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Review of: **David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003).**

It takes time to absorb David Bentley Hart's sprawling and difficult book, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*. Most reviews that I have read are full of qualifiers, noting that there is far more to this book than can be captured in a summary, and often admitting candidly that the reviewer has not yet mastered the material. The indefatigable Peter Leithart began blogging about Hart's book in December of 2003, eventually starting a series of reflective essays responding to each section of the book. As of this writing, he has made it a little over half way through the work (<http://www.leithart.com>) with nearly 200 pages still to cover.

Part of this is because of Hart's writing style. He is not difficult in the way that many academic writers are difficult; his writing is not sloppy or intentionally obscure. Indeed, there is often a poetic, soaring and persuasive quality to his prose. His sentence structure sometimes rivals the apostle Paul's for complexity, but when pondered everything he says is clear. He is difficult because he is holding so many strands of thought together and because he is in dialogue with such a wide variety of thinkers.

The book begins with an introductory section in which Hart helpfully defines his terms and outlines his project. He begins with a question: "Is the beauty to whose persuasive power the Christian rhetoric of evangelism inevitably appeals, and upon which it depends, theologically defensible? [1]" The book can be understood not only as an attempt to answer this question but as an attempt to justify the centrality of the question for Christian theology.

The introductory section includes a significant exposition of the meaning of beauty. Beauty is a hot topic in academic circles just now, not only within theology, but across the disciplines. Since I work in the theology of beauty, I maintain a bibliography on the topic, and it has grown exponentially in recent years. Discussions of beauty are flourishing in the sciences, in art criticism, and in literary theory. In theological circles the new concern with beauty is largely a response to Hans Urs von Balthasar's magisterial *The Glory of The Lord*, a seven-volume treatment of theological aesthetics, which Hart recognizes as one of his chief influences. Hart's treatment of beauty is bracingly and unapologetically unoriginal, in that he is translating the understanding of thinkers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, and Bonaventure into contemporary terms.

The main body of the book consists of three sections. First, Hart takes on postmodern metaphysics with a devastating critique. He contrasts the call to peace that is at the heart of the Christian gospel with the violence of postmodern thought, an understanding of postmodernism that has been heavily influenced by John Milbank. Those who are uninterested in continental philosophy may still find this section helpful, for many of

Hart's criticisms apply to other thinkers as well, and many of the ideas of which he is most critical have found their way into popular culture.

Second, Hart develops his understanding of the beauty of the infinite within a dogmatic context, considering the doctrines of the Trinity, creation, salvation, and the eschaton. For theologians, this is doubtless the most intriguing section of the book. Again, Hart is not trying to be original, but is defending the tradition of Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, Aquinas and Bonaventure, against contemporary misunderstandings and attacks. Despite his often brusque treatment of those with whom he disagrees, Hart's primary approach is not to debate these questions but to assert his convictions as winsomely as possible using contemporary categories.

Finally, in the briefest section of the book, Hart returns to his initial question, considering the nature of rhetoric and persuasion. He asserts that the postmodern commitment to a hermeneutic of suspicion must perpetuate violence, whereas the Christian understanding of evangelistic persuasion must lead to peace.

Hart treats the theme of analogy throughout the first two sections. He appeals to Aquinas, who made the case for analogical language most clearly. Aquinas said we cannot use univocal language for God; that is to say, we cannot assume that a word like "love" means the same thing when applied to God as it does when applied to a person, for that is to imagine that God is a being like ourselves, different only in scale rather than in kind. But there must be something more than equivocation – which would suggest that God is complete unknowable, that there is no connection at all between what the word "love" means when applied to a person or when applied to God. The third way to understand language, the way that is neither univocal nor equivocal, is analogy.

Much contemporary theology bandies about the term "analogy" in a sloppy manner, so that so-called analogy comes to serve as a screen for equivocation. Others boldly claim the right to univocal language for God, thereby annihilating the Creator/creature distinction and nullifying Christ's mediating work. Hart displays characteristic lack of patience with such thinkers, particularly Karl Barth.

If rejection of the *analogia entis* were in some sense the very core of Protestant theology, as Barth believed, one would still be obliged to observe that it is also the invention of antichrist, and so would have to be accounted the most compelling reason for not becoming a Protestant. [242]

In contrast, Hart offers a clear and compelling case for the inevitability of analogical language for God, while also arguing that only analogy allows us to understand other people. He argues that those who are committed to a "univocity of being" homogenize reality and deny the wealth of difference that God has created. But Hart spends more time on the other side of the equation. He argues that the postmodern commitment to the sublime does away with analogy by understanding God as inaccessible and unrepresentable. Were that true, then the only language for God that would remain to us would be equivocation, which is essentially agnostic.

Hart also rehabilitates the idea of God's *apatheia* or impassibility, sternly warning that most critics of this doctrine have not bothered to understand it, nor have they thought through the implications of rejecting it. Hart defines divine *apatheia* as "trinitarian love," saying:

God's impassibility is the utter fullness of an infinite dynamism, the absolutely complete and replete generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit from the Father, the infinite "drama" of God's joyous act of self-outpouring – which is his being as God. ... [N]o pathos is possible for God because a pathos is, by definition, a finite instance of change visited upon a passive subject, actualizing some potential, whereas God's love is pure positivity and pure activity. His love is an infinite peace and so needs no violence to shape it, no death over which to triumph. [This is not] some kind of original unresponsiveness in the divine nature; it is divine beauty, that perfect joy in the other by which God is God: the Father's *delectation* in the beauty of his eternal Image, the Spirit as the light and joy and sweetness of that knowledge. [167]

God is purely act with no potential love yet to be expressed, not waiting for us to feel pain before pouring himself out for us. Hart accuses those who reject the classical doctrine of impassibility of "apologetical plantiveness," which he explains as "a sense that, before God, though we are sinners, we also have a valid perspective, one he must learn to share with us so that he can sympathize with our lot rather than simply judge us. ...[159]"

From a Reformed perspective, one of the most interesting and helpful things about this book is Hart's focus on rhetoric as the primary locus of beauty rather than image. I confess that I expected Hart to focus on image and icon, given his clear Eastern Orthodox loyalties. But for much of the book he sounded more Reformed than Orthodox on this question. The irony, of course, is that there are few Reformed thinkers today willing to defend the traditional commitment to a priority of word over image. Perhaps Hart can show Reformed theologians a way to reclaim our own tradition.

Hart's treatment of election is also helpful, since he understands God's electing work as an "aesthetic" action [338]." A Christian understanding of beauty values particularity and difference, rather than homogenizing all people as the same. So God's love is also particular, not a love for humanity in general, but for specific persons. Reformed readers might still expect more conversation about sin. Hart talks extensively about systemic sin and its epistemological effects, but relatively little about individual sin. Perhaps Hart will spur Reformed readers to return to Edwards, who has canvassed this territory for the Reformed tradition.

Overall, this is an important book that deserves careful reading and extensive study. But it may not receive the attention that it deserves because it does not fit neatly into any discipline that is usually taught in college or seminary. Hart's accomplishment makes clear that it is time to recognize theological aesthetics as a legitimate theological discipline – on a level with ethics and dogmatics. Perhaps there will even come a day when a class in theological aesthetics will be required in seminary curricula. Should that day come, this book will be at the top of the required reading list.