


Spring 2007

## Review: The Beauty of the Infinite: the Aesthetics of Christian Truth

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### Recommended Citation

Morrison, John D., "Review: The Beauty of the Infinite: the Aesthetics of Christian Truth" (2007). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 43.

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repentant transformed, and its victims honored and healed. Then, after evil has been both condemned and overcome, we will be able to release the memories of wrongs suffered . . . We will not 'forget' so as to be able to rejoice; we will rejoice and *therefore* let those memories slip out of our minds!" (p. 214). Though this line of thought is geared primarily toward the world to come, it can nevertheless exert an important impact in the world in which we now live—even if only "partially and provisionally," as we seek to exist "as human beings whose lives reverberate the life of God" (pp. 151, 120).

*The End of Memory*, while not terminologically complex, is not for the faint of heart. In one sense it offers a treatise in mature discipleship, which requires from the beginning that one be open to the possibility of loving one's enemy in the midst of the most dreadful circumstances. Professors and students of theology, psychology, sociology, and philosophy, as well as pastors, counselors, and parishioners, will no doubt find much benefit in this work.

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*The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of the Christian Truth*. By David Bentley Hart. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004, 448 pp., \$35.00.

I would prefer not to initiate a constructive-critical review of so magisterial a philosophico-theological work as *The Beauty of the Infinite* by D. B. Hart, but I must first allow myself to vent a bit. Kurt Vonnegut was largely correct when he said that semi-colons should be outlawed. Hart's sentences, especially in the first major selection, are not merely long, they are like large, lengthy rivers that meander throughout a continent, being much "dotted" throughout by semi-colons at the various twists and turns and sprinkled here and there with archaic terminology.

Yet despite significant stylistic difficulties (making the reader's role a most weighty one), *The Beauty of the Infinite* must be recognized as one of the most learned, erudite, deeply argued works of constructive philosophical theology produced for some years. It is, in one sense ironically, a postmodern theological deconstruction of Nietzschean post-modernity and a postmodern affirmation of the classical Christian faith in the beauty of the infinite triune God and his peace in Jesus Christ. Hart is an American, Eastern Orthodox theologian, and his Orthodox tradition colors much in the book, beginning with the title. Gregory of Nyssa's theology lies behind and at the forefront of much of what Hart develops (Augustine and H. von Balthasar taking prominent roles as well). As a work of theological aesthetics (the true beauty of the infinite triune God), this tone arises from the question, "Is the beauty to whose persuasive power the Christian rhetoric of evangelism inevitably appeals (the beauty of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ), and upon which it depends, theologically defensible?" This question unfolds and eventually opens out upon the entire Christian tradition. The truth of that gospel is inseparable from the beauty of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth who is the ultimate revelation of the truly infinite triune God.

Central to Hart's argument, and hence to his response to various contemporary philosophical developments (especially trajectories in postmodernism variously under the sway of Nietzsche), is that Christianity has always portrayed itself as a gospel of peace, a way of reconciliation both with God and other persons, and so as a new model of human community offering the peace that passes all understanding to a world caught in the thrall of sin and "violence." The earliest Christian confession, "Jesus is Lord," meant the radical peace of Christ, resulting from the rejection and violence he suffered

and healed. Then, after evil has been released, we will rejoice and therefore through this line of thought is geared to exert an important impact in and provisionally," as we seek the life of God" (pp. 151, 120). complex, is not for the faint of heart, which requires from the enemy in the midst of the of theology, psychology, sociology, will no doubt find much

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on the cross from the powers of this world. But he has been raised up by God as the true form of human existence, the eschatologically perfect love now invulnerable to all "violences" while yet present in history. Hence, as Hart emphasizes, it is only as the evangel is the offer of this true peace as the answer to all "difference," and true beauty as the answer to all "distance" from the "other" (as real and available and practiced), that it has any meaning at all. Though the church has often belied this confession, it is this "presence" within time of an eschatological, divine peace, really incarnate in the person of Christ and imparted graciously to the body of Christ by the Spirit, that is the very heart of the church's evangelical persuasion ("rhetoric") to the world and of the salvation it thereby offers.

