

On David Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite*

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Abstract

In “The Beauty of the Infinite,” David Hart offers a persuasive case for why the beauty of God’s infinity is at the heart of the Christian evangel of peace, a peace funded by our analogical participation in God’s Trinitarian life. At the heart of his argument is an appropriation of Gregory of Nyssa’s concept of infinity, which presupposes a “non-dialectical creation of out of nothing.” He then links this understanding of infinity with what he calls the “Christian evangel of peace”, which he contrasts with what he calls a “genealogy of violence” (identified with Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger). His main contribution lies in his use of this understanding of God’s infinity to rethink important issues in Trinitarian and Christological doctrine. Nonetheless, the question can be raised about whether his argument does justice to classically Christian understandings of the following: the presupposition, rooted in creation, of a shared human rationality, the importance of law, the centrality of the prophetic critique of idolatry and individual and corporate sin, and the place for lament in biblical depictions of Christ’s death and the Christian life.

Keywords

Beauty, Infinite, Creation out of nothing, Trinity, Kenosis.

Every once in a while a book comes along that offers a truly interesting internally coherent proposal. David Hart’s *The Beauty of the Infinite* is one of those books. My response to it is twofold. Overall, I appreciate its persuasive case for why the beauty of God’s infinity is at the heart of the Christian evangel of peace and how that peace is funded by our analogical participation in God’s Trinitarian life. At the same time, I question whether it conforms too much to current modes of thought and thereby loses some of the complexity classical theological approaches—especially those which have stressed God’s infinity—have traditionally accounted for.

I begin with what I think is the book's chief contribution to contemporary theology: its conception of infinity. Drawing on Gregory of Nyssa, Hart defines infinity in positive terms. Not an absence, God's transcendence is an actual excessiveness; the finite can never contain or exhaust the infinite. Although this understanding of infinity draws on Plotinus, its distinctive characteristic, presupposing the Christian doctrine of creation, is the nondialectical creation out of nothing in which "nothing" has no relation to "being". This contrasts with Platonism, which presupposes a dialectical relation between being and "nothingness" and therefore has a dualistic element, a power that resists being. This dualistic element underlies both paganism and a tragic interpretation of life and is what has, as Hart points out, re-emerged in postmodernity's shift either towards the "sublime" (in the various postmodern forms that seek to go beyond Kant's third critique) or towards the "will to power" (as depicted by Nietzsche). By contrast, Hart following Gregory proposes that infinity be defined not as a qualitative dialectical negation but as divine excess. Change and contingency as characteristics of finitude need not be negated in order to participate in divine infinite life, in all its aseity. The vision of God entails not so much a shift from appearance to reality or the multiplicity to the one as an analogical expression of the dynamism and differentiation that characterizes the Trinitarian distance and difference between the Father and Son and the Spirit who is their ongoing "futurity." Gregory appropriates the Pauline language of straining and stretching toward the fullness of Christ—*epéktasis*—to describe a dynamic ontology whereby the finite participates in the infinite in an endless display of beauty surpassing beauty. Creatures are called to an endless, successive growth in God's life, not lapsing into nothingness, yet never transcending the conditions of their finitude. Evil in this view, which includes all sin and suffering, is that purely private nothingness that lies outside of creation's motion to God.

Hart presents this understanding of infinity within the context of a *diegesis*, a Platonic commentary, that compares two stories about two cities: a story of peace, identified with the Christian evangel, and a story of violence, identified with much postmodern thought. His genealogy of the latter story starts with Hegel's attempt to wed time and history with metaphysics and ends with Heidegger and Nietzsche representing its two main consequences. Heidegger's dialectical negation (which indifferently grants beings their infinity through the disclosure of nothingness) influenced various postmodern "narratives of the sublime" and their variations on Kant's third critique. These narratives of the sublime assert the destruction of metaphysics and contend that the unrepresentable—whether it be difference, chaos, being, alterity, or even infinity—is truer than the representable and that dialectical or negative indeterminacy, or nothingness,

is all that there is. Nietzsche turns this negation into sheer positivity, an assertion of the will to power and an affirmation of the ecstatic, orgiastic and irrational. Hart contrasts his story of peace not only with these two postmodern narratives but also with the modern narrative of a universal reason abstracted from linguistic and historical constraints. Apollonian necessity is as foreign to the story of creation and grace as Dionysian chance.

Especially significant in my view for contemporary theology is Hart's explicit attempt, again following Gregory, to rethink infinity in Trinitarian and Christological terms. On the Trinity, he seeks to avoid two perils by accepting Karl Rahner's axiom that the economic is the immanent trinity. The first is the nominalist peril of collapsing the immanent into the economic trinity (a danger he sees in post-Hegelian Trinitarian theologies); instead, given his definition of infinity he argues that divine *apatheia* is essential for any proper understanding of the dynamic of Trinitarian love and its work in history. The second is the speculative peril of abstracting the Trinity from the economy of salvation; Hart offers an ecumenical account of how both social and psychological analogies can account for Trinitarian life and our analogical participation in it. He also offers an ecumenical mediation on how the Spirit is both a bond between the Father and Son and a "person" from eternity who embodies their "futurity." On Christology, he seeks to think through how the *kenōsis* of the Son is precisely the place where God's power is manifest most profoundly. The Son's *kenōsis* is embraced within the kenosis of divine life, an ecstasy whose fullness is rooted in the infinite outpouring of the Father in the Son, and in the joy of the Spirit and that comes to fruition in the *communicatio idiomatum* of the divine and human in Jesus Christ. He also offers insightful discussions of recent work on atonement. In response to Girard's mimetic theory of sacrifice, he offers a positive understanding of Old Testament conceptions of sacrifice as a sacrifice of prayer, an eternal life offered back to God. In response to criticisms of Anselm's theory of atonement, he offers a reading of *Cur Deus Homo* that highlights its proximity to patristic notions of recapitulation in which Christ restores humanity. In both cases, Hart contends that the sacrifice of the cross offers a notion of sacrifice that counters an economy of credit and exchange with a gift that precedes, exceeds and annuls all debt.

