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Love or Nothing?
Locating the Question of Modern Belief

Ian Clausen

What is the essence of modern belief? Two scholars offer different answers to the question of modern belief that challenge some basic assumptions about our current secular age. While Simon May develops the claim that moderns believe in love, David Bentley Hart defends the view that moderns believe in nothing. Which of these judgements on modern belief is correct, and why does it matter? After exploring how the two judgements may not stand in complete tension, this article follows May's advice in rethinking our notion of love to rediscover the central questions that religion aims to provoke.

Introduction

Thanks, we are told, in large part to western secularisation, affiliation with traditional religions has rapidly declined. These religions have given way to other forms of community that better suit the secular, non-religious mindset. True as this may be regarding religious affiliation, at least in the West, certain features of religious experience ineluctably persist. One attempt to capture this comes to the fore in *Love: A History* (2011), by British philosopher and cultural historian Simon May.[1] Acknowledging the current demise of Christian belief in the West, May highlights a new development in the modern religious consciousness that Christians can stand to learn from and fruitfully engage. That development concerns modern belief in *love*: an ideal of divine-like status in a so-called secular age.

May's history of how love came to prevail in the West invites reflection on the continuing relevance of religion. His thesis revives interest in the legacy of Christian love, but also issues an important challenge to prevailing Christian assumptions that can be gleaned from the pen of American theologian David Bentley Hart. Hart's thesis applies pressure to May's analysis of modern belief, while also illuminating his contribution. His diagnosis of modern belief suggests that love implies questions that Christianity gives to us and claims to answer definitively. By using Hart to frame May's proposal to rethink the meaning of love, we uncover the central questions that both animate the Christian faith and continue to haunt the landscape of so-called secular life.

No New God? Hart on the Haunting Legacy of Christ

The essence of modern belief pertains to its shape and not just the specific things people claim to believe in. In his provocative article, 'Christ and Nothing',[2] Bentley Hart argues that modern people stand at the edge of an abyss, their spiritual energies all but sapped by a profound belief in nothing. They claim to believe in all sorts of things - yet the terms on which they believe them are devoid of transcendent purpose, as they take form within a cultural context based on consumer choice, crude materialism, and pointless self-worship, i.e. on nothing. How does Hart arrive at this excoriating judgement?

Hart takes us back to the dawn of the modern age. Channelling Nietzsche's rueful awakening to the malaise of modern life, he contends that Nietzsche's 'death of God' signalled the death of many things, including the disappearance of a transcendent horizon. Nietzsche famously complained: 'nearly two thousand years and no new god'.[3] The kernel of truth in this was that Christianity had seized hold of a culture (or cultural imaginary) and fundamentally transformed

the terms on which religion was to be understood. Christianity, with its revolutionary testimony about Jesus Christ, outstripped the pagan order, dispelled the gods on which it was founded, and rendered belief in any other god into a perverse form of self-worship. As Hart explains: 'The only cult that can truly thrive in the aftermath of Christianity is a sordid service of the self, of the impulses of the will, of the nothingness that is all that the withdrawal of Christianity leaves behind'.

For Hart, Christ's arrival brought an end to sacrificial systems in which humanity remained subservient to the whims of the divine. Instead of labouring within the pagan sacrificial order, humanity now breathed the free air of total redemption in Christ, Christ bringing an end to humanity's need to sacrifice. Moreover, by taking captive all powers and principalities, Christ liberated the human spirit to inherit its divine calling as a creature made in the image of the Crucified and Risen One. This means that the intelligibility of modern secular 'humanism' owes its substance to the Christ-event at the centre of Western culture. When this humanism turns its back upon its centre, erecting its own so-called 'secular' equivalent, it must retreat to its own resources in order to sustain its existence, only to fall to worshipping its self-projection as a dim and pale image.[4]

The modern world, Hart reminds us, owes a huge debt to Christianity, without which it cannot understand the questions it faces. Unable to find solace in the gods of antiquity - a fate lamented by Nietzsche - humanity falls prey to a self-centred religion whose internal collapse appears all but inevitable. The modern world thus teeters on the brink of self-destruction while persisting beneath the shadow of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. In short, Hart's answer to the question of modern belief is that nothing stands between moderns and vanity or despair. Christ's absence imposes on moderns the awful burden of self-creation, having to make up and sustain our future, where failure means losing out on the only life we have. This burden hides the precarious and tragic foundation of modern belief in nothing, where 'nothing' denotes the substance and end of our struggle.

