

**What David Hart's *Atheist Delusions* Has
to Teach Us concerning the Rise and Fall
of Christianity's Cultural Dominance
in the History of the West**

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IF YOU HAD gone to a certain kind of Catholic college or university thirty years ago, you would almost certainly have encountered a version of Western intellectual history that emphasized the glories of the classical Greek and Roman cultures, the sweet fruits brought forth from their encounter with the Catholic faith, and, most likely, Thomas Aquinas's synthesis of Christian faith and Greek reason as that harvest's most savory plum. If it went beyond the apex of the thirteenth century, the narration would have taken a dark turn with the rejection of Thomas's realist account of human knowing by the nominalists and guided the student down the spirals of modern philosophy, modern art, and modern statist politics, bottoming out with the horror show of the twentieth century. Throughout it all, prophetic voices, for example, Pascal, Dostoevsky, Newman, Leo XIII, Eliot, and Maritain, would have been heard warning that reason shut to God's revelation would before long erase the dignity and purpose of human existence. And like the prophets of old, these modern spokesmen for God looked fearfully to confirmation in the course of history and would find it in spades with the slaughter benches of Fascism, Nazism, Soviet communism, and Maoism. At the end of this bloody road, shining like the sole beacon of hope, would be the possibility of a return to the realism of Aquinas's philosophy and, ultimately, the return of Catholicism's dominance of Western culture. If the student had learned rightly, he (or she) would be prepared to accept a rejuvenated

Catholic intellectualism as the most credible alternative to the folly of modern thought.

But that was thirty years ago and much, much has changed. The old Ockham to Auschwitz narrative is rarely seen in Catholic higher education these days—although there still remain a few places flying high that flag. Accordingly, it is worth asking why the Catholic interpretation of the course of Western history has lost its previous hold on the hearts and minds of the faculty teaching in our colleges and universities these days. A satisfactory explanation would be multi-dimensional and, of course, beyond the ambition of this review. It is enough for our purposes to acknowledge that the standard Catholic narrative was too often burdened by overwrought claims implying the all-sufficiency of the medieval synthesis and a consequent rejection of all aspects of modern culture. These days the vast majority of Catholic intellectuals insist upon a more subtle, albeit hardly uncritical, approach to modern philosophy, art, politics, and, of course, science. For these and other reasons, any hope for a simple restoration of the traditional narrative is misplaced. Yet the recognition that the old model had its flaws, some even fatal, must be distinguished from the vital importance of the project itself. At the risk of sounding too didactic, I would say that a convincing Catholic narration of the rise and fall of Christian cultural and intellectual dominance in the West is a necessary condition for the Catholic faith to be a credible animator of academic teaching and learning.

The obligatory task of re-envisioning a Catholic interpretation of Western history is, I believe, greatly assisted by the appearance of David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, despite the fact that the author is an Eastern Orthodox Christian and does not pretend to offer anything approaching a complete overview of Western culture. His project is, rather, at once more humble and more grandiose. Hart argues that the Christian vision of God as self-sacrificing love represents an idea at once so radical in its ethical demands and so pervasive in its implications of how we conceive of ourselves and our world that it must be considered the greatest conceptual revolution in the history of Western, and even, human, consciousness. Hart puts it this way:

My argument is . . . that among all the many great transitions that have marked the evolution of Western civilization, whether convulsive or gradual, political or philosophical, social or scientific, material or spiritual, there has been only one—the triumph of Christianity—that can be called in the fullest sense a ‘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. . . . [I]t was an event immeasurably more impressive in its cultural creativity and more ennobling in its moral power than any other movement of spirit, will, imagination, aspiration, or accomplishment in the history of the West. And I am convinced that, given how radically at variance Christianity was with the culture it slowly and relentlessly displaced, its eventual victory was an event of such improbability as to strain the very limits of our understanding of historical causality. (xi)

So profound is that revolution that Hart does not shy away from saying that the emergence of Christianity in the cultural context of late antiquity marked nothing less than the “invention of the human” (213). Simply put: we are who we are because Christianity entered, and entered dramatically, into our history.