But can this be so if, as is now often claimed, all persuasion, all rhetoric is "violence" against the "other," all claims of "peace" inevitably a covering, a falsification, masking an agenda of power and enslavement? A primary concern of Hart's argumentation is to engage the major current of postmodernity that has been much molded by Nietzsche's repugnance of Christianity and, thereby, his "genealogical," flourish-filled, rhetorical dismantling of the "weakness" of Christian faith. With some effective help from John Milbank (*Theology and Social Theory*), Hart "genealogically" engages at length the thought of such nihilistic, deconstructive and neo-Nietzschean "others" as Lyotard, Foucault, Derrida, Levinas, and (especially) Deleuze, together with their anti-metaphysical, anti-totalizing efforts on behalf all violated "others," and so makes clear that all such argument is itself ironically an ontology of violence. This is not at all to say that Hart disagrees with claims about the violence of human rhetoric and humanly produced metaphysical and political totalizations (e.g. National Socialism). On the contrary, he fully agrees, as one must. Rather, Hart asserts that while all metaphysical, cosmic portrayals of the whole (whether Platonic, Aristotelian, Hegelian, or otherwise) have done and do much violence in history, and while human offers of "peace" are inevitably duplicitous concealments of coercion, the offer of peace from the truly infinite God (versus a false infinite) who is infinitely beautiful, and so is the God who can and does effect true peace in Jesus Christ, is faithful and actually effects peace through the evangel. Thus, Hart's questions regard the difference between two narratives: one that finds the grammar of violence written on every institution and embedded in every form of rhetoric, and a second narrative, the Christian message, which claims that a way of real peace, true reconciliation, has opened within history in Christ Jesus, a peace and beauty that ultimately overcomes all violence.

But Hart's effective genealogical dismemberment of "Nietzschean" anti-Christian rhetoric is not enough. Simply showing Nietzsche to be in fact a clear, if very stylish, imaginative fabricator in his ragings against Christian faith still misses much of Nietzsche's point. Can the content of the Christian faith and its claim of the true infinitude and beauty, and so peace, in and from the triune God revealed ultimately in the incarnate life, death, and resurrection of God's incarnate Word/Son, be shown to be coherent, that is, not a covert scheme of manipulative power and violence? While the issue of rhetorical violence cannot be ignored, Hart's lengthy essay argues that in the world of sin and violence there is a "difference" that is peace, a "distance" that is beauty, and that "affirmation" can only be truly theological. The peace of God made manifest in Christ is unique; it alone can liberate the world from the tyranny of power and violence. In affirming this, Hart reflects a significant portion of "the postmodern" in the course of his postmodern theological critique of the Nietzschean stream of postmodernity, that is, against modern concerns for truth as such, for "cold rationality" in relation to the Christian evangel. Hart is clear that beauty rather than simply (only?) truth, or rather beauty as inseparable from truth, is the measure of that which theology may speak of as truly Christian. The beauty of God as historical is none other than the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. Hart thus condemns modernity's search for comprehensive

metanarratives and epistemological foundations by way of some neutral rationality—in which Christianity has “no stake.”

Given this conclusion, and his postmodern theological deconstruction of contemporary deconstructive violence against the Christian faith, Hart then gives most of his attention to a major constructive philosophico-theological argument, what he calls “A Dogmatica Minora” (though there is nothing “minora” about it). This theological panorama is itself an aesthetic confession of the beauty of the truly infinite God. It is Hart’s portrayal of the Christian narrative in the broad sense as critical Christian reflection on the four major “movements” or “vantages” of the authoritative Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (“in its unadulterated Greek form”). These four “moments” are Trinity, Creation, Salvation, Eschaton. Faithful to his earlier criticism of “cold” dialectical rationality, Hart carefully develops a larger (and particular) Christian narrative of the triune God’s reconciling love in Christ in powerfully sweeping, sometimes almost poetic, form. This extensive essay in dogmatic theology does not reduce the faith to a series of separate propositions. Rather, a series of major theses plays a prominent developmental role throughout Hart’s argument, giving order and relative conciseness to a variety of issues. Hart avoids any typically systematic, deductive sequence in his dogmatic argument, but forms his theses into a series of interrelated but somewhat independent “interpretive vantages” upon the essential matter of the Christian narrative. Again, this “Dogmatica Minora” is both rhetorical answer to postmodern violence against the claim of peace in the Christian evangel (and so the Christian narrative as a whole) and an expansive rhetorical re-complexification of the thought of the Christian fathers (especially Gregory of Nyssa) via these four “moments” of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan symbol of the faith.

Throughout Hart’s developing “Dogmatics,” the beautiful truth of the infinite glory of God found in the perichoretic relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is rightly made central, the divine basis for the gospel of peace effected in history in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Word/Son of God. Many will find Hart’s dogmatic rhetoric, his almost total avoidance of discursive, dialectical, critical, theological argument, frustrating. But Hart has been forthright throughout about the fact that (for him) the Christian faith has no stake in the cold, neutral, dialectical rationality of modernity, which was a fiction anyway. As a result, Hart’s theological argument, though extraordinarily deep and rich, as it constantly develops important theological-redemptive insights from within the tradition, often reads (feels?) like poetry, or better, as complex multileveled hymnody. This is deeply theo-logical confession. With this statement Hart would be pleased and would surely agree. Indeed, he refers to the glory and beauty of God’s triune infinitude and its revelation in Christ Jesus, and so the evangel of peace for the world, as music.

