

BOOK REVIEW

of

David Bentley Hart,

Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies,
Yale University Press, 2009.

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

I don't suppose it was their intention, but the writings of the New Atheists have spawned a wealth of Christian responses that is truly impressive. It is as if a door has been opened for Christians to make a new and fresh presentation of the claims of Christianity to the modern world. No doubt the New Atheists would disagree, but in my opinion there is a stark contrast between the writings of the New Atheists and the best of the Christian responses, in the Christians' favor. This book by David Bentley Hart is a good example of one of the better Christian responses. One of the remarkable contrasts is clearly demonstrated here. Hart makes a very compelling presentation by one who is very well informed and who has clearly thought deeply about the subjects addressed in this volume. This book may never achieve the financial success of, say, *The God Delusion*, but those who genuinely wish an intelligent discussion of issues raised by the New Atheists will find this book to be a very good read.

David Bentley Hart is an Eastern Orthodox theologian and philosopher, and author of several books. In addition to this book under review, he has written *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, *The Story of Christianity: An Illustrated History of 2000 Years of the Christian Faith*, as well as others. Hart has taught at the University of Virginia, Duke Divinity School, and other universities.

The book under review contains four parts and seventeen chapters. Part 1 is titled *Faith, Reason, and Freedom: A View from the Present*, and contains the first two chapters with the following titles: The Gospel of Unbelief, and The Age of Freedom. Part 2 is titled *The Mythology of the Secular Age: Modernity's Rewriting of the Christian Past*, and contains chapters 3 through 9 with the following titles: Faith and Reason, The Night of Reason, The Destruction of the Past, The Death and Rebirth of Science, Intolerance and Persecution, Intolerance and War, and An Age of Darkness. Part 3 is titled *Revolution: The Christian Invention of the Human*, and contains chapters 10 through 15 with the following titles: The Great Rebellion, A Glorious Sadness, A Liberating Message, The Face of the Faceless, The Death and Birth of Worlds, and Divine Humanity. Part 4 is titled *Reaction and Retreat: Modernity and the Eclipse of the Human*, and contains the last two chapters with the following titles: Secularism and Its Victims, and Sorcerers and Saints.

In Part 1 the author makes comments about the present increasingly antireligious state of our culture, more-or-less introducing his subject. While, in general, Hart's book is a scholarly work, he does not refrain from expressing his true opinion of some of the New Atheists. For example, on pages 3 and 4 he writes: "*The God Delusion*, an energetic attack on all religious belief, has just been released [in 2006] by Richard Dawkins, the zoologist and tireless tractarian, who – despite his embarrassing incapacity for philosophical reasoning – never fails to entrance his eager readers with his rhetorical recklessness." Now that hardly seems like a proper way to treat the distinguished Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University who won both the Royal Society of Literature Award and the Los Angeles Times Literary Prize in 1987 for his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, and won the 1989 Silver Medal of the Zoological Society of London and the 1990 Royal Society Michael Faraday Award for the furtherance of the public understanding of science, and won the 1994 Nakayama Prize for Human Science, and was awarded an Honorary D.Litt. degree by the University of St. Andrews in 1995, and received the Humanist of the Year Award in 1996, and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1997. Surely we should defer to the opinions of such a distinguished man as Richard Dawkins! But, I guess Hart never got the memo. He shows similar disrespect for Sam Harris, author of *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*. On page 8 Hart writes: "In his remarks on Christian belief, Harris displays an abysmal ignorance of almost every topic he addresses". On page 14 Hart writes: "What I find most mystifying in the arguments of the authors I have mentioned [Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett], and of others like them, is the strange presupposition that a truly secular society would of its nature be more tolerant and less prone to violence than any society shaped by any form of faith. Given that the modern age of secular governance has been the most

savagely and sublimely violent period in human history, by a factor (or body count) of incalculable magnitude, it is hard to identify the grounds for their confidence.” In terms of the arguments made by the New Atheists, Hart writes on pages 19 and 20: “The sorts of ‘scientific,’ ‘moral,’ or ‘rational’ objections to faith I have described above are not really scientific, moral, or rational in any but a purely rhetorical sense. There is no serious science in Dennett’s ‘science of religion’; and there is no genuine moral cogitation or rigorous reflection in any of the moral indictments of religion advanced by him or his fellow ‘New Atheists.’ . . . The reason that today’s cultured despisers of religion tend to employ such extraordinary bad arguments for their prejudices, without realizing how bad those arguments are, is that they are driven by the precritical and irrational impulses of the purest kind of fideism. At the deepest level of their thoughts and desires, they are obedient to principles and promptings that rest upon no foundation but themselves.” I thought it was supposed to be the Christians who are delusional. Apparently Hart thinks otherwise! Nihilism, championed by Friedrich Nietzsche, appears to be the outcome of modernism carried to its logical conclusion. Hart realizes that the New Atheists may not have thought this through, even though some of it displays itself. He writes on pages 20 and 21: “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 anything, 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, . . . In the most unadorned terms possible, the ethos of modernity is – to be perfectly precise – nihilism.”

