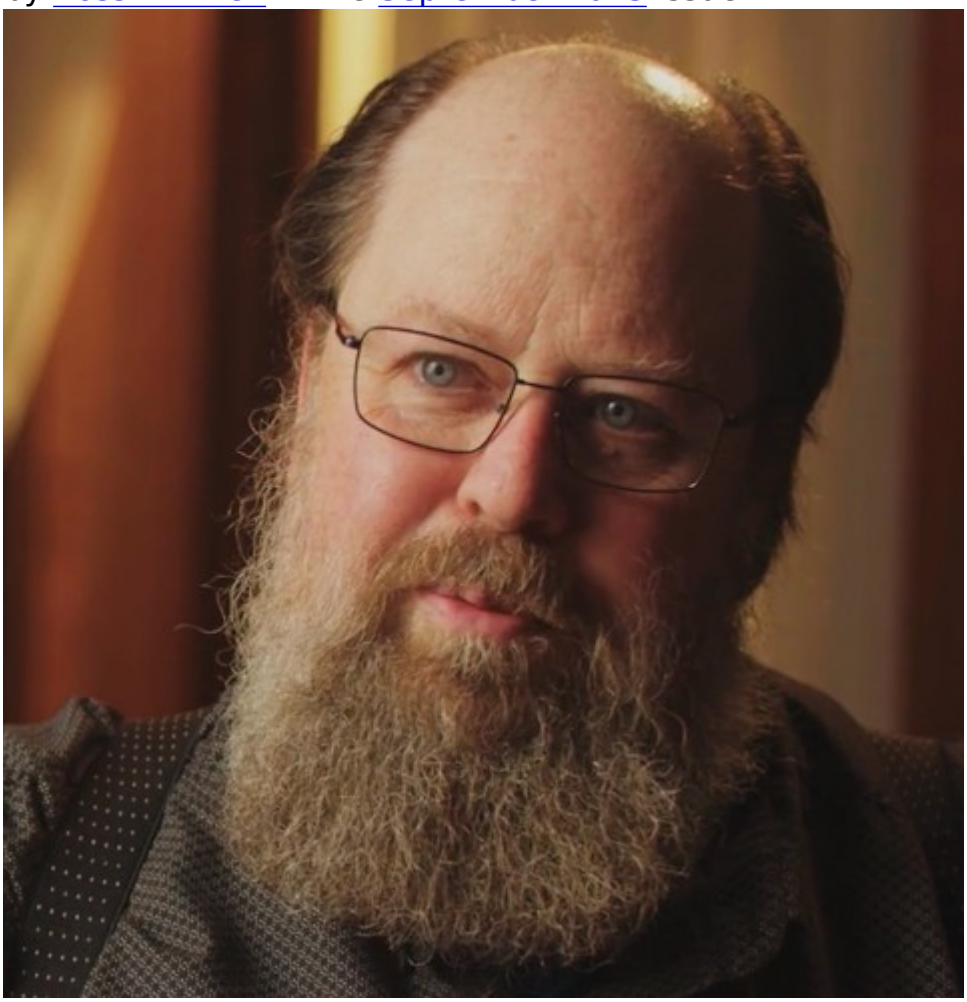
What we think we know about God

“Anyone who thinks he knows the orthodox consensus can always be shown to be wrong,” says David Bentley Hart.

by Ross M. Allen in the September 2023 issue



Religion scholar David Bentley Hart (Jjhake / Creative Commons)

***David Bentley Hart*** *is an Eastern Orthodox scholar of religion and a philosopher, writer, and cultural commentator. He is author and translator of 23 books, including the award-winning* Theological Territories: A David Bentley Hart Digest *(2020)*.

**Let's start with *You Are Gods*, published last year. It's a collection of essays arguing against the distinction between nature and supernature in Christian theology. In it, you say that "any coherent metaphysics is a monism." What are the book's main arguments? What are you hoping to accomplish with it?**

The precipitating occasion for this book is the revival, in recent years, of a tradition in Catholic thought that many of us had happily thought dead and buried. Unfortunately we neglected to drive a stake fully through its heart, and so now it's back. When people are seeking to be opprobrious, they call this tradition "two-tier Thomism," so I call it two-tier Thomism. It is actually an early modern school of thought which arose in the 16th century and has very little to do with Thomas Aquinas. It sought to affirm the gratuity of God's goodness by creating an absolute distinction between the natural and supernatural ends of rational creatures.

