

## ***Atheist Delusions* by David Bentley Hart**

**A Review of David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, xiv + 253 pages, 2009.**

To recommend a book by an Eastern Orthodox theologian I would have to be thoroughly impressed by its content and its long-term worth. Since both of these personal criteria are well met by the title under review I am happy to declare my full endorsement of its main thesis.

The author is one of the best polemicists in the Christian tradition writing today. He is, at turns, witty, ironic, level-headed, theological, and disdainful of false pretensions. He deals with the big picture and asks what it looks like from believing and unbelieving perspectives. He does not like shoddy argumentation, and he does not like misrepresentation.

David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions* is a book that seeks to address the arrogant dismissals of the positive influence of Christianity upon the world. Because it aims to correct the whinging about the evils of Christian belief of modern atheistic tractarians the book concerns itself with history. Was the Roman world and its pagan forerunners really superior to the reshaped world of the Church? Would it have arrived in the present in a better condition had Christian-theism and ethics been lost in the rubble of the ancient world? Is Christianity bad at its core or are its sometime professors just adept at not practicing what they preach?

These are the sorts of questions with which this book deals, and one wonders at one level why it should need to be written. Shouldn't a little determined historical research and a few moments reflection deliver the proper verdict in favor of the accused?

Sadly, that is not the world we live in. We live in a world suffering from historical amnesia. We live in an age where "intellectually fulfilled atheists" can produce diatribes against a system of thought (Biblical Christianity) of which they are almost totally ignorant, all the while recommending a materialistic outlook on life which, if it were true, would extend that ignorance into very part of our deterministically conditioned existence. We live in times where Ivy League scholars can describe the past in terms, not in which things actually occurred, but in the way they wish they had occurred. This is the intellectual arena into which Hart has tossed his hat, and which he is trying to correct.

Before continuing something needs to be said about the books' title. It is not so much about atheist belief, but, as Hart puts it in his introduction, "an apologia for a particular understanding of the effect of Christianity upon the development of Western civilization." (ix). Perhaps the publisher thought an allusion to Richard Dawkins' work was justified? Be that as it may, the subtitle, *The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* is much nearer the mark. As the author says on the next page:

I feel no need to evade or excuse the innumerable failures of many Christians through the ages to live lives of charity and peace. Where I come to the defense of historical Christianity, it is only in order to raise objections to certain popular calumnies of the church, or to demur from what I take to be disingenuous or inane arraignments of Christian belief or history, or to call attention to

achievements and virtues that writers of a devoutly anti-Christian bent tend to ignore, dissemble, or dismiss.” (x).

With that said let’s take a look at the book’s content.

At the beginning of chapter one Hart does take momentary aim at, among others, Richard Dawkins (“who – despite his embarrassing incapacity for philosophical reasoning, never fails to entrance his readers with his rhetorical recklessness.”); and Sam Harris, whose *The End of Faith* never stoops to define “faith” and which Hart characterizes as an “extravagantly callow attack on all religious belief.” Granted such salvos soothe the sanctified ear, they also betray the frustration of the author who complains: “It probably says more... about the relative vapidness of our culture that we have lost the capacity to produce profound unbelief.” (220). And certainly, when Christopher Hitchens presents the genius of the ancient Greeks to conceive of and erect the Parthenon as an argument against belief in God (or the gods) one might expect him to “take five” and ask himself what they put in it!

In contrast to the New Atheists Hart calls our attention to Friedrich Nietzsche (6), who at least “had the good manners to despise Christianity, in large part, for what it actually was.” There follows a few pages in which the shallow arguments of Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris are reviewed, and acknowledgment is then made that “religion kills.” But this is not really saying much. For, as we are reminded, “Some kill because their faiths explicitly command 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.” (12). The ethics of any system of belief or unbelief may or may not support the violent behavior of its adherents. But that surely is the real question. When Christianity commands us to love our enemies and to do good to those who persecute or spitefully use us, it thereby disassociates itself from those “Christians” who have taken up the sword and shed blood “for the cause of Christ” (for example, the Crusades). God and his Christ are blasphemed by such misrepresentation, but Divine ethics cannot thereby be impugned.

