

THE CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION

FASHIONABLE ENEMIES

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Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies, by David Bentley Hart. Yale University Press, 2009.

When Friedrich Nietzsche authored his second Untimely Meditation, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874), there was a hypertrophied sense of history among his German contemporaries. He urged his reader to hate any study of history that offers “instruction without invigoration” and “knowledge not attended by action.” Under the Hegelian philosophy of history, for example, Christianity was treated as an idea rather than a way of life, “denaturalized” through abstraction and dissection, unrecognizable to an “impartial auditor.” Humanity needs, Nietzsche insisted, a history “for the sake of life and action, let alone for the purpose of extenuating the self-seeking life and the base and cowardly action. We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life.”

If the malady of Nietzsche’s day was an excess of history, ours is a deficiency of history, nowhere more conspicuous than in the oblivious writings of the so-called “New Atheists” — Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris, all dwarfs in the shadows of giants like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In their clumsy hands, Christianity is always treated as a poison rather than an elixir, a weapon rather than an olive branch, denaturalized through pride and prejudice, unrecognizable to scholars and adherents of the religion. While the malady has changed, the prescription has not.

Atheist Delusions is a history that serves life by restoring and revivifying the memories lost when the church and its “fashionable enemies” drank from Lethe. Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart argues for a brave thesis that will stiffen the backbone of Christians who suffer from sloth—the signature sin of postmodernity—and will spank the posterior of their enemies who suffer from pride—the signature sin of modernity:

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.

Here is a genuine historian who possesses, in the words of Nietzsche, “the power to remind the universally known into something never heard of before, and to express the universal so simply and profoundly that the simplicity is lost in the profundity and the profundity in the simplicity.” *Atheist Delusions* is a rarity, on the order of the Black Prince’s Ruby, because its author is not a historian by training but by “great artistic facility, creative vision, [and] loving absorption in the empirical data.”

Do not expect Hart to indulge the temper tantrums of the New Atheists, except for when he occasionally cuts with the polemical edge of Tertullian, such as:

There are many forms of atheism that I find far more admirable than many forms of Christianity or of religion in general. 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.

The main purpose of the book is to transport the reader—who is separated by historical forgetfulness, cultural alienation, and banal familiarity with the present—to the early centuries of the Christian era, so he can become sensible again to “the novelty and uncanniness of the gospel as it was first proclaimed.” With astonishing success, Hart achieves his objective of showing

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.

Transportation to this revolutionary past, however, is not possible without first unveiling the ideology of “the modern,” which hides as imperceptibly in our *Zeitgeist* as a mimic octopus blends into the colors and textures of the sea floor. What is the ideology of the modern? According to Hart, it is the “story of the triumph of critical reason over ‘irrational’ faith, of the progress of social morality toward greater justice and freedom, of the ‘tolerance’ of the secular state, and of the unquestioned ethical primacy of either individualism or collectivism.” Again, with astonishing success, Hart achieves his objective of showing that

what many of us are still in the habit of calling the “Age of Reason” was in many significant ways the beginning of the eclipse of reason’s authority as a cultural value; that the modern age is notable in large measure for the triumph of inflexible and unthinking dogmatism in every sphere of human endeavor (including the sciences) and for a flight from rationality to any number of soothing fundamentalisms, religious and secular; that the Enlightenment ideology of the modern as such does not even deserve any particular credit for the advance of modern science; that the modern secular state’s capacity for barbarism exceeds any of the evils for which Christendom might justly be indicted, not solely by virtue of the superior technology at its disposal, but by its very nature; that among the chief accomplishments of modern culture have been a massive retreat to superstition and the gestation of especially pitiless form of nihilism.

Space does not permit me to survey the evidence that Hart marshals for his objectives. Let me hazard a prediction: Christians and heathens will undergo a paradigm shift when they realize, based on the substantive evidence and perspicacious analysis, that they have been enchanted by a tale—like “Little Red Riding Hood”—that is “false in every identifiable detail,” a tale memorably rehearsed by Hart:

Once upon a time, it went, Western humanity was the cosseted and incurious ward of Mother Church; during this, the age of faith, culture stagnated, science languished, wars of religion were routinely waged, witches were burned by inquisitors, and Western humanity labored in brutish subjugation to dogma, superstition, and the unholy alliance of church and state. Withering blasts of fanaticism and fideism had long since scorched away the last remnants of classical learning; inquiry was stifled; the literary remains of classical antiquity had long ago been consigned to the fires of faith, and even the great achievements of "Greek science" were forgotten till Islamic civilization restored them to the West. All was darkness. Then, in the wake of the "wars of religion" that had torn Christendom apart, came the full flowering of the Enlightenment and with it the reign of reason and progress, the riches of scientific achievement and political liberty, and a new and revolutionary sense of human dignity. The secular nation-state arose, reduced religion to an establishment of the state or, in the course of time, to something altogether separate from the state, and thereby rescued Western humanity from the blood-steeped intolerance of religion. Now, at last, Western humanity has left its nonage and attained to its majority in science, politics, and ethics.

It is not my usual habit to quote at length, but Hart's sentences are worth hearing because they are chords that defy imitation, truths that vibrate on the ear long after they are sounded.

