David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell and Universal Salvation*

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David Bentley Hart argues for an admittedly minority position in this book. But is his interpretation of Christianity within the realm of acceptable doctrine? This question is particularly applicable to Adventists, for at least two reasons: first, Adventists themselves make a moral argument for the annihilation of the wicked, and second, Adventists themselves argue against a clear teaching in the book of revelation regarding the wicked at the last judgment who will be "tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image." Rev. 14: 11.

Setting the context for the discussion

Seventh-day Adventism on hell

Ellen Harmon White

> Regarding hell fire, Satanic angels tell us that God is a "revengeful tyrant…[and that sinners will] suffer unutterable anguish, and writhe in the eternal flames, [and God] is represented as looking down upon them with satisfaction" *Early Writings*, 218-9.
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> The doctrine of an "eternally burning hell…does injustice go the benevolent character of God….[making God the] veriest (sic) tyrant in the universe" I *Testimonies*, 334.
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> This is what Ellen Harmon was taught in her Methodist church: "Satan was represented as eager to seize upon his prey…there to exult over our sufferings in the horrors of an eternally burning hell, where, after the torture of thousands upon thousands of years, the fiery billows would roll to the surface the writhing victims, who would shriek: 'How long, O Lord, how long?' Then the answer would thunder down the abyss: 'Through all eternity!' Again the molten waves would engulf the lost, carrying them down into the depths of an ever-restless sea of fire" 1 *Testimonies*, 24.
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> [The doctrine of] "eternal torment [is] opposed to the teaching of the scriptures, to the dictates of reason, and to our feelings of humanity…." [Many have been] "driven to insanity" "by the thought" *The Great Controversy*, 545.

> The damned "must receive the penalty of transgression—'the wages of sin.' They suffer punishment varying in duration and intensity, 'according to their works,' but finally ending in the second death" *The Great Controversy*, 544.

Fundamental Belief 27: "The millennium and the end of sin: The millennium is the thousand-year reign of Christ with His saints in heaven between the first and second resurrections. During this time the wicked dead will be judged; the earth will be utterly desolate, without living human inhabitants, but occupied by Satan and his angels. At its close, Christ with His saints and the Holy City will descend from heaven to earth. The unrighteous dead will then be resurrected, and with Satan and his angels will surround the city; but fire from God will consume them and cleanse the earth. The universe will thus be freed of sin and sinners forever. (Rev. 20; 1 Cor. 6:2, 3; Jer. 4:23-26; Rev. 21:1-5; Mal. 4:1; Eze. 28:18.)"

Scholarly reviews of *That All Shall Be Saved:*

Joshua R. Brotherton gives a rather even-handed summary but engages in at least gentle criticism, indicating that Hart "takes particular umbrage at the claim of Aquinas and others that the blessed must rejoice at the justice manifested in the punishments imposed upon those who are eternally condemned." "…Hart eventually makes some robust argument for his position." "However, the tone of the book…strikes this reader as incredibly arrogant." Brotherton also speaks of a "lack of source citations," "repetitive *ad hominin* attacks," and Hart's "continuously attempting to psychoanalyze the reasons people believe in an eternal hell." (*Nova et Vetera,* pp. 1394-1399, vol. 18, #4, Fall, 2020)

Taylor Patrick O'Neill says the book "does not seem to be a text which admits of moderate responses," and after reading it "one thirsts desperately for even a drop of irenicism." "Names and ideas are referenced in passing but never cited. A single contemporary text is mentioned but hardly explored…One keeps expecting the rhetorical setup to punch through to a complete argument on the next page, but the blow never lands." "On the very final pages of the book, Hart seems to be alert to the lack of argumentation, saying: 'I could go on. I could, if nothing else, spend a few hundred pages more dealing with certain highly technical issues of Christian metaphysical tradition…But I do not think that it would actually add anything to the essential arguments of these pages,' (207-8). It is hard to overstate how frustrating it is to find this statement nestled at the end of over two hundred pages...I would like to see this argument in its fullest and most robust form. Instead, all we receive is, frankly, a lot of preaching to the choir with rhetorical flourishes. Hart's grasp of the English language is probably unmatched by any living theologian, and yet he transgresses the fundamental principle of writing: show rather than tell." (*Nova et Vetera,* pp. 1399-1403, vol. 18, #4, Fall, 2020)