Not surprisingly, if Hart is to argue for the novelty presented by Christianity, he must focus our attention on crucial moments when Christianity first emerged out of its birthplace in Palestine and encountered the main cities of the Roman empire of the third and fourth centuries. It is here, if anywhere, that we will be able to assess just how radical the ideas of the early Church were and to consider their historical impact on Western culture. This impact is, without doubt, inseparable from Constantine’s momentous decision to favor this strange and foreign faith, and Hart has some very interesting and useful things to say about the harsh ambiguities of Christendom, but his main interest lies in comparing the beliefs of the early Christians and the pagan Romans concerning the nature of God, morality, and the character of the cosmos. In venturing a comparison, Hart treads the same ground as all those who wish to tell the story of first contact between Christianity and classical culture. It is of interest, therefore, to consider how his approach differs from other accounts. His claim that Christianity was revolutionary certainly puts him at odds with the traditional Catholic narrative summarized above, which sees the relationship between Christianity and the classical world as essentially positive. This narrative, of course, recognized certain problem areas in Roman morality, especially in its later, more decadent, phase, but made the choice to view classical culture primarily through its philosophers and the heroic images found in its epic poetry. Accordingly, the high ideals of the Romans, and the Greeks before them, are presented as a *preparatio evangelium*, and the eventual advent of the Christian Gospel a privileged working out of God’s providence in time and place. Christianity was new, of course, but this novelty consisted primarily in the theological information it transmitted, that is, the proclamation of the triune divinity of God, and the sending of the Son to redeem the world. One could formulate this

historical nexus within the traditional Catholic narrative, with only a touch of exaggeration, as Christian grace being placed on top of classically formed nature.

Although Hart stands at considerable distance from this way of thinking, he reserves his firepower for how the emergence of Christianity within the classical world is treated in what he calls modernity's "grand narrative." In this accounting, the ideals of the Enlightenment—tolerance, critical rationality, and freedom—were anticipated in Greco-Roman culture but suffocated before given a chance to blossom fully. Playing the villain, the Christian religion, and more particularly, the Roman Catholic Church, deprived the world of an early flowering of peace and light through a combination of religious fanaticism and enforced ignorance. Only after centuries of intellectual darkness and barbarity, culminating in the bloody and obviously irrational "wars of religion" was Europe finally able to turn away from superstition and bigotry toward true science and authentic liberty. It is to dismantle this anti-Christian story of Western history, piece by piece, that Hart wrote this book. His strategy is to expose his readers to a comparison between the "values" of the classical world and those of the early Christians on such issues as the care for the sick, the disabled, the unwanted, religious tolerance, war, slavery, and science. Once the truth is understood, further adherence to the modern myth becomes impossible (and so also does the standard Catholic account, it must be said). Far from enlightened pagans innocent of the confusions of the Christian faith, Hart's Romans were morally callous when not outright bloodthirsty, reliably intolerant of anything that threatened their own social cohesion, and woefully ignorant of how to gain wisdom concerning the workings of nature. In other words, the classical world, when viewed honestly, is not only far from a pre-Christian arcadia, it is a world that we moderns, formed as we are by the historical aftermath of the "Christian revolution," would condemn with indignation and revulsion. This reaction and the acknowledgment of its source is, for Hart, the beginning of wisdom:

If we find ourselves occasionally shocked by how casually ancient men and women destroyed or ignored lives we would think ineffably precious, we would do well to reflect that theirs was—in purely pragmatic terms—a more 'natural' disposition toward reality. It required an extraordinary moment of awakening in a few privileged souls, and then centuries of the relentless and total immersion of culture in the Christian story, to make even the best of us conscious of (or at least able to believe in) the moral claim of all other persons upon us, the splendor and irreducible dignity of the divine humanity within them, that depth

within each of them that potentially touches upon the eternal. In the light of Christianity's absolute law of charity, we came to see what formerly we could not: the autistic or Down syndrome or otherwise disabled child, for instance, for whom the world can remain a perpetual perplexity, which can too often cause pain but perhaps only vaguely and fleetingly charm or delight; the derelict or wretched or broken man or woman who has wasted his or her life away; the homeless, the utterly impoverished, the diseased, the mentally ill, the physically disabled; exiles, refugees, fugitives; even criminals and reprobates. To reject, turn away from, or kill any or all of them would be, in a very real sense, the most purely practical of impulses. To be able, however, to see in them not only something of worth but indeed something potentially godlike, to be cherished and adored, is the rarest and most ennoblingly unrealistic capacity ever bred within human souls. (213–14)