In Parts 2 and 3, which is the majority of the book, consisting of 13 chapters in all, Hart presents a positive case, based on history and philosophy, for the huge, positive impact that Christianity has had on Western civilization. Throughout this large section of the book, the New Atheists are seldom, if ever, mentioned, presumably because they have had no contributions or challenges to make when it comes to the serious, scholarly study of the history or philosophy of the period addressed. My primary interest in reviewing this book by Hart was to note his response to the New Atheists. Therefore, for this reason, and for brevity, my comments here will be brief. One of the things that Hart attempts to do, is to set history straight, correcting some of the distortions of enlightenment historians. In this sense, he has broadened his view, and is taking on much more than the rantings of the New Atheists. One case in point is the notion that Christianity had no interest in classical Greek philosophers, and, in fact took steps during the early middle ages to destroy the wisdom of classical culture, and it was only due to Islamic scholars and the rise of the Enlightenment that saved classical literature. On page 39, Hart notes the following: “that Christian hordes took seven hundred thousand scrolls from the Great Library of Alexandria and, intoxicated by their fanatical and brutish detestation of profane learning and heathen science, burned them in open fires in the streets, setting back the advance of Western civilization by centuries in the process – is pure fiction. . . . Colorful myths aside, the early church did not systematically destroy the literature of pagan antiquity, and there was no universal Christian prejudice against profane learning”. Following up on this, Hart writes on page 49: “we possess largely intact Greek texts of all of Aristotle’s extant works, thanks largely to the Christian scholars of the Byzantine East; many of his writings, including all of his dialogues, we no longer possess, but they were lost well before the Christian period of the empire.” And again on page 52: “Talk of medieval Christian civilization being ‘quick to burn’ the writings of ancient pagans, moreover, is tantamount to a confession of an almost total ignorance of that civilization. In fact, not only did medieval Christians not burn pagan texts, the literary remains of ancient Rome were hoarded and jealously guarded in monastic libraries even as the Western Roman world was disintegrating.”

In Part 4, Hart returns to the present and makes additional comments about the New Atheists. At the very beginning of Chapter 16, on page 219, Hart has less than kind words for Christopher Hitchens and his recent book: “The rather petulant subtitle that Christopher Hitchens has given his (rather petulantly titled) *God is Not Great is How Religion Poisons Everything*. Naturally one would not expect him to have squandered any greater labor of thought on the dust jacket of his book than on the disturbingly bewildered text that careens so drunkenly across its pages – reeling up against a missed logical connection here, steadying itself against a historical error there, stumbling everywhere over all those damned conceptual confusions littering the carpet – but one does still have to wonder how he expects any reflective reader to interpret the phrase.” Not confining himself to Hitchens alone, on page 220 Hart writes: “The best we can now hope for are arguments pursued at only the most vulgar of intellectual levels, couched in an infantile and carpingly pompous tone, and lacking all but the meagerest traces of historical erudition or syllogistic rigor: Richard Dawkins triumphantly adducing ‘philosophical’ arguments that a college freshman midway through his first logic course could dismantle in a trice, Daniel Dennett insulting the

intelligence of his readers with proposals for the invention of a silly pseudo-science of ‘religion,’ Sam Harris shrieking and holding his breath and flinging his toys about in the expectation that the adults in the room will be cowed, Christopher Hitchens bellowing at the drapes and potted plants while hoping no one notices the failure of any of his assertions to coalesce with any other into anything like a coherent argument.” Hart clearly takes exception to the idea that secularism has, or can, move culture forward in any meaningful way, as the New Atheists almost universally suggest. Hart states on page 222: “Can one really believe – as the New Atheists seem to do – that secular reason, if finally allowed to move forward, free of the constraining hand of archaic faith, will naturally make society more just, more humane, and more rational than it has been in the past? What evidence supports such an expectation?” Hart continues his assessment of New Atheist reasoning (page 232): “At times, this delusion [that empirical science should be the arbiter of values, morality, and metaphysical truths] can take a form no more threatening than Richard Dawkins’s philosophically illiterate inability to distinguish between, say, theoretical claims about material causality and logical claims about the mystery of existence, or simply between the sort of matters that the sciences are competent to address and those they are not. . . . no good historian of science believes that the rise of modern science is a special achievement of secular rationality; but the occasional pitilessness that follows from making an ideology out of science most definitely is.”

After having read a number of writings of the New Atheists and a number of Christian responses, it is very difficult for me to believe that anyone giving a fair hearing to both sides of this debate could conclude that scholarship and reason is on the side of the New Atheists. In fact, it appears difficult to find anyone who argues such. The contrast between the New Atheists writings and Christian responses seems rather stark to me. For example, when I began reading Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, given the very prestigious position that he holds at Oxford University, and all the awards, accolades, honorary degrees, etc., I was prepared to be intellectually challenged by carefully reasoned arguments, instead what I found was rather confusing and even incoherent. I felt like the McGraths, as I noted in my review of Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, IVP Books, 2007: “The McGrath’s acknowledge that there isn’t a lot worthy of a response in Dawkins’ book.” Also, I once responded to an email enquiry about the arguments for atheism as follows: “I have read Dawkins, and if his ‘arguments’ are to be taken as some sort of serious presentation against theism, I think many of us theists are baffled if this is supposed to be seriously taken as argument! If that is what theists are up against we have nothing to fear!” A fine example of a Christian response to all of the hoopla from the New Atheists is this one by David Bentley Hart. He is clearly a highly accomplished scholar in the areas in which he writes in this book. Aside from his occasional bafflement by what those he is responding to have written, sounding a little bombastic himself (of which I have focused on in this review!), the majority of the book is carefully reasoned and of a scholarly level. There are many good books challenging the New Atheists, and it has given Christians an open door to present the case for Christianity to a new generation, and this book by Hart is one of those that I would warmly recommend.