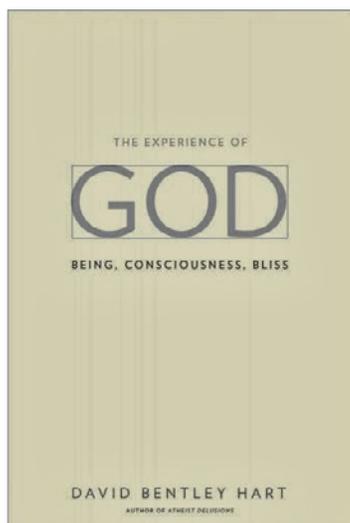


# BOOKS FOR THE NEW EVANGELIZATION



## **The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss.**

By David Bentley Hart.  
Yale University Press, 2013  
\$17.00.

David Bentley Hart's *The Experience of God* is a continuation of the project inaugurated in his 2010 book, *Atheist Delusions*. Although Hart's goal in this project is on one level to "take on" the so-called new atheists, it might be more accurate to say that Hart attempts in these books to reorient his readers on a number of important issues so that a real discussion can actually begin to take place. In *Atheist Delusions*, Hart sought to reorient his readers' historical vision, particularly relating to the early centuries of the Church. In *The Experience of God*, he seeks to do so concerning

the seemingly straightforward word "God." According to Hart, in the heated contemporary debates between atheists and believers, "the concept of God around which the arguments have run...has remained strangely obscure." Indeed, argues Hart, "on most occasions," no one involved "is talking about God in any coherent sense at all" (1). This provocative thesis is directed equally at those on either side of the debates, and it launches Hart into 332 pages of alternately delightful, dense, and acerbic conceptual recalibration.

Hart organizes his discussion around three terms used together in Sanskrit to refer to God: being (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*). He argues that these three terms not only summarize how many ancient religions understood God, but also describe how humans have tended to experience God, and point to the areas of human experience which Hart contends are most difficult for naturalism to explain. Hart nicely summarizes his argument towards the end of the book when he writes,

In the *being* of all things we encounter the primal “supernatural” reality, the premise of all things that cannot be explained by or contained among those things... In our *consciousness* of being we are immediately aware of a reality that... cannot be given a cogent mechanical explanation, that is more indubitable than any other reality, and that therefore is logically prior to and logically transcendent of mere physical causality... And in the transcendental structure of consciousness... we find that the extraordinary *joys* of which rational intellect is capable... far exceed what nature can adumbrate or warrant (288-289, emphasis mine).

Being, consciousness, and bliss, in other words, are found within nature, but always point beyond nature to something which nature can neither contain nor explain. “And in finding an indissoluble interconnectedness in all three of these realities taken together, we come upon the supreme mystery of all experience” (289). This supreme mystery, argues Hart, has been identified by all the great religious traditions as God.

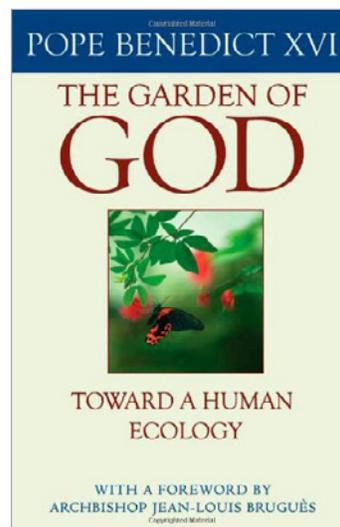
The mistake of those living in the modern West, from Hart’s perspective, is the failure to understand God in these absolute and transcendent terms. Instead of understanding God to be “the one infinite source of all that is: eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, uncreated, uncaused, perfectly transcendent of all things and for that very reason absolutely immanent to all things” (30), we have thought of God as one more being within a mechanized universe that contains all conceivable beings. This failure has resulted in a corresponding blindness to the mysteries of being, consciousness, and bliss, which substitutes the wonder appropriate to these mysteries with a false confidence in the capacity of empirical method to explain every aspect of reality and human experience. Hart argues that this blindness constitutes nothing less than an

ideology, a dogmatic commitment that precedes rather than results from empirical investigation or rational argumentation. Further, Hart compellingly argues that within the strictures of this empirical fundamentalism, the universal human experiences of being, consciousness, and bliss become entirely unintelligible. Attempts by physicists to explain the ontological contingency of the universe in terms of ever-smaller particles, an ever-larger cosmos, or an infinite sequence of time have only misunderstood the nature of the question of being. Attempts by neuroscientists to reduce consciousness to a neuro-chemical process can be consistent only if they ultimately deny the existence of consciousness and reason altogether. And moral goodness and beauty—two of the transcendentals towards which our desire for bliss is oriented—only confound attempts to reduce them entirely to evolutionary terms. This, in brief, is the burden of Hart’s argument. Hart’s goal, however, is not to make a decisive or comprehensive argument against naturalism. Rather, he aims to describe and distinguish naturalism and its logical implications from the God of “classic theism,” who rarely makes an appearance in current debates between “science” and “religion.”