Aside from admiring the startling beauty of the prose—beauty enough to render the temptation of white plagiarism invincible—we must attend to what it might mean to think of Christianity as a revolution within classical culture for the project of producing a credible narration of the place of faith in the unfolding of Western history. In particular, we must attend to Hart's choice to describe the radical love of the unwanted and the seemingly useless as the distinguishing mark of the Christian revolution.

Hart frames his overall argument by critically engaging the spate of atheists now garnering popular attention, notably Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. Truth to be told, however, Hart finds these poor souls supremely uninteresting and employs the opening chapter to cast them aside in order to move on to what he really wants his readers to consider. This dismissal is accomplished not so much by way of a detailed refutation of their arguments but by brutally exposing the deep ignorance and intellectual sloppiness behind their attempts to trash Christianity. In essence, Hart charges that these “fashionable enemies” of the Christian revolution demonstrate zero evidence either of having gained any understanding of what Christians actually believe and why, or of having made anything approaching a serious effort to do so. Yet, as bad as it is not to know, or try to know, what it is one is so hotly repudiating, worse still, according to Hart, is the lack of historical understanding that prevents these folks from realizing how much of what they hold dear about ethics, human dignity, and the value of science is dependent on the historical contributions of the Christian religion they so hate. A number of reviewers have objected to the rhetoric Hart employs to ensure that his readers will cease to take these *à la mode* anti-Christians seriously. They worry that Hart's undeniable skill at lampoon-

ery might backfire against his purposes, turning off too many of those otherwise open to being convinced by his central argument. Different strokes for different folks, I guess, but I find great value in Hart's chosen tack. Wading into public dispute with critics of the faith and beating them at their own game is one of the few palpable contributions Christian intellectuals can make to the life of the average Church-goer. When done well it serves to buoy the psyche of believers who feel themselves under siege and perhaps are even beginning to doubt the intellectual solidity of their faith. Few Christian writers, if any, offer more solace in this regard than David Hart, or are able to. Moreover, when considering the role of polemic in his many writings, including this book, one finds that Hart almost always (I wish always) reserves his acerbic best for those who employ self-hyped intellectual prowess to do the faith intentional harm. Or, to express it in another way, his fire is (almost always) return fire. While other approaches are possible, and even necessary, I am convinced that Hart's blistering rhetoric has the capacity to lift the sagging spirits of many a harried believer and fortify him or her to live publicly as a Christian.

In any case, the chapter dedicated to best-seller atheism is more or less separable from the more placid, historical argument that makes up the rest of the book. There is, however, a profound connection: the dependence of the atheists on their readers uncritically accepting modernity's "grand narrative" as, if I may say, gospel truth. Indeed, the fact that these men have gained a hearing among so many reveals a troubling level of popular ignorance concerning both the Christian and the classical past. In fact, very few, even among the relatively well educated, have any appreciation of the moral abyss that separated the sensibilities of the Romans (and the Greeks before them) and those of the early Christians. For that reason, they are susceptible to characterizations of the ancient pagans as scientifically minded and religiously tolerant in contrast to the credulity and fanaticism of the Christians. Indeed, it is not at all uncommon to hear Christians themselves speaking as if the ancient Romans shared many of the moral convictions found in the New Testament, at least by way of aspiration. Worse still, however, is the shoddy spectacle of Christians conceding the morally blighted nature of their forbearers in order to demonstrate their own alignment with modern sensibilities. Often this kind of ignorant treason is part of a rhetorical strategy to gain a hearing from those who reject the very possibility of a Christianity that can be tolerant, reasonable, and so on. It never works. In any case, Hart is doubtlessly correct that a history lesson is in order for believer, non-believer, and anti-believer alike. The intellectual beauty of this book provides more than enough evidence that he is just the teacher we need.