This is not the case with humanistic ethical theories. As Hart crushingly puts it,

“... every ethical theory developed apart from some account of transcendent truth... is a fragile fiction, credible only to those sufficiently obstinate in their willing suspension of disbelief. If one does not wish to be convinced, however, a simple “I disagree” or “I refuse” is enough to exhaust the persuasive resources of any purely worldly ethics.” (15).

One may wish to continue the argument, but they should make sure they are conversant with “the actual particularities of Christian history and belief.” (16). This is what launches Hart into the main part of his book.

*Atheist Delusions* is divided into four parts. The first two chapters comprise part one, which deals with the present day. Part two comprises chapters 3 through 9 and examines the past, especially the world of the early church. Part three continues looking into history but with special emphasis on the outworking and impact of Christian teachings. Finally, part four appraises the alternative value-system of the New Atheists and its likely aftermath in our culture.

In the first half of this review I stated that the second chapter really launches us into the main argument of the book. Although it precedes the two central parts of the volume, this chapter, entitled “The Age of Freedom” is where Hart gives his diagnosis of modern man’s dilemma. Unsurprisingly the problem is as old as human history.

To understand what it is that drives certain of us not only to unbelief but to a passionate and often articulate hatred of belief in God, and to an evangelical dedication to its eradication, one must understand what it is they – and perhaps, in a larger sense, all of us – believe *in*, and why it demands of us the overthrow of the faith it seeks to displace. (20)

Put simply, we believe *in* ourselves. Personal autonomy; what the author calls “Modernity’s highest ideal” and “our primal ideology,” stands behind the propaganda of atheism new and old.

Armed with stories and interpretations which support the tale of morality we have told ourselves, we still cannot get rid of the “fragments of Christian moral theology” which give credence even to our preferred self-understanding (32). With this understanding, Hart tackles such yarns as the “age of reason” releasing men from the blinkers imposed on it by “the age of faith,” given potency, not by the findings of good historians, but too often by the “myths” and “simplifications” promoted by “bad popular historians” (33-35). Examples given by Hart are Jonathan Kirsch’s account of the destruction of the great Serapeum of Alexandria or the myriad retellings of the murder of Hypatia, about whom “more twaddle tends to be written...than about any other figure from early or late antiquity.” (46).

One might think that the numerous examples of odium perpetrated by those calling themselves Christians would prevent one from giving a robust apologetic defense, of say, the Crusades, or the Inquisition. But the writer, who never tries to deflect well deserved censure, does us the favor of at least separating the truth from the rant in the middle chapters.

The chapter on “The Death and Rebirth of Science” addresses such modern myths as the Greek foundations of science, the enlightened Islamic medievalist, the Galileo affair and its corollary, the church’s resistance to the Copernican Revolution. It is a brilliantly written and informative chapter. We are reminded that “the birth of modern physics and cosmology was achieved by Galileo, Kepler and Newton breaking free not from the close confining prison of faith (all three were believing Christians, of one sort or another) but from the enormous burden of the millennial authority of Aristotelian science.” (68).

*Atheist Delusions* includes many memorable challenges to contemporary folklore. How refreshing it is to hear a Christian author who is not taken in by the secular separation of faith and reason! He writes, “One can believe that faith is mere credulous assent to unfounded premises, while reason consists in a pure obedience to empirical fact, only if one is largely ignorant of both.” (101). The sanitized vision of Roman society is made to look more lifelike and believable under Hart’s correctives. Even the noble failure of Julian (the Apostate) is shown to have been inevitable given the philosophical and ethical resources available to him (Chapter 14).

Such a book could only receive a recommendation from this appreciative reader. Still, in more than one place I put question marks over some of Hart’s assertions. Most of these came towards

the back of the book, when I'd already felt like I'd got my money's worth. A couple of examples will suffice: When Hart, possessed of every ounce of self-assurance, asserts that John's Gospel "is a composite text...probably incorporating earlier Gnostic or semi-Gnostic texts within itself" (137), one has to wonder who he's been reading. He certainly needs to avail himself of one or two of the best evangelical treatments (e.g. Carson, Morris, or Ridderbos) and revise his opinion. Likewise his annihilationism (155) is not the product of biblical exegesis. Notwithstanding these not insubstantial blips on the radar, *Atheist Delusions* leaves us with the satisfaction that much has been learned and many precious beliefs has been fortified against the tirades of New Atheists and society in general.