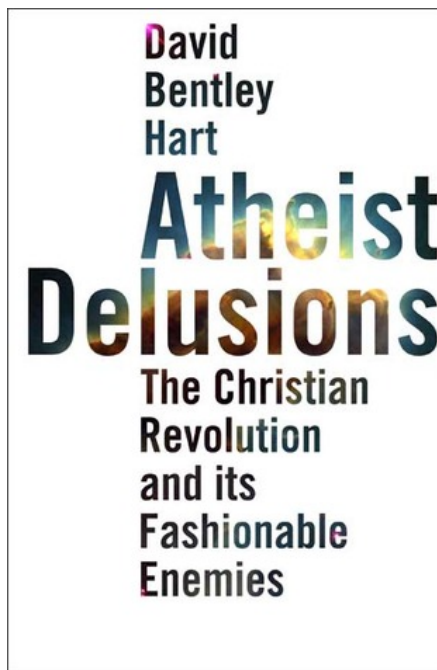




Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies

David Bentley Hart

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In this provocative book one of the most brilliant scholars of religion today dismantles distorted religious “histories” offered up by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and other contemporary critics of religion and advocates of atheism. David Bentley Hart provides a bold correction of the New Atheists’s misrepresentations of the Christian past, countering their polemics with a brilliant account of Christianity and its message of human charity as the most revolutionary movement in all of Western history.

Hart outlines how Christianity transformed the ancient world in ways we may have forgotten: bringing liberation from fatalism, conferring great dignity on human beings, subverting the cruelest aspects of pagan society, and elevating charity above all virtues. He then argues that what we term the “Age of Reason” was in fact the beginning of the eclipse of reason’s authority as a cultural value. Hart closes the book in the present, delineating the ominous consequences of the decline of Christendom in a culture that is built upon its moral and spiritual values.

Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies Details

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Jeffrey Backlin says

This book drips with contempt (e.g. Ch. 1, 16, 17) and clashes swords with the New Atheists diatribes from the Christian perspective. This is both entertaining, but also tiring. The book contains argument, but does not always point to specifics leading the reader towards assumed common understood historical facts. I think the book could have been more established if the author would have given a little more argumentation. However, with that said, I enjoyed the book. The argument of the work starts with the first two assumptions: Christians have indeed done some deplorable things contra to their founders teaching (Intro), and, the New Atheists central assumption that a secular view is > a christian one (Ch 1) and that moderns are enamored by a free will that allows them to do whatever they want essentially (Ch 2, p. 224+). Hart then argues as follows:

1. The 'de jure' arguments against Christianity based off its historical tradition (e.g. censored others, didn't care for others, anti-science, violent, anti-reason) are vacuous (e.g. the building of hospitals, the tolerance of pagans, the copying of pagan works, establishment of schools, contribution of their own works, their contribution to the emergence of science, p. 219, etc.). This is discussed in chapters 3 through 9. Hart also responds to objections such as: Christians were cruel to lepers, Christians burned books, Christians burned the library of Alexandria, Christians were anti-science, Christians burned witches and were intellectually mad, Christians lead to the holy wars, etc.
2. Rather, Christianity changed the way the violent, militant pagan world thought through its novel message and social impact (e.g. through its generosity and philanthropy, its egalitarian view of woman at the time, its weak press against slaves, its removal of pedigree, its argument for human dignity, its protection and help for science and history, metaphysics/existentialist views, etc.). This new order called for exclusive demand and change of one's passions, views of God, and obligations towards one's neighbor.
3. Finally, the secular view and modern march of "progressive" reason and moral superiority is a sham (e.g. while Christianity has its blemishes as well, the modern record is more bloody - colonization, universal conscription, mass exterminations, Jacobin Club and the massacres in the Vendee, the great revolutionary socialism's, nerve toxins and nuclear weapons, court-mandated sterilization's, lobotomies, experimentation on prison populations, clinical studies of untreated syphilis in black men; and less philosophically supporting of human dignity leading to either banality or monstrosity - eugenics, infanticide, euthanasia, genetic engineering, etc.). This is discussed in chapters 16 and 17.

