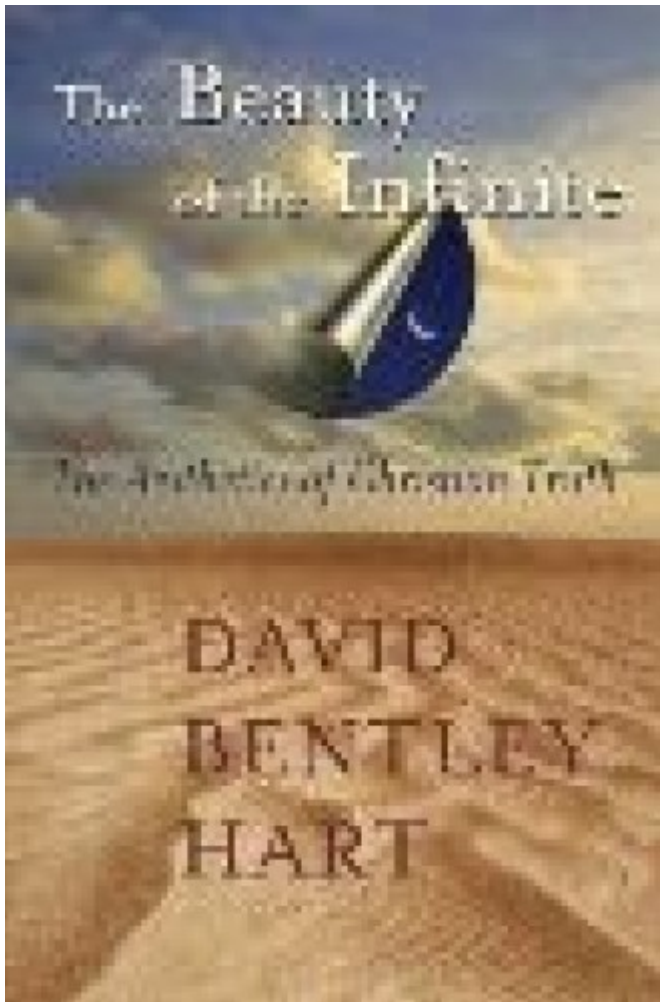


God's beauty

By [William C. Placher](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth

David Bentley Hart
Eerdmans

David Bentley Hart is a convert to Eastern Orthodoxy with a recent Ph.D. in theology from the University of Virginia. This volume, his first book, is a much-revised form of

his dissertation. Given the scope of its references and sheer intellectual flair, I can think of no more brilliant work by an American theologian in the past ten years—a remarkable beginning for a theological career. But be forewarned—this is tough going, distinctly not the book to take to the beach.

Three thinkers seem Hart's most important influences: John Milbank, Gregory of Nyssa and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Let me use the occasion of this review to try to explain aspects of the work of three very complex theologians and then talk about how Hart ties them together.

Milbank, an English philosophical theologian about to move back to Britain after several years of teaching at the University of Virginia, stands at the center of a self-conscious theological movement called "radical orthodoxy" (its adherents have their own book series, their own Web site and a passion for self-promotion). In his 1990 book *Theology and Social Theory* (also brilliant, also difficult) Milbank offered a new account of how to make a case for Christianity in a postmodern world.

The Enlightenment, he argued, is over and done with. Starting around the 17th century, many philosophers, scientists, political theorists and even theologians dreamt of proving their conclusions so decisively that no reasonable person could ever doubt them again. Lots of intellectuals these days no longer think that's possible. This conclusion need not imply radical relativism. Truth—the truth—can still be out there. But all our arguments for what we believe the truth to be (even in science or math) rest inevitably on some set of assumptions, some perspective, with which other reasonable folk might not agree. Our arguments therefore need to involve persuasion and rhetorical strategy; we can't *prove* we're right. Accepting that turn to the rhetorical is one definition of what it means to be post-Enlightenment or postmodern.

Ever since Nietzsche's version of postmodernism, Milbank's argument continues, many philosophers have concluded that truth is a matter of power. If everyone has a different story to tell, and no one can prove the truth of their story, then the only way to establish something as true is to have enough power (enough brute force or enough rhetorical skill) to impose your idea of truth on everyone else. As Nietzsche put it, truth is the lie socially agreed upon.