In addition to appreciating these themes, I also have questions about Hart's proposal. First, I question whether he has conceded too much ground to postmodern sensibilities by rejecting any notion of a shared human rationality unconstrained by language and history and by reducing all theological reflection to rhetoric and aesthetics. Ancient Christians, even Gregory of Nyssa, did not do this but spoke of the true and the good in addition to the beautiful, of

metaphysics and ethics in addition to aesthetics and rhetoric. In Hart's own words, persuasion is intrinsically violent unless there is a truth and goodness more basic than rhetoric and its figural play of language. But such truth cannot simply be an assertion of power; it must be rooted in what measures power. As Hart himself points out, the Jewish and Christian assumption that God sees creation as good (Genesis 1) roots the measure of such power in being and infinity—as excess and fecundity. Precisely because creation is nondialectically related to the “nothing” out of which it was created, we are left neither with tragedy nor with a demonic jostling for power, but with a fecund infinity whose beauty and persuasiveness lies not simply in its appeal but in a truth and goodness that resonates with the truth and goodness that all creatures, albeit analogically, participate in. This is what classical Christian language about conscience has sought to maintain, rooted as it is in the most ancient ground for any talk of analogy: our being created in God's image. The apostle Paul made his appeal to a universal human conscience; Irenaeus made his appeal to the universal fact of creation and natural law; later Christian theologians would distinguish nature and grace, law and gospel. This point is not merely a theoretical one but has profound implications for how Christians might work with non-Christians (and other Christians with whom they disagree) in society—whether in the academy, government, economy, or our shared cultural life.

Moreover, while I affirm Hart's critique of the excesses in both Kantian—and before him Christian—notions of the disinterested nature of moral obligation or of Levinas' singular focus on the unrepresentable demand of the Other, I question whether he does justice to the importance of the law in addition to creation in Jewish and Christian thought and the very real fact that in much of our lives—individual and corporate—duty and desire are not always commensurate. It is not insignificant that throughout the Old and New Testaments stress is placed on the ethical demands placed upon us by those we might not naturally find appealing—the poor, widows, orphans, the elderly, the sick and demon-possessed, those stigmatized in some way ethically, religiously, or politically, and so on.

Conversely, I question Hart's sharp rejection of certain aspects of postmodern critique, especially those that are secularized forms of much more ancient forms of Jewish and Christian judgments of idolatry and individual and corporate sin. Much biblical literature deals with the critique of false forms of religious and political practice—from the prophets and psalmists who questioned kings and priests and advocated for justice for the powerless to the gospel writers who depicted Jesus' challenges to religious and political authorities to the apostle Paul who, with a dialectical logic not

dissimilar to many postmoderns, challenged both spiritual enthusiasts and legalists. Further, as in much postmodern thought, a central role is often given in biblical traditions to “others”—those outside of religious, ethnic, and ethical boundaries. This is especially apparent in the Gospels—from the outsiders who “get” Jesus’ secret messianic identity in Mark to a range of other characters: the good Samaritan, the Samaritan woman, the Syro-Phoenician woman, the healed foreigners that Jesus mentions in his first sermon, the list goes on—but it is a theme in both Old and New Testaments as well. In other words, the proclamation of peace that Hart advocates may not always be unidirectional—something missionaries throughout the ages have encountered.

Finally, Hart is right to criticize the current theological fashion to emphasize the “tragic” depths of the story of the atonement—especially if it leaves one with an essentially tragic vision of life. He is right to point out that Christianity draws on a Jewish wisdom that boldly affirms the goodness of what is and expects God to act to rescue a wholly good creation from the violences that enslave it. Nonetheless, that very Jewish wisdom, especially as expressed in Job, the psalmist’s laments, and even in Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 22 in Mark 15, also has a place for mourning and lament. Our world—with its hurricanes and earthquakes, senseless wars, bombings, inequalities between the poor and rich, injustices repeated over generations—though it is God’s good world is also a world of evil, sin, and suffering. Even Paul, in his great hymn (in Rom 8) about how nothing can separate us from God’s love nonetheless quotes a national lament psalm (Ps 44) and lists all sorts of disasters, from famine, persecution, the sword, and so on, that we might not escape.

Nonetheless, the complexity that I am arguing for with these questions is not inherently disallowed by Hart’s proposal. Indeed, for all his postmodern rhetoric, Hart’s main contribution to contemporary theology, in my view, is his elegant articulation of a deep truth that Gregory of Nyssa and other ancient Christians grasped—a truth that lies beyond necessity and chance, and beyond all tragic and demonic visions of life, a truth that encompasses all of life’s complexities. This truth is that the significance of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection must be understood in relation to divine infinity and aseity. When that link is made, as it was in classical Christological and Trinitarian formulations, the very notion of divine infinity is redefined not as a reality that negates human finitude, with its contingency and change, but as the very fullness and fecundity that not only creates our creatureliness, and is the ongoing source of its finite creativity, but also, by way of fully entering and embracing it—even to the point of death—heals and transforms the ways it is distorted by sin, evil, and suffering. Christian evangels of peace are only nonviolent

when their yearnings and desires are measured—that is, judged and healed—by that truth and grace.

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