*The Experience of God* is a brilliant book in multiple ways. It is erudite and entertaining, expansive in its range and ingenious in its threefold arrangement of a complex array of topics under the single heading of “the experience of God.” This heading is itself an adequate summary of the book’s argument and of the basic reason that Hart believes naturalism is essentially incoherent. But one wonders for whom this book was written, as there are few who will easily navigate the unexplained allusions and undefined philosophical language that pepper the work. Nonetheless, for those willing to undertake the necessary labor, *The Experience of God* is rewarding and thought provoking, and it ought to inspire confidence against the deceptively authoritative pronouncements made by some scientists and philosophers about God. Hart shows just

how powerful, profound, and intellectually satisfying it is to believe in God as understood by many religions, and how much very real human experience must be rejected or left unexplained by those committed to mechanistic naturalism. Alongside others currently addressing such topics, Hart has offered his own particular and valuable contribution. In doing so, he has rendered a service to anyone interested in thinking more deeply about the human experience of God and about the God to whom that experience points.

*Review by Jimmy Haring, M.T.S. candidate,  
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### **The Garden of God: Toward a Human Ecology**

By Pope Benedict XVI  
The Catholic University Press, 2014  
\$24.95

The Vatican announced earlier this year that Pope Francis’ first Encyclical Letter will deal with the environment, a theme for which Francis has already shown particular concern. In this prominent and widely-embraced focus of his papacy, Pope Francis is in direct continuity with his predecessor, Benedict XVI, whose reflection on ecology and the environmental crisis was both extensive in its scope and central to his years as pope. Indeed, Benedict’s concern for ecology even earned him the title of the “Green Pope”! It is unfortunate that this aspect of his papacy went largely unnoticed.

The collection of writings, homilies, and speeches found in *The Garden of God* offers a comprehensive testament to the depth and breadth of Benedict's decades-long reflection on the issue of ecology. The variety of documents found in this collection is striking, including—among others—formal addresses to Heads of State and Official U.N. Organizations, questions posed to the 2011 Crew of the International Space Station, and even a personal response to a letter from a teenager struggling to come to terms with the relation between science and faith. The book is divided into three main parts: 1) “Creation and Nature,” 2) “The Environment, Science, and Technology,” and 3) “Hunger, Poverty, and the Earth's Resources.” These titles indicate how Benedict understands the environmental crisis to be inextricably tied up with a variety of other issues, such as social justice, politics and economics, the use and abuse of technology and the sciences, and certain “secular” metaphysical and ethical visions that oppose the Christian vision of creation and the moral life. Given the breadth of the themes addressed in this book, it is only possible to give a brief taste of some of the primary ones that persist throughout.

What are the roots of the environmental crisis? Here Benedict at times points to explanations of nature and morality he identifies as misguided. Explanatory accounts that ground nature and therefore human nature in “pure chance” or “evolutionary determinism” ultimately, according to Benedict, erode our sense of the dignity of life and hence of the human responsibility toward the natural order (182). Benedict's own vision of nature reveals his rooting in the Catholic natural law tradition. “Nature” is an ordered whole expressing a “design of truth and love” (182). It reveals a natural and moral order, both of which can be accessed by human reason. As he likes to put it, nature is a “book” with a “language” of its own that we have forgotten and hence need to relearn (132). Nature is, moreover, a gift from God to humanity and as such demands to be treated with care and reverence.

Benedict is also adamant that the correct response to the ecological problem is not to turn to a form of “neo-paganism” that judges humanity to be of no more worth than any other living being. He therefore repeatedly affirms the *primacy* of humanity as the apex of the created order. Moreover, Benedict does not find any value in blanket condemnations of

technological progress. On the contrary, technology reveals the “autonomy and freedom of man,” and through it we “express and confirm the hegemony of the spirit over matter” (188-9). What is required is an overarching vision of humanity and the natural order that can allow technological progress both to aid integral human development as well as respect the “vocation” of nature, which is not simply to be recklessly exploited.

