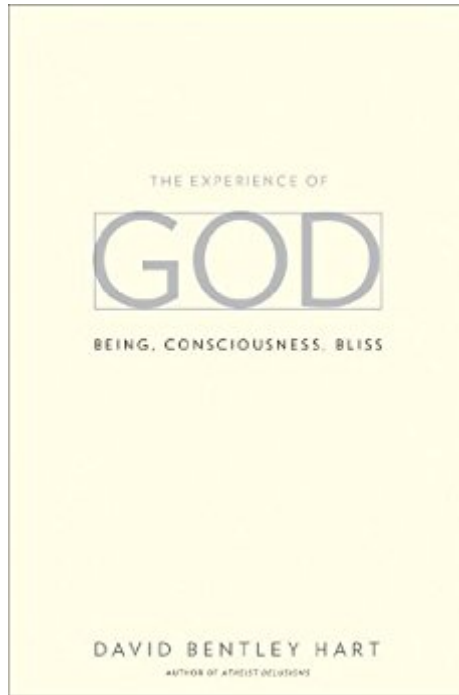


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The Experience Of God



Synopsis

Despite the recent ferocious public debate about belief, the concept most central to the discussion—God—frequently remains vaguely and obscurely described. Are those engaged in these arguments even talking about the same thing? In a wide-ranging response to this confusion, esteemed scholar David Bentley Hart pursues a clarification of how the word—God—functions in the world's great theistic faiths. Ranging broadly across Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism, Sikhism, and Buddhism, Hart explores how these great intellectual traditions treat humanity's knowledge of the divine mysteries. Constructing his argument around three principal metaphysical moments—being, consciousness, and bliss—the author demonstrates an essential continuity between our fundamental experience of reality and the ultimate reality to which that experience inevitably points. Thoroughly dismissing such blatant misconceptions as the deists' concept of God, as well as the fundamentalist view of the Bible as an objective historical record, Hart provides a welcome antidote to simplistic manifestoes. In doing so, he plumbs the depths of humanity's experience of the world as powerful evidence for the reality of God and captures the beauty and poetry of traditional reflection upon the divine.

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Customer Reviews

My general preamble to reviews these days starts the same way: I have fallen out of the habit of writing reviews because I think to do a review properly takes the time and energy at this moment in my education I would prefer be spent reading. Nonetheless both the excellence of this book and what in my humble opinion is the poorness of another review, have momentarily called me back. It is of course anyone's right to give a one-star review to a book--even a book I love; in doing so however one would hope cogent reasons other than "I didn't understand it" or vague incriminations of association with a journal one apparently dislikes, would be more than forthcoming. Sadly, such was not the case. That said, I can assure you that my "five-star" rating is not merely serving as a countervalance to the one-star, it is my genuine opinion of the book that would have been given either way. But now that the throat-clearing is done, lets get down to business. Long story short: if you have read Hart and enjoyed his learnedness and witticism in the past, buy this book. If you haven't read Hart but are intrigued: this, or *Atheist Delusions*, are the places to start. In short: buy this book. Read it, Enjoy it. Pop some popcorn and wait for the fireworks. There really is no second guessing (especially at the affordable price). I was initially expecting something of a sequel to *Beauty of the Infinite* (which I still consider my favorite of Hart's books, despite its difficulty) but really for those interested I would consider this more akin to *Atheist Delusions* than anything.

Well, this is a tough one for stars. On the one hand, the arguments are right on the mark. I especially like how Hart places the arguments of new atheists and creation scientists/fundamentalists within a shared world view that diminishes the whole idea of God to begin with -- call it materialist or naturalist, once you begin with those post-Enlightenment habits of seeing the world you've pretty much written a coherent notion of God out of the picture. And Hart is very good at pointing out the lumbering absurdities of such an approach. He's also very good at ripping through the just-so stories of evolutionary psychology (aka in an earlier guise, sociobiology). So on the merits of argument, he gets a very high score. My problems with the book are really two: (1) It would be twice as good a book if it were half as long. Hart needs to learn some restraint. He's too besotted with his prose, trying to effect, I suppose, a tweedy Oxonian style that just gets tiresome for most contemporary American readers. I don't want to call it pretentious, but it is annoying how it calls attention to itself and gets in the way of the ideas. (2) More problematic for me is this

undercurrent of what I can only call "anger" muddying his robust attacks on the new atheists. It's certainly true that they deserve to have their goofy illogic and ignorance unmasked and Hart does this with abandon. But his evident contempt for them takes on this unsettling character of boot-stomping that feels unpleasant, defensive, and ... well ... mean. It's either that or Hart is too fond of his own erudition -- an arrogance, probably better founded, that actually mimics that of the Dawkins, Dennett, Grayling crowd. But where their smugness is laughable, Hart's is more of a concern.

With works like "The Beauty of the Infinite," David Bentley Hart has already established himself as one of the most talented metaphysicians and theologians alive today. The man is clearly a genius. But occasionally, he bothers to write books that provide a public service for those of us who aren't academics--namely, books that offer a corrective to modern misunderstandings about religion, history, philosophy, and theology ("Atheist Delusions" was one such book). And now, with the publication of "The Experience of God," Dr. Hart has delivered another much-needed antidote to modern misunderstandings of the "God question"--what is God? There are lots of books attempting to "defend" or "refute" the existence of God, but strangely enough, not many books attempting to explain just what exactly the word "God" is supposed to mean. And those that do make such an attempt (at least the ones that I've seen) fall short in numerous ways. One such shortcoming seems to me to be the failure to grapple with the various religious traditions of the world, which is no easy task, but certainly one that is necessary for any thoughtful person who wants to have a coherent account of the traditional meaning of "God." In this magnificent work, Dr. Hart does exactly that, aptly citing some of the greatest religious thinkers to reveal what the word "God" has traditionally meant across philosophical and theological faith traditions. Don't get me wrong. Hart is not here engaging in the sort of naïf pluralism that says that all religions are saying the same thing; he is aware that there are clear theological differences across religious traditions, and he is respectful of those differences.

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