

Answering the Atheists: Assessing David Bentley Hart's Latest Achievement

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IN AN EARLIER age, a profession of atheism incurred public opprobrium and social penalties. No longer. Today's atheists—men like Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, et al—often hold prestigious academic posts, reap handsome profits from their writings, and enjoy near-celebrity status. Until now their criticisms of religion in general and Christianity in particular have not been effectively answered. David Bentley Hart has ably taken up the task of responding to the “New Atheists” in his latest book, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*.¹ From the first, it hardly seems a fair fight. Hart is an exceptionally intelligent and erudite theologian with vast historical knowledge and philosophical acuity. Peerless in his command of language, his prose is crisp, his style engaging; one's attention never slackens while reading this book, which combines Chestertonian conviction with Wildean wit. Hart is deadly serious and devilishly funny. (One example should suffice: “Nothing so dilutes one's sympathy for the Gnostics as an encounter with their actual writings” [139].) His adversaries, by contrast, appear boorish, superficial, and ignorant, and Hart levels a devastating critique of their positions.

The New Atheists recite a familiar litany of criticisms. Christianity, they contend, is an unreasonable, repressive, and power-driven institution guilty of persecution, violence, obscurantism, hatred of the body, the oppression of women, and slavery. The demise of Christendom, for these authors, thus marked an historical advance for the forces of enlightenment

¹ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

and freedom. Progress in science, technology, and politics, so their Whig-gish narrative goes, required the defeat of the authoritarian church. But the philosophical and practical victory delivered by modernity and the rise of the secular nation-state remains vulnerable if Christian belief and practice endure; hence the vigor of the New Atheist polemics.

Hart is fully equal to the challenge. The main burden of his argument, given the nature of the criticisms listed above, is to correct the historical record so egregiously distorted by popular and scholarly writers alike. Hart accomplishes this handily, marshalling an extraordinary range of historical evidence to demonstrate that Christianity introduced a revolutionary change in ideas that had widespread, positive social effects. With this revolution one encounters nothing less than “an entirely new universe of human possibilities, moral, social, intellectual, cultural, and religious” (124). Among other things, Christianity, unlike its pagan predecessors, affirmed the goodness of the body; elevated the status of women for whom it had special appeal; affirmed the dignity and spiritual equality of slaves; and stimulated scientific investigation.

Hart’s case for the positive moral and social effects of “the Christian revolution” is compelling, and he is correct in saying that the case needs to be made in the current climate. In an earlier age, he observes, the detractors of Christianity had granted—and, like Nietzsche, lamented—the new creed’s dramatic social impact; today’s critics either deny the significance of the changes effected by Christianity or insist that its effects were negative. After extensive appeal to numerous sources, Hart can confidently claim that, yes, Christianity represented something utterly novel on the historical scene both theologically and morally and that the doctrinal innovations of the new faith—the incarnation of God, the dignity of the human person, the radical requirements of charity—yielded a likewise unprecedented and radical ethics, marked by: “giving to all and sundry, freely, heedless of their characters, out of love for their humanity; visiting those in prison, provisioning the poor from temple treasuries, ceaselessly feeding the hungry, providing shelter to all who might have need of it; loving God and neighbor as the highest good, priestly poverty, [and] universal civic philanthropy” (191).

So far so good. This is a crucial point to make. There is, however, a subtle danger in this approach, and it is one to which all Christians should be sensitive. The German philosopher Robert Spaemann astutely identified it in the case of de Bonald and other philosophers of the Restoration. It is this: In responding to a modern error, one can unwittingly adopt the terms of one’s adversaries and end up forwarding a position that, in fact, departs from the Christian tradition. In de Bonald’s case, he

succumbed to what Spaemann calls “the Traditionalist error,” the most pertinent dimension of which for our purposes is the sociological reduction of religion. A devout Catholic, de Bonald understood himself to be defending Christian tradition against the assaults of his contemporaries. Yet, Spaemann contends that the pious Frenchman can be seen as the founder of that most modern of disciplines, sociology. Why? Because in de Bonald the theory of society is paramount, supplanting the place of metaphysics and rendering social utility the ultimate criterion of value. In consequence, as Spaemann observes, “Religion is not justified on the basis of its truth, but rather on the basis of its necessity for society.”² De Bonald’s reflection on the Christian dogmas concerning the existence of God, the immortal soul, and the final judgment is revealing. “These dogmas are true,” he maintains, “*because* they are useful for the preservation of society.”³ But, as Spaemann perceptively notes, the highest Christian convictions must have a justification different from their social necessity. “When theology turns into a mere tautology of sociology, there is no reason to keep it. But this is what happens in de Bonald. What gets lost in him is the insight into the meaning of truth that transcends all things sociological, insight into its sociological *uselessness* and therefore into its liberating character.”⁴

Hart insists that he wishes “to make no claims regarding the plausibility or truth of Christian belief, or of religious conviction in general” (156). He is (ostensibly) not an apologist. (This claim is belied time and again by Hart’s stirring rhetoric. The beauty of his language in describing Christian beliefs itself exerts a persuasive power; he is, perhaps unwittingly, an apologist of a very high order.) He is approaching the question of Christianity (again, ostensibly) in sociological terms. “Probably the soundest ways [sic] to ascertain what the ‘Christian difference’ was—what set the new faith apart from other creeds, what drew converts to it, what excited the wrath of its detractors—is to attempt to assess what social or moral difference Christianity made, either for individuals or for culture as a whole” (156). Now, given that contemporary critics of Christianity often make their case on the same grounds, this is an understandable move, and Hart executes it exceedingly well. He is especially effective in

² Robert Spaemann, “Der Irrtum des Traditionalisten. Zur Soziologisierung der Gottesidee im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Wort und Wahrheit* 8 (1953): 496. Translated by David C. Schindler in preparation for a forthcoming anthology of Spaemann essays to be published by ISI Books and edited by David C. Schindler and Jeanne Heffernan Schindler.