The book is full of scorn and is clearly written, and is self-identified as, a polemic against naturalistic modernity. Still, a useful book and a more entertaining read.

Jacob Aitken says

I will forgo the standard adjectives that came to mind when I read this book: brilliant, stunning, breathtaking. That is a given when one reads David Bentley Hart. This book is a combination of alternative history, apologetics, and smash-mouth theology.

Hart claims the Christian faith represented a revolution in the story of humanity (ix). It shattered the pagan

cosmology (115) and introduced new categories of reality, the dimension of the human person for one. However, Hart's thesis is more subtle than that. He is not simply saying "Christianity has done a lot of good to the world; therefore, you need to believe,"--that would be a variant of the genetic fallacy that Hart so masterfully refutes. Rather, Christianity has its own telling of the story, a telling that reworks the categories of human existence within the framework of its own story.

Over against the story is the narrative of modernity. Modernity's telos is that of freedom. Its highest ideal is putting trust in the absence of a transcendental. Its freedom is nihilistic. Modernity's current defenders, and this is the first half of Hart's book, retell the Western story in a way to demonize Christianity in their defense of modernity. Therefore, Hart meticulously shows how Christianity did not impede science (the chapter on Galileo is hilarious), burn witches (the Inquisition, despite its bad moments, actually limited the bloodiness of the State's persecution of heretics), or fight religious wars (the Crusades are actually a different case, worthy of a conversation but not under this topic).

Conclusion:

Like all good things, this book must end. Not only does one have the privilege of being smarter after reading this book, one also has an amusing privilege as well: Hart's in-your-face rhetoric is hilarious and refreshing. May this book enjoy many printings.

Toby says

Just finished (finally). Two thoughts:

The first hundred pages or so of this book are just grand. Hart's bombastic and over-the-top rhetoric is in some of his other work pretty obtuse, perhaps unintentionally, and in other books one wonders how much intellectual flexing is going on. And perhaps there are works of his where it is just part of the jargon of doing philosophy in our world. But whatever the case, Hart's rhetoric is perfect for laying out the new atheists. He mocks them, harasses them, and generally has a great time of showing how their history and reasoning and logic are about as complex and meaningful as a six year old on a playground. There is some really useful historical work in this book as well, countering some of the more common claims that Christianity generally introduced anti-intellectualism, tyranny, and the mistreatment of women and slaves into the world. Hart handily dismantles various attempts at this and frequently shows that the reverse is actually the case. And he does this without glossing over various failures and problems in the story as well.

On the flip side, the book ends rather bland. While it doesn't quite reach shrill, his tone is far more tragic as the pages go on. Where he begins almost triumphalistically, calling the new atheists cowards and buffoons, he fears that their popularity is a symptom of a broad and grand sweeping change in the modern intellectual and religious landscape that signals the overwhelming retreat of Christianity from western culture. He cites the monastic movement as perhaps something of what the modern Church has to look forward to. And this tragic, retreatist conclusion was the most disappointing. While it's absolutely true that the Lord may have His people in a period of decline, and the scenery may change significantly as this occurs, this retreatist mentality is exactly what got us here in the first place. Now Hart is most certainly not advocating "running away," and his book is a clear example of cultural engagement. But his book begins as a rallying call, looking back at the progress of the gospel down through the centuries, despite many weaknesses and failures on the part of

believers. But when it comes to the present, Hart fails to see the same possibilities, the same gospel leaven at work, and one gets the sense that Hart is something of a romantic, looking back in longing for the old days and rather bewildered by the modern world he faces.

Definitely worth the read, but also definitely disappointing, especially after such a fun start to the book. I see that I apparently rated this book before I finished it. Given the ending, I'm taking back one of those stars. Only three stars.

Tim says

Resoundingly refutes the modern myth that the rise of the Christian Church created scientific and technological stagnation, unprecedented violence, and suppressed the learning and wisdom of the Hellenistic period, all of which had to be overcome to make way for the Age of Enlightenment. The historical detail was more than I bargained for, and, therefore, a bit dry at times, but I can't fault DBH for being thorough.