The subtitle of the book, “Towards a Human Ecology,” highlights one of Benedict's central and most fruitful insights, to which he returns again and again: the interconnectivity between “environmental ecology” and “human ecology.” A permanent solution to the environmental crisis demands not simply changes in political policies and the implementation of laws to curb the exploitation of the environment but also a “profound cultural renewal; [humanity] needs to rediscover those values which can serve as the solid basis for building a brighter future for all” (41–42). The two “ecologies” are tied up in such a manner that “there is an inseparable link between peace with creation, and peace among people” (100). Indeed, one of Benedict's favorite slogans is: “If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation” (51). He therefore moves

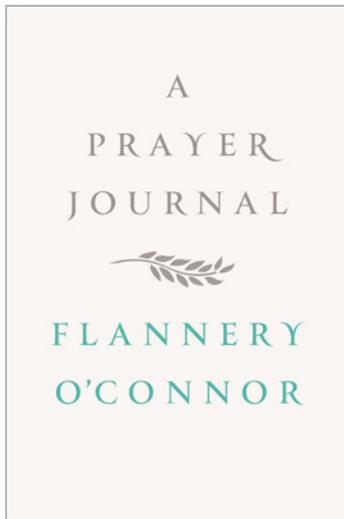
seamlessly between issues of social and environmental justice and possesses a keen awareness of how it is often the poor who suffer most from the destruction and exploitation of the environment. Furthermore, Benedict is explicit about the importance of Catholic moral teachings with regards to the two ecologies: “If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation, and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology” (187). Interestingly, the values that need to be reaffirmed are often best exhibited in the *rural* and *agricultural* lifestyle. Thus, the “*rural family* needs to regain its rightful place at the heart of the social order” (143).

Globalization requires that the solution to the environmental crisis be an international, collaborative affair. But this of course requires a shared international vision for the future. Benedict opposes a vision of international progress or development that focuses primarily on *technological-economic* growth and profit; this ends up only “unleashing man’s destructive capacities” (98). Rather, he calls for an international understanding of development that respects the absolute dignity of human life, since, as he notes, it is futile to insist that future generations respect the environment when our current “educational system and laws do not help them respect each other” (187–88). Foundational to a proper model of development must also be fraternity between nations and solidarity with the poor. Benedict repeatedly points out that the scandalous persistence of starvation and malnutrition in certain parts of the world is often not an inevitable result of environmental conditions; rather, it stems from a “logic of profit” that still dominates international economics and politics. What is needed then is an international “logic of sharing and solidarity” within the human ecology, which will in turn transform our relation to the environment.

I have only touched here upon some of the many interconnected themes that arise in *The Garden of God*. Readers may find others to be of equal or greater significance. For readers seeking detailed analyses of these issues, the book works at a level of generality that may leave them wanting more. Nevertheless, the book is valuable for those seeking to gain a general sense of the multifarious nature of the “environmental crisis” and of a deeply Catholic vision of its underlying causes and possible solutions. This book most certainly offers the opportunity for the Catholic Church to recognize the centrality of the ecological theme in Benedict’s work and subsequently to draw upon his wisdom as it seeks to care for and cultivate the “garden of God” in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Benedict repeatedly makes clear: “*The Church has a responsibility toward creation* and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere” (187).

*Review by Dylan Belton, MTS; Research Assistant, Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Studies*





### A Prayer Journal

By Flannery O'Connor  
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013  
\$18.00

“Even in prayer it is only you praying in us” (7).

*A Prayer Journal* consists of twenty-three entries written from January 1946 to September 1947 by renowned Southern Gothic author, Flannery O'Connor. In these entries, O'Connor reflects upon devotion to God, struggles with faith, and her own fears of mediocrity. She criticizes her tendencies towards the “pedantic egocentric” (7). She worries about those moments when she approaches the Eucharistic altar without due reverence. Not surprisingly for a young person, she devotes much reflection to vocation, specifically her own vocation as a writer. In these pages, we see O'Connor’s desire to consecrate her writing to God

as well as the difficulty of doing so when human pride attempts to get in the way. *A Prayer Journal* offers its readers the unique opportunity to read O'Connor’s most intimate conversations with God.

When I agreed to write a review of Flannery O'Connor’s *A Prayer Journal*, I did not realize that I would be reading the prayers of a Flannery younger than I, a Flannery twenty-one and twenty-two years of age. It is an awkward thing to read the private thoughts of a person who is talking to God. I couldn’t help but feel a little indecent about it, almost as if I walked in on someone in the shower. This prayer journal is challenge to read, even more so than her stories, because its content is the ruminations of a private mind. But to one who has read her stories, essays, and letters, the voice is still very much that of O'Connor, with her acerbic wit and good-humored self-deprecation. But the process of reading a prayer journal is very different from the process of reading the journals, papers, or letters of a famous person. If you are a believer reading the words another believer has addressed to God, you cannot help but see your own prayer life reflected in what you read. You may even have whispered the same words O'Connor whispers here: “Help me with this life that seems so treacherous, so disappointing” (10).

