



THE ONE THEOLOGY BOOK ALL ATHEISTS REALLY SHOULD READ?

AN REVIEW ARTICLE ON THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD: BEING, CONSCIOUSNESS, BLISS BY DAVID BENTLEY HART

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David Hart is not well known in Protestant circles or outside North America, but perhaps he should be. He is a lay, Eastern Orthodox theologian, a feisty social commentator, and a very competent philosopher as well. He is probably best known for his demolition of the “new atheists” in *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*; and before that for his *The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?* and *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*.¹ This new

¹ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2009); idem. *The Doors of the Sea: Where was God in the Tsunami?* 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2005; 2011); idem. *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

volume continues his deconstruction of unbelief in several, perhaps surprising, ways, alongside a somewhat novel, challenging and potentially helpful re-statement of the cogent plausibility of theistic faith.² The witty, polemical and erudite style for which he is well known is present as well. The genre of the book embraces both philosophical theology and constructive apologetics. Hart insists that he is not attempting to prove God but that he does want to demonstrate the utter inevitability of such belief. He repeatedly affirms that he wants to contrast what a theist concludes from a God-saturated universe with

² David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God, Being Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2013). US\$16.99 (paperback) 376 pp. ISBN 978-0-300-16684-2.

the atheist's conception of a God-less universe, and to explain and defend what theists mean by "God" from atheistic misrepresentation. Any long, tightly argued and philosophically astute volume defies easy summary; but several themes are constantly woven into Hart's argument and provide a framework for what he has to say.

THE MEANING OF "GOD"

One of the major tasks that Hart sets himself is to expose and demolish contemporary caricatures of God, including some Christian misrepresentations. His aim, he says, is both to reveal the persuasive power of theism's portrayal of "God" and to demonstrate how it embraces a rationally coherent, and emotionally and aesthetically satisfying clarification of the universal human experience of the reality that is the living God. He begins by arguing that the word "God" is so poorly defined, both in unbelieving as well as in some Christian circles, that the very word itself can be hopelessly vague (which is the reason Christians can sometimes say to atheist or agnostic caricatures of God: "I don't believe in such a being either!"). In public debate about belief in God "often the contending parties are not even talking about the same thing; and I would go so far as to say that on most occasions none of them is talking about God in any coherent sense at all."³ In fact, he claims, whatever it is that the new atheists reject it is, in terms of their own understanding, not God as understood by any of the major theistic traditions. They often simply ignore "how the word 'God' functions in the intellectual traditions of the developed religions..." (2) To acknowledge that the God rejected by the new atheists does not exist is an "altogether painless concession to make" (23). At the very least, Hart's insistence on Christian clarity about the meaning of "God" could help diminish the frequency of promiscuous Christian God-talk and remind talkative Protestants of the helpfulness of Hart's own Orthodox appeals to the "apophatic" tradition: the wise necessity of silence before the God who cannot be adequately described in merely human categories.

³ *The Experience of God*, 1. Further page references are bracketed into the text. The "public debates" Hart has in mind were the subject of his 2009 work, *Atheist Delusions*, his demolition of the so-called "new atheists" (Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris).

At the same time, however, Hart does make two concessions about such talk. Although he is going to appeal to the world's major religious traditions, he has no time for the "gods" who inhabit the religions: "Any gods who might be out there do not transcend nature but belong to it... Of such gods there may be an endless diversity, while of God there can only be one." And Hart also apologises to atheists for the distortions caused by fundamentalist literalism. In fact, "there would not be so many slapdash popular atheist manifestoes... if there were not so many soft and inviting targets out there to provoke them" (24). Elsewhere in the book, the excesses of a totalising Darwinism are also exposed.

But perhaps Hart's most controversial thesis (about which this reviewer admits advance scepticism when he heard of it) is his assertion that universal global religious experience points inexorably to the God of classical theism. To quote him:

To speak of "God" properly – to use the word in a sense consonant with the teachings of orthodox Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Hinduism, Baha'i, a great deal of antique paganism, and so forth – is to speak of the one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things (30).

In other words, having established the meaning of the word "God," he then demonstrates how the word actually functions in the world's major religions. He concludes that there is an essential continuity between humanity's lived experience of reality and the ultimate reality to which that experience clearly points.