That conclusion not only shapes a great deal of recent philosophy, but also pervades our society more widely. Even a generation or two ago, arguments for social justice

characteristically began with Enlightenment appeals to reason: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal . . .” These days, at least in academic circles, they more often begin with power: “You whites can no longer ignore us people of color; we have more power now . . .” (The fact that appeals to power often come from the advocates of groups without much power is one of the paradoxes of current leftist thought, but that is a topic for another time.)

Milbank’s bold claim is this: These post-Nietzschean philosophers assert that truth (socially accepted truth, the only kind there is) is to be decided only as a struggle among competing powers. They treat that analysis as if it were simply an objective account of how things are. But, given their own assumptions, *it is just a story too, potentially one among others*. Milbank offers a Christian counterstory.

Christianity, he says, declares that the world is ultimately not about power but about love. The God who is ultimately the beginning and end of all things is not a tyrant at the top of a hierarchy but a community of three mutually loving persons. The world that God created is made for peace, not violence, and so violence is always a distortion of the true nature of things. Thus the Nietzschean story of how things are is really only a story of how things have become distorted. Christianity’s story of love and peace is the truer story. Not, of course, that this is something we can prove. Rather, Milbank offers a rhetorical argument in its favor—the only way a good postmodernist will try to persuade anyone of anything.

Hart follows his example, with two principal differences. First, Milbank paints with a broad brush; he tends to say that nearly everyone since Nietzsche has been wrong in the same way. Hart too thinks that nearly all Continental philosophers following Nietzsche have been wrong, but he believes they have been wrong in a host of different ways. His examinations of those particular errors contribute to both the book’s brilliance and its difficulty. Second, where Milbank’s hero in *Theology and Social Theory* was Augustine—more recently he focuses on Aquinas—Hart, standing in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, appeals more often to Gregory of Nyssa.

Gregory was one of the three theologians (along with Basil and Gregory of Nazianzus) from Cappadocia, in modern-day Turkey, who, more than any others, developed the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. These Cappadocians are often identified as strongly dependent on Plato’s philosophy, but Hart argues that Gregory, at least, broke more radically with the Platonic tradition that pervades Western philosophy than even the most daring of postmodernists.

Plato believed in two realms: the unchanging, perfect world of the divine and its inadequate image, the world of change, imperfection and matter. One has to escape the second world to have hopes of reaching the first.

Such a dichotomy has no room for a divine Son who becomes incarnate, but a great many Christian theologians have nevertheless at least tried to remain Platonists. But not, Hart insists, Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory said that God's unchangeableness is not static. Rather, within the Trinity, God keeps overflowing in mutual love: "God's impassibility is the utter fullness of an infinite dynamism." God is unchanging because that flow of love never stops or slows down, and God's love of creatures (as manifested in the act of creation and in the incarnation) is thus not an aberration from God's nature but an expression of it.

At the same time, it is not the nature of creatures to be simply frozen permanently in the world of imperfection. Rather, we are constantly (infinitely and therefore without ever reaching our goal) striving toward God.

For Gregory God is to be understood first as . . . an unanticipated beauty, longed for, but without certain hope, . . . 'seen' only by the infinite inflaming of desire, whose savor draws one on into ever greater dimensions of his glory, so that one is always at the beginning of one's pilgrimage toward him, always discovering and entering into greater dimensions of his beauty.

Both God and creatures are always in motion, a motion inspired by beauty.

Talk of beauty in theology leads Hart to the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988). Balthasar is often identified these days as a "conservative" because of his views on the role of women and some other hot-button topics among Catholics. But in his openness to the Protestant theology of Karl Barth, his hope for universal salvation, and his understanding of Christ as the one who is present in suffering even with those who have rejected God, Balthasar was anything but theologically conservative. His three multivolume works—on theological aesthetics, theological drama and theological logic—add up to the only theological masterpiece of the 20th century in the same league with Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.

