

Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies

David Bentley Hart

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"Anyone interested in taking the debate about God to the next level should read and reflect on Hart's spirited brief on behalf of Christian truth."
—*New Republic*

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David Bentley Hart : Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Essential reading for all who have heard the current critiques ...By

Susan Dawson Vasquez Essential reading for all who have heard the current critiques of Christianity and find themselves at a loss in how to respond. It exposes the groundlessness and historical amnesia of much of public discourse. 3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. On History By M. Walsh Excellent book, especially the early chapter. Got a bit tedious later on. There is so much material in history; who can absorb and understand it all. A quote that I, as an amateur historian, treasure about history: History is, in fact, the fragmentary record of the often inexplicable actions of innumerable bewildered human beings, set down and interpreted according to their limitations by other human beings, equally bewildered. This statement is attributed to one C. V. Wedgwood, a twentieth century historian of some merit. 1 of 3 people found the following review helpful. a profound book with a misleading title By Paul Adams As others have said, the title does not do justice to the book. Hart does give short shrift to the popular atheists of our day, but the book is really about something else. Drawing especially on a deep understanding of the early centuries of the Church and its cultural context, Hart offers an erudite essay that takes on the view--pervasive since the Enlightenment--that Christianity was a violent and irrational interlude between the cultured classical world and a modernity of reason and science. Hart accepts that Christianity was an interruption, or irruption, but sees it as one that revolutionized our understanding of what it means to be human. It was the most profound revolution in human history. Hart points out that, unlike today's evangelical atheists, Nietzsche hated Christianity for what it actually was, a religion the God of which is Love and which regards charity as the highest virtue. It was, he understood, unique and subversive in its insistence on God's universal love--beyond ties to place, tribe, nation, or ruler--and the duty of Christians to help the sick, poor, weak and oppressed, to visit prisoners, and to respect the intrinsic dignity and worth of all human life. Its adherents often disappoint, as Hart insists, like all other human individuals and institutions in our fallen world. But in developing a (highly sophisticated) understanding of the God-man in whom God became human so that humans may become divine, Christians of the early centuries overthrew older views of the infinite distance between God and humanity and rejected the arbitrariness and immorality of the pagan gods. Christians established a world-view that saw the world as law-governed and humans as subject to a natural law "written on their hearts" and--in great contrast to pagan religions--a social ethic. This made scientific discovery--initially largely the work of churchmen and, like Galileo and Newton, devout Christians--a reading of the book of nature that God had written. No longer could we say, except in the depths of despair like the brutally blinded Gloucester in King Lear, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport." Christianity, says Hart, is a religion of joy and hope, as opposed to the prevailing pagan sadness and resignation. So Hart's argument takes us from the pagan world, with its lack of a sense of the arrow of time and hence of the future and of the purpose and direction of life, its moral callousness toward the weak and oppressed, through the Christian revolution in which king and slave, aristocrat and worker, were of equal worth as sharing in the divinity of the God-man. The Church--again unique in its separation of religion from the state--suffers (what Hart sees as) the catastrophe of being adopted as the religion of the Roman Empire. But unlike the pagan cults, the Church retains its subversive aspect. It insists on the submission even of emperors and kings to God. The long struggle (as well as collusion) between church and state ends in defeat for the Church as Protestant rulers place themselves at the head of their national churches and Catholic states like France and Spain completely subordinate the church to the monarchy--even in Spain's case insisting on the Inquisition as an instrument of "nation-building." The long march of the hypertrophied state culminates in the secularist horrors of the 20th century. Indeed, Hart argues, the modern secular state has a unique penchant or drive to violence on a vast scale that makes the violence attributed (much of it wrongly) to Christianity appear minuscule by comparison. Hart's view of our present cultural situation is exceedingly--and for a Christian one might say excessively--bleak. He sees a post-Christian world no longer restrained by any conception of the equal dignity and worth of the individual. The moral restraints that are rooted in the Christian social ethic but have no solid basis in secularist ideologies, survive as memories for awhile but then fade. A foretaste of this world appears in the enthusiasm with which progressives and liberals of all kinds took up the eugenics movement in the U.S., which the Nazis adopted and learned from. The twentieth century, with its court-mandated sterilizations, lobotomies, scientific experiments on prisoners and denial of treatment to poor Black men in the interests of science in the U.S. as well as the unrestrainedly murderous anti-Christian regimes (atheist or neo-pagan) of Russia and Germany, shows us the post-Christian future. It is a world in which the God who is Love is dead, science is freed from moral restraint, and humans become objects of manipulation. Fortunately, there are developments that might make us want to temper such pessimism, not in the sense that Hart is wrong about the dehumanizing implications of a loss of the social ethic or spiritual depth and beauty of Christianity, but in the sense that secularization is not a done deal, not beyond academia and elite opinion anyway. Christianity is growing rapidly in Africa, Asia, and Russia, has not succumbed (except in its liberal forms) to secularization in the U.S., and rumors of its demise are greatly exaggerated even in Europe, according some accounts (God's Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis (The Future of Christianity)). But this is a profound and serious book that invites us to confront what is at stake in the secularist trends among Western elites.