The "phenomenology of religion" is my academic speciality and I was persuaded by the sure-footed way that Hart navigates his way through the metaphysical complexities of the religions. This appeal to the religions is, to be sure, not the usual Protestant starting point (although some evidentialist apologists use rather more modest versions of it). I do not think that Protestants can respond by saying that Hart isn't really talking about the living God, given that he does employ classical Christian language (as seen above) to describe the reality to which this human experience points. The word "experience" in the book's title will also worry some Protestants, but what Hart intends is to point out that the common human experiences of "being,"

of “consciousness” and of “bliss” (or their religious-cultural equivalents) are completely inexplicable in a world of sheer materialistic naturalism. And then to argue that,

to say that God is being, consciousness, and bliss is also to say that he is the one reality in which all our existence, knowledge, and love subsist, from which they come and to which they go, and that therefore he is somehow present in even our simplest experiences of the world, and is approachable by way of a contemplative and moral refinement of that experience... These three words are not only a metaphysical explanation of God, but also a phenomenological explanation of the human encounter with God (44).

Can this appeal to ubiquitous global religious experience be sustained, theologically speaking? Yes; as long as several qualifications are made. The first is that the appeal is not, of course, an endorsement of the religions *as developed systems* with their often distinctively different ritual, ethical, social, institutional, experiential and material dimensions. Nor is it to endorse *every* claim to divine encounter in the religions; no Christian (or Buddhist or Muslim) makes such a claim about their own tradition, let alone all or any of the others. The links with both “general” and “special” revelation (perhaps by means of the biblical foundations for a *Logos* Christology, and an appeal to the continuity-discontinuity and fulfilment paradigms) need also to be made clear. Jesus’s rather unJewish openness to the Gentiles and Samaritans he met could also be employed.

DEMOLITION OF NATURALISM

A second major intention of the book is the demolition of naturalism – the philosophical faith-assumption that nature is a closed system whose every feature is caused by and explainable by matter alone, and that nothing exists beyond the physical order. Hart assembles his persuasive analysis of and then, rejection of naturalism across the three lengthy chapters that make up the bulk of the volume: one each on being, consciousness, and bliss (the three terms that are the subtitle of the book). Although Hart’s intentions are generally positive – the affirmation of the reality of God – he employs these three dimensions of human experience to pose questions that he believes the

philosophical naturalist cannot plausibly and coherently answer: Why is there something rather than nothing? What makes reasoning possible? Why do we love? In other words, there are three dimensions of universal human experience that are impossible or nearly impossible to explain within the assumptions of philosophical naturalism. What follows is a comprehensive demolition of naturalism, an exercise that he summarises as follows:

Naturalism is a picture of the whole of reality that cannot, according to its own intrinsic premises, address the being of the whole; it is a metaphysics of the rejection of metaphysics, a transcendental certainty of the impossibility of transcendental truth, and so requires an act of pure credence logically immune to any verification... Naturalism’s claim that, by confining itself to purely material explanations for all things, it adheres to the only sure path of verifiable knowledge is nothing but a feat

of sublimely circular thinking: physics explains everything, which we know because anything physics cannot explain does not exist, which we know because whatever exists must be explicable by physics, which we know because physics explains

everything. There is something here of the mystical (77).

Again, Hart is confident that his alternative, as affirmed by the ubiquitous human experience of reality is, in fact, the God of classical theism. What is distinctly novel and creative about Hart’s configuration of his argument is that he frames it in terms of being, consciousness, and bliss (as we shall see). “These three words are not only a metaphysical explanation of God, but also a phenomenological explanation of the human encounter with God” (44).

DREAM-LIKE FORGETFULNESS OF GOD

Before outlining Hart’s positive affirmations in a little more detail, we might also note his warning that effort will be required to wake Western people from the dream-like trance of forgetfulness about and neglect of God that they currently inhabit. Why, he asks, does naturalism seem plausible this side of the Enlightenment – at least in the global north (New Zealand included, of course)? After all, he believes that “evidence for or against the reality of God... saturates every moment of the experience of existence, every employment of reason, every

act of consciousness, every encounter with the world around us” (34). But one consequence of this very totality (God as everywhere and always present) is that it prompts a dream-like neglect; an example of familiarity breeding contempt? And, the “reason the very concept of God has become at once so impoverished, so thoroughly mythical, and ultimately so incredible for so many modern persons is not because of all the interesting things we have learned over the past few centuries, but because of all the vital things we have forgotten” (328). In other words, the loss of God within Western consciousness is not an example of enlightened progress but of dream-like forgetfulness.

This ability to recognize God in his creation is, of course, a consequence of “general revelation” which Hart develops as the three modes of revelation whose discussion occupies most of the book.

BEING: WHY IS THERE SOMETHING RATHER THAN NOTHING?