William says

This is another book that I recently finished after spending over a year slowly picking through it. The book is a defense of Christianity, not in the narrow theological apologetic sense, but against the broader societal narrative that Christianity has been a negative influence through history (e.g., suppressing science) and that modern enlightenment provides liberation from the artificial restraints of a bygone era.

The book is broadly divided into four parts:

- (1) A short introduction that summarizes the attacks to which the book will respond
- (2) A dense historical discussion rebutting the negative view of Christian influence
- (3) A more straightforward section elaborating on some of the positive Christianity has provided
- (4) A short conclusion anticipating the negative consequences of "liberating" society from the Christian influence

For those who haven't experienced David Bentley Hart's writing, his colorful use of the full breadth of the English language is consistently entertaining and alone bumped my review score from 2 stars (goodreads scale: "it was ok") to 3 ("liked it"). I also particularly enjoyed the third section of the book, where each chapter addressed a topic that we take for granted today and traced back how the Christian worldview fundamentally transformed pre-Christian thinking on the issue—that included practical issues like slavery/equality, as well as more philosophical topics such as the relationship between the divine and man.

Where things got bogged down for me, and why I took so long to finish the book, was the second section. In it, Hart responds in minute detail to historical criticisms, some that are widely repeated (e.g., the Catholic persecution of Galileo) and others specifically taken from New Atheist writers like Dawkins, Hitchens, etc. My problem is that in many cases Hart takes for granted familiarity with the arguments made by the opponents—the book reads a bit like a dissenting opinion, when I haven't read the majority. It also assumes knowledge of detailed early Roman and church history, which I just don't have. The end result is that I couldn't meaningfully evaluate the rhetoric as sophistry or truth (and there's a lot of zinging rhetoric), the positions being attacked as strawmen or accurate characterizations, or the facts cited as cherry-picking or representative. Maybe that's my limitation rather than Hart's, but it did hamper my enjoyment of the book.

Fredösphere says

I was frustrated with the book in the early pages because it made a lot of assertions without offering evidence. I urge anyone also bothered by this to press on. The fat middle of this book is where the thesis is really developed.

The thesis is simply that Christianity is the greatest revolution the world has ever seen; that it is, in a sense, the *only* revolution (because it was a quiet revolution from below); that therefore only Christianity has been capable of truly altering hearts and minds; that Christianity is unique in the extent it motivates charitable institutions such as hospitals and orphanages; and that, above all, the Christian vision introduced an understanding of universal human dignity which forever after made it impossible to "innocently" engage in cruelty toward the weak and the lowly.

On this last point, the author's bold claim is that we in the West, having grown up in a culture still immersed in Christian attitudes (even if we have begun to turn away from it) are unable (without the author's erudition, naturally) to imagine how different pre-Christian attitudes were toward slaves, beggars, and the like--that it was natural for the rich and mighty to view themselves as utterly deserving and to view others with contempt. Of course, if a change of fortune brought about a change of status, there could be no recovery, especially if one's humiliation came by the hand of an enemy. There was no rooting for the underdog, no narrative of redemption and rebirth. There was only winning and losing--and you had better make sure you won.

Into this horrible zero sum game came the story of a peasant who died in contemptible humiliation who was also, somehow, the Son of God, and whose life and death dignifies every person no matter how humble. That is the story which overturned the old order. And today we can't see how different our thinking is--unless we read this book. Which I recommend.

Scott says

I wanted to like this book and did enjoy it as a discussion of Christian history, but as a rebuttal directed towards the so-called "New Atheists". Well, it wasn't. The "New Atheists" are popularizing atheism and directing it towards the masses. Their works are hardly nuanced enough to take the criticism of most academics, even those in agreement. But this can be true for other arguments too. It wouldn't be hard to pick a popular book on Christian apologetics written for laymen and tear it apart. So in my mind this book is like a stage for the great warrior to kill the rabbit. Sure, this book has a particular audience in mind, too. There's nothing wrong with that, but the arrogance that comes through for the "New Atheist" project does grow tiresome (that's not to say the "New Atheists" can't be guilty of arrogance too). Besides if all arguments became academic monographs, who in the masses would actually read them anyway. There is a place for such "popular" arguments and discussions. But academics, if anything, should recognize the difference, and the tone of their books, in my opinion, would be better if they reflected this. Maybe all parties can at least agree that it's refreshing to see an broad interest in such important questions.