Hart's analysis does not command universal assent, nor is it designed to yield insight on how to go on. It extends an apocalyptic judgement on the essence of modern life, and forces us take stock of our implicit beliefs. Hart leaves us with the challenge to investigate whether, within the interim between Christ and nothing, i.e. the modern age, there persist any 'intermediate deities' granting humanity a temporary stay. Might we say more about the *content* of modern belief, even if it is founded on nothing?

To this end, we introduce the philosopher Simon May. Citing the same Nietzschean complaint that guided Hart's analysis - 'nearly two thousand years and no new god' - May replies, 'But he was wrong. The new god was there - indeed was right under his nose. That new god was love. Human love' (1). For May, there is to more to say about the content of modern belief which further reveals our cultural indebtedness to Christianity's legacy.

Divesting Love's Pretensions: May on the Human Search for Home

According to May, the consummate modern deity to emerge in this age owes a great deal to the deity it usurped. At a time when the great religion of love has diminished in cultural power, Christianity continues its influence through modern belief in love. Not just any love. The 'new god' of modern belief may escape the secularist's notice, yet it bears uncanny similarities to the God of Christian faith. Replacing Christian proclamation that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), May writes, the modern age inverts the mantra to proclaim that 'love is God' (1), clinging to a notion that is deeply Christian and deeply unrealistic.

May argues that our devotion to Christian love mistakenly elevates the pursuit of love to an impossible standard. Moderns assume a definition of love they inherit from Christian tradition - perfect love is unconditional, disinterested, eternal, *et cetera* (2) - and thereby impose a substantial burden on the one who deigns to love, holding them to a standard reserved for God alone. Moderns may have dispelled God in the name of enlightenment and liberation, but not without shackling modern humanity with God-like obligations.

Behind this, May suggests, lie ingrained misconceptions concerning the origin of love and the nature of love itself. His initial task is to strip away modern belief to expose the inherent folly of its devotion to love. Aspirations to

'unconditional love' not only rely on Christian beliefs. They also betray incoherence with respect to love itself. To love someone unconditionally is strictly speaking impossible. It makes no sense in a human relationship. According to May, every love has implicit conditions. To shed light on one condition at the core of human love, May offers a different account of the nature of true love:

'Love, I will argue, is the rapture we feel for people and things that inspire in us the hope of an indestructible grounding for our life. It is a rapture that sets us off on - and sustains - the long search for a secure relationship between our being and theirs' (6).

In May's view, it is our longing to *belong* to something (or someone) that discloses the deepest dimension of our aspiration to love. Such belonging to a beloved may involve an unconditional surrender, yet it *first emerges* within a struggle to satisfy the human condition, our deep-seated desire for an 'indestructible grounding for our life' (6).

Human love's most basic condition for May is the desire to find a home in the arms of the beloved. This 'ontological rootedness' renders human love wondrously mundane, binding us mysteriously to a person or place. May reasons that '[i]f we all have a need for love, it is because we all need to feel at home in the world' (6). That condition, that feeling of displacement, to which religions (even Christianity) often bear witness, captures the essence of what it is for us to step forward as a lover. It is also, at the same time, what makes our efforts to love so *dangerous*, and why May regards our current confusion as a recipe for disaster.

To illustrate the peril of love, May starts with the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as the narrative from which the western concept of love originates.[5] In particular, he traces his definition of love/ontological rootedness to the (in)famous story of Abraham and Isaac at Mount Moriah (Gen. 22). By commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God paints a deeply potent and disturbing portrait of love. The story's lesson remains lost to pious readers striving to excuse God's immoral command (e.g. Kierkegaard). It conveys a simple point about love: perfect love demands nothing less than perfect obedience. The story puts the true nature of love in full relief as an act of *radical obedience* to the one called beloved, in this case the divine being, or source of all existence, for Whom Abraham is willing to sacrifice his own beloved son.

If this is correct, then not only must we divest love of divine pretensions, we must also exercise great care in pursuing our beloved. The narrative betrays love's perilous possibilities and innate tendency to corrupt 'humane values'. Yet, alongside this destructive tendency inherent to true love, May acknowledges its marvellous capacity to make us more human. It is, in fact, thanks to our desire for ontological rootedness that we can 'unleash the will to value, defend, affirm, empathise with, and give to the supremely loved one in the most intense way possible' (31). May therefore advocates giving attention to this love as the seat of human passion and creative possibility. Letting go of impossible standards in pursuit of true love, moderns can recover a richer vision of what love *is* and *offers*. This in turn affirms their humanness and basic limitations. For '[t]his is how all love works. Like Israel's love for God, love does not need deep knowledge of the other in order to be evoked and sustained…. Love is evoked not by beauty or moral goodness (in the sense of kindness) but by the mysterious promise of the loved one to anchor and sustain one's life.…' (36).