If establishing the truth about the Christian and pagan past lies at the center of Hart's efforts in this book, it must be said again that his concerns are far from antiquarian. Rather, Hart finds himself in a rare point of concord with the new atheists that what one thinks about the past is determinative for how one envisions the future. In particular, if one can be convinced that Christianity's historical impact upon the West consisted mostly of introducing bigotry and ignorant bullying where there had been tolerance and healthy curiosity, so much easier will it be to yearn for a future freed of Christian sway. Accordingly, atheists often bolster their excited expectations of a coming godless day—a day when the small-mindedness of the true believer will yield to the latitudinarianism of the non-believer, faithful credulity to critical rationality, and cringing servility to an absent deity to the spacious freedom of the materialist—with the assertion that this temporal wheel has turned before, but in the opposite direction. In other words, unbelief becomes all the more attractive if the movement toward secular enlightenment represents a return to the ideals and cultural practices of our classical ancestors, ancestors every school girl and boy has been taught (I think this is still vaguely the case) to admire. Much is altered, therefore, if the truth can be shown to have been quite different. If it was the Christians, not the Romans, who stood for the moral code that changed world history for the better, arguments that a future shorn of Christian influence become instantly less attractive. Of course, Hart has in mind bigger game than this, that is, to argue that this code derived from the Christian proclamation of a God who sends his own Son to redeem sinful human beings for no other reason than love for his creation. If God has revealed himself to be love, every human being is bound to every other by a law of absolute charity, the stranger as well as the neighbor, the strong as well as the weak, the rich as well as the poor, and the enemy as well as the friend. Accordingly, the revolutionary idea to love all without exception is itself theological and its cultural maintenance incompatible with atheism. To begin this case, Hart must bust a few modern myths about the past.

It is fully worth the effort, therefore, to follow Hart as he eruditely descends into the details of historical episodes such as the end of the great library in Alexandria (36–40), the destruction of the Serapeum (41–44), the murder of the female philosopher Hypatia (45–48), the pagan recovery project of Julian the Apostate (185–93), the scientific work of John Philoponus (69–70), the astronomical speculations of Ptolemy (58–59, 67–68), and the conflict between Galileo and Pope Urban VIII (62–66). In each case, he offers up a common depiction of one of these events that casts Christianity as a purveyor of intolerance and ignorance, and he

proceeds to correct the record, either by challenging the historical reasoning or by offering evidence that leads to a different conclusion. On this level, the book presents a luxurious cornucopia for the historically inquisitive, and the reader cannot fail to be impressed by the level of specificity this systematic theologian shows himself capable of as he ranges through distant centuries and cultures. It is beyond my ken to say with authority that he is absolutely right about everything he claims about Roman society (despite the fact that I write these lines with the Coliseum, that great symbol of pagan savagery turned tourist attraction, out my window) or the many other disputed areas he enters; but, nothing he says seems to me wrong. One could imagine some classicists rising in defense of the Romans on this point or that, and I certainly hope that the book gets a fair hearing from that community. Yet, whether or not this happens, any fair-minded reader must grant Hart has convincingly smashed a number of entrenched slanders against the early Christians. If the truth is a bit more complicated with respect to this or that detail, Hart's main thesis still stands firm as a rock: it is simply untrue to represent either the early Christians as ignorant thugs or the Romans as enlightened lovers of humanity in all its diversity and frailty. The correct generalization is precisely the reverse.