But more importantly, this book only covers criticisms directed towards Christian history, which for anyone who has actually read the "New Atheists" would recognize isn't a significant (or read convincing) part of their argument anyway. To a large extent the "New Atheists" are only rehashing popular post-Enlightenment strains of thinking about Christianity. They are hardly adding anything new to the argument (which isn't

surprising since they aren't historians). The argument is old, but anyone who knows much about history would recognize that interpretation can never be divorced from the interpreter's viewpoint and context. Hart is no different in how he frames his argument. Despite how one writes the history of the church, whether one chooses to demonize Christians or not, the fundamental argument of the "New Atheists" about the existence of a personal God and the value of faith/belief (or danger of faith/belief as Harris might argue) remains unanswered by Hart's argument.

This is too bad, because at times Hart does make reference to the "New Atheists" terrible understanding of philosophy and theology, but he never elaborates on what he means here. But it is here that something important can be said against the "New Atheists." And, perhaps, Hart's interpretation of Christian history can feed this, but in the end it just never does. He could have just as easily taken up the argument for a different interpretation of Islamic history, too, but he still wouldn't have challenged the core of the "New Atheists" argument that there is no personal God. To make matters worse, the history reads of Western nepotism (Centrism would work here too although I like the negative implications, biases and all implied by nepotism). Should we really be surprised to find so many good contributions from Christianity in Western history when Christianity has dominated Western history for so long, including the present and it's values, all this despite one's view of modernity and post-modernity? Even to a large extent Western atheism is a contribution of Western Christianity. A more honest comparison would be looking into the history of the East too. What really was the difference? Is charity really one of them? What about science? Some might consider this more a curse than a blessing.

David Withun says

A must read for EVERYONE. Not only is it a very entertaining and informative read, but a deathblow struck against the "New Atheists" like Richard Dawkins, Bart Ehrmann, Christopher Hitchens, Elaine Pagels, etc. Hart exposes the logical and historical errors pervasive to modern atheism and modernism in general, and reaffirms the heart of Christianity and the new humanity it created.

[Name Redacted] says

I was going to dismiss this book as annoying polemic until I did a little further research. It is not, actually, a rebuttal directed at Dawkins & Hitchens & co. It is, actually, more of a rebuttal to Gibbons & Clarke & co. The author examines many of the myths about the history of Western civilization, detailing how much more complex it is than we are usually willing to admit, and how much of what we "know" is more akin to the tale of George Washington & the cherry tree than it is to hard, objective historical fact. For instance: Christian mobs did not burn the library of Alexandria; Christianity didn't suppress and/or destroy the original Greek texts of Aristotle's works, but rather preserved them; Galileo & co. were tearing down hellenistic (ie: pagan) pseudo-science which had been limiting Western scientific inquiry for so long that it had come to be adopted as religious dogma. Many of these points are pet-peeves I have when talking with others about the history of religion and the West, and I'm interested to see where this book takes things. Unfortunately its inflammatory and baffling title will invalidate it in the eyes of the very people who, it seems, NEED to read it.

Christopher says

I came to this book mostly because of the author, whose "impressive erudition and polemical panache"

(Richard John Neuhaus, of First Things) are things I grew to both envy and adore while reading "Doors of the Sea." Roger Olson has noted that "[Hart] is a word master. Just reading him elevates your mind and soul. And, if you pay attention and learn, your vocabulary!" I wholeheartedly agree. It takes me a while to read a Hart book because I have to stop after almost every other line and marvel at its compelling sophistication and insight.