Daniel Waldow, Duquesne University, writes “from my own Catholic infernalist perspective.” In this interpretive summary the author says Hart’s “thesis is not merely that all particular souls will happen to be saved, but additionally that a state of eternal damnation is not even a theoretical possibility. He strives to support this thesis primarily through logical analysis of the doctrine of hell and secondarily through biblical exegesis. He argues that the idea of hell is logically impossible, morally abhorrent, and absent from Christian revelation.” This reviewer sees two central questions in Hart’s book: a) “Does being a human person necessarily entail the capacity to voluntarily, eternally reject God? (13).” and b) “Can we identify the omnipotent and omniscient God as the supreme ‘God’ if he freely created a universe in which even a single soul could be damned? (28).” Here is another notable sentence: “If all are not saved, then God is a monster, and the reality we live in is ‘something considerably worse than a nightmare’ (91).” (*Journal of Moral Theology*, pp. 200-202, 2020)

Bible texts pointing to universal salvation

Then as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” Ro. 5;18,19
“For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. 1 Cor 15: 22
“For in him (Christ) all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” Colossians 1:19,20
Hart points to over 20 other biblical passages that indicate universal salvation, seeing these passages as more numerous than passages that point toward individual salvation/damnation.

Hart’s chapter, “Doubting the Answers” in which he makes essential points

Actually, this chapter should not employ “Answers” in the title, because there is only one answer that Hart recognizes, although it has variations.

The answer that is most often given to the question of Why a fiery hell?, particularly why an *eternally* burning hell?, is clear enough: It’s the argument of “rational freedom of the creature, and from the refusal of God to trespass upon that freedom, for fear of preventing the creature from achieving a true union of love with the divine (though, of course, unspeakable consequences await those who fail to do just this, discriminate between “pure” love and love motivated by fear)” (34-5). Hart proceeds to speak of a “remarkable array of variations” of this answer that change according to different emphases given to one element or another, the argument’s language, the method of exposition given, and the rhetorical gifts of the author.

If Hart had been more thorough in his treatment of hell, he'd likely have indicated that the Hebrew word *Sheol* means the place of all the dead, the "grave," or "pit." "As Ps. 16.10 indicates, there arose a hope in Judaism that the righteous would not be 'left' there, and, acc. to Acts 2.27-31, Christ, after passing like all men through death, entered this realm but by His Resurrection, fulfilled Ps. 16.10 in his own person and, becoming 'the firstfruits of them that slept', made possible its fulfillment for all who are 'in Christ' (1 Cor. 15:20-23, cf. Rom 6:5-9)." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, "hell" entry.

But back to Hart's chapter: Even before he can articulate the "answer" that he'll criticize throughout the chapter, he gives his response in the chapter's first sentence: Hart claims that he can't even come up with "an intelligible grammar" that can make sense of a "hell of eternal torment."

As Hart is wont to reason throughout this book, he invokes our contemporary intuition of what makes sense, of what seems logical and morally praiseworthy. So in this he asserts that hell fire's "logic is intrinsically defective." This picks up a theme threaded throughout chapter 1: the need to "make real moral sense" of a notion of hell (15), and the value of something making "rational good sense" (18).

As a believer, indeed as a philosophically and scientifically informed theologian, Hart accepts revealed truths from the Bible, but his interpretation of such notions as hell and heaven must make sense in today's world. So, is it really a surprise that at chapter's end he confesses what his idea of "eternal hell really means"? "For what it's worth," writes Hart, "I do in fact believe in hell, though only in the sense of a profound and imprisoning misery that we impose upon ourselves by rejecting the love that alone can set us free...Practically all of us go through life as prisoners of our own egos…Hence, a secret that we all too often hide from ourselves is that we walk in hell every day… There is, though, another and greater secret too: We also walk in heaven, also every day. This too we can occasionally see, though usually only in rare moments of spiritual wakefulness or imaginative transport."

And Hart continues: "Redemption then, if there is such a thing, must consist ultimately in a conversion of the heart so complete that one comes to see heaven for what it is—and thus also comes to see, precisely where one formerly had perceived only the fires of hell, the transfiguring glory of infinite love. And 'love never fails' (I Cor. 13:8)."