In any case, Hart's argument rests, in the end, not so much on the relative immorality of the pagan Romans as on the conceptual treasures introduced into history by Christianity, and their cultural impact. As a Christian thinker of the first rank, Hart is more than competent to move beyond the historical record and draw the reader into intelligent consideration of how Christian teachings concerning God as love, the Incarnation, and salvation from sin through divinization transform the ways we think of the demands of charity, human identity, and the nature of the material world. Note how Hart weaves history and the Christian view of fallen human nature to make the following point:

Christians ought not to surrender the past but should instead deepen their own collective memory of what the gospel has been in human history. Perhaps more crucially, they ought not to surrender the future to those who know so little of human nature as to imagine that a society 'liberated' from Christ would love justice, or truth, or beauty, or compassion, or even life. 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. Christians, indeed, have a special obligation not to forget how great and how inextinguishable the human proclivity for violence

is, or how many victims it has claimed, for they worship a God who does not merely take the part of those victims, but who was himself one of them, murdered by the combined authority and moral prudence of the political, religious and legal powers of human society. Which is, incidentally, the most subversive claim ever made in the history of the human race. (17–18)

And, with the Christian view of the cosmos:

This world, it was now believed, was neither mere base illusion and ‘dissimilitude,’ nor a quasi-divine dynamo of occult energies, nor a god, nor a prison. As a gratuitous work of transcendent love it was to be received with gratitude, delighted in as an act of divine pleasure, mourned as a victim of human sin, admired as a radiant manifestation of divine glory, recognized as a fellow creature; it might justly be cherished, cultivated, investigated, enjoyed, but not feared as evil or deficient, and certainly not worshipped. In this and other ways the Christian revolution gave Western culture the world simply as world, demystified and so (only seemingly paradoxically) full of innumerable wonders to be explored. What is perhaps far more important is that it also gave that culture a coherent concept of the human as such, endowed with infinite dignity in all its individual ‘moments,’ full of powers and mysteries to be fathomed and esteemed. It provided an unimaginably exalted picture of the human person—made in the divine image and destined to partake of the divine nature—without thereby diminishing or denigrating the concrete reality of human nature, spiritual, intellectual, or carnal. It even provided the idea (which no society has ever more than partially embodied) of a political order wholly subordinate to divine charity, to verities higher than any state, and to a justice transcending every government or earthly power. 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. (213)

The approach we find here gets things, in my opinion, exactly right for future attempts to reconstruct the place of Christian faith in the history of Western culture. Correcting mistaken characterizations about what happened long ago is not in the end a matter of historiography, but involves the illuminative power of Christian theological beliefs about God, humanity, and the world, and what their cultural eclipse will mean for a truly human future.

By way of concluding this reflection on Hart’s book, I shall focus on two themes that are particularly pertinent to my own concerns. The first

regards the question of what constitutes modernity and the second, the value of viewing Christian distinctiveness in light of the historically demonstrable universals of human nature. What I say here is not by way of criticism—I enjoyed, and was convinced by, the book too much for that—but rather to further tease out what I found particularly valuable in Hart’s work for constructing an adequate account of the place of Christianity in the history of the West.

To say that David Hart has a low view of modernity in this book would be an understatement so severe as to border on the false. Modernity presents for him the naked triumph of the will over and against all natural and divine constraints. If the post-modern heart “wants what it wants,” the modern will wants to will without any consideration apart from its desires. It aspires to a freedom so untethered to the truth of reality that it requires a universe utterly devoid of moral character.

To be entirely modern (which very few of us are) is to believe in nothing. This is not to say it is to have no beliefs: the truly modern person may believe in almost nothing, or even perhaps in everything, so long as all these beliefs rest securely upon a more fundamental and radical faith in *the* nothing—or, better, in nothingness as such. Modernity’s highest ideal—its special understanding of personal autonomy—requires us to place our trust in an original absence underlying all of reality, a fertile void in which all things are possible, from which arises no impediment to our wills, and before which we may consequently choose to make of ourselves what we choose. We trust, that is to say, that there is no substantial criterion by which to judge our choices that stands higher than the unquestioned good of free choice itself, and that therefore all judgment, divine no less than human, is in some sense an infringement upon our freedom. This is our primal ideology. In the most unadorned terms possible, the ethos of modernity is—to be perfectly precise—nihilism. (21)