The title is a misnomer because the book isn't an ambitious defense of God's existence in any traditional sense; it is rather--to quote Hart's introduction--"an extended meditation upon certain facts of history, and no more [...]" At a particular moment in history, I believe, something happened to Western humanity that changed it at the deepest levels of consciousness and at the highest levels of culture. It was something of such strange and radiant vastness that it is almost inexplicable that the memory of it should have so largely faded from our minds, to be reduced to a few old habits of thought and desire whose origins we no longer know, or to be displaced altogether by a few recent habits of thought and desire that render us oblivious to what we have forsaken [...] the most important function of Christian history is to remind us not only of how we came to be modern men and women, or of how Western civilization was shaped, but also of something of incalculable wonder and inexpressible beauty, the knowledge of which can still haunt, delight, torment, and transfigure us." (pp.XIII,XIV)

David says

Hart does not systematically respond to the "New Atheists" here, instead he focuses on aspects of their attack on Christianity relating to history. The general myth in our culture, promoted not just by new atheist but older critics of Christianity as well, is that the ancient world was a place of reason and prosperity until Christianity came along and replaced it with dogmatic faith, plunging western culture into centuries of "dark ages" from which we only emerged in the modern period with the Enlightenment and a return to reason. Hart shows that every point in this story is wrong. Most important is the recognition that the rise of Christianity was so revolutionary and changed western culture so thoroughly in positive ways (hospitals, charity, view of humanity, etc.) that these ideas have become so ingrained in our culture to the point we forget they were new with the Christians. In the final chapter Hart rightly asks, if we lose Christianity, why should we retain, as many atheists simply assume we will, these good things? Overall this book is not really a defense of Christianity as a shattering of the modern myth and retelling of the story. Hart does write with biting sarcasm, even coming off as mean at times, but if the reader can forgive him that we end up with a thorough, needed and great book.

Murtaza says

One thing that immediately jumps out at me upon reading this book is what an intellectual mismatch David Bentley Hart is with the "New Atheist" philosophers of our contemporary popular culture. He doesn't so much as deconstruct their contentions as much as pull the rug out from under them with a few deft strokes. They're simply not making any serious arguments and it doesn't seem like they think they even need to. Hart evinces the erudition and knowledge of both a classical philosophical and theological education. The people he's critiquing would charitably be described as charlatans, and some of them are even worse.

The "Christian Revolution" alluded to in the book's title doesn't refer to a coming event, but the revolutionary arrival of Christianity several centuries ago which transformed a formerly pagan world. Our prevailing

secular liberal society today tends to disparage (quite vociferously) Christianity as being a force which imposed backwardness and darkness upon Western civilization, and from which we have now "awoken" ourselves to a world of reason, rationality, and an improved conception of freedom.

Needless to say this popular understanding is not really true; more of a legend we have concocted to glorify ourselves in the present. As a great empire Christendom had its share of crimes and excesses, but it also transformed the world and helped give rise to Western civilization's conception of what it means to be human today. More fundamentally, it gave the idea that each human life has intrinsically divine and infinite value of its own, and that there is thus necessarily a higher morality required of us than simply the needs or desires of the moment. Secular concepts such as "human rights" would be incomprehensible without concepts which are themselves borne out of and inextricably tied to Christianity.

Now that we have more or less discarded Christianity in the West, what solid basis will we have for continuing to carry these ideas into the future? While they may exist independently within themselves for awhile, once the animating underlying principle (the religious conception of the value of life) is no longer seen as credible how long until we slip into entirely new beliefs?

Nietzsche for one seemed to grasp the stunning magnitude of the contemporary "Death of God". Our current crop of disbelievers on the other hand seem to be cheerfully unaware or unconcerned about what may fill this gaping moral vacuum. Not just that, they evince an inexplicable and unsubstantiated optimism which happens to fly in the face of the secular 20th century - the single bloodiest period of time in human history.

What is particular disturbing to me is that some of the loudest proponents of the new "enlightenment" are actually arguing for an outright return to barbarism, although they may term it "utilitarianism". Sam Harris (my particular bete noire) has for instance argued in favor of the utilitarian revival of torture. After all, if there's no more God that we take seriously and the idea of the infinite value of each human life is now quaint - why not use torture when we feel we need it? Why not even contemplate nuclear warfare or other forms of indiscriminating mass violence if the moment seems to call for it as well? This is a return to the primordial view of the world, a blank slate where there is no fundamental reality; nothing more than the exigencies, requirements and prejudices of ones present circumstances. Needless to say, this is a call for a return to the most basic and utter primitivism, that in our modern age of confusion and ignorance is absurdly masquerading as "progress". In other words, we spent millenia refining these high concepts of the value of man, only to toss them out the window on the backs of a few undergraduate level NYT bestsellers. This is the behavior of a trivial and confused culture.