On what basis does Hart so radically re-conceptualize heaven and hell? *I suggest that the answer lies in Hart's thorough integration of what are too often seen as opposites: faith and reason, revelation and nature, supernatural and natural, and, the divine and the human.*

One of the most important critiques of Hart is his supposed audacity in "judging the acts of God" according to "some ethical standard applicable to finite creatures" (54). He bridles at this charge, saying the criticism " simply is not so" 55.

Hart is clear about the profound difference between human beings and Being Itself or God. However, morally speaking, he believes that we can at least begin to speak "analogically" about basic moral values that apply to both to ourselves and to God. And the clearest example is the unrelenting argument of this book: only a "monster" would create finite human beings with limited ability to freely choose, and then consign them to eternal torment for exercising that divinely appropriated contingent choice.

David Bentley Hart doesn't pretend to know the ways in which God acts in complex human affairs, but he feels theologically compelled to critically judge the stories we humans tell about God's interaction with humankind in general. "In fact," asserts Hart, "it is morally required of us to do so; not to judge is a dereliction of our rational vocation to know and affirm the Good. And here, recall again, we are not assessing God's acts against some higher standard of ethical action; we are merely measuring the stories we tell about him against his own supposed revealed nature as the transcendent Good" (60). Hart continues: "Because he is the Good itself, God cannot be the author of absolute injustice, absolute evil; such an irrational possibility would be a limitation upon the infinite freedom with which he expresses his nature" (60).

Hart says more about the inseparability of Goodness and God: "So it is no error of reason for a believer to refuse to assent to a supposedly complete narrative of God and creation if that narrative severs every analogical connection between goodness among creatures and the goodness of God. In fact, reason and faith alike forbid such assent; to believe solely because one thinks faith demands it, in spite of all the counsels of reason, is actually a form of disbelief, of faithlessness. Submission to a morally unintelligible narrative of God's dealings with his creatures would be a kind of epistemic nihilism, reducing the act of fidelity to God to a brutishly obstinate infidelity to reason (whose substance, again, is God himself)" (61). Wow, what a clear confession by Hart of his own comingling of reason and faith, of goodness and God! (Hart hasn't in this book laid the groundwork for such a union of reason and faith, but he has a basis that we've only alluded to thus far, but I'll be laying it out as clearly as I can within a page or two below.)

Hart gives a glaring example of how God and Goodness have been torturously separated—the reformer John Calvin, in his formulation of double-predestination. "[T]he Calvinist account of predestination is unquestionably the most terrifying and severe expression of the late Augustinian heritage…Calvin makes no effort to deceive either us or himself that there is some deeper kindness in the doctrine he proclaims, hidden from our sinful eyes only by our own depravity. He proclaims that God hates the damned, and in fact created them to be the objects of his hatred….For him, the true unadorned essence of the whole story is nothing more than sheer absolute power exercising itself for power's sake" (49-50).

Perhaps Hart's most severe criticism of hell-fire being the just dessert for anyone is that none of us has "absolutely unpremised liberty, obeying no rationale except its own spontaneous volition toward whatever end it might pose for itself..." 40. He contends that "the character of even the very worst among us is in part the product of external contingencies, and somewhere in the history of every soul there are moments when a better way was missed by mischance, or by malign interventions from without, or by disorders of the mind within, rather than by any intentional perversity on the soul's own part" (39).

Hart cites two examples: Adolph Hitler and Eve. Hitler becomes the Fuhrer for one of two reasons (or a combination): he had bad influences in his upbringing, or he was congenitally wicked. Regardless, "his guilt was a qualified one," and he was never "wholly free." Similarly, Adam and Eve were not intrinsically evil, but were merely somewhat naïve and ignorant. "When, therefore, we try to account for the human rejection of God, we can never trace the wanderings of the will back to some primordial moment of perfect liberty, some epistemically pristine instant when a perverse impulse spontaneously arose within an isolated, wholly sane individual will, or within a mind perfectly cognizant of the whole truth of things" (43).

Hart's undergirding philosophy of religion – "the experience of God"

The book we are now exploring, in which Hart unrelentingly attempts to slaughter the notion of eternal hellfire, is welcome news to many of us Adventists who appreciate such an erudite thinker giving such strong backing to a position so many of us have been taught throughout our religious lives. However, on the other side of the discussion, aren't many of us unnerved by Hart's equally unequivocal advocacy of salvation for all—even Hitler?