This tradition came to assert that spiritual beings are so undeserving of grace, so incapable of meriting or rising to the grace that God may or may not elect to give them, that in their own natures they don't even have the supernatural knowledge of God as their proper end. In that way of thinking, humans might be curious about God in a kind of etiological sense, as an explanatory principle. In other words, they might be moved to wonder where the world came from. But as purely natural beings they would not have the insatiable longing for God that Augustine describes as the unquiet heart—"our hearts are restless till they rest in you."

Put simply, it suggests that grace cannot truly complete human nature but that it must be superadded.

**Where do you think this touches the ground for the Christian story? What difference would it make to how someone articulates the faith?**

Well, there are any number of immediate problems with this. One is that it is basically a rejection of the whole Christian tradition on what a spiritual being is. Any coherent consideration of a natural being's nature requires that all of its desires and wills occur in the context of a consuming rational desire for the good, the true, the beautiful; otherwise nothing would prompt the rational will into action. But this consuming rational desire is, in fact, simply a way of naming the essence of God. Every other Christian tradition affirms this.

Another problem is that it creates a logical or metaphysical impossibility. It says that when God superadds grace to our natures, we are transformed into beings at once natural and supernatural, though there is no premise, either in faculty nor in potency, for the supernatural in us. Despite the Thomistic claim that grace perfects—rather than abolishes—nature, this view requires just the latter. If human beings—in receiving the fullness of grace—are transformed into something for which we have neither the potency nor the faculty already, then we're not actually transformed: we are annihilated in our natural essence and replaced with something other than ourselves. For grace to transform us means that what we become by grace must be continuous with who and what we are as natural beings already.

A further problem is that it's a hideous picture of reality. The whole point of maintaining the ridiculous division is to suggest that grace is so thoroughly gratuitous that it doesn't constitute any injustice on God's part to withhold it from any rational nature if he should elect to do so. Most of creation is thus destined for annihilation or eternal torment; a small, artificial distillate will enjoy eternal beatitude. This also means, as Thomas said, that the torments of the damned will be of no consequence to the blessed in eternity—other than that they will actually increase the beatitude of the blessed in heaven. To be fair, supposedly this is not because you will intrinsically take delight in their suffering but because you will simply delight in the contrast between your state and theirs.

This form of Thomism involves a sadistic pleasure in one's immunity to the suffering of those you see suffering. It should be regarded as a psychopathology that needs pity and pharmacological adjustment.

**Is this primarily a philosophical project, or is it concerned with what is sometimes called "theology proper"?**

The book is aimed not just against the metaphysics of a particular tradition but against a false religion that I regard as morally inferior to Satanism.

Satanism, if Christianity is so understood, is a revolt against an evil God. But although my book is written in a provocative way and draws on traditions that are rarely used by Christians—the Vedantic tradition, for example—it is an affirmation not only of Eastern patristic thought but also of a broadly mainstream Christian metaphysics.

**Does this essentially amount to something like a trinitarian pantheism, in that you're soundly rejecting any final distinction between God and the created order?**

*Pantheism* is one of the great meaningless terms in metaphysical history. It is usually used as a term of abuse, vaguely, and since it doesn't have a meaning I don't use it: I find it neither a word to be avoided nor a word to be embraced.

But yeah, at the end of the day, I'm firmly in a tradition of central importance to Christian orthodoxy, which includes the Cappadocian fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Maximus the Confessor as well as chancier figures like John Scotus Eriugena, the Rhineland mystics, Nicholas of Cusa, and the greatest theologian of the late modern age, Sergei Bulgakov.

**Is there any space left, in your view, for the supernatural in theology, as that concept is typically understood?**

Well, the idea of supernature is a kind of late intrusion upon Christian discourse. It has no presence in the Eastern tradition, and in the Western tradition it doesn't appear until Philip the Chancellor in the 13th century. Even there, it's not talking about a different order over and above nature as such. It's only used to mean something in excess of the nature of a particular creature.

I'm not the first to say this: both Maurice Blondel, the greatest Catholic philosopher of the 19th and 20th centuries, and Henri de Lubac, for instance, made the case that supernature in the sense commonly meant—as a discrete order of divine reality separated from the created realm—is alien to scriptural, patristic, and early medieval thought.

Basically, what's being said is that there has to be one principle of all, and that that principle is God. When this is understood, the natural and the supernatural are seen to be not really two different orders—as in nature against grace. Really, they are the same thing as viewed from two different perspectives. There's no final dividing line between them.

**I think for most Christians this will sound radical, but you're suggesting that the end result of grace is that we, ourselves, become one—truly unified—with God.**

Yes, and again, this is directly from Maximus the Confessor and Meister Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa and the book of Acts: “In him we live and move and have our being.” Maximus says the whole purpose of creation is the calling forth of creatures from nothingness to enter into the infinity of God directly and to be perfectly united in the Logos in Christ.

