

# Dismantling the anti-Christian arguments from history

*Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*

David Bentley Hart

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The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies

Lita Cosner

It is popular with New Atheist authors, among others, to list historical atrocities supposedly perpetrated by Christians in the past. They argue that Christianity was responsible for the ‘Dark Ages’, oppressing women, slavery, and a whole list of other grievances. It’s these sorts of accusations that David Bentley Hart (1965–) takes on in *Atheist Delusions*. Hart is an Eastern Orthodox specialist in Patristics (Church Fathers) and a cultural commentator, and this book won the Michael Ramsey prize in Theology in May 2011.

As one may gather from the title, Hart isn’t particularly interested in a polite dialogue. Indeed, his sarcastic tendencies can be a little too much for even his ideological allies at times. But it is worth overlooking what some may consider a rhetorical weakness in the book, because Hart quickly reveals himself to be very conversant with ancient historical works—far more so, it seems, than the people whose arguments he seemingly easily dismantles. Sarcasm is not the only stylistic quirk—Hart is very florid in his writing style, making it a chore to read at points. It is hard to tell whether this diminishes as the book goes on, or whether the reader simply gets used to it after trudging through enough of his prose. But there are genuinely funny statements and inventive insults, such as where Hart calls *The Da Vinci Code*

“surely the most lucrative novel ever written by a borderline illiterate” (p. 4).

Hart does not set out to give a detailed, carefully footnoted account of the historical questions he covers—in fact it would be helpful if he did give sources more often. The lack of citations (the notes for the entire book only cover 6 pages) means that its usefulness as a launching point for research is limited. However, his main goal seems to be to undermine the ‘narrative’ of the New Atheists—their attacks against Christianity require a certain view of the ancient world and Christianity’s effect on it. Therefore he strikes back with a narrative of his own.

## Historical ignorance of New Atheists

Hart starts out by demonstrating that the New Atheists are almost entirely ignorant of the history that they cite to attack Christianity. And it is not only historical ignorance, but this carries over into other areas. Hart lampoons Richard Dawkins as

a “tireless tractarian” with an “embarrassing incapacity for philosophical reasoning”. And the late Christopher Hitchens’ *God is not Great* “raises the wild non sequitur almost to the level of a dialectical method” (pp. 3–4). He claims that he finds some forms of atheism more admirable than some forms of Christianity or religion in general: “But atheism that consists entirely of vacuous arguments afloat on oceans of historical ignorance, made turbulent by storms of strident self-righteousness, is as contemptible as any other form of dreary fundamentalism” (p. 4). It is this ignorance that he seeks to combat in the rest of the book.

Unfortunately, historical ignorance is not only limited to the New Atheists—indeed most people today believe things about the past that are wildly distorted, and Hart argues that some of this is the fault of historians who really should know better. Unfair caricatures of the medieval era, for instance, are often accepted

“... because we are so predisposed to believe not only that social morality is something that naturally evolves over time toward higher and higher expressions but also that we, today, are vastly more enlightened than those poor, uncouth, benighted brutes who slouched through the swamps of medieval fanaticism, superstition, and hypocrisy” (p. 31).

### Setting the record straight on early Christianity’s ‘war on intellectuals’

Perhaps the most useful function of *Atheist Delusions* is to refute certain accusations that are periodically thrown at Christians. For instance, in Jonathan Kirsch’s *God against the Gods*, he blamed the burning of the library at Alexandria on a Christian mob. Hart counters, citing ancient sources which blame the fire on Julius Caesar, about 100 years before Christianity came on the scene, during his war with Pompey

(p. 37). In fact, he argues that “the early church did not systematically destroy the literature of pagan antiquity, and there was no universal Christian prejudice against profane learning” (p. 39). While Christians may not always have lived up to the ideals of Scripture (Hart concedes that Christians may have been behind the burning of the Serapeum), they were often no worse than their pagan contemporaries.

A related popular myth is about the superiority of the Islamic culture during the Middle Ages, and how the Muslims preserved Aristotle’s works, which otherwise would have been lost. In fact, Byzantine scholars preserved Greek texts of all of Aristotle’s extant works (p. 49). And much of the Arab medieval scholarship was carried out by Christians (p. 50).

### Little-known historical insights

One of the most interesting aspects of Hart’s book is his seemingly effortless storytelling, which acquaints the reader with a radically different view of events and institutions which have traditionally been used to cast Christianity in the worst light possible. For instance, he recounts how, far from being an instigator of persecution, the Spanish Inquisition (figure 1) was often a voice of reason countering the hysterical secular courts. Hart writes, “it was the Catholic Church, of all the institutions of the time, that came to treat accusations of witchcraft with the most pronounced incredulity;” and “[t]he first significant objections to the reality of satanic witchcraft came from Spanish inquisitors, not from scientists” (pp. 80, 81).