Hart isn't systematic in his approach—e.g., laying out Biblical texts that are for and against eternal torment, and reasoning to a biblical conclusion. And Hart's an orthodox theologian who takes the Bible seriously! He seems to take reason as equal to faith—and he asserts, without giving a rationale, that reason and faith are somehow equivalent. At an even deeper level, he asserts that *God and Goodness* are one and the same! Isn't he familiar with Plato's writings in which Euthyphro poses the now classic question on this topic, "Does God command a thing because it is good, or is it good because God commands it?" (cf. 34).

This book, *That All Shall Be Saved*: *Heaven*, *Hell and Universal Salvation (2013),* is logically and conceptually **secondary** to his earlier one, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (2013). And I will now summarize that earlier book's essence, as it spells out Hart's basic philosophy of religion—something largely presupposed in his 2019 book on eternal torment and universal salvation.

At a fundamental level Hart is pre-modern, and he criticizes our contemporary enthrallment with modernism in which we analyze everything worth believing into its basic component parts. Overall, Hart is less Aristotelian in his analysis of issues, and he openly appreciates his Platonic bias in that he too (ala Plato) portrays a grand vision. If Hart were to answer Euthyphro's question, he'd say, in good Platonic fashion, "It's a bad analytical question, indicating a confusion of categories; the answer is that God and Goodness are one. We wouldn't even ask the question of goodness were it not for God."

The question of God.

The first thing to be said about Hart's God is that she/he/they/it (all pronouns are grossly inadequate) couldn't be larger: God is Being itself. His God is the God of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism Hinduism, Baha'i, "and a great deal of paganism," and is defined as: "one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things" (30).

Hart invokes an old Scholastic distinction between sacred literature written "*de Deo uno*" ("about the one God") and "*de Deo trino*" (about the Trinitarian God")—the latter denoting Christian doctrine. He describes his own approach as the former perspective—metaphysical or philosophical (as opposed to dogmatic).

Hart describes his approach to God as philosophical, but he doesn't mean impersonal—anything but. His book title, *The Experience of God*, is meant very literally: it's "to a great degree a rather personal approach to the question of God. I do not mean that it is subjective or confessional; rather, I mean that it takes the structure of personal experience—not mine particularly, but anyone's—not only as an authentic way of approaching the mystery of the divine but as powerful evidence of the reality of God" (9). Hart starts with "the conviction that many of the most important things we know are things we know before we can speak them…even as children, and see them with the greatest immediacy when we look at them with the eyes of innocence" (9).

God is categorically different from god or the gods. For this reason Hart agrees with the "new atheists" in their augments against God—as Hart says, the God of fundamentalist religion against which these atheists rail is not his God either.

Hart's God is not the god who miraculously weaves in and out of human affairs, one player among others in a world of contingent beings. God and god, the latter a "demiurge" according to Hart, are not logically uttered in the same breadth. And he sees the whole line of thinking that proves God's existence using the cosmological argument of design as but pushing back and back and back in search of a first cause—but of which its own cause could be questioned. It's "an infinite regress of *contingent* ontological causes," asserts Hart.

In contrast, Hart's "orthodox" God of the historic religious faiths is the absolute ground of all that is. God is existence itself. God is not an object among all objects that are illuminated by the "light of being," but "is himself the light of being. It makes perfect sense to ask what illuminates an object, but not to ask what illuminates light. It makes perfect sense to wonder why a contingent being exists, but not to wonder why Absolute Being 'exists'" (143).

The question of science/naturalism

David Bentley Hart is pro-science and enthralled by nature, but sees some scientists over-reaching their realm of physical reality. For example, he's dismissive of Richard Feynman and Steven Weinberg who've commented on the apparent "meaninglessness" of the universe as revealed by modern physics—"as if any purely physical inventory of reality," chides Hart, "could possibly have anything to tell us about the meaning of things" (75). Similarly, Hart sees Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow as naively "pompous" in declaring the death of philosophy.

"It never crosses [Hawking's] mind that the question of creation might concern the very possibility of existence as such, not merely of this universe but of all the laws and physical conditions that produced it, or that the concept of 'God might concern a reality not temporally prior to this or that world, but logically and necessarily prior to all worlds, also physical laws, all quantum events, and even all possibilities of laws and events" (40). Hart has a philosophical definition of God that includes all that is, and all that could possibly be—and to deny this "God," thus defined, is to embrace an "ultimate absurdity" (17).

