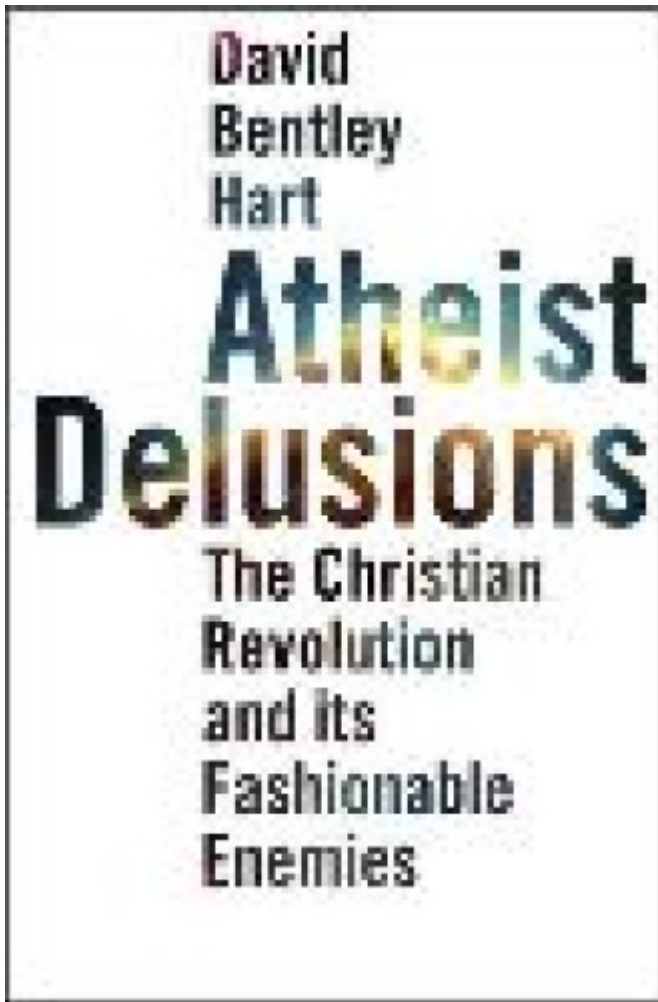


Bold apology

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [September 22, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies

David Bentley Hart
Yale University Press

Radical Orthodoxy is not a theological movement known for its accessibility. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward insist on a particular sort of Christianized Platonist metaphysics. Their game of one-upmanship asks who can thunder against modernity and the market most loudly and who can find the most obscure French philosopher as a must-read ally. They pack lecture halls at conferences and fill their mostly British departments (at Nottingham, Cambridge and Manchester respectively) with American graduate students, but they rarely settle for a clear sentence when an obscure one will do.

How surprising then that their first generation of students includes Philip Blond, a theologian who writes influential op-eds in European newspapers and advises politicians in Britain. And how much more surprising that one of Milbank's students at the University of Virginia, theologian David Bentley Hart, would publish a book like *Atheist Delusions*. It is a work of piercing Christian apologetics, in the vein of C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* but more sophisticated and bracing, aimed at the same Barnes & Noble crowd that is the New Atheists' target audience. It often had me wanting to convert all over again.

Hart's first book, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, set academics to buzzing but was hardly more accessible than Milbank's brilliant and recondite *Theology and Social Theory*. Since then Hart has written an elegant and almost accessible work of theodicy in response to the Indonesian tsunami of 2004 (*The Doors of the Sea*) and a genuinely readable and beautifully produced volume on all of church history (*The Story of Christianity*). Academics are rarely bold enough to deal in big ideas anymore, but Hart has the brilliance and chutzpah to do it. If you're not reading Hart, you should be—he might be the most important theologian now writing in English.

The problem is that Hart seems to know he's the smartest guy around. When he calls Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* "the most lucrative novel ever written by a borderline illiterate," readers (like me) who agree with the judgment laugh out loud. The tens of millions who read Brown likely do not. When he recounts the standard scientific history of enlightened Greece, the barbarous Christian Dark Ages, and the dawning of light in modernity, he calls it a "simple and enchanting tale, easily followed and utterly captivating in its explanatory tidiness," then charges that "its sole defect is that it happens to be false in every identifiable detail," we who are in the know get our jollies, but he is unlikely to convert the skeptic. One searches *Atheist Delusions* in vain for a judgment made without absolute certainty. A friend

far more orthodox and well read than I says, “When Hart argues for the Trinity he makes me want to be Unitarian.”

Hart has no time for tepidness on the part of Christianity’s antagonists. Julian, Constantine’s nephew, tried to reimpose ancient paganism on his Roman subjects, seeing clearly that a Christian civilization would compromise everything he held dear. Nietzsche was wise enough to worry that after Christianity people would no longer take on great projects of cultural creativity. By contrast, in recent years we see among “Christianity’s most fervent detractors” a “considerable decline in standards.” The New Atheists, it seems, suffer from insufficient boldness.

Christianity, in Hart’s thinking, does not: “The Christian view of human nature is wise precisely because it is so very extreme.” It is bold enough when rightly practiced, as it has been by Christian lights through history. Troublingly, those lights seem to be everyone who agrees with Hart; Christians who do evil are only nominal believers, in his view, so their bad deeds can roll off genuine Christians’ consciences. This can go to bizarre extremes: the Crusades were a gasp of dying barbaric gallantry, and the Reformation succeeded only where it aided modernity’s rebellion against the church. I find Hart most satisfying when he complicates the beloved stories of secularists and least when he mimics their tendency to pronounce their own side all good and the other side all bad.

Hart is neither blind to Christian misdeeds nor shaken by them. It is fully appropriate to deplore Christian wrongs, he argues, but paganism, whether ancient or modern, has no grounds for such tongue clucking because it has no morality to betray. And further, it is not Christian civilization but modernity that has the most sins to confess (or would if it had recourse to the confessional). Hart defines modernity as a particular view of freedom—unencumbered by the old gods, God, or anything or anyone else. Christendom, he writes, “could generally reckon its victims only in the thousands. But in the new age, the secular state, with all its hitherto unimagined capacities, could pursue its purely earthly ideals and ambitions only if it enjoyed the liberty to kill by the millions.”

The single most interesting contribution of Hart’s book is its insistence that we are all Christians now—in moral temperament. We would not value the individual person, or even understand the concept of personhood, were it not for the “Christian interruption” of paganism ancient and new. Peasants who stood up to empires were understood to have gotten what they deserved when they were crucified. Only “in

the light cast backward . . . by the empty tomb” did Christians come to see one crucified peasant as the embodiment of grace unimaginable. So too, slowly but unstoppably, were millions of others of all nations able to see each soul as infinitely precious, as a bearer of the divine image, confirmation of God’s creative power and mercy. There is a reason even secularists tend to see children with Down syndrome as “resplendent with divine glory, ominous with an absolute demand upon our consciences.” Hart concludes with a stirring call for Christians to remember the wisdom, and perhaps reenter the habits of life, of ancient desert monastics.

Hart’s work is the only response to the New Atheists by someone sufficiently familiar with (and even in love with) ancient Christian doctrine as to be able to express forthrightly what loss of the religion of the God-man would mean: a return to man-gods who grab divinity for themselves at the expense of the weak.