In this provocative book one of the most brilliant scholars of religion today dismantles distorted religious histories offered up by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and other contemporary critics of religion and advocates of

atheism. David Bentley Hart provides a bold correction of the New Atheists' misrepresentations of the Christian past, countering their polemics with a brilliant account of Christianity and its message of human charity as the most revolutionary movement in all of Western history. Hart outlines how Christianity transformed the ancient world in ways we may have forgotten: bringing liberation from fatalism, conferring great dignity on human beings, subverting the cruelest aspects of pagan society, and elevating charity above all virtues. He then argues that what we term the Age of Reason was in fact the beginning of the eclipse of reason's authority as a cultural value. Hart closes the book in the present, delineating the ominous consequences of the decline of Christendom in a culture that is built upon its moral and spiritual values.

"Hart has the gifts of a good advocate. He writes with clarity and force, and he drives his points home again and again. He exposes his opponents' errors of fact or logic with ruthless precision." Anthony Kenny, *Times Literary Supplement*

"Atheist Delusions will be remembered as Hart's breakout book. His contributions to such journals as *First Things* have long marked him as a rising public intellectual. . . . Hart's work is now likely to come to the attention of a wider audience. And not a moment too soon." William L. Portier, *Commonweal*

"Few things are so delightful as watching someone who has taken the time to acquire a lot of learning casually, even effortlessly, dismantle the claims of lazy grandstanders. . . . Hart isn't making a bid for wealth, fame, or cocktail-party acceptance: He knows whereof he speaks." Stefan Beck, *New Criterion*

"Anyone interested in taking the debate about God to the next level should read and reflect on Hart's spirited brief on behalf of Christian truth." Damon Linker, *New Republic*

"Hart writes with elegance. Even his invective has style." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*

"Absolutely brilliant . . . a cultural tour-de-force." John Linsenmeyer, *Greenwich Time*

"[A] major work by one of the most learned, forceful, and witty Christian theologians currently writing." Paul J. Griffiths, *First Things*

"The strength of Hart's essay is how this modern apologia seeks to disturb the confidence of his interlocutors and bystanders long enough to raise serious doubts about modernity's 'grand narrative.' In its place, Hart presents a robust Christian narrative of true revolution embodied in the early church and sourced in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The original revolution . . . is for Hart, very much alive." Lyndon Shakespeare, *Anglican Theological*

"Atheist Delusions is an ambitious historical essay that takes particular aim at modernity's smug grand perception of itself as an age of reason overthrowing a superstitious age of faith. . . . [Hart] has written an important, provocative, and often brilliant book that hacks at the roots of the new atheists' arguments with devastating force." Donald A. Yerxa, *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*

"Atheist Delusions is a history that serves life . . . Hart argues for a brave thesis With astonishing success, [he] achieves his objective." Christopher Benson, *The City*

"Atheist Delusions leaves the reader enlightened and inspired about our past." Elizabeth Kantor, *Conservative Book Club*

"This is a delightful book to read; funny, wise, thoughtful, and passionate. I highly recommend it." John E. Phelan Jr., *Covenant Companion*

"This is a book I'll return to in the future, and one I strongly recommend for anyone interested in a counter-perspective to popular new atheist writers." Blair Dee Hodges, *Association of Mormon Letters*

"[Hart] writes with clarity and force, and he drives his points home again and again." Anthony Kenny, *TruthDig.com*

"Indeed, in a culture battle, pitting religion against secularism, Hart may be the best 'corner man' in the business, providing would-be Christian pugilists with a better understanding of both their own strengths and their opponent's weaknesses." Graham Reside, *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*

"With impressive erudition and polemical panache, David Hart smites hip and thigh the peddlers of a 'new atheism' that recycles hoary arguments from the past. His grim assessment of our cultural moment challenges the hope that the Christian revolution could happen again." Richard John Neuhaus, former editor in chief of *First Things*

"Provoked by and responding to the standard-bearers of 'the New Atheism,' this original and intellectually impressive work deftly demolishes their mythical account of 'the rise of modernity.' Hart argues instead that the genuinely humane values of modernity have their historic roots in Christianity." Geoffrey Wainwright, *Duke Divinity School*

"In this learned, provocative, and sophisticated book, Hart presents a frontal challenge to today's myopic caricature of the culture and religion that existed in previous centuries." Robert Louis Wilken, *University of Virginia*

"Surely Dawkins, Hitchens et al would never have dared put pen to paper had they known of the existence of David Bentley Hart. After this demolition-job all that is left for them to do is repent and rejoice at the discreditation of their erstwhile selves." John Milbank, author of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*

"A devastating dissection of the 'new atheism,' a timely reminder of the fact that 'no Christianity' would have meant 'no West,' and a rousing good read. David Hart is one of America's sharpest minds, and this is Hart in full, all guns firing and the band playing on the deck." George Weigel, Distinguished Senior Fellow, *Ethics and Public Policy Center*, Washington