As Hart points out our new modern view of the world is in fact the literal definition of nihilism. There is no underlying reality, and our modern conception of freedom is simply the freedom of the will to respond to each of its whims without obstruction. There is no higher calling, or higher purpose to strive for. And since the will itself is being exercised by a being (us) that has been stripped of any divine or infinite value, then it is not "anything" in and of itself either. Its simply meaningless impulses acting out within a world itself devoid of meaning. Our conception of reality is nothing acting upon a vast canvas of nothingness, simply the will being pulled this way and that at any given moment. This is much different than the classical conception of freedom which was freedom from the desire to commit sin, or to act against ones best nature. "Freedom" was the freedom to be who you are meant to be, and to act in harmony with your divine calling. As I've mentioned before, this idea is embodied in the Islamic concept of fitra, and ones lifelong struggle to act in accordance with it.

Indeed, most of us don't actually manage to fully live like this and many of us are either still believers in God in some manner or otherwise we find distractions (pursuit of wealth, nationalism) to fill the cavernous void that the public demise of religion has opened up. But lurking beneath is this disturbing reality; a reality which has allowed us to be alternately banal and at some times monstrous on a scale never before seen in human history. We have refined our ability to be cruel to one another past anything we've ever seen. By

reducing the world down to its mechanical spare parts it has allowed us to kill with wanton abandon. While in the past people killed for various types of chauvinism, the new amorality of the time has opened the door for atrocities of a scale ("industrial") and type ("scientific") never seen - and we've walked through this door time and again. Curiously enough, we never seem to step back and reflect upon the significance of this fact.

A lot of this book is a recap of Christian history intended to be a rebuttal of the popular modern characterization of it as one huge shameful mistake. Hart is obviously frustrated and it comes out in his tone, and I can entirely empathize. To be lectured to by a group of people who would best be described as anti-intellectuals in the most condescending and arrogant manner is aggravating to say the least. The history of monotheism has been far from a utopia, but it also happened to give us the best of the underlying moral sensibilities we have today. Simply put all of the most cherished values of modernity (pity, charity, compassion) have religious origins. Rejecting "religion" as an unmitigated evil would lead to the incomprehensible (but it seems rapidly approaching) condition of looking at the world as one giant playground of biological machines, subject to nothing more than their mutual and collective wills.

Having said all this I don't want to upend secular modernity; my conservatism leads me to be wary of any type of revolution - even if its a revolution back towards conservatism. It's not impossible to picture a Christian (or for that matter Islamic) theocracy that is an improvement upon our present circumstances, but I wouldn't like to take that gamble and would prefer to fight to preserve truth and goodness within a secular context. Doing this however requires honest and complete knowledge of the past, and specifically knowledge of how we got here today.

Hart is a gifted writer, and clearly the product of an intellectual tradition utterly removed from the mass market paperback writers he addresses at points. The history was interesting even if it was not why I picked up the book in the first place. There were sections where I felt he was too zealous in making his point and also a few legitimate contradictions I found (specifically regarding the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria) but nonetheless I considered it to be an admirable and edifying exercise.

One thing he does particularly entertainingly is torch the pasted-together "spiritualism" of secular modernity, a partly consumerist phenomenon that seeks to put together bits of old pagan beliefs with a few concepts here and there taken from Buddhism. It's tragic and comic at the same time, the exercise discarding of Christianity only to seek a superficial type of solace in Wicca or something - an effort that almost invariably pierces only skin deep and winds up as a type of ornamentation at best. It brings to mind that Rabindranath Tagore specifically predicted that Westerners would end up doing this to cope with the inhuman "machine civilization" he saw them building in the late 19th century. Sam Harris is like a parody of these types of wayward people (with a nauseating level of hubris thrown in) though he is assuredly oblivious to this.