### A new way to be human

Hart argues that Christianity’s biggest achievement was to create a revolution in how we think about human life. Ancient people did not think of everyone as equally human.

Rather, there was a sort of scale, with the rich, powerful, and influential at the ‘top’, while “slaves, base-born non-citizen and criminals, the utterly destitute, colonized peoples” and other ‘non-entities’ were, in the view of the society of the day, not human in the same sense (p. 168). Christianity’s declaration of equality of all people regardless of sex, nationality, or societal status was truly revolutionary, and horrifying for many:

“[I]t is all but impossible for us to recover any real sense of the scandal that many pagans naturally felt at the bizarre prodigality with which the early Christians were willing to grant full humanity to persons of every class and condition, and of either sex. ... What they saw, as they peered down upon the Christian movement from the high, narrow summit of their society, was not the understandable ebullition of long-suppressed human longings but the very order of the cosmos collapsing at its base, drawing everything down into the general ruin and obscene squalor of a common humanity” (p. 169).

Christians for the first time taught that Christian slaves were the spiritual siblings of even the richest and most powerful Christians. This great leveling caused some people as early as Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, in 379 to call for the complete abolition of slavery. In a Lent sermon that year “he reproach[ed] his parishioners not for mistreating their slaves but for daring to imagine they have the right to own other human beings in the first place” (p. 178).

“He leaves no room for Christian slaveholders to console themselves with the thought that they, at any rate, are merciful masters. ... For anyone at all, he says, to presume mastery over another person is the grossest imaginable arrogance, a challenge to and a robbery of God, to whom alone all persons belong” (p. 178).



**Figure 1.** Despite the popular misconception, the Spanish Inquisition was often an improvement over the secular courts.

This attitude also led Christians to care about the vulnerable, taking in exposed infants who were left to die, and caring for the pagan poor as well as their own. And this attractive example led many to the faith, but it also transformed wider society.

### Odd statements about John's Gospel

On the whole, Hart's statements seem responsible and fairly nuanced. However, in two places Hart promotes a bizarre view of the Gospel of John:

"The Gospel of John is a composite text, admittedly, probably incorporating earlier Gnostic or semi-Gnostic texts within itself, and so it is difficult to pronounce upon it as a whole; its style is, moreover, frequently dark and disturbing; and it definitely portrays Christ as a divine savior who descends from the world above into a cosmos ruled by evil, which is the classically Gnostic picture of the savior" (p. 137).

This is one place where it would have been helpful had Hart provided a source, given that he has strayed far from his area of expertise. First, this does not match the textual evidence we have for the Gospel of John. The first fragment of John extant is dated to the second century; some date it as

early as AD 125. There are also early quotes of the Gospel, none of which hint at it being a composite text. If this had been just a single rabbit trail, one might forgive such a regrettably misinformed statement. But then, in a different chapter, he decides to try his hand at Greek (and thereby shows that he doesn't actually know very much about Greek at all):

"As a general rule, the 'articlar' form *ho Theos*—literally, 'the God'—was the title reserved for God Most High or God the Father, while only the 'inarticlar' form *theos* was used to designate this secondary divinity. This distinction, in fact, was preserved in the prologue to John, whose first verse could justly be translated as: "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was a god" (p. 204).

Hart has seen fit to contradict every single mainstream English translation of Scripture and propose his very own translation (which happens to agree with the Jehovah's Witness translation). But in fact, the few words that Hart is discussing have been debated among Greek specialists for centuries—and the Jehovah's Witness translation has been shown to be wrong based on some very simple principles of Greek grammar. The subject and predicate

nominative in this construction are not totally interchangeable. And the anarthrous (inarticlar) form of  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  (*theos*) occurs 282 times in the New Testament, often referring to God the Father.<sup>1</sup> Only someone ignorant of the Greek would place such importance on the presence or the absence of the article. In fact, the best possibility, both from the grammar and from the context of the book of John, is that  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$  is qualitative—meaning that the *logos* has all the qualities and attributes of  $\theta\epsilon\omicron\varsigma$ —so the Word is God, or the Word is divine (in the most literal sense of the word).<sup>2</sup> But it rules out the reverse, where God is identical with the Word (but God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while the Word is only the Son).

It may seem disproportionate to dedicate such a large section of the review to a relatively minor point that is unconnected with the main thesis of the book. However, when someone makes such an irresponsible statement, it calls their other writing into question, and it makes one even more curious about all the other unique statements that have no cited sources.

### Countering the anti-Christian narrative

Hart's book does a good job of exonerating the early church of some of the 'atrocities' of which it has traditionally been accused, while having an appropriately nuanced tone where Christians were genuinely in the wrong (after all, no group of fallen people is perfect, not even those with whom we most want to sympathize). But the lack of sufficient sources to back up his points is a significant weakness; had he quoted primary sources supporting his views, it could have been a much more powerful book.

### References

1. Wallace, D., *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 267, 1996.
2. Wallace, ref. 1, p. 269.