

...underrated

David Bentley Hart

James Mumford praises a theologian with the wit to expose the laziness of the new atheists' arguments



A theologian who can write. A profound scholar who is pithy. A leading academic who is a master of the English language. If those sound to you like a series of oxymorons you should read David Bentley Hart, the most exciting religious writer for a generation.

Here he is on Dawkins et al: “The books of ‘the new atheists’ [are] nothing but lurchingly spasmodic assaults on whole armies of straw men.” He gives as good as he gets: Dawkins is “the zoologist and tireless tractarian” and Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith* is “extravagantly callow”. I’ll see your insult and raise you vehemence.

It’s not all rhetoric, either. Hart is clever, with the substance a lifetime of scholarship affords. This, for example, is what he has to say about the claim at the heart of philosophical naturalism, that truth is only found in material explanations of reality:

[It’s] a feat of sublimely circular thinking: physics explains everything, which we know because whatever exists must be explicable by physics, which we know because physics explains everything.

At long last we have a religious writer who can play with the big boys.

Interestingly, though, and thankfully, Hart’s punch is balanced by a rare lyricism. After the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 he wrote a moving reflection on the question of theodicy, *The Doors of the Sea*. “Far below the water’s surface,” he began, “at and beneath the ocean floor, lies a source of elemental violence so vast, convulsive, unpredictable, perennial, and destructive that one might almost be tempted to think that it is itself a particularly indomitable and infernal sort of God.” Nothing cold or clinical about this engagement with the issue of suffering.

Hart’s new book *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness and Bliss* (Yale, £18.99) has been causing a stir on both sides of the Atlantic. “The one theology book which all atheists should read,” said Oliver Burkeman in the *Guardian*, an exhortation echoed by *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat. Read it “back to back”, Douthat advised, in the middle of a heated, lengthy exchange with *New Yorker* staff writer Adam Gopnik over Hart’s arguments. Hart has bust into an arena to which few religious leaders, let alone writers, typically gain admission.

Born in 1965 and brought up in Maryland, Hart does not hail from a privileged background. At his local public (i.e. state)

school in Howard County he plunged into Latin and Greek. Outside the curriculum, he took up French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian and modern Greek; he is still fluent in them all. At the University of Maryland, he studied classics, history, world literature, religious studies and philosophy, learning to read Chinese and Sanskrit on the side. This unusually broad education also had an existential element. He was so drawn to the theology of the early church fathers that he converted to Eastern Orthodoxy aged 21.

Like G.K. Chesterton, Hart excels at overturning the lazy, ideologically-loaded narratives we have inherited. So, the wars of religion “ought really to be remembered as the first wars of the modern nation state”. They weren’t about faith at all. They were about regional princes across Europe using religious beliefs as pretexts for power-grabs. Even the history of science is skewed. Hart highlights the heliocentrism of Christian thinkers from as far back as fifth-century Alexandria.

Despite his feistiness, Hart’s intellectual projects are actually quite contained, even modest. In his book *Atheist Delusions* he doesn’t presume to proselytise. No, he simply thinks the new atheists have got it wrong about the past. He wants to set the record straight. He wants to argue for “the sheer immensity of the Western tradition’s ‘Christian interruption’”, the way its ideas—for example, about the dignity of the human being—“entered ancient society rather like a meteor from a clear sky”.

The ambition of Hart’s new book is similarly specific. *The Experience of God* attempts merely to offer a definition of the word “God” which would be recognised by all of the major religious traditions. For while the debate has raged over belief in God, the actual concept of God has “remained strangely obscure”.

“My chief purpose,” he writes, “is not to advise atheists on what I think they should believe. I want merely to make sure that they have a clear concept of what it is they claim not to believe.” Thus Hart dives into the difference between “God” and “gods” in Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism, the meaning of monotheism for Hellenistic Jews, and the three Sanskrit definitions of the divine nature: *sat* (being), *chit* (consciousness) and *ananda* (bliss).

In all of this, perhaps his greatest skill is to be apologetic—in the sense of giving an “apologia”, or reason, for religious belief—without being apologetic. To defend faith non-defensively. David Bentley Hart feels like the thinker we’ve been waiting for.