In something of an ironic twist, Hart argues that the historical possibility of a purely nihilistic view of freedom required the triumph of Christianity over ancient paganism. While the ethical system of the Romans would be unacceptable to anyone affected by Christianity, that system was seen by the Romans to be secured by divine and natural realities, realities that proscribed certain actions and prescribed others. These gods of old and the nature over which they ruled have, however, been abolished by the Christian upheaval and abolished so completely that no return is possible. Indeed, as Hart makes clear in his poignant and remarkably sympathetic discussion of Julian the Apostate’s attempt to turn back the Christian tide, Roman religion had by the fourth century A.D. already exhausted what-

ever legitimating power it had once possessed, and it had given way to an enervating formalism. When Christ vanquished the aged and half-dead deities of the ancient West, therefore, nothing but ruins beyond shoring up remained. Accordingly, the waning of Christian faith in the modern West leaves a metaphysical void in which the post-Christian will expresses itself without guidance or restraint.

There is much value in Hart's charge that modernity is inherently and frighteningly nihilistic—a claim he deepens in the final chapter of the book regarding the possibility of a “post-human” future (229–41). His description provides a bountiful service for those charged with teaching students how best to understand the slow but unrelenting emergence of secularity following upon the Reformation and its seeming culmination in their own directionless postmodernity. Moreover, his demolition of the modern myth of the “wars of religion,” for instance, should be essential reading for anyone who finds him or herself in a course on the development of Western civilization. Instead of seeing these bloody wars as a last gasp of medieval fanaticism which had the effect of turning Europeans to the sweetness of secular rationality, Hart convincingly argues that they were instead a nightmarish first look at the secular nation-state unhinged from medieval Christian constraints (88–108). Yet, I wonder if Hart's portrait of the modern age in this work, for all its brilliance, paints things with too dark a brush. Hart seems to concede as much when he admits early on that his complaint against modernity has to do with its rejection of Christianity and does not include “modern medicine or air travel or space exploration or any of the genuinely useful or estimable aspects of life today” (xi). He proceeds in the next paragraph to exclude as well from his wrath “modern” philosophical methods, social ideologies, and modern political theory. If I may say so, that's excluding quite a bit of what most understand as constituting modernity! I understand, of course, that Hart is frying different fish here and is under no particular burden to provide a more complete rendering of the modern world for purposes not his own. Rendered it must be, however, for any credible relating of the Christian faith and the course of Western history. In particular, it will need to find positive points of contact between God's revelation in Christ and typically modern insights into the moral dangers of racism, sexism, imperialism, and so on. Only the most obtuse defender of the Christian centuries doubts that real moral advancement has been made over the past few centuries in these areas and often without explicit reference to Christian values. Thus, it is incumbent upon anyone who wants to follow Hart's approach to acknowledge more explicitly these advances and show that they have their historical origin in a working out of the absolute

inclusiveness of Christian charity. Let me make clear, Christian commentators on Western culture are under no obligation to concede anything to secularity here or “modernity” as an ideological construct. The issue, rather, is that a credible Christian rendering of modernity will need to go beyond the purely negative and link its positive elements to the Christian revolution.

The same goes for the necessity to tease out Hart’s suggestions for how Christianity changed the way we view the natural world. While very careful not to fall into the trap of seeking legitimation for Christianity as a *preparatio scientiae*, Hart nonetheless makes a convincing case that the emergence of ‘modern’ science is historically dependent on the particular understanding of nature as creation found in Christianity (202–3). Yet, as intriguing as the points he makes are, I found myself less than completely satisfied. While there is no doubt that any division between an “age of faith” and an “age of reason” must be rejected as Enlightenment piffle, Hart seems to underplay the novelty involved in the dawn of experimental science in the seventeenth century. This is not to deny the importance of medieval forerunners to Galileo and Newton, but merely to acknowledge that there arose a new understanding of how reason must operate if it is reliably to uncover the regularities of the natural world. This shift may not constitute the “Rational Revolution” often claimed by champions of the Enlightenment, but something most definitively did change, and for the better. Indeed, I can think of nothing that more gives credibility to modernity’s “grand narrative” than the notion that the reasoning that has proven so successful in natural science rules out theology as a conveyor of truth and renders religious faith nothing more than a personal fancy. Again, I did not expect Hart to develop his own thoughts (which can be found elsewhere) on the relationship of theology, faith, and modern notions of reason, especially since it would have needlessly obscured the argument he wanted to make. Nonetheless, a complete defense of the ongoing importance of the Christian revolution will need to relate positively that revolution to the modern conceptions of scientific reasoning. My own view, not to be explicated here, is that the pattern of biblical revelation and faith found in the history of ancient Israel and early Christianity contains often-overlooked resources for establishing Christian theology’s organic connection to empirical and critical rationality.

