

David Bentley Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite*: Critical Responses

Introduction

David S. Cunningham

The following four articles offer three critical responses to David Bentley Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, followed by Dr Hart's response. These essays are edited versions of papers originally presented at a panel of the Christian Systematic Theology Section of the American Academy of Religion at its 2005 Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I have been asked to offer an introduction — not so much to the essays, their writers, or the book that they discuss, but rather to the *venue* in which they were originally presented. I hope to set the following exchange in context, which may be particularly valuable for those readers unfamiliar with the American Academy of Religion and its annual meeting.

Christian theologians working in the United States have no single professional meeting at which most of them can gather on a regular basis. Unlike the Society for the Study of Theology in the U.K., which most British theologians would probably identify as the annual conference most representative of their discipline, the various professional organizations in North America tend to bring together either a much smaller or a much larger group than 'all Christian theologians'. On one side are those associations that deliberately seek to gather a subset of this group, usually parsed along denominational lines. These range widely in size and breadth, from the relatively large Catholic Theological Society of America and the Evangelical Theology Society to the much smaller National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion and the Society of Anglican and Lutheran Theologians. On the other side are those organizations that gather a range of academics far beyond the field of Christian theology, which may include anyone studying the history, literature, and/or practices of any 'religion' (very broadly defined). The largest of these organizations is the American Academy of Religion (AAR), which meets annually in November and has, since 1970, met jointly with another very large and broad organization, the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL).

A great many North American theologians have expressed their lack of enthusiasm for these arrangements. Those who attend only the meetings of the smaller denominational societies have little opportunity to engage with the highly ecumenical and interdisciplinary conversations that are so much a part of the North American theological context. On the other hand, the larger societies — particularly the AAR — cover such a wide range of faiths, subdisciplines, and methodologies that most first-time attendees feel lost in a sea of papers, panels, and plenaries — most of which are completely irrelevant to their own work. Indeed, even long-time veterans of the conference do not find it particularly easy to navigate. This is partly due to its sheer size: in the last several years, the joint meeting of the AAR/SBL has drawn well over 10,000 attendees.

Most of the work of the AAR and the SBL is undertaken by subsets of the whole membership, known as *program units*. These loosely-defined groups sponsor a number of sessions at each year's conference. The sessions are typically two and one-half hours in length and focus on a particular theme; the vast majority of these sessions consist of three or four papers submitted in response to a Call for Papers. However, these are often worded in a very general way, in order to maximize the number of submissions and the breadth of participation. (Some program units receive five to ten times as many paper proposals as the slots that are available to them.) The resulting sessions can sometimes be rather diffuse; they may bear a label that suggests that the papers will all examine a particular topic, but they often do so only tangentially, and in most cases the papers are completely unrelated to one another. Some program units attempt to alleviate this problem by organizing at least one of their sessions around a more narrowly-defined theme, a particular theologian, or a book — and/or by soliciting particular scholars to present their work in some form of panel discussion.

The American Academy of Religion is obviously something of an 'umbrella' organization, but over the years, the degree to which Christian theology has been invited under that umbrella has varied. Before 1963, the AAR was known as the National Association of Biblical Instructors; in those days, most Christian theologians — in fact, most people working in any field of the traditional theological encyclopedia, from scripture to practical theology — could find a foothold in one or another of its program units. But by the 1980s, a certain degree of ill will had developed within some quarters of the AAR against Christianity in general and against Christian theology in particular. Part of this was a legitimate reaction to the dominance of Christianity across the United States — in university departments of religious studies, in popular culture, and especially in politics. (This was the era of the Reagan administration, during which evangelical Christianity was beginning to get its first solid foothold in the

corridors of U.S. political power — a prospect that worried adherents and students of other faiths, and not a few Christians as well.) But some of the ill will within the AAR was simple prejudice and power-play. Whatever one may think of Christianity's cultural hegemony in North America, the fact remains that the majority of scholars studying religion in that part of the world — and, in fact, the majority of the members of the American Academy of Religion — are working in some area of Christianity.

Nevertheless, during most of the 1980s, many Christian theologians had great difficulty finding any program unit to sponsor their work. In fact, those of us in graduate school at the time rarely found many sessions worth *attending*; we dared not imagine that we would be invited to present a paper in one. Most of the Christian theology that was done at the AAR was carried out surreptitiously, in program units that did not appear too theological: one of the more successful was the Narrative Interpretation Group. But even when operating undercover, theology could not gain a foothold: when that program unit came up for renewal at the end of its five-year term, its application was not approved.

Fortunately, however, as a result of some changes within the AAR's executive structure in the 1990s, matters began to shift. In 1994, a new program unit was initiated, called the Systematic Theology Group. The degree of pent-up demand for this topic became obvious when the conference rooms to which its meetings were assigned consistently filled to capacity and beyond; sessions drew 100 to 200 attendees, many more than typically attended the sessions of other comparable program units. The original co-chairs of the group, Philip Clayton (of California State University at Sonoma) and Kevin Vanhoozer (then of the University of Edinburgh), guided the Group through its early years and applied successfully for its renewal for a second five-year term, now under the (more accurate) name Christian Systematic Theology Group. It continued to receive large numbers of paper proposals and to attract large crowds; one session on 'Theologies of the Gift' in 2003 drew over four hundred attendees. In 2004, the Group was not only renewed; its status was upgraded (in the AAR's nomenclature) from *Group* to *Section*. This meant a significant increase in the number of sessions that it could sponsor at each year's Annual Meeting — as well as a much higher profile for the field of Christian theology within the AAR.

During the same period of time, several other program units have emerged as venues for Christian theologians to present their work at the AAR Annual Meeting. In the wake of this and other developments, the number of Christian theologians who regularly attend the conference has steadily increased — and in particular, representation from Great Britain, Ireland, and continental Europe seems to have

grown dramatically over the past five years. (Fortunes continue to change, however: the AAR's recent decision to meet separately from the SBL has once again raised questions about whether it will remain a solid venue for Christian theology.)

As a result of the growing presence of theological inquiry at the AAR meeting, the Christian Systematic Theology Section was able to sponsor a greater variety of sessions, some quite narrowly focused. In planning for the 2005 annual meeting, the Section's steering committee chose 'theological aesthetics' as the general theme for its six sessions. They also recognized that David Bentley Hart's new book *The Beauty of the Infinite* offered a major contribution in this area, and that (at least according to its advance publicity!) it might well come to be seen as a significant contribution to Christian theology more broadly. They chose to invite four theologians to respond to the book, seeking a fair degree of diversity across various categorizations: Catholic and Protestant, male and female, scholars working in a variety of academic contexts (research university, theological seminary, undergraduate college). Such was the significance of the book and of the opportunity to discuss it at the AAR Annual Meeting that, somewhat to the surprise of the steering committee, the first four choices for panelists all accepted their invitation to present papers, and Dr Hart accepted an invitation to respond. The session was enormously successful, drawing over 200 attendees and generating a good deal of conversation at the 2005 Annual Meeting.

Three of the four papers presented at the session, along with Dr Hart's response, are printed here. The fourth paper, by Francesca Murphy, appeared in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60 (2007): 80–89. I would like to express my gratitude to the editors of *New Blackfriars* for their willingness to publish these essays, and also for the opportunity to introduce the journal's readership to the context in which they were generated.

Dr David Cunningham
Professor of Religion and
Director, The CrossRoads Project
Hope College, Holland, Michigan, MI 49423
Email: cunningham@hope.edu