and to have shaped all of us (to one degree or another) in the deepest reaches of consciousness (p. 213).

But there was a more vital accomplishment, the new morality worked into the very stuff human consciences. So Hart ends the chapter and Part Three of the book with the question:

If, as I have argued in these pages, the “human” as we now understand it is the positive invention of Christianity, might it not be the case that a culture that has become truly post-Christian will also, ultimately, become posthuman? (p. 215)

In Part Four, Chapter Sixteen, “Secularism and Its Victims”, in a few deft strokes, Hart puts the New Atheists in their place: utterly lacking in intellectual rigor or honesty. “The special glories of Christian civilization – in its arts and sciences, in its institutions and traditions, in its philosophies and ideals – speak for themselves, and it would be undignified to cosset intellectual perversity [of neo-atheists] by pleading the obvious (p. 222).” So much for the New Atheists who in their complacency do not rise to any legitimate level of rigorous unbelief.

Hart moves on “to ask where the ascendancy of our modern notion of freedom as pure spontaneity of the will leads the culture it pervades (p. 226).” He points out that in the 20th century alone it has produced 100 million murder victims.

Chapter Seventeen, “Sorcerers and Saints”, asks the question, “When, therefore Christianity departs, what is left behind? (p. 230)” Perhaps only nihilism, rejoins Hart, since no other god can be found with the departure of the Christian God; likewise no other “organizing myth”.

Banality may also be left behind. But possibly monstrosity too, says Hart. Especially when modern science is treated as magic, in which “power is evidence of permissibility (p. 233).” – because we can... So, “Knowledge as power – unmoored from the rule of love or simply a

discipline of prudent moral tentativeness – may be the final truth toward which a post-Christian culture necessarily gravitates (p. 233).” He cites Joseph Fletcher for instance as one who argued openly and vociferously for the elimination of “substandard” genes from the human gene pool. He cites the continued robust eugenics voices. He cites as well many other voices arguing for elimination of unwanted persons through infanticide and euthanasia. Genetic engineering is favoured by some to allow humanity complete control of its own evolution.

Hart therefore suspects “that our contemporary ‘age of reason’ is in many ways an age of almost perfect unreason, one always precariously poised upon the edge of – and occasionally slipping over into – the purest barbarism (p. 236).”

Hart posits what

might be viewed as the final revolutionary moment within ancient Christianity: its rebellion against its own success, its preservation of its most precious and unadulterated spiritual aspirations against its own temporal power (perhaps in preparation for the day when that power would be no more), and its repudiation of any value born from the fallen world that might displace love from the center of the Christian faith (p. 241).

The author wonders whether this may not in fact be the case for the future of Christianity: again to retreat to the desert.

As stated at the outset, the book is less an engagement of atheists (neo-atheists) as it is a look at the amazing revolution Christianity occasioned in antiquity, one whose cultural fallout is rapidly melting away, like the polar ice caps. The uncertainty of Christianity’s future is “no cause of despair for Christians, however, since they must believe their faith to be not only a cultural logic but a cosmic truth, which can never finally be defeated (p. 241).” To which this reviewer says a hearty Amen!,

All thinking Christians should read this amazing book. The author is utterly lucid, honest and restrained in his argument throughout. He has produced a classic of reasoned cultural analysis that speaks equally to world culture in its incremental losing its Christian heritage, and to the church in living faithfully to a cosmic truth (in the vision of John 1) that will not be silenced or overcome.