With respect to religion and human nature, my second theme, much of what Hart says on this topic comes by way of responding to the common mantra of the new atheists that there is a causative relationship between religious conviction and violence. One can barely get through

a page of their tracts, or two minutes of a televised screed, without encountering heartfelt assertions that “religion is the greatest cause of violence in history,” “religious passions are the most savage,” or, simply, “religion kills.” Hart’s first objection to such statements is that “religion” does not exist in a way that allows it to do or cause anything. There are, of course, such things as religions, and they share what Wittgenstein would call “family resemblances”; however, they differ from one another to such an extent that what holds true at any level of detail for one most likely does not hold true for any of the others. Thus, to use Hart’s example, it is possible, indeed, quite more than probable, for the same person to believe the Nicene Creed with great “religious” certitude while just as surely rejecting the Aztec “religious” practice of sacrificing human beings, and to do this without suffering a whit of cognitive dissidence. In other words, describing a conviction as “religious” tells us almost nothing more about it and certainly not enough to bear the epistemic heft of the damning universal claims so cherished by the new atheists. This does not mean, however, that Christian interpretations of human culture can dispense with the consideration of religion as a universal human reality. Indeed, the fact that where one finds human culture one will find culturally specific expressions of a desire to know the ultimate reality, to live in accordance with its truth, and to dwell in its presence is for Christian theology evidence of a “natural desire for God.” (On this score, Hart has great fun skewering the pseudo-scientific declarations of Daniel Dennett that he has, at long last, “discovered” that religion is “natural” to humanity and that this is very bad news for believers [6–16].) Yet while being religious, in some way or another, is natural to human beings, so are many other things—for example, to live in society, to conduct war, to procreate, and so on. In each of these cases, what is important for the historian of culture is not so much the universality of the fact of certain cultural practices but their particular expressions in time and place. Thus, if we want to ascribe any historical causality to religious convictions, we will have to discipline ourselves to deal with particular religions, their distinctive teachings and practices. Apart from a serious consideration of what a religion teaches on, for instance, the nature of God or how to consider one’s neighbor, talk of its historical significance has little if any value. Thus, to return to the issue of killing, if one wants to claim that “Islam kills” or “Buddhism kills,” it will have to be demonstrated not that Muslims or Buddhists kill, or have killed, but that such actions are products of being faithful to their own religion’s demands. This, according to Hart, may very well prove difficult since, in addition to being religious, human beings have historically demonstrated a universal propensity to

kill when it seems the advantageous thing to do—which, alas, they do on a fairly regular basis.

Some kill because their faith explicitly commands them to do so, some kill though their faiths explicitly forbid them to do so, and some kill because they have no faith and hence believe all things are permitted to them. Polytheists, monotheists, and atheists kill—indeed, this last class is especially prolifically homicidal, if the evidence of the twentieth century is to be consulted. Men kill for their gods, or for their God, or because there is no God and the destiny of humanity must be shaped by gigantic exertions of human will. They kill in pursuit of universal truths and out of fidelity to tribal allegiances: for faith, blood and soil, empire, national greatness, the ‘socialist utopia,’ capitalism, and ‘democratization.’ Men will always seek gods in whose name they may perform great deeds or commit unspeakable atrocities, even when those gods are not gods but ‘tribal honor’ or ‘genetic imperatives’ or ‘social ideals’ or ‘human destiny’ or ‘liberal democracy.’ Then again, men also kill on account of money, land, love, pride, hatred, envy, or ambition. They kill out of conviction or out of lack of conviction. . . . 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. (13)