Hart criticizes naturalism's claim that it "adheres to the only sure path of verifiable knowledge" as "nothing but a feat of sublime circular thinking: physics explains everything, which we know because anything physics cannot explain does not exist, which we know because whatever exists must be explicable by physics, which we know because physics explains everything." And Hart adds: "There is something here of the mystical" (77).

Hart is particularly brilliant in so clearly laying out how naturalism (also known as physicalism and materialism) inevitably goes beyond its own announced realm—material—if it makes metaphysical/philosophical claims about that realm. Hart observes that "the doctrine that there is nothing apart from the physical order…is an incorrigibly incoherent concept, and one that is ultimately indistinguishable from pure magical thinking. The very notion of nature as a closed system entirely sufficient to itself is plainly one that cannot be verified, deductively or empirically, from within the system of nature. It is a metaphysical (which is to say 'extra-natural') conclusion regarding the whole of reality" (17).

Hart as part of a relatively new turn in Western religious thinking: Radical Orthodoxy

There is a relatively new movement in Western Christian thought called "Radical Orthodoxy." This movement is centered in Cambridge University, and theologian John Milbank is a primary leader. In the few comments here, I draw on the 1999 anthology, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology,* edited by Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward—all associated with Cambridge. Three of our presenters here in our class over the next month are influenced by radical orthodoxy. Osborn suggested to me that our class would likely be interested in Hart as an author; Daryll Ward is one of Hart's biggest fans, and Yi Shen Ma recommended the Milbank volume to me as a good introduction to this theological movement.

David Bentley Hart is no card-carrying radically orthodox thinker, but he holds more in common than separates him from this Cambridge-inspired movement. Both Hart and Milbank deeply lament that secularism is the default ideological construct of today's thought world—and this has been so for at least the past two centuries. Hart himself could have written Milbank's criticism of secularism's materialist ideology, which Milbank sees as "soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic" (1). Those of us reading Hart's book know just how central is his charge against nihilism—nihilism being the notion that traditional values are unfounded and that existence is senseless and useless. Milbank too joins Hart in decrying the lack of any metaphysical foundation in secular materialism's account of existence. Regarding existence, Milbank says that "all there is *only* is because it is more than it is" (4, his italics). "In a bizarre way, it seems that modernity does not really want what it thinks it wants," says Milbank; "but, on the other hand, in order to have what it thinks it wants, it would have to recover the theological" (4).

Milbank's Cambridge orthodoxy is not "simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern," as it addresses a full array of concerns in contemporary life: "aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space" (1). But Hart's and Milbank's *orthodox* platforms could not be more different. Whereas Hart's orthodoxy essentially collapses faith and reason, Milbank boldly proclaims traditional dogma "in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist" (1). For Millbank, *de Deo trino* soundly trumps *de Deo uno*—to invoke a distinction that Hart makes and that I referred to above.

Milbank and his colleagues are thoroughgoing in their orthodoxy—"a commitment to creedal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix…. [and more specifically] "reaffirming a richer and more coherent Christianity which was gradually lost sight of after the late Middle Ages" (2). Milbank is radical in his unabashed "return to patristic and medieval roots, and especially to the Augustinian vision of all knowledge as divine illumination—a notion which transcends the modern bastard dualisms of faith and reason, grace and nature." Such language sounds very much like Hart's. However, Milbank applies his Augustinian vision opposite that of Hart. Milbank uses his radical

orthodoxy “to criticize modern society, culture, politics, art, science and philosophy with an unprecedented boldness” (2).

A very limited post script

Given Milbank’s radical orthodoxy, is Hart part of this movement or is he merely “radical”?
Is Hart’s God the God of the classical world religions, as he claims?
How does Hart’s definition of God differ from that of contemporary liberal theology, e.g. Tillich’s God as Ultimate Realty or the Ground of Being?
Is Hart advancing a disputable new metanarrative? Postmodernism is highly critical of grand overreaching paradigms, those big ideas that are rooted in transcendent, universal truths and insights.
Similarly, postmodernism questions the modernist versions of foundationalism—e.g. Kant’s grand theory of categories of thought, and Descartes’ distrust of one’s senses in favor of an affirmation of personal existence—I think therefore I am.

What are we to make of David Bentley Hart’s “experience of God”?