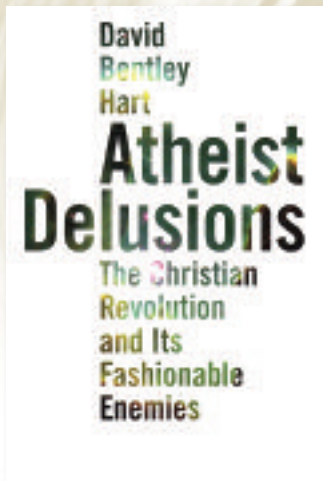




ATHEIST DELUSIONS:

The Christian revolution and its fashionable enemies

REVIEWED BY ANDREW ERRINGTON



Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies

David Bentley Hart, New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2009.



David Bentley Hart is a North American Orthodox theologian who is perhaps best known for his essays (some of which are published as *In the Aftermath: Provocations and Laments*) and his short book *The Doors of the Sea*, a challenging theological response to the 2004 tsunami. However, his major work is a daring and combative articulation of the Christian gospel as a fundamentally aesthetic reality, titled *The Beauty of the Infinite*.

Hart's latest work, *Atheist Delusions*, is ostensibly a response to the 'New Atheists' who loom so large on the contemporary apologetic horizon. Hart has little time for the likes of Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris, whose arguments he describes as being—to take a fairly representative example—'pursued at only the most vulgar of intellectual levels, couched in an infantile and carpingly pompous tone, and lacking all but the meagrest traces of historical erudition or syllogistic rigour' (p220).¹

However, Hart has more than rhetoric

here. The first and second sections of the book present a devastating demolition of several key pillars of the New Atheist argument. The assumption that reason is the special possession of modernity (chapter 3), the story of Christianity's suppression of all that was civilised and good and progressive in the ancient world (chapters 4 and 5), the polemical tale of the incompatibility of faith and

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science with Galileo as its standard-bearer (chapter 6), and the portrayal of Christianity's intrinsic intolerance as seen in its witch hunts and religious wars (chapters 7 and 8)—all these stories are convincingly rebuffed by means of historical investigation.

Though at times one suspects Hart's polemic runs ahead of him, his historical recasting is frequently fascinating, such as

when he argues that 'the rise of modern science and the early modern obsession with sorcery ... were two closely allied manifestations of the development of a new post-Christian sense of human mastery over the world' (p82). However, Hart's book is far more than a mere broadside against Christianity's modern critics. (Indeed, one gains the impression that Hart would see them as hardly worth

the ink.) Hart's real intention is to recover a sense of the profound, transforming vision of early Christianity from the forgetfulness, ignorance and criminal misrepresentations of our own day.

Hart argues that Christianity was a revolution, 'perhaps the only true revolution in the history of the West' (p108), changing Western humanity 'at the deepest levels

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surviving remnants’ (p298). Frame spells out how the sea of faiths has become a ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’ (as Matthew Arnold put it).

He admits that during Billy Graham’s Crusade in 1959 3.25 million Australians (one third of the entire population) flocked to see and hear the evangelist and that his Crusade was ‘an incredible phenomenon that went against the cultural mood’. So much so that it even ‘seemed for a moment that religion might not be in terminal decline’. But it had, Frame insists, no lasting significance: ‘Graham ... returned to the United States and most Australians resumed the

life they had known beforehand’ (p66).

The Billy Graham Crusade, however, cannot be so easily dismissed. The lives of many Australians were changed and dramatically transformed—including those of Peter Jensen (the Archbishop of Sydney) and his brother Philip (Dean of St. Andrew’s Cathedral).

One does not deny that unbelief in Australia has its propagandists. Philip Adam, for example, is a gifted and

Australia it is clear that there are an increasing number who, despite the fact that they themselves are casual or indifferent to their faith, are nevertheless eager that their children should be exposed to Christian values. Deeds speak louder than words. They are willing to make costly financial sacrifices in order to send their children to schools that expound and exemplify ethical values and good behaviour.

In secular Australia it is clear that there are an increasing number who ... are nevertheless eager that their children should be exposed to Christian values.

effective communicator. And there are many others. Frame gives a detailed and exhaustive account of their views, which are no doubt reflected in the increasing number who, at the time of the census, state ‘no religion’. But there is another sociological fact that needs to be taken into account—the phenomenal growth in the number of independent schools that are being established. In secular

For all his (sometimes depressing) honesty about the prospects of faith in contemporary Australia, Frame concludes his study of unbelief with these reassuring words: ‘Despite the difficulties and the problems associated with believing in God, I am still confronted by Jesus’ words and works and by the conviction that his dying and rising has transformed human history’ (p304). ©

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29. of consciousness and at the highest levels of culture’ (pxiv). In the third section of the book, Hart describes how Christianity conquered the ancient world not by political fortune, but by winning its heart: offering liberation from spiritual desperation, audaciously embracing slaves and women, and radically reimagining what it meant to be human. Western civilisation was reborn through ‘something of incalculable wonder and inexpressible beauty’ (pxiv).

Not every aspect of Hart’s vision of Christianity will be endorsed by all. For example, his descriptions of authentic Christianity tend to have a somewhat ritualistic bias and he endorses a strong view of salvation as divinisation (chapter 15). In all, however, Hart’s book represents a powerful response to the critiques of Christianity currently in vogue, as well as an inspiring retrieval of many positive

aspects of Christianity’s historical legacy. In this regard, Hart has something to teach us about the value of historical investigation. Hart clearly believes that the concrete effects of Christianity on culture and society are a battleground worth defending. Perhaps in this he rightly perceives something evangelicals can easily forget: that the history of Christendom, though muddled by human sinfulness and failure, and mired in complexity and disappointment, is and must be (at one level at least) a history of the work of the Holy Spirit. To abandon this history to misrepresentation and dismissiveness cannot, ultimately, aid the cause of Christ in the modern world.

Atheist Delusions is a counter-cultural work in the fullest sense. ‘If ever an age deserved to be thought an age of darkness,’ Hart avers, ‘it is surely ours’ (p106). In the final section of the book, Hart reflects ominously on what the future of the West

might be like, having abandoned the revolution that gave it birth. Although Christianity ‘permeates everything we are’ today in one sense, in another sense it is disappearing. In its place ‘something new is in the centuries-long process of being born’ (p239). Hart argues that this something includes a conception of freedom as unrestricted personal volition (chapter 2), differing markedly from the classical Christian understanding of freedom as the liberty to flourish in accordance with one’s nature (p24). And Hart sees in this the distinct possibility—and this is his most profound response to Christianity’s critics—that the result will be a culture which is not just post-Christian, but also post-human. ©

END NOTE

1 Reading the book, one frequently feels glad both that it has been written and that it was not written by oneself.