Hart begins chapter 3 (“Being”) with the assertion by Plato and Aristotle that philosophy begins in the experience of wonder. Hart expands this insight; “the beginning of all serious thought” starts not only with the experience of wonder but “in a moment of unsettling or delighted surprise” (87) that leads to reflection on the sheer givenness of reality. God’s revelation as “being” is, of course, a theme in the Areopagus address: “[God] gives life and breath and all things... in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:25b, 28a). In an appealing application of the classical argument, Hart appeals to the experience of the captivating moments when humans experience a startling awareness of the world’s contingency, an “abiding amazement” that “everything one knows exists in an irreducibly gratuitous way: ‘what it is’ has no logical connection with the reality ‘that it is’” (88). Hart nicely illustrates from the philosopher, Richard Taylor, who imagines a man strolling in a forest and coming across a large translucent sphere; and then comments:

Naturally, he would immediately be taken aback by the sheer strangeness of the thing, and would wonder how it should happen to be there. More to the point, he would certainly never be able to believe that it just happened to be there without any cause, or without any possibility of further explanation; the very idea would be absurd. But, adds Taylor, what

that man has not noticed is that he might ask the same question equally well about any other thing in the woods too, a rock or a tree no less than this outlandish sphere, and fails to do so only because it rarely occurs to us to interrogate the ontological pedigrees of the things to which we are accustomed (90–91).

The example leads into a long discussion of contingency (the way in which everything is dependent on something else) as Hart relentlessly pursues the question “Why is there something rather than nothing?” in terms of the sheer givenness of reality, a givenness that does not have to be. Hart rehearses the near-universal agreement among classical thinkers that since everything we encounter is utterly dependent upon (meaning “caused by”) other dependent causes, such an “order of ubiquitous conditionality” could never supply a “source of existence as such” (105). Only an *unconditioned* source of being could supply an

ultimate explanation – given the absurdity of an infinite regress of conditional, dependent beings. This is why the classical religious traditions speak of an “unconditioned and eternally sustaining source

of being” which alone can supply an explanation for the existence of the world’s dependent beings. All of which is why “there simply cannot be a natural explanation of existence as such; it is an absolute logical impossibility. The most a materialist account of existence can do is pretend that there is no real problem to be solved (though only a tragically inert mind could really dismiss the question of existence as uninteresting, unanswerable, or unintelligible)” (44–45).

CONSCIOUSNESS

Alongside the experience of sheer being as “our experience of the world awakens us to the strangeness – the utter fortuity and pure givenness – of existence” (152) there is another phenomenon: “no less wonderful than the being of things is our consciousness of them...” And yet consciousness “cannot be explained in any purely physiological terms at all” (153–54). The chapter continues with an analysis of mechanical or naturalist accounts (often reductionist denials) of consciousness or the mind. Hart’s conclusion is that materialism cannot account for the existence of consciousness, or trust the conclusions of the human mind. However, despite the sophisticated thoroughness of this lengthy discussion of consciousness and

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the philosophy of mind, many readers will find the chapter to be tediously full of problems about which they care rather little. If so, they might move to the final pages of the chapter (234–37) in which God, as infinite consciousness, offers an altogether simpler and more plausible account of the self-transcending consciousness possessed by creatures made in the image of such a Being who is

the logical order of all reality, the ground both of the subjective rationality of mind and the objective rationality of being, the transcendent or indwelling Reason or Wisdom by which mind and matter are both informed and in which both participate... God is never without his Logos, the divine Wisdom, in and through whom the world is created, ordered, and sustained (234–35).

BLISS / LOVE / DESIRE

In chapter 5 (“Bliss”) Hart turns his attention to the third mode of God’s self-revelation: the desire and the longing for God of which the Psalmist, for example, writes – or, in Hart-speak, a “longing for the ideal comprehensibility of things, and a natural orientation of the mind toward that infinite horizon that is being itself” (239). The ubiquitous quest for goodness, truth, and beauty is the mind’s search for its true fulfilment. We are made by God not only to know God, but to desire him above all else. This is Augustine’s restless heart seeking rest in God; it is the unquenchable human desire for God that the theologians of the early church saw in their Greek, Roman and other forbears and is apparent in the longing of countless Christian and other mystics over the centuries.

