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by Peter Augustine Lawler, Professor of Government at Berry College

A review of *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*
by David Bentley Hart (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009) from *Intercollegiate Review*, Fall 2010

This brilliant, stunningly erudite, and powerfully provocative work begins as a tough criticism of the naive stupidity of the books of our popularizing “new atheists”—the likes of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett. Those best-selling authors have made atheism newly fashionable by spinning it shamelessly to appeal to our “sophisticated” prejudices. They criticize the immoral effects of Christianity from an anti-cruelty, pro-freedom, pro-Enlightenment perspective. They paint a historical picture of the scientifically advanced civilizations of the ancient Greeks and Romans, reasonably adorned with an easygoing polytheism. That admirable world was ruined, they explain, by the repressive disruption occasioned by the superstitious belief that there is only one, true, personal God.

Hart’s “governing conviction” is that what our new atheists regard as modern progress in the direction of rational liberation is itself a reactionary superstition. The modern Enlightenment has actually been a rebellion against the whole truth about our natures, about who we are, and about the true source of our freedom and dignity. And that rebellion has been not so much radical as selective and self-indulgent. By compassionately privileging personal freedom and human rights over what they believe they know through science, the new atheists remain parasitic on the key Christian insight about who we are. Their attachment to the humane virtues makes no sense outside the Christian claim for the unique and irreplaceable dignity of every human person. That claim is completely unsupported by either ancient (Aristotelian) or modern (Darwinian) science. The sentimental preferences of our atheists are really those of a Christianity without Christ.

Hart repeatedly highlights, and shares, the contempt of the old atheist Nietzsche for the cowardly unsustainability of such groundless preferences. It was Nietzsche who prophesied that our fading, subjective experiences of dignity, freedom, and love have a very limited future as merely beneficial illusions. It was Nietzsche, “the most prescient philosopher of nihilism,” who

predicted the coming of a world full of Last Men lacking the great aspirations or profound longings that are the foundation of cultural creativity. For Hart, what follows Christianity is inevitably a post-Christian world that's all about nothing. Still, much more than Nietzsche, Hart sees the pre-Christian world as also, in a different way, being all about nothing.

Hart describes for us a pre-Christian world that was cruel and capricious— reminding us forcefully of the torture and murder that ancient paganism tolerated as a matter of course, precisely because it regarded particular persons as unreal. The truth was best seen by the philosopher who became dead to himself, who resigned himself to the ephemeral insignificance of his particular existence. Christianity was, in a way, the slave revolt Nietzsche described, a “cosmic rebellion” against the enslavement of each of us to natural and political necessity. Christ, the Christians claimed, freed us from the limitations of our merely biological natures through his perfect reconciliation of God's nature and man's nature. He was, the Nicene fathers concluded, fully God and fully man, and his redemption was to divinize every man. Christ freed each of us for unlimited love for every other person made in God's image; Christ was the foundation of a virtuous way of life based on a vision of the good that has no pagan counterpart. Charity to all became the virtue most in accord with the truth about who we are. For Hart, the wonder is that anyone could have imagined the ideals of the Christian faith in the first place, given that those ideals had so little support in any pre-Christian conception of who we are.

It is barely too strong to say that, for Hart, Christ transformed each of us from being nobody to being somebody—indeed, a somebody of infinite value. None of us is destined to be a slave, and death has been overcome. We are no longer defined by our merely biological natures, because our nature is now to be both human and divine. From one view, there is no empirical evidence that death has been overcome for each particular human being. From another, the evidence is the unprecedented virtue flowing from the unconditional love present among the early Christians and that virtue's indirect, historical transformation of the broader social and political world. The change in who we are is the result of a deepened human inwardness or self-consciousness: Christ made each of us irreducibly deeper by infusing divinity into every nook and cranny of our natures.

Every feature of the personal liberation praised by our new atheists and our egalitarian autonomy boosters generally came into the world in Christian communities. Even the Stoics didn't approach the Christians in their indifference to a person's social status. The Christians were the first to be completely opposed to slavery; the first for raising women to equality in marriage and elsewhere; the first for faithfulness in monogamous marriage; the first for the egalitarian brotherhood of all men. For the Christians, the community of personal love wasn't some otherworldly hope. Rather, that community was formed by obligations given to divinized beings here and now. Our divinization through Christ includes what is called life after death, but we can live lovingly liberated from death even before we die.

A big difference between Hart and Nietzsche, it should go without saying, is that Hart doesn't hate the modern world insofar as it is a Christian accomplishment. There is ennobling truth in the egalitarianism of secular Christianity; our secularism is not simply the emptying out of all human content from our lives. Nevertheless, Hart should make clearer than he does that he actually affirms much of what's called modern social progress in the direction of the liberation of

women, the technological liberation of many from mere subsistence, the erosion of unjust conventional hierarchies, and even the affirmation of universal human rights. The modern abolitionists and the fervent partisans of civil rights, Hart repeatedly observes, were either Christians or consciously inspired by Christianity. Liberty without love is an illusion, or at least a distortion, and there's no denying that modern political liberation was often inspired by a love for free beings, as well as by the love of being free.