What interests Hart most about Balthasar's works is their order. Over 200 years ago, Kant wrote three great "critiques," addressing, first, what we can know; second, ethics; and third, aesthetics—and that order became standard. After all, what we can

know about the world, ourselves and God does seem like the first thing that needs to be settled, before we can ask how we should live our lives. As to what's beautiful—well, that can come as a sort of afterthought.

As Hart points out, Balthasar reversed the order. Start with aesthetics: the first thing for Christians to establish is that God is beautiful, glorious. That sets the primary context for ethics, how we ought to live our lives. What we seek to understand about the world and what we are willing to accept as mystery (questions about the nature of knowing) then follow in turn. So Hart begins his own book with a careful analysis of beauty, and his whole project is, as his subtitle notes, an “aesthetics of Christian truth.”

As he points out, we do have aesthetic reasons for our faith. Like scientists arguing in favor of a theory because of its beauty, we wonder at the infinitely complex orders of the universe, or the narrative power of the gospel, or the mystery of the liturgy. Hart is offering, he explains, “a defense of the suasive loveliness of Christian rhetoric” which regards the infinite not “in terms of a primordial and inevitable violence” but “as originally and everlastingly beautiful.”

Like Dante, Hart has written a kind of divine comedy—not in the current sense of comedy as a series of jokes, but in the old meaning of a story that ultimately ends happily. The tragic view of life invites us to admire the hero dying bravely. Hart finds that too easy, too optimistic. The hero is dead. He will someday be forgotten. Death-doomed as we are, we cannot ourselves make enough meaning to give a happy ending to our stories. Christianity, Hart believes, offers hope only on the other side of a despair worse than tragedy contemplates.

This is a hope like that of Kierkegaard's knight of faith, or those strange late Shakespeare plays in which the dead come back to life and women condemned to prostitution turn out to have remained virgins: “It places all hope and all consolation upon the insane expectation that what is lost will be given back, not as a heroic wisdom (death has been robbed of its tragic beauty) but as the gift it always was.”

In sum, from Milbank we learn that Christianity cannot prove its case but must offer a rhetoric of peace in contrast with our age's dominant Nietzschean rhetoric of violence. Gregory of Nyssa teaches that both God and creatures, in radically different ways, are always in motion inspired by love. Balthasar makes the case that theology begins with the aesthetic appreciation of God. Put the three together, and

one has the beginning of the argument of David Bentley Hart's remarkable book—part one a Milbankian treatise on theological method, part two a survey of the Trinity, creation, incarnation and eschatology influenced by Gregory and Balthasar, part three Hart's own conclusions.

What to make of it? First, there is the aforementioned difficulty. Much of the argument evolves in dialogue with the most obscure of contemporary Continental philosophers. If I counted right, the text includes untranslated quotations in five languages. While some sentences achieve a complex beauty, others verge on parodies of academic prose. I have been in this theology business for a while, and I thought I knew the vocabulary, but Hart regularly uses words I had never seen before. Sometimes his prose is complex because he is making a technical point with precision. Sometimes he is just not thinking about his audience and how to explain things for them. Sometimes, I worry, he is just showing off.

Second, for someone committed to moving from the rhetoric of violence to the rhetoric of peace, Hart is often oddly nasty in his own rhetoric: "Setting aside its atrocious oversimplifications, the problem with Tillich's approach . . ." Levinas's work "is poor philosophy—the banal tortured into counterfeit profundity, the obviously false propounded as irresistibly true . . ." "Scharlemann's treatment of traditional Christian metaphysics is surprisingly inept." And so on. Just rhetorically, this seems a bad strategy; readers inclined to doubt that these well-known figures are quite as dumb as Hart claims will begin to wonder about Hart's own assertions.

I am also frustrated by Hart's choice of conversation partners: he is always responding to one more contemporary philosopher, but the great theologians of the 20th century often get little mention. I think Wolfhart Pannenberg and above all Karl Barth are engaged in projects more like Hart's than he acknowledges, and he needs to figure out his similarities and differences with them. Maybe that's the next book.

Still, *The Beauty of the Infinite* is a major work by a really smart guy. It will not hit the best-seller list, but it will be one of the books with which other serious theologians should find themselves engaged. n