This is because, in God, the fullness of being is also a perfect act of infinite consciousness that, wholly possessing the truth of being in itself, forever finds its consummation in boundless delight. The Father knows his own essence perfectly in the mirror of the Logos and rejoices in the Spirit who is the “bond of love” or “bond of glory” in which divine being and divine consciousness are perfectly joined” (248),

to cite a rare passage in which the trinitarianism of Hart’s Eastern Orthodoxy is discernible.

So, by way of summary:

to say that God is being, consciousness, and bliss is also to say that he is the one reality in

which all our existence, knowledge and love subsist, from which they come and to which they go, and that therefore he is somehow present in even our simplest experience of the world, and is approachable by way of a contemplative and moral refinement of that experience (44).

This is a majestic portrayal of the living God who soars majestically above all our attempts to domesticate him: not only the source of all being, but also “the final cause of all creation, the end toward which all things are moved, the power of infinite being that summons all things into existence from nothingness and into union with itself” (286).

ILLUSION AND REALITY

In a final chapter, “Illusion and Reality,” Hart returns to the dynamics of dreaming and forgetfulness and uses them shrewdly to reverse some central themes of the debates between atheism

and religious faith over the past century or so. He does this by describing atheism as a religion of consolation, the opiate of unbelief, and “one of those religions of consolation whose purpose is not to engage the mind or will with the mysteries of being but merely to

provide a palliative for existential grievances and private disappointments. Popular atheism is not a philosophy but a therapy” (305; the reason, he says, why the books of the new atheists always outsell his!). Perhaps this is why there is a certain cultural inevitability about popular atheism. Humanity has, however, often paid a substantial price for it in some of the disastrous consequences of God-less naturalism: social Darwinism, racist eugenics, and some of the ideologies of both Stalin and Hitler – not to mention other tendencies towards violent and dehumanizing systems of control that derive from philosophical naturalism (307–9).

According to Hart, part of the therapeutic appeal of naturalism is its current set of addictive infatuations: scientism, capitalism, and, above all, consumerism.

Late modern society is principally concerned with purchasing things, in ever greater abundance and variety, and so has to strive to fabricate an ever greater number of desires to gratify, and to abolish as many limits and prohibitions upon desire as it can. Such a society is already implicitly atheist and so must slowly but relentlessly apply itself to

the dissolution of transcendent values. It cannot allow ultimate goods to distract us from proximate goods. Our sacred writ is advertising, our piety is shopping, our highest devotion is private choice. God and the soul too often hinder the purely acquisitive longings upon which the market depends, and confront us with values that stand in stark rivalry to the only truly substantial value at the center of the social universe: the price tag. So it really was only a matter of time before atheism slipped out of the enclosed gardens of academe and down from the vertiginous eyries of high cosmopolitan fashion and began expressing itself in crassly vulgar form. It was equally inevitable that, rather than boldly challenging the orthodoxies of its age, it would prove to be just one more anodyne item on sale in the shops and would be enthusiastically fêted by a vapid media culture not especially averse to the idea that there are no ultimate values, but only final prices. In a sense, the triviality of the movement is its chief virtue. It is a diverting alternative to thinking deeply. It is a narcotic. In our time, to strike a lapidary phrase, irreligion is the opiate of the bourgeoisie, the sigh of the oppressed ego, the heart of a world filled with tantalizing toys (312–13).

FINALLY, A SURPRISING ENDING?

Hart does not conclude his volume with a final burst of argumentation but with a challenging appeal to contemplative prayer. Such prayer, he suggests, is the most appropriate and fitting means towards an extended knowledge of God by those who are genuinely interested in seeking God. Hart hints at the necessity of such an encounter earlier in the book when he writes that he has “begun to vest less faith in certain forms of argument, or at least in their power to persuade the unwilling, and more in certain sorts of experience – certain ways of encountering reality...” (84) We can and do encounter “the mystery of being... within every encounter with the things of the world... Above all, one should wish to know whether our consciousness of that mystery directs us towards a reality that is, in its turn, conscious of us” (151). But he is explicit in this final chapter:

If one is really to seek “proof” one way or the other regarding the reality of God, one must recall that what one is seeking is a particular experience, one wholly unlike an encounter with some mere finite object of cognition or some particular thing that might be found among other things. One is seeking an ever

deeper communion with a reality that at once exceeds and underlies all other experiences (320).