My intention here was less a review than a summary of my thoughts and takeaways from this book, but needless to say it was a worthwhile, clearminded work of rare quality. Hart makes the argument that we are militantly forsaking what made us "good" without even realizing who we are, how we arrived at this point in the first place, and what is keeping us from sliding into the abyss. He's sober and realistic in making this case, and its compelling. The cause of remembering is important and its rare and valuable to find writers who can champion it so eloquently. Recommended.

Adam Birch says

Despite its polemical title, this book contains interesting information both for Christians and non-Christians. Western culture has revised the history of religion to the point where many facts have been done away with in favor of fairy tales designed to stroke the modern ego. Hart digs into the real history of religion, paganism,

and secularism and strives to clear up misconceptions about each with the intention of creating an accurate fundamental understanding of history upon which real dialogue can be based.

Aeisele says

The title of this book is a little unfortunate, since really it's not so much about "delusions" as simply DB Hart narrating the revolution in human values (Nietzsche's "transvaluation of all values") brought about by the advent of Christianity within the ancient world, and his thesis that modernity is a counter-revolution. In some ways, he locates Nietzsche's thesis that Christianity represents a slave-morality, affirms this thesis (of course, with a positive gloss, rather than a negative one), and gives some historical details to show it.

He also affirms another of Nietzsche's theses, which is that the "scientism" of the 19th century was really parasitic on Christian values (this is the substance of Nietzsche's "death of God" argument: modern humans destroyed God and did not understand the significance of this, but still pretended they could use Christian values without God).

Along the way he takes aim at a lot of mis-informed historical narratives about the past, especially in regards to ideas such as the supposed "dark ages," where (as the story goes) Greek science was lost until the brave (and persecuted) Galileo broke the mold. That of course is non-sense, and for those who have actually read history will know that modern science was in fact developed *despite the Greeks, and in fact was developed most by very devout Christians in the well-endowed universities of the middle ages.*

Hart can be pretty acerbic at times, but if you're an atheist, I would really recommend this book. If you can read Hart you'll get a chance to sharpen your arguments against a really good mind. It's always best, as it were, to be able to disagree with the best of an argument. So try it.

Matt Escott says

This is a brilliant rebuttal to some of the more popular anti-religious, anti-Christian polemics making the rounds these days (ie: the writings of Dawkins, Hitchens, etc.). Hart traces the impact of the Christian "revolution," arguing that the gospel truly was novel and a radical break from previous pagan moralities and worldview. He corrects the tired and largely historically inaccurate portrayals of the history of Christendom (while still allowing that terrible things have been done in Christ's name, much as terrible things have been done for an almost infinite number of reasons). I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and the only thing I would have wanted was for him to reference more, but from the outset he states it isn't his intention to do so.

What I most appreciated about the book, however, was the way Hart shows how Christian thought, based on the foundational principle of love and charity (that is, caring for the other), was both a radical break from what had happened before it, and the cause of much of what we, today, consider to be good (even if we have largely lost the ability to discern where it originally came from). He doesn't try to make one-to-one correlations (ie: this aspect of Christian thought led to x), but rather focuses on the big picture, particularly in regards to how the Christian conception of creation and humanity (creation as a loving gift, humanity as uniquely endowed with dignity since it was both created and redeemed by God) played out in the proceeding centuries. He finishes by reflecting on the great modernist project, arguing that it is essentially nihilistic in that it believes in nothing greater than itself, and holds the freedom to act in whatever way the person or institution conceives of as the highest good. There is much more that could be said, but he does it better, and so I would urge anyone who is interested in the historical impact of Christianity, or is curious about how accurate popular attacks on Christianity actually are, to pick it up.

Matt Bianco says

Both entertaining and enlightening. Hart really does give it to the new atheists, and he does it by correcting false assumptions from history, theology, and the role of Christianity in both. But, he does it by not glossing over human failings, Christian failings, and the institutional church's failings.