Thus, it appears that when it comes to the causes of human violence, religion proves a very imprecise explanation, at least when compared to the more obvious explanation that killing others is often a rather efficient way to advance one’s self-interest or the interest of one’s community. Another way to put it is that since both the human propensity to violence and the human need to be religious are equally universal, things only get interesting if we can discover historical moments when these tendencies collide. Instead of looking for what kinds of ideas have become rationales for violence—a target-rich environment if there ever was—one should employ intellectual energy searching for that greater rarity: ideas that at once work against the violent tendencies of human beings and have proven attractive on a wide scale.

Hart’s central assertion that Christianity must be seen as a revolution within Western history means, if I understand him rightly, that its particular notion of God as love and its consequent high ethical demands were not evolutionary, that is, explainable by organic shifts within the ethical systems of Western late antiquity. On the contrary, any honest, non-anachronistic, investigation of what the Romans thought and did regard-

ing war, the poor, the lame, slavery, public entertainment, and the care of unwanted offspring leads to the conclusion that they never went beyond the practical, nor even thought much about the possibility of doing so. It was, on the other hand, of the very nature of the Christian view on these subjects to be intensively impractical, to love and care for others despite the fact that doing so would bring no discernible benefit to oneself or one's community. The Romans were nothing if not practical. In this sense, Christianity stood as a thorough indictment of Rome's pragmatic morality, not of its development. In other words, the Christian law of charity of all for all had to be introduced, even forced, into Roman history and, therefore, Western history; it would not have appeared otherwise. To appreciate this, however, we must begin to see cultural history in light of the *contingency of specific religious ideas and practices* and how they relate to the cross-cultural proclivities of human nature. "Compassion, pity, and charity, as we understand and cherish them, are not objects found in nature, like trees or butterflies or academic philosophers, but are historically contingent conventions of belief and practice, formed by cultural convictions that need never have arisen at all" (16). These convictions are part of our history because they entered it as part of a definitive complex of religious ideas about who God is, what it is to be human, and the nature and fate of our cosmos. Of course, mere introduction is not enough; they must prove attractive for enough people to make a cultural and historical impact. Here again, Hart has much to teach us as he explores in the later chapters of the book the conceptual and practical allure that Christian teachings had for the Romans and beyond. To give the reader a sense of what can be done on this score, I offer a last sampling of Hartian insight in prose:

To look on the child whom our ancient ancestors would have seen as somehow unwholesome or as a worthless burden, and would have abandoned to fate, and to see in him or her instead a person worthy of all affection—resplendent with divine glory, ominous with an absolute demand upon our consciences, evoking our love and our reverence—is to be set free from mere elemental existence, and from those natural limitations that pre-Christian persons took to be the very definition of reality. And only someone profoundly ignorant of history and of native human inclinations could doubt that it is only as a consequence of the revolutionary force of Christianity within our history, within the very heart of our shared nature, that any of us can experience this freedom. We deceive ourselves also, however, if we doubt how very fragile this vision of things truly is: how elusive this truth that only charity can know, how easily forgotten this mystery that only charity can penetrate. (214)

In essence, Hart insists that we can understand the place of Christianity in the history of Western culture, the “Christian revolution,” only when we pay attention to the clash of human universals and religious particulars. If we are to tell an intellectually interesting and convincing story of the rise and seeming fall of Christian cultural dominance in the West, it will only be by way of attending to the revolutionary impact of the particulars of Christian teaching on recalcitrantly practical human nature. Only when we consider those moments of conflict, grace against nature, will we be able to appreciate and communicate the true impact of the faith on the history of the West and the ongoing necessity of the faith for there to be a human future. David Hart has already done much of the work, and we Catholics should be grateful and follow his lead. **N·V**