The Restless Heart, Now Facing a Quest(ion)

From this analysis we can derive a different take on the modern age. In a curious departure from Hart's dire diagnosis, May intimates that the modern predicament stems less from the *absence* of Christ, and more from an implicit *allegiance* to the ideal that Christ represents. Get rid of this allegiance to unconditional love, May suggests, and true love soon returns to us as a realistic possibility. The claim is not that moderns can no longer *seek* divine love (though May has doubts about the search[6]) but that to do so requires loving God in the manner May describes, awakened to our deep longing for a place to call home.

And yet surely this is a bizarre way to re-encounter the Christian faith! In following May by divesting love of its Christ-like pretensions, don't we inevitably draw *away* from Christ and his offer of unconditional love? What benefit arises from further de-Christianizing love, save that it exposes the precarious foundation of modern belief in love?

Although May's concern is not to revive interest in Christianity's claims, it might be argued that his proposal extends a much needed antidote. It reminds Christians to take seriously their condition as finite limited creatures on the way to *visio Dei*. God is the only Being transcending all conditions. Christians are humble wayfarers rooted in the soil of the earth. Their confession must be that of Augustine in the *Confessions*, acknowledging both the origin and end of their journey: 'You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you'.[7]

May's analysis highlights the 'restless heart' at the centre of human existence, but does not go on to draw out the *question* that this restlessness implies. That is precisely the point at which religion, not least Christianity, enters in and invites us to reconsider what it is even to exist. Why this deep longing for ontological rootedness? What does this tell us about who we are and where we are? If this desire defines the human condition, does it also extend an invitation to examine that condition, formulating a question that can begin to make sense of it? As Oliver O'Donovan puts it:

'It is possible for humanism to refuse the mighty answers of the Reformed Catechisms, 'Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever'… But it is not possible for humanism to refuse the *question*, 'What is the chief and highest end of man?' For without some answer to that question it has lost, not only the grounds for respecting this human species (thus leaving itself engaged upon a pointless self-worship), but also… the very reason to understand humanity as a unitary species at all….'[8]

As long as we ignore this deep dimension of human life (or, as May suggests, as long as we hold ourselves to impossible obligations) we shall fail to understand our current restless state. We shall also fail to uncover the lurking question at the centre of existence. In facing this question, with the pangs of desire, we may enter upon a terrible void that is the nothingness of our future; or, in fact, invite the occasion of our spiritual awakening, as Hart suggests:

'But we Christians - while not ignoring how appalling such a condition is - should yet rejoice that modernity offers no religious comforts to those who would seek them. In this time of waiting, in this age marked only by the absence of faith in Christ, it is well that the modern soul should lack repose, piety, peace, or nobility, and should find the world outside the Church barren of spiritual rapture or mystery, and should discover no beautiful or terrible or merciful gods upon which to cast itself'.

***For further reading*:**

- David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (Yale University Press, 2010).
- David Bentley Hart, 'Christ and Nothing', in *First Things Online Journal* October 2003. http://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing Accessed 29 May 2014.
- Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (University of Chicago Press, 2007).
- Simon May, *Love: A History* (Yale University Press, 2011).
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ* (Tribeca Books, 2013).
- Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Apollos/Eerdmans, 1994).

Dr Ian Clausen recently completed a PhD on 'The Weight of Love: Locating and Directing the Soul in St. Augustine' at the University of Edinburgh. He currently holds the Postdoctoral Lilly Fellowship at Valparaiso University, and is also a KLICE Research Associate. From 2008-11 he was a British Marshall scholar.

[1] Simon May, *Love: A History* (Yale University Press, 2011). All subsequent page references refer to this book.
[2] David Bentley Hart, 'Christ and Nothing', in *First Things Online Journal* October 2003. http://www.firstthings.com/article/2003/10/christ-and-nothing Accessed 29 May 2014. All subsequent quotations of Hart refer to this essay.
[3] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, sect. 19.
[4] For fuller thoughts on the 'Christian revolution' see David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (Yale University Press, 2010).
[5] May's history is a refreshing alternative to those histories that largely ignore or downplay the Judeo-Christian legacy.
[6] May questions the notion of 'unconditional love', doubting it has a foundation in the New Testament writings; see his chapter, 'Why Christian love isn't unconditional', in *Love: A History*, 95-118.
[7] *Confessions* I.1.1, trans. Henry Chadwick.
[8] O'Donovan, Oliver, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Apollos/Eerdmans, 1994), 38.