³ De Bonald, quoted without citation in *ibid.*, 497.

⁴ *Ibid.*

showing the morally transformative effects of Christian teaching that yet exert an influence on our post-Christian consciences and to which the New Atheists themselves are unconsciously indebted. As Hart observes, these forgetful souls, so distracted by their indignation, “rarely pause to consider where so many of the moral principles they tirelessly and confidently invoke as their own really come from” (221). Likewise, Hart paints a sobering, indeed chilling, picture of the inhumane possibilities of a post-Christian future, a future that has ample room for the return of the category *Lebensunwertes Leben*. And yet, as important as these considerations are, they are secondary and depend upon ontologically prior matters. Moreover, if Spaemann is right, to defend Christianity against its current detractors principally on these terms risks succumbing to the modern error of sociological reduction.

This is not to say that Hart focuses exclusively on the social dimension. His treatment of Christian orthodoxy against the Gnostics, for example, or his explanation of the crucial doctrinal significance of the Incarnation delves deeply into first-order theological issues. But one would have to say that the main thrust of Hart’s argument is neither metaphysical, nor theological, but ethical. And to the extent that this is true, his enterprise stands in need of another kind of argument. So, for instance, as important as it is to clear up the historical record regarding the church’s supposed anti-scientific stance—and Hart does this brilliantly—it is as crucial to challenge the way modern science understands itself. Dennett and Dawkins arguably bring to expression something latent in its origins (for example, its positivistic method and utilitarian ethos) and thus an adequate rejoinder to their proposals would require a first-order engagement with the founding principles of modern science. Hart does not provide this kind of engagement but appears anxious precisely to show Christianity’s contribution to the progress of science understood in conventional terms. In doing so he risks losing the philosophy of nature that essentially distinguishes the Christian from the materialist world view. This example, which applies to other observations Hart makes (for instance, concerning equality), points up the necessity of engaging in “first philosophy” even when responding to criticisms of a historical and sociological kind. Social theory, to invoke Spaemann again, cannot replace metaphysics. If Hart were to bring his prodigious intelligence to bear on the primary philosophical issues underlying the New Atheist charges, we would be very much in his debt.

For all of its strengths, *Atheist Delusions* may fall prey to another error typical of a modern perspective, a curious fact given the author’s stringent criticism of modernity and his identity as an Orthodox theologian.

It is an ecclesiological error that posits a difference—even a bifurcation—between the church and Christianity. Hart deploys it in part to account for the fact that the radical social implications of the new faith took centuries, if not millennia, to emerge. Individual Christians in his reckoning have enjoyed special moral clarity, but the force of their insight has often been blunted by what he pejoratively calls the “institutional church” (194). So, for instance, an individual luminary, like Gregory of Nyssa, enjoyed a rare clear-sightedness about the evil of slavery and preached against it with an evangelical fire that, Hart laments, “subsided into a pale and feeble flicker in the centuries that followed, all but lost in the darkness of the immense historical tragedy of institutional Christianity” (181). This is a familiar modern trope: the heroic or creative individual stifled by an oppressive structure. In a similar vein, Hart observes that Theodosius I’s adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the empire was “a great boon for the institutional church, perhaps, but was obviously an almost irreparable catastrophe for Christianity” (194). This reflects another modern, and in this case specifically post-Reformation, contention: Christianity can be separated from the church. The problem is that both sentiments would have been foreign to the habit of mind of the Fathers, the very sources to which Hart appeals as exemplars of the Christian revolution. The Patristic period didn’t know a Christianity apart from the “institutional church” (a concept Hart does not define). It was the very same (presumably “institutional”) church legalized by Constantine that defined the Christological terms which provided the foundation for human dignity proclaimed by Gregory.

On the one hand, the church’s internal structure admits of variation and development and even correction (one thinks of curial reforms, for instance), and its leaders’ prudential judgments on temporal matters can be justly scrutinized (Hart’s criticism of the “imperial church” is not without merit). On the other hand, the church cannot easily be separated into “official” or “institutional” and somehow “real” or “genuine.” It is a unitary, visible, living reality, and though its members participate in the paradox of the *casta meretrix* unto the last, the church remains the *primary* locus of Christian experience in the world. To dichotomize Christianity and the church renders the faith an abstraction and paves the way for the incoherence of religious individualism. Hart’s position is vulnerable on just this score. “The Christian revolution with which this book is concerned has very little to do with the triumph of the institutional Catholic order” (197). Rather, for Hart, its substance is “the conversion of individuals” (197), the “numberless consciences” (202) transformed by Christian beliefs, which, over time profoundly changed the values of the

ambient culture. But it was precisely through the church, not a disembodied Christianity, that those conversions were effected—through catechesis, the provision of the sacraments, the proclamation of the Word—in short, the offering of a radically new vision of human life and possibility incarnated in a living community.

Hart well appreciates the radical character of this new vision, and his presentation of its transformative effects constitutes a powerful rejoinder to the New Atheists. The fact that these effects were rooted in an anthropology and metaphysics uniquely articulated and safeguarded by the church deserves equal mention. Perhaps a sequel to *Atheist Delusions* is in order. Were David Bentley Hart to write one in this vein, his audience would be richly served. N.V.