Eric says

This was a thorough evisceration of the standard pop atheist arguments that appeared at the height of the New Atheist movement, circa 2009. Through deft historical examples simple logical analysis Hart undermines many of the basic claims of "Ditchkins" et al, and entertainingly wishes that the Christianity has more worthy critics today, such as the 2nd century Celsus. In fact, for Hart, Nietzsche sees most clearly the place of Christianity in the West and doesn't so much discount it, but abhor it. Anyway, Hart's refreshing acknowledgement of both the great good and great evil that institutional Christianity has caused in the West seemed balanced and fair. Despite the unfortunate main title, the heart of the book is really his illumination of how the "Christian Revolution" (of the sub title), was the discovery of the infinite value of every human regardless of class, and how the seemingly pointless theological and Christological controversies of the 4th-6th centuries were a struggle to ground the basic narrative story of God's love for all creation in a matrix of "divination". That is the early Church struggled over who God and Jesus were and how they related because they were so concerned with humans, made in the image of God, related to the Creator of all. In short, this was a vastly encouraging book, not so much because I have been much swayed by the arguments of the New Atheists, but because of the erudite and loving description of the checkered history of Christianity that illumines how Western history in all of its glory and shame is depended on the energy that the Christian Revolution inspired. Now, his argument rests on what you could call a narrative metaphysics, the story of Jesus, Israel, and the Creator God implies a specific reordering of the metaphysical world, one much different from Aristotle's. This book doesn't really tackle the broader issue of if God is actually ontologically real, but does to my mind show convincingly that the Christian story of the person and the world was superior to the fatalism of the pagan world. In light of reading Richard Beck's work on Freud and existential psychology I was often wondering what Hart would make of some this. I look forward to dipping into the more technical of Hart's books, this one was on a popular level and to my mind wonderfully engaging and entertainingly written. Any recommendations out there on his other books?

Highly recommended.

Paul says

It's just unfair, really -- four adorably shallow "public intellectuals" (Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett) with zero theological training versus one of the most learned human beings on the planet. Hart basically wins the argument against atheism in the introduction and then just systematically demolishes all of the weak and/or fallacious critiques put forward by so-called "New Atheists." It's certainly possible to be an intelligent atheist (cf. Nietzsche, Celsus) but no one in the past century has really managed it.

Rachael says

Hart takes on some of the prevailing themes in the popular New Atheist literature including the idea that religion has been a primary source of misery throughout history and that its effects were only mitigated as the chains of superstition were thrown off with the scientific revolution and enlightenment. He makes some interesting and no doubt valid points including that the witch hunts were not nearly as bad as is imagined and that the church actually tended to suppress them rather encourage them; he takes on the myth that Galileo was mercilessly and unfairly persecuted by scientifically illiterate and even anti-science churchmen, and so forth. I am glad he brings these things to light. Clearly the interaction between church and violence, church and science is not nearly as clear cut as many want to make it out to be. Christianity has surely inspired many positive reactions including the elevation of charity and the belief that the universe is ruled by rational laws.

where I think he lost me is when he reiterated the tired refrain that things are getting worse. we are more superficial and violent than we have been and this is possible because we are set free to follow our own worse inclinations. Unshackled from ethical norms rooted in a firm belief in God reiterated by a church structure we are free to pursue nefarious schemes such as the holocaust, or the purges of Stalin. what Hart doesn't seem to realize is that per capita, including the horrors of the two world wars the last century was the most peaceable so far in human history. In fact, violent crime only seems to decrease. Since many of his arguments seem to be Rodney Stark inspired I am surprised that Hart does not seem to acknowledge this fact at all, since Stark does.

My other major critique has to be his writing style. By the end of the book I found it terribly grating and in fact had to take breaks from reading the book for that reason alone.

Jamie Howison says

I almost wish that Hart had foregone the opening section of this book, in which he gets as scrappy and aggressive as those he's challenging (Hitchens, Dawkins, and company), because by the time he really hits his stride it becomes not really about the new atheism at all, but rather a soaring portrayal of how the Christian faith transformed what it means to be human. That part of his book is gorgeous (and is worth five stars), while his argumentative beginning is frankly not all that appealing.