Still, Hart never forgets that the effects of Christianity on political life are always incomplete and compromised. That was true of both the Roman Empire and imperial Christendom, as well as the British and American empires. The *polis* or nation or empire can be influenced or limited by the presence of the Christian community, but always against politics' own grain. Hart's view seems to be that all political life is unworthy of divinized beings, and part of our true liberation is from politics' "inherent violence." For Hart, it was a tragedy that the church as an institution ever played a role in political life or assumed responsibility for national or imperial unity—and so he has little nostalgia for the comprehensive dream that was Christendom. Much of his book is a description of "the history of a constant struggle between the power of the gospel to alter and shape society and the power of the state to absorb every useful institution into itself." But he should have made clearer that the modern separation of the nation from the church—in, for example, the American case—cannot be regarded as a tragedy for the church, so long as the gospel has retained some influence. The separation of church and state, Hart acknowledges, is a distinctively Christian accomplishment. The tragedy, of course, was the nation's eventual liberation from Christianity's chastening influence—a liberation, Hart should have added, that is surely least complete in America.

The Christian view that our freedom is for love's sake also included the thought that we cannot and should not change our God-given natures; we are, by nature, divinized beings free from merely biological limitations and so free for deathless, unconditioned love. The post-Christian affirms that we are meant to be free, but without any sense that we have been freed from death or necessity. So our freedom is to be used to win, by our own efforts, what the Christian God had promised to provide. Loving unconditionally from faith in an imaginary divinity is for suckers, but there's no denying that this faith showed us that we are, in fact, free—and we won't be satisfied until we've used that freedom to overcome death for ourselves. We are not, by nature, divine beings: there's no evidence for that without faith. But perhaps we can employ our freedom to make ourselves divine—free from the impersonal limits of our biological natures. The modern thought is that faith in God can be replaced by a more reasonable faith in the unprecedented historical future, faith in what we can do for ourselves in a basically hostile world.

Having been given nothing that corresponds to the high opinion he has of his personal significance (which he learned, indirectly, from Christianity), the anxious modern person believes, nihilistically, that he is on his own to make his world worthy of him. He is not nihilistic, we might say, in his own case. No Christian or post-Christian is nihilistic in his own case, and his "delusion" concerning his own personal significance is at the core of the always-futile Aristotelian (Straussian) and Darwinian criticisms of the basically Christian pretensions of all modern persons. The secular Christian incoherence that Hart repeatedly criticizes is that no person is really a materialist in his own case, even though he "knows" he has no scientific

reason why he should not be. From one view, modern nihilism always amounts to the position that, after the revelation or discovery of the Christian insight about personal freedom, the individual person is a persistent, irreducibly mysterious leftover from the world described by science. How can the person be happy or secure while believing personal love—love worthy of me—and personal existence itself are, objectively, illusions? It is little wonder that Christianity without Christ leads to the conclusion that we should transform nature—and especially our own natures—to be worthy of our freedom.

It is not Hart's intention to provide aid and comfort to those—from new atheists to conservative Darwinians, Straussians, and many Heideggerians—who wish that Christianity had never had such a profound influence in the world. But he does say that after Christ's incarnation the alternatives are Christianity or nothing, and he sees no prospect of reversing the declining cultural influence of Christianity anytime soon. There can be no return to the prudence of the ancient world, which was based on an insight about our natural limitations that is rejected by free persons. There seems to be no return, for now, to a widespread belief that our natures have

been freed from death by the divine gift of the incarnation of God. In Hart's view, the Christian insight about who we are will not completely disappear, but its future for now will be in small countercultural communities that will be increasingly alienated from a world that will be dominated, at best, by apathetic Last Men and at worst by eugenic transformationalists employing all means necessary to win our final freedom from nature. Christianity discredited every other understanding of god or human idealism, and so in the absence of Christ—Nietzsche and Hart agree—God more or less inevitably seems dead.

Hart says in one place that the genius of Christianity lies in its extremism. Christians contrast the intractable selfishness, cruelty, violence, and melancholic hopelessness of our merely biological natures with the unconditioned personal love that can govern our divinized nature. Hart sometimes seems to say that Aristotle was right, in his time, about our ultimate enslavement to an impersonal logos that negates every aspiration for personal significance; then, Christ transformed us—changing our natures. But surely Christians believe that, from the beginning, the world and each of us was a divine gift. And, from the beginning, human experience was, finally, that logos is only present in persons. Only persons are open to the truth about being and human being. The Christian insight opened our eyes more fully to what we can see for ourselves about the ground for personal freedom in being itself. The personal logos affirmed by the church fathers was always more true than the impersonal logos affirmed by Aristotle and Darwin.

That's why we can say with some confidence that both Nietzsche and Hart exaggerate by describing persons today as Last Men or beings without human content or nothing—emotionally puerile and flat-souled mere consumers. And that's why we can be more hopeful about the political and cultural future of the human person than Hart seems to be. That our world is inescapably Christian or post-Christian is more good news than not about our inescapably human future. We know we are all equally not nothing, and it's not in our power to negate that truth. Still, we can and will, as Hart rightly shows, make ourselves (and others) miserable trying.

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Postmodernism Rightly Understood

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, have been widely and positively reviewed. He was the 2007 winner of the Weaver Prize for Scholarly Excellence in promoting human dignity to a broad audience.

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