Hart points out that the contemplative and experiential disciplines are “peculiarly suited to (for want of a better word) an ‘empirical’ exploration” of the mystery of God (324). This approach is reminiscent of the great Thomas Aquinas at the end of his life, and Sarah Coakley among contemporary theologians.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Hart’s theological intelligence is everywhere apparent. He draws on the writings of a formidably wide range of theologians and philosophers, past and present, Eastern and Western, Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox, and their engagements with philosophy, metaphysics, global religions, and contemporary debates in the worlds of science (including evolutionary theory and the cognitive sciences). However, one consequence of this erudition is that the parts of the work will be difficult reading for those without some grasp of the first principles and basic vocabulary of both theology and philosophy. Nonetheless, the burden is considerably lightened by means of the delightful readability of the book; in fact, Hart displays an engaging sparkling, exuberant and often witty style. Even the occasional very long endnote is written in the same way, and the book concludes with a wonderfully instructive eight page “Bibliographical Postscript” in which Hart discusses his sources along with instructive suggestions for further reading. A detailed index also helps.

Alongside these strengths, possible weaknesses will also be apparent to some readers. For example, there are his generally positive assumptions about the role and sufficiency of human reason in the knowing of God. Hart has some confidence in “reason’s power to illuminate reality” – but he also acknowledges that philosophy (he has analytical philosophy primarily in mind) can function as “an excellent vehicle for avoiding thinking intelligently at all” (47). As well as the creaturely limitations of human reason, other Protestant critics might consider that Hart underplays the seriousness of sin, especially as an impediment to the knowledge of God. His dominant image for sin is that of forgetfulness and dreaming rather than the more usual Protestant emphases on alienation and rebellion against God. (Hart, as Orthodox, does not inherit the Augustinian framing of human nature in terms of original sin and the fall.) Nonetheless, we have already noted Hart’s trenchant outline of some of the devastating and disastrous consequences of godless materialism and unbelief,

updated by him to include the dehumanising and corrosive dimensions of scientism, capitalism and consumerism. Nor is he afraid to label materialism as “audacity” and “barbarism” and to point out that, “as often as not, the history of philosophy has been a history of prejudices masquerading as principles...” (46).

The absence of an explicitly christological dimension also deserves comment. After all, in Hart’s own Orthodox tradition, incarnational faith has been the heart of Christian faith. However, the clear intention of Hart’s volume is to clarify the theistic (rather than the christological) centre of faith by pointing to *shared universal* dimensions of divine revelation rather than the *historical particularity* that is found in Jesus Christ – somewhat along the lines of Paul’s universal rather than particular starting points in Acts chapters 14 and 17 when he addresses non-Jewish audiences. For the purposes of this book Hart chooses theocentric rather than christocentric starting points. The (near-) absence of trinitarianism might also draw negative comment. Nonetheless, there is a nicely implicit fit between Hart’s description of God as “infinite being, infinite consciousness, infinite bliss” – as implied by the book’s subtitle – and the traditional Christian affirmation of God’s triune character. Hart is not here defending the Trinity, but simply “God,” as universally experienced and known within ubiquitous global religious experience. Even so, when he asks the questions around which he arranges his three central chapters (“Why is there something rather than nothing? What makes reasoning possible? Why do we love?”) it is not at all difficult to see how the answers relate closely to the Father-Creator, Son-Logos, and the Spirit as the bond of love. The derivation of the book’s subtitle is actually explained by Hart in detail that includes explicitly trinitarian categories as found in Indian Christian theology (42–45). (And there are other trinitarian allusions in the volume as well.) In other words, the genre of the book is not a defence of trinitarian and christological orthodoxy but a kind of culturally-aware prolegomenon to it. As with any author, it is important that we distinguish between what he is trying to do and what he is not, and most preachers, apologists and theological teachers will have no difficulty in adding the biblical and other theological foundations that Hart himself assumes but does not explicitly outline.

CONCLUSION

This is a volume that is unlikely to be found at airport bookstalls, or even in popular Christian bookstores. But a commentator in the (liberal)

Guardian newspaper headlined his blog’s review of *The Experience of God* with “The one theology book all atheists really should read.”⁴ Who else should read it? Theological teachers, preachers and students will be one group of grateful recipients among those who care about “faith seeking understanding.” This reviewer may not be the only reader to be made uncomfortably thankful to have had some long-cherished misgivings (about the validity of an experiential and multi-religious basis for theistic belief) helpfully shaken and stirred.

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4 Oliver Burkeman, “The One Theology Book All Atheists Really Should Read: What if Most Modern Arguments against Religious belief have been attacking the Wrong God all Along?” *The Guardian*, 14 January 2014. Online: <http://www.theguardian.com/news/oliver-burkeman-s-blog/2014/jan/14/the-theology-book-atheists-should-read>. Accessed 7 October 2014.