I should mention three concerns. My first concern is that Hart's exclusive commitment to *Christus Victor*, a motif of atonement that prevailed among the early church fathers, only partially explains why the gospel spread in late antiquity. *Christus Victor* holds that Christ, as a second Adam, saves us by defeating the powers of evil. I would argue, like Martin Luther, that a biblically comprehensive account of the atonement incorporates *Christus Victor* and penal substitution (Col. 2:13-15). The latter motif holds that Christ, as a sacrifice, saves guilty and condemned sinners by taking our sins on himself. The gospel transformed "the moral and spiritual consciousness of Western humanity" not just through the cosmic emphasis of *Christus Victor*, lest we reduce the gospel to social justice, as Hart sometimes does, but also through the personal emphasis of penal substitution. In short, the baptized Roman was not only freed from "the schemes of the devil," "the rulers," "the cosmic powers over this present darkness," and "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" — Amen! — but also from "the wrath of God," the judgment of the law, and the "wages of sin."

My second concern is that Hart's contrast between the modern concept of freedom and the Christian concept is not sharp enough. In his brilliant chapter, "The Age of Freedom," Hart claims that moderns departed from an antique understanding of freedom by maintaining 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." Hart rightly describes this "primal ideology" as nihilism. Libertarian freedom—conceived as pure spontaneity of the will—is a patent illusion, and should be seen as "a kind of slavery: to untutored principles, to empty caprice, to triviality, to dehumanizing values." Nevertheless, the autonomous will has become the reigning god of our age, fed by "heroic and insatiable consumers."

So far, so good. My concern arises when Hart endorses what he calls a "classical understanding" of freedom, whether pagan or Christian, as "emancipation from whatever constrains us from living the life of rational virtue, or from experiencing the full fruition of our nature." While he recognizes that those constraints include "our untutored passions, our willful surrender to momentary impulses, our own foolish or wicked choices," he seems to express a semi-Pelagian confidence in the fallen will, cooperating with divine grace, to "achieve that end toward which our inmost nature is oriented from the first moment of existence." In my view, the Reformed accent on total depravity corrects this error of synergism, as theologian Michael Horton writes:

We do not deny that we cooperate with God's grace and, by receiving the means of grace (Word and sacrament), grow into maturity in Christ, but we do deny that we can cooperate in our own regeneration (i.e., acceptance by God), our will being enslaved to sin until God graciously frees it to embrace Christ and all his benefits. We are not declared righteous because we have cooperated with God's grace; we are justified "freely by his grace" (Rom. 3:24) so that we can.

The free will teaching of the Greek fathers, which Hart adopts, does not adequately reckon with how sin deprives humans of soundness of will. Church historian Charles Partee succinctly articulates the Reformed view on freedom: "Two perils must be avoided. If divine sovereignty is overemphasized, the result is complete resignation. If

human freedom is overemphasized, the result is brazen confidence or abject fear. Calvin's astounding conclusion is that we should accept our freedom but not boast of it. "The only "live option," to use William James' terminology, is between libertarian freedom and Christian freedom that dares not speak its name; in the end, this is a "dead option" because the former is an illusion despite its appeal to our consumerist sensibilities.

My third and final concern is that Hart's treatment of the Christian revolution is limited to the first four or five centuries of the early church, as if to suggest that the subsequent centuries of medieval Christendom and its Protestant challenge lost the revolutionary fever. A schismatic whiff can be detected in this contestable assertion:

The church—the only universally recognized transnational authority that could possibly rival or even overrule the power of the monarch—had to be reduced to a national establishment, an office of the state, or a mere social institution. This was the principal reason, after all, for the success of the Reformation, which flourished *only* where it served the interests of the secular state in its rebellion against the customs and laws of Christendom, and in its campaign against the autonomy of the church within its territories.

By overplaying the political aspect, Hart rules out the possibility that the Reformation succeeded because the radical message of the gospel was renewed. Presumably, Hart shares the *idée fixe* that "Orthodoxy has no stake in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation polemics." Horton's reply to this dismissive attitude is worth repeating:

Orthodoxy may not have a stake in the Reformation/Counter-Reformation polemics per se, but it must have a stake in the exegetical questions and answers raised by that momentous debate. If Orthodoxy has no stake in interpreting such scriptural themes as union with Christ, justification, sanctification, and related aspects of Christian teaching, then it is hardly Christian.

The Protestant revolution, much like the Patristic revolution, was "nothing less than—to use the words of Nietzsche—a 'transvaluation of all values,' a complete revision of the moral and conceptual categories by which human beings were to understand themselves and one another and their places within the world."

Privileging the era of the early church above any other era risks chronological snobbery and ecclesial triumphalism. Using an Elvis

Presley intonation, Rodney Clapp, editorial director of Brazos Press, writes:

Classical Christian spirituality... is best respected and lived when it is not treated as an untouchable, frozen, and unchangeable deposit. It is better inhabited from the inside out, constantly pushed and probed, presented with unprecedented questions and objections and sometimes daringly taken in a direction not previously considered. We live by faithful improvisation. Only then will the Spirit "mooo-ve" us from the past, into the future.

Faithful improvisation is the key to a revolutionary future, just as it was to a revolutionary past. Faithfulness without improvisation veers toward dogmatism; improvisation without faithfulness veers toward heresy. Let there be no doubt: the Christian revolution was not hatched in the basement of political dissidents but in the empyrean heaven, where Jesus Christ executes the primal act of the revolution—to keep the "form of God" (faithfulness) while taking the "form of a slave" (improvisation). The Incarnation *is* the revolution—so we are charged to perpetuate this slave revolt, being the noble face of Christ to the powerful and powerless.

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