As the patristic formula put it, God became man so that man might become God. To say “become” is a bit misleading, though. Every little Logos of everything is itself a modality of the divine presence already. We don’t have to mollify the shockingness of that language—for patristic and medieval theologians it’s simply obvious.

**You go so far, in the book, as to suggest that we “become uncreated.” Readers familiar with radical theology might hear this and think you’re talking about a kind of ego death, destruction of the self as it is collapsed into the apophatic ultimate. But you’re drawing on a different theological tradition here.**

I am. Becoming uncreated is not the same as becoming nothing. God, recall, is uncreated, and he’s hardly nothing. Uncreation is not the destruction of personality but the fulfillment of personality in each of us—in our becoming utterly transparent to the Logos that’s the ground of our own personalities already. It’s theosis: it’s to become God with a capital *G*.

Paul teaches this explicitly in 1 Corinthians 13: “For now seeing only is in a glass darkly but then . . . face to face.” Remember that in the ancient world, looking directly into the face of another is not a privilege you enjoy with your superior. If he reaches down and lifts you by the chin and raises your face to his, this is an act of extraordinary grace. Paul is talking about a state of union between equals.

**The second edition of your New Testament translation was released this spring. For those who missed the first edition, could you tell us why it’s been described as “pitilessly literal” and what’s new in the new edition?**

As I translated the New Testament, I tried to free the text from habitual patterns of translation to avoid misleading translations that tried to retrofit the text to match later theological developments. I didn’t always succeed in the first edition, as some smart critics pointed out.

In fact, one correction I made in the second edition is related to our discussion of nature and grace. There's a tradition, more Western than Eastern, of making a firm distinction between nature and grace and treating it as a Pauline distinction. This is contingent on a few verses from Romans 11, in which Paul uses the metaphor of an olive tree into which the gentiles have been grafted even though they by nature are wild, not cultivated. In my original translation of verse 24, I translated *para physin* as "contrary to nature." If you came from a tree that was wild by nature and then, contrary to nature, you were grafted into the cultivated olive tree of Israel, then how much more so those who by nature—that is, the Jews—belong to this lineage.

But even in making my translation, I knew that Paul was not using the word *nature* in its later theological sense or in the philosophical sense that was taking root in his time. *Physis* in Greek—like *natura* in Latin—primarily means line of descent, origin, race, or lineage. So when Paul says the gentiles are by derivation wild rather than cultivated, he's literally talking about viticulture and arboriculture. And "contrary to nature" is not really what *para physin* means, either here or in Romans 1. *Para* doesn't mean contrary; it means it's outside of. So now I've retranslated that verse: if you who by genealogy are wild olives who have been "exogenously grafted in," how much more those who by pedigree belong to the people of Israel.

This makes a huge difference, because that's the only passage in Paul that's ever been invoked in the tradition to back up this spurious division between nature and grace, which is not a Pauline idea at all. In fact, it couldn't be more contrary to the actual shape of his theology. Paul just doesn't think in those terms. Grace, *charis*, is something he invokes, but not as a special principle. It just means God is always generous and loving in his dealings with creatures.

**I appreciate the nuance here, because you're embracing things like textual and historical criticism in your translation while at the same time staying deeply rooted in the classical worldview and, crucially, the Hellenistic Judaism that actually facilitated the development of the text.**

I mean, there really should not be a conflict here. The funny thing is it's only fundamentalists—and people who don't know that they're fundamentalists but are anyway—who seem to think that there should be some great conflict between higher criticism and patristic orthodoxy. The early church fathers were in many respects historical critical readers, to the degree they could be.

It didn’t bother Origen that there was not a single consistent text for the Gospels, for instance. He was using an allegorical reading which was borrowed from pagan culture to address what he called the scandal of the text, which is that monstrous things are attributed to the character of God in the Old Testament, things that we would not attribute to the worst of human beings, and yet, he says, that prompts us to a higher reading. When I say it, people act as if this were the most abominable blasphemy ever uttered, but it’s right there in Gregory of Nyssa and other church fathers—and even in passages in works by Joseph Ratzinger.

And the New Testament, for that matter, simply isn’t made up of historically trustworthy documents. The Gospels disagree with each other on the basic outline of key events and their duration—Matthew and Luke give us two completely different dates for the birth of Christ, John gives us the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of a three-year ministry rather than at the end of a one-year ministry, Paul disagrees with Acts at critical points, and I could go on.

