

The New Criterion

Books

June 2009

Liberation theology

by [Stefan Beck](#)

In a footnote to Chapter Six of this book, David B. Hart laments that “one still encounters educated persons who believe that Galileo was tortured by the Roman Inquisition or imprisoned in its dungeons,” and cites, “for example, A. N. Wilson’s *God’s Funeral*.” I was stunned, not because Wilson had gotten so elementary a point wrong, but because my own lousy memory had conflated Galileo and Joan of Arc, and placed the former on a bonfire, whispering “*E pur si muove*” (“And yet it moves”) where the latter is said to have whispered the name of Jesus.

I’m proof that, as Alexander Pope’s famous bumper sticker has it, “a little learning is a dangerous thing”—but a lot of learning has its drawbacks, too. What pleasure is there in knowing that much “common knowledge” is at best half-remembered and at worst false? How does the expert feel, watching gadflies deepen this general ignorance with every word they write? Ask Hart, who has had to watch the New Atheists scale the bestseller list for some time now.

This book, a rebuttal not of their atheism but of their historical and cultural claims about Christianity, is astonishingly calm and courteous next to the works of its “fashionable enemies,” like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and, especially, Sam Harris. But Hart has his fun. His writing, a marvel of both complexity and lucidity, is no stranger to the slyly understated putdown, which he might follow with: “A note of asperity, though, has probably already become audible in my tone, and I probably should strive to suppress it.” This debate, because it involves the public’s faith, requires style and salesmanship as much as it does substance. Hart has all of the above.

I confess here to having greatly enjoyed Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great* and to being leery of the argument that, as Hart puts it, “among Christianity’s most fervent detractors, there has been a considerable decline in standards.” This is a legitimate complaint—Sam Harris, unlike Hitchens, isn’t even entertaining—but if you believe the old saw that “God never gives you more than you can handle,” bear in mind that today’s novice atheists at least give novice believers something safe to practice on. Hart, however, is anything but a soft target.

Hart’s major theme is that early Christianity was a transformative faith in every sense, but, because we live in the world it transformed, we are often “insensible to the novelty and uncanniness of the gospel as it was first proclaimed.” Christianity civilized us, up to a point, but we take our comparatively exalted state for granted.

Hart meets head-on the contradictions and embarrassments in early Christian history that are the New Atheists’ bread and butter. The example of slavery, to which he devotes many pages, goes a long way toward illuminating his thesis. Why, a sneering Sam Harris might ask, wasn’t slavery abolished immediately and totally by the ascendant Christians? Hart writes:

Given the inherently restive quality of the human moral imagination, it is only natural that certain of the moral values of the pagan past should have lingered on so long into the Christian era, just as any number of Christian moral values continue today to enjoy a tacit and largely unexamined authority in minds and cultures that no longer believe the Christian story.

Blink and you might miss it, but this is one of the most frightening statements in Hart's book. It says, in effect, that there is no reason to expect that what was permitted as a matter of course in the pre-Christian world will be condemned by a post-Christian one. This is not Hart's way of insinuating the cynical argument that religion (though he takes pains to distinguish the meaningless term "religion" from his true subject, Christianity) is a necessary tool of social cohesion. It is simply a reminder that what has been learned can be willfully forgotten, at great cost.

It also demonstrates something in short supply these days: a realistic appreciation of human beings and behavior. Enemies of Christianity often see a "gotcha" moment in the fact that people aren't perfect, hypocrisy in what is only a failure to live up to an exacting standard. Hart's view is more penetrating, and, frankly, more humane. The persecution of Galileo, the basis for so much delusion about Christian hostility to science, he portrays as the consequence of a clash of personalities, with Galileo "needlessly mocking a powerful man [Urban VIII] who had treated him with honor and indulgence." He doesn't excuse it, but notes that "Christians are under no obligation to grant, on account of this ridiculous squabble, that the church of their faith was somehow a constant impediment to early modern science, when the historical evidence indicates exactly the opposite."

Christianity's not-so-fraught relationship to science, however, is but one example of the things "common knowledge" gets wrong. Hart shows, with reference to sources of which most of us—including bestselling authors—are probably unaware, that the early Christian church was a pioneer of sexual equality and the abolition of slavery, that it tried to stamp out not witches but belief in witchcraft, that it preserved and encouraged scholarship, that it kept warfare in check more frequently than it caused it, and, above all, that none of this should be a surprise to us. The evidence for all of this is breathtaking in both its scope and its specificity.

It's also entertaining. Few things are so delightful as watching someone who has taken the time to acquire a *lot* of learning casually, even effortlessly, dismantle the claims of lazy grandstanders. Run your eyes over this book's index, and I think you'll agree that Hart isn't making a bid for wealth, fame, or cocktail-party acceptance: He knows whereof he speaks, to a (forgive me) monkish degree.

Yet Hart's historical crash-course is nothing next to his grasp of just how Christianity has *changed* us:

[W]e shall never really be able to see Christ's broken, humiliated, and doomed humanity as something self-evidently contemptible and ridiculous; we are instead, in a very real sense, *destined* to see it as encompassing the very mystery of our own humanity. . . . Obviously, of course, many of us are capable of looking upon the sufferings of others with indifference or even contempt. But what I mean to say is that even the worst of us, raised in the shadow of Christendom, lacks the ability to ignore those sufferings without prior violence to his or her own conscience. We have lost the capacity for innocent callousness.

Would we care to rediscover it? This is not, needless to say, what the New Atheists have in mind. But they would do well to reexamine what motivates their assault on a faith that, for all the flaws and failures of its adherents, taught mankind a new, radically liberating conception of its relationship to the divine. And they would do well to revisit the facts. They just might learn something.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 27 June 2009, on page 78

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