

Christ and Nothing by David Bentley Hart
First Things, October 2003

The main points of the article can be summarized as follows:

- For contemporary culture there is no value higher than choice and contrary to pre-Christian religions, modern religion commands neither reverence, nor dread, nor love, nor belief. So how do you make war on nothingness?
- The author's thesis is that Christianity, with its cry of "no other god," is in part responsible for the nihilism of our culture. The gospel shook the ancient world to its foundations, so how did Christianity bring us to the ruin of the present moment?
- The word "nihilism" has a complex history in modern philosophy. Nietzsche and Heidegger identified modernity as nihilism and accused Christianity as complicit in its genesis.
- Christian theology assimilated elements of the metaphysics, ethics or method of ancient philosophy and improved them in the process. It integrated pagan philosophy into a vision of reality more complete than philosophy could attain apart from theology.
- The Church claimed for herself all spheres of social, religious and intellectual life and much of the grandeur and beauty of antiquity were preserved in a radically altered form in Christian civilization.
- How did Christianity then assist in bringing along the nihilism of modernity? The contemporary drama is that with the withdrawal of Christian culture, all the glories of the ancient world that it baptized and redeemed have perished. Christianity is the midwife of nihilism: not because it is itself nihilistic but because to reject Christianity now is to reject everything except modern subjectivity.
- Modern philosophy established itself as a discipline independent from theology by insisting on the autonomy of the self. It did not return to the Ancient wonder of being or to the perfections of the world, for to do so would be to slip again into a sphere long colonized by theology. The new point of departure for modern reason had to be the perceiving subject rather than the world perceived.
- So the question persists: which is the spiritual warfare to be waged against nothingness? The failure of Christian culture to live up to its victory over the old gods, left room for the prevailing cult of the self, of the impulses of the will, of nothingness.
- Christians need to recover and understand the meaning of the command to have "no other god" and make an ever more concerted effort to recall and recover the wisdom and centrality of the ascetic tradition as self-abnegation, contrarianism and a willingness to refuse secularization.
- Christian asceticism is the cultivation of the pure heart and pure eye, which allows one to receive the world, and rejoice in it, not as a possession of the will or an occasion for the exercise of power, but as the gift of God.
- It also involves the painful acknowledgement that modern persons will never find rest for their restless hearts without Christ, for our society has become aesthetically arid, culturally worthless, and spiritually deprived.
- In this age marked by the absence of faith in Christ, the modern soul lacks repose, piety, peace, or nobility, and should find the world outside the Church barren of spiritual rapture or mystery.
- The only choice that remains for the children of post-Christian culture is not whom to serve, but whether to serve Him whom Christ has revealed or to serve nothing — *the* nothing.