The point is that the historical-critical method helps us recover a saner view of the traditional allegorical reading. Origen didn’t think that Isaiah sat down and said, “How can I encode Jesus secretly into the text?” Origen worked under the assumption that scripture is inspired not as an unalterable or literal portrait of God or the will of God, but as an object of prayerful contemplation by the mind of the church and those reading in the embrace of the Holy Spirit.

**Are there points at which the incongruence between the language of these texts and later doctrine become particularly acute?**

I try to make it clear in my translation—and this could be sobering or troubling for your faith—that Paul simply didn’t have what would later be called an orthodox view of Christ at the Council of Chalcedon. One would think he would have mentioned it if he had. Resurrection “of the flesh” becomes part of Catholic tradition, but the problem is that Paul would have abominated the idea—flesh can’t be resurrected, he’s quite explicit. So he totally disagrees with what is presented at the end of Luke about the resurrection, for example. I’m sorry, but whether we like it or not, Paul is a first-century Hellenistic—so, quasi-Platonic and quasi-Stoic—Jew. And that’s good.

**Is there a role for dogma still?**

There are a great number of people today who believe that what they’ve signed on for is a system of propositions that have been totally consistent and entirely

understandable across history. This is false. The reality is that if you go back to the beginning of Christianity, the one thing that was shared was this extraordinary conviction of the resurrection, of which there was never one single interpretation. The experience of the resurrection—of the real presence of the risen Christ—was attested by everybody, whatever their different convictions about its metaphysical or physical calculus might have been. What's crucial is that there had been real, vivid, life-changing encounters by a huge number of Christ's followers after his death. There was this huge eruption of faith, and people were even willing to die for their conviction that they had encountered the risen Christ.

**Does that disavowal of propositional faith mean then that you're advocating an ahistorical understanding of the resurrection?**

Well, I'm not talking about Schillebeeckx's notion, where everybody gets together after the crucifixion and discusses it and Easter becomes salvation through group therapy. First Corinthians 15 is a very early text, and it's just a straightforward report of what I take to be very credible experiences, first of what others had experienced and then of Paul's own experience—and I find nothing there that makes sense if you demystify it. I think the only way to understand it is that the one who had been crucified really was alive and vindicated by God and present manifestly, at times physically, though not in a flesh-and-blood way, but physically nonetheless.

Now, it might be that it's not an objective phenomenon. But is there even such a thing as an objective phenomenon? It's perhaps like when Owen Barfield, in *Saving the Appearances*, talks about the rainbow. It's real, but it's not there in the physical sense of an actual colored strip that's somehow drawn across the sky. You can't separate the event of its manifestation from the event of its perception.

**It does seem as though you're doing something like what's been called demythologization in Protestant theology, though. What makes your project substantively different from that of someone like Tillich or Bultmann?**

No, because I don't deny the historical reality of the resurrection, or even of the empty tomb. I'm not a modern rationalist. For starters, Tillich was a joke. He couldn't have made it as a philosopher, with his watery, middle-Schelling approach to things, and he wrote these huge, vapid books about a religion that he only barely knew anything about. And Bultmann's attempt to reduce everything down to apocalyptic

inner illumination simply because the cosmology of the first century doesn't match the cosmology of the 20th—I mean, it's just the Protestant principle reaching its reductio ad absurdum.

You can find it in Hegel. The idea was that the rational inwardness of the Protestant religion is superior to Catholicism because Catholics still require visible artistic mediation and mythological structure and are profoundly reliant on the aesthetic dimension. Hegel understood religion as representation of a rational truth and, in one sense, thought Jesus was no more the Son of God than Jerry Lewis. So, needless to say, I don't take that very seriously. I'm very interested in the concrete. I believe the resurrection was a real historical event, I just don't think it was one we understand.

**I know you wrote at length about this in your other book from last year, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, which we reviewed in the century (see March 2023 issue), but would you say there are any tenets of the faith that require making historical claims?**

In the end it's a matter of prudence. Nicaea is legitimate, and it's not arbitrary. I will admit, though, that I no longer have much use for the organs of authority. It should all be relativized and rethought. The tradition has, among other things, been a set of historical fortuities—accidents—and, frankly, atrocities. So one shouldn't feel bound to any of them.

This isn't as odd as it seems. From an Eastern perspective, there is a notion that the seven councils deliver truths, although in fairly minimal terms. But it's not like before Nicaea people were saying, "Well, we need an ecumenical council, because we know that it will deliver firm and unalterable dogma." The very idea of a council was new.