I must add here an important note with unfortunate brevity. Hart constructively develops numerous important theological issues that have recently been and continue to be much discussed and argued. Among these noteworthy contributions are Hart’s unexpectedly convincing argument for the rehabilitation of (emphasizing the crucial nature of) analogy for theological understanding and reflection. Another is his imposing argument for divine *apatheia*. He argues that it has been much misunderstood in most recent theological argument, but in fact it is necessary and ought to be properly recognized not as aloof unresponsiveness but rather as trinitarian love, divine beauty, and perfect joy in the “other,” by which God is God. Herein Hart gives much food for fresh theological consideration.

Despite much weariness acquired as a result of D. B. Hart’s ponderous, often archaic, style of writing, *The Beauty of the Infinite* is the richest of theological feasts (and “feasting” is appropriate here, along with wine, as the biblical symbol of divine bounty). Hart has undertaken a massive task, both in relation to contemporary philosophical culture and to the whole Christian narrative, the Christian confession, and the evangel of Jesus

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Christ at its center. Hart's "postmodern" deconstruction of the postmodern rejection of the Christian faith, as just another form of the will to power through false weakness and a claim to peace as necessarily false (in favor of Dionysian life), is both quite complete and extraordinarily effective. Such hatred of the Christian evangel is itself an ontology of violence. Hart's amplification of the Christian narrative of God's offer of peace, reconciliation in Christ as answer and as rhetorical "showing" of the cogency of that Christian claim, is likewise mighty, often almost staggering in depth and scope. Amazing.

Yet, in a work of this magnitude one cannot help but have concerns. Despite regular reference to the biblical basis of Christian theological authority, the book gives to Scripture only very occasional explicit roles, for example, the narrative of the divine Trinity from the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism. In fact, much of the argument simply baptizes certain philosophical streams, which are set over against opposing positions, and these are said to affirm the logic of the scriptural revelation (e.g. Anselm's *id quo maius cogitari nequit*). Though this reviewer undoubtedly still reflects here certain effects of modernity, it often appears that Hart's rhetorical articulation of the Christian narrative is as empty rhetorical as, say, Nietzsche's; indeed, some portions even sound almost Spinozean (though Hart would emphatically deny this). It also seemed at times that theological positions were criticized only because they did not fit the patristic or medieval Christian vision of God as the infinite source of all being, as though such philosophico-theological expression were to be equated with the biblical portrayal of God. I worried at times about a serious case of historical romanticism. Finally, Hart has little time for, nor anything positive to say about, Luther, Calvin, or Protestantism, since these reflect, he says, a "low ebb" in Christian theology (pp. 133-34). Still, this is a truly amazing, demanding, but highly rewarding theological treatise. Most highly recommended.

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*The Way That Leads There: Augustinian Reflections on the Christian Life.* By Gilbert Meilaender. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, xi + 172 pp., \$16.00 paper.

In his recent work, Gilbert Meilaender interacts with key aspects of Augustine's moral theology, appropriating his thought toward a variety of contemporary ethical issues in a masterful economy of words. A specialist in ethics, Meilaender capably tries his hand at Augustine, with his stated purpose being "to probe . . . some aspects of the moral life" (p. ix). While making no claim to being an Augustinian specialist, he carefully interacts with those who are (Robert Markus, Donald Burt, John Burnaby, Edmund Hill, Peter Brown, and Lewis Ayres, among others) while also responsibly incorporating some choice works from Augustine (*Confessions*, *City of God*, *Against Lying*, *The Trinity*, and some of Augustine's letters). Furthermore, the author is not attempting to do the work of an historian—some of which would strengthen his argument, as this review will show. Rather, he regards Augustine as a "conversation partner" with whom he can "worry aloud" over certain moral issues.

Meilaender begins with a discussion of the tension between desire (chap. 1) and duty (chap. 2) before carrying those thoughts into more practical conversations on politics (chap. 3), sex (chap. 4), and grief (chap. 5). Interestingly, he waits to discuss his methodology until the close of the book (chap. 6). In large measure, Meilaender's goals are not unlike those of Donald X. Burt in *Friendship & Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy* (Eerdmans, 1999); he does in fact interact with Burt in chapter four. While Burt is an accomplished Augustinian scholar in the area of