I had the comfort, however, of O'Connor struggling alongside me. She regards her prayers, too, as often less than sincere and usually aimed at getting something. “My dear God, Supplication. This is the only of the four I am competent in. It takes no supernatural grace to ask for what one wants and I have asked you bountifully, oh Lord” (13). She is very aware of her own failings, and she often uses humor to cope with them. She knows that she, along with the rest of us, is thoroughly ridiculous; she gives herself the same seemingly uncharitable portrayal as she does most of the characters in her stories. “It does not take much to make us realize what fools we are, but the little it takes is long in coming. I see my ridiculous self by degrees” (20). Refreshingly, and unlike her characters, O'Connor does not seek to hide her ridiculousness from herself. Rather, she prays about it. Her own ridiculousness is very often, directly or indirectly, the subject of her supplication. She also has a healthy Augustinian appreciation of the dangers of pride. From her first entry she writes: “I do not know you God because I am in the way. Please help me to push myself aside” (3).

We approach Flannery O'Connor's *A Prayer Journal* with the realization that these were not words intended to be seen by other eyes. These are the thoughts uttered by a mind in isolation, a mind prayerfully seeking God. They are private thoughts and sometimes even shameful ones. But above all, they consist in an entreaty; they are the reflections of a mind ardently desiring a relationship with God. "Oh God please make my mind clear. Please make it clean" (4). Her pen drips with desire for God. Yet she is also aware of the dangers of desire and how easily it can be misplaced. The desire she seeks is a tempered one, a calm one. "Frenzy is caused by an eagerness for what I want and not a spiritual trust. I do not wish to presume. I want to love" (4).

Like many young twenty-somethings, O'Connor struggles with vocation. In her case it is not so much a question of what she should do with her life but how she should do it and how successful she might be. She realizes that her call to write could bring her into conflict with a greater call, the call to beatitude: "But how [to] eliminate this picky fish bone kind of way I do things—I want to love God all the way. At the same time I want all the things that seem opposed to it—I want to be a *fine* writer. Any success will tend to

swell my head—unconsciously even" (23). O'Connor believes that her desire to be a fine writer conflicts with her desire to serve God. But she willingly accepts the cross of writing for the glory of God, should that prove to be her cross to bear. Ultimately, O'Connor interprets her vocation as one which will require great struggle and mortification. She prays that her work will be God's work. "Help me to get what is more than natural into my work—help me to love & bear with my work on that account. If I have to sweat for it, dear God, let it be as in Your service. I would like to be intelligently holy" (18).

The end of the prayer journal comes as a bit of a shock. In her final entry, O'Connor writes:

My thoughts are so far away from God. He might as well not have made me. And the feeling I egg up writing here lasts approximately a half and hour and seems a sham. I don't want any of this artificial superficial feeling stimulated by the choir. Today I have proved myself a glutton—for Scotch oatmeal cookies and erotic thought. There is nothing left to say of me" (40).

And indeed, it seems there is nothing left to say, for O'Connor concludes her journal here. What are we to make of this ending? Does she compose these lines in despair or in self-disgust?

I think it is safe to say that the latter option is the true one. O'Connor does not leave us with despair; I think her humor would have faltered completely if that were the case. She is disgusted with herself, a "glutton," but she also does not make her gluttony into something grandiose. It is a pathetic gluttony—one for Scotch oatmeal cookies and erotic thought—not one for fine wine and intellectual conversation. She maintains, even to this end—and it is a bitter one—a sense of humor about herself which does not allow to her depict her failings as respectable failings. She does not give her sin such honor.

Of course, this final line is not the last that we will read of O'Connor. *A Prayer Journal* is very much the beginning. O'Connor completes her education at the renowned Iowa Writer's Workshop. At the age of twenty-six, only a few years after the completion of these closing lines, she suffered her first attack of the debilitating lupus which eventually killed her. But in the years of suffering before her death, O'Connor wrote some of the best American fiction of the twentieth

century. Perhaps it is the profound self-knowledge and honesty that we see here in *A Prayer Journal* that allowed her to depict the petty flaws of her characters with such effectiveness. For any O'Connor fan, *A Prayer Journal* offers a window into the mind of a great author. For those of us learning to pray, it offers an opportunity to struggle alongside a fellow pilgrim in our search for God.

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