**You sound almost like a Protestant!**

Protestants have their own problems on that score, s*ola scriptura* chief among them. No, what I sound like is something far worse than a Protestant: I sound like a syncretist—because, you know, I am. I draw quite happily from all the religions of the world.

**So you'd dispense with the concept of heresy?**

The more of the history of Christian dogma you know, the more you come to see not only the accommodations but the willful, almost cynical, minimalism of doctrinal determinations—and you realize that talk of heresy is language for children. It's like a child throwing a tantrum—it's just noise. It's always a sign of ignorance and of a bad argument. Anyone who thinks he knows the orthodox consensus can always be shown to be wrong.

**You're also known as a vocal proponent of socialism. What's the relation between your theological work and your interest in politics and economics?**

Well, this is also a matter of translation. There are aspects of the Gospels that couldn't be translated away, so they just tend to be swallowed whole. When you look at the Magnificat, you just have to say, "My goodness, the mother of God was a Bolshevist." And Jesus was clearly a provocative and revolutionary figure.

We see this clearly in the Lord's Prayer. An accurate translation of the Lord's Prayer from the Sermon on the Mount reveals that it's actually a prayer for the impoverished to pray. It's really talking about being relieved from debt. It's not saying, "Deliver us from evil," but deliver us from *the evil one*: the man who's already been described above as someone who strikes you in the face or defrauds you with extravagant oaths. Don't resist the evil man—who wants to cheat and enslave you—by force, Jesus says, because you'll lose. Don't go to court, because you'll lose. He's not recommending universal amity; he's saying you'll be robbed by a corrupt legal system. This is very practical counsel.

Jesus' whole ministry is soaked with political and social provocation, including absolute condemnations of personal wealth. "What did you come into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind, a man dressed in fine clothing? Soft garments can be found in the palaces; you came here to find the righteousness of God" (Matt. 11:7–10). What that literally means is that if you're rich, you have a camel's chance of getting through a needle's eye to be a proper citizen of the kingdom that's coming. Jesus is calling for an inversion of the social order—and he forbids lending to accrue interest. There's just no question that political and social remedies are being recommended.

**But I understand that for you, this doesn't translate into a wholesale endorsement of the Democratic Party.**

Absolutely not. I'm not an American liberal. I'm a Christian socialist. The Christian socialist tradition is just an actual attempt to translate the teachings of Christ into a social and political vision in the postindustrial world. John Ruskin is my favorite figure in the Christian socialist tradition, and he was a monarchist. I'm sort of culturally conservative on a lot of things. Children should be taught Shakespeare in school, for example, and Greek and Latin.

**Though you're not conservative in the sense of proposing that Christianity bolster an American civil religion?**

Christianity has never really taken deep root in America; we've all been much more committed to Mammon. I'm not talking conservative and liberal in the American cultural sense. It's absurd to suggest that you can have any actual devotion to who Jesus of Nazareth was and embrace laissez-faire capitalism or the entrepreneurial principle or erecting a border wall and keeping out asylum seekers. National conservatives—the people who think Jesus would have loved the Second Amendment and hated Mexicans—are simply not Christians. There's nothing about their vision of reality and their relations to their fellow human beings that bears the slightest resemblance to who and what Christ was and what he taught.

There's not even a meaningful debate to be held on this: the Christian right is a movement whose ultimate ends are to extinguish real Christian convictions in society.

**On that note, can we end with some rapid-fire questions, some of them collected from our readers?**

Only if it's very rapid.

**Alright. Do you consider yourself part of the radical orthodoxy movement?**

Sure. I mean, I wasn't there when the charter was drawn up, but I'm a fellow traveler. Although I prefer to think that they're following me.

**What's your take on theology as an academic discipline?**

I sometimes think it should be abolished.

**What's the greatest philosophical challenge to Christian faith today?**

The incoherence of a lot of traditional Christianity. In its theological traditions and historical embodiments, much of what is called Christianity is philosophically incoherent at a radical level and self-evidently false.

**Do you think of yourself as a mystic?**

No.

**Is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?**

[David's dog barks in the background.] Roland, my dog, is actually a talking dog. I may somewhat exaggerate his eloquence in *Roland in Moonlight,* but he really does mimic human phrases with uncanny accuracy and uses them in the correct settings: he has a whole repertoire of two dozen phrases.

**Do you have any new work we should be looking for in the near future?**

I'm writing another children's book with my son, a sequel to *The Mystery of Castle MacGorilla* called *The Mystery of the Green Star*. And I have a collection of short fiction coming out and a collection of essays and…. you know, more books.

*Ross M. Allen is designated term minister at South Acton Church in Acton, Massachusetts.*