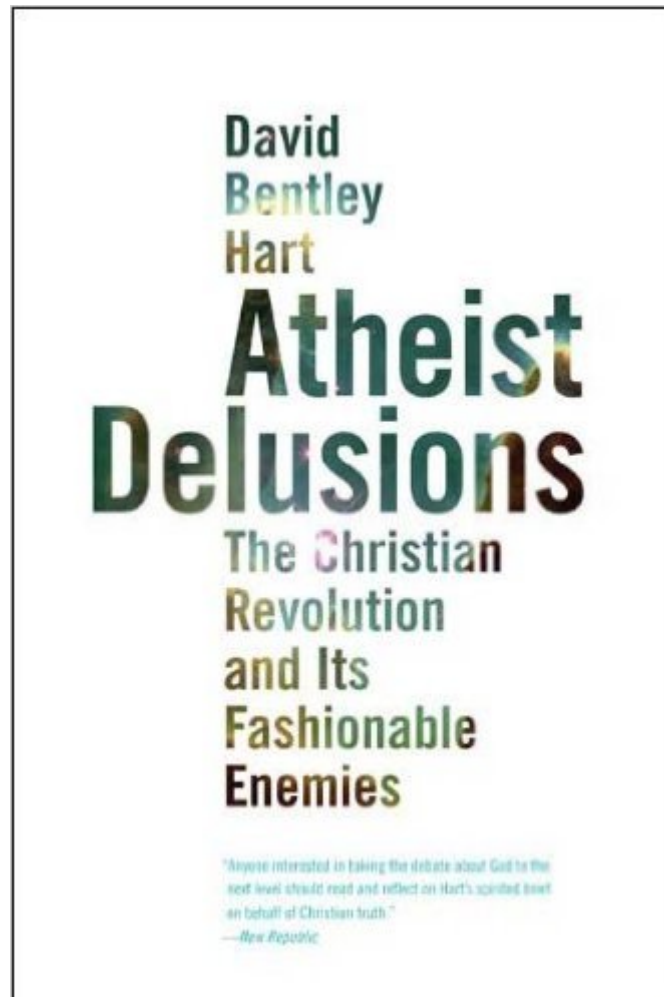


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Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution And Its Fashionable Enemies



Synopsis

In this provocative book one of the most brilliant scholars of religion today dismantles distorted religious histories offered up by Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and other contemporary critics of religion and advocates of atheism. David Bentley Hart provides a bold correction of the New Atheists' misrepresentations of the Christian past, countering their polemics with a brilliant account of Christianity and its message of human charity as the most revolutionary movement in all of Western history. Hart outlines how Christianity transformed the ancient world in ways we may have forgotten: bringing liberation from fatalism, conferring great dignity on human beings, subverting the cruelest aspects of pagan society, and elevating charity above all virtues. He then argues that what we term the Age of Reason was in fact the beginning of the eclipse of reason's authority as a cultural value. Hart closes the book in the present, delineating the ominous consequences of the decline of Christendom in a culture that is built upon its moral and spiritual values.

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Customer Reviews

To begin with, the book should probably be titled "Atheist Delusions About Ancient History." This book is not so much a debate with our Fashionable New Atheists (Dawkins, Harris, Dennett, and Hitchens -- "The Gang of Four?? :-)) It is more a long, and endlessly fascinating, revisit of Ancient History. It may not be surprising to learn that there are at least two main narratives commonly provided for "The History of Western Civilization." Here they are (very compressed): Narrative #1: The Christian Version. "The world was lost in pagan immorality and darkness; man enslaved man

and man dominated woman. Then, with the Birth of Christ, came the Divine Light, and the world was forever transformed. The barbarian, knuckle-dragging rapists of Europe were baptised and brought to Jesus, and the world got much, much better. Even today, there is no other known source of European civilization and we reject it at our peril." One of the most popular novels of all time, "Quo Vadis," is in this narrative tradition. Narrative #2: The Modernist Version. "We had the Glory of Greece and the Splendor of Rome, but alas a bunch of superstitious people completely replaced the glories of Paganism with the knuckle-dragging ignorance of Blind Faith. The result was the Dark Ages, which only ended when Heroic Forces restored the classics of Greece to a benighted Europe. Then came the Enlightenment, and Democracy, and all manner of good things, once the Europeans cast off the shackles of Faith." Arthur C. Clarke and many other modern thinkers followed this narrative. Whether you approve of my "summaries" or not, the point is that they are both tremendous oversimplifications and they are both therefore silly.

The only thing I dislike about Atheist Delusions is its title. A few other reviewers have pointed out that it seems to indicate the book will be a rebuttal of atheist writers like Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and the rest. It is not. Indeed, David Bentley Hart asserts that men like them are hardly worth attention because of the infantile level on which they argue. What Hart does, instead, is provide a history lesson for the "fashionable enemies" of Christianity. The delusions in question, Hart says, are mostly historical ones. One will not discuss religion with an atheist long before history comes up. What of the injustice of the Inquisition? The Crusades? The long-running war of religion against science? The Reformation and the subsequent wars of religion? We hear constantly that religion (read: Christianity) is the most destructive force in human history. It is Hart's purpose to debunk the delusions and historical fabrications that characterize historical arguments against Christianity. The primary focus of Hart's book, hinted at in the subtitle, is the "Christian Revolution," those first, tense centuries AD when Christianity replaced ancient paganism. The pagan era has been eulogized since in the Enlightenment as an era of peace and progress, of scientific advance that was stymied by the bigoted, book-burning Christians of the "Dark Ages." Hart shows that, while we owe much to the ancient world, it was also an irredeemably ugly place of slavery, infanticide, of callousness and hopeless reconciliation to the whims of cruel fate. Christianity, which he calls the only true revolution in history, changed everything from the bottom up--and since Christianity was first accepted among the lower classes and slaves, it changed everything quite literally from the bottom up.

Obviously there are tons of reviews here that you can read to make up your mind over the purchase

of this book, but as someone who has been on both sides of this debate, and as a trained historian and teacher of history, I can say that what I found most useful was the author's critique of so many mythical versions of history that pit religion (Christianity in particular) against reason, charity, science and history itself. At university I was indoctrinated with almost every alternate, pop-historical theory that supported a discounting of Christianity's usefulness, along with any possibility that the historical documents could have any usefulness in knowing what actually took place. The historical and exegetical gymnastics and twists that were employed by both myself and the faculty were, in retrospect, rather dishonest. But that is the post-modern milieu; distrust all ideologies (except the current one that got you your PhD thesis accepted). So I would say check the book out at the library at least. It reads very well and Hart can turn a phrase. You may even laugh out loud a few times, either because you see his point or think he is so off the mark that you cannot believe it made it into print. But let's be honest, too much of the debate ignores history and is built upon straw men- barns full of straw. Hart helps clean the floor so we can be a little more honest with our sources. As he notes, "The past is always to some extent a fiction of the present." And philosophically, he shows what seems obvious to many: the fundamental presupposition of a logical argument is not provable, but assumed. Questions about the existence or non-existence of God(s), and all epistemology, begin with begged premises that are then built upon based upon experience, history, reason, etc.

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