

On David Bentley Hart’s Account of Tradition

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In *Tradition and Apocalypse*, David Hart argues that “the concept of ‘tradition’ in the theological sense, however lucid and cogent it might appear to the eyes of faith, is incorrigibly obscure and incoherent.”¹ This claim coheres with the New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann’s notion of apocalyptic, as set forth in Käsemann’s well known rhetorical questions—to which he answers in the negative—“Has there ever been a theological system which has not collapsed? Have we been promised that we should know ourselves to be in possession of a *theologia perennis*?”² For Käsemann, Christian theological “continuity” (if such there is) consists in “the hope of the manifestation of the Son of Man on his way to enthronement”³—Easter hope. Hart follows his own version of this path.

Hart contends that he does not intend to overthrow the truth of the Nicene Creed.⁴ But he bemoans the claims of various Christian communi-

¹ David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 1. I also discuss Hart’s book toward the end of my *Newman on Doctrinal Corruption* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire Academic, 2022), and the present reflections are intended to clarify and expand upon my remarks there.

² Ernst Käsemann, “The Beginnings of Christian Theology,” in *New Testament Questions for Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 82–107, at 107.

³ Käsemann, “Beginnings,” 107. For another recent Orthodox theology that is indebted to Käsemann, see John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), especially ch. 2. It will be clear that not only Albert Schweitzer, but even more Martin Heidegger stands in the background of Käsemann’s apocalyptic interpretation of the New Testament.

⁴ See Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 109.

ties—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant—to have faithfully communicated the Gospel: “All Christian communions of any size or duration have their distinctive traditionalisms, their myths of continuity amidst rupture and rupture amidst continuity, their claims of doctrinal pedigree and of allegiance to the authority of the Christian past.”⁵ Hart rejects all such ecclesial claims of dogmatic continuity and fidelity. Theologically, he deems it impossible for anyone “to say with absolute finality what the *one true* tradition is.”⁶ Historically, he thinks it impossible to discern any “rational unity within the course of Christian tradition that one could confidently claim has been sustained intact amid the flux of times and cultures.”⁷

There are certain rhetorical emphases that stand out as Hart describes his own constructive view of Christian “tradition.” He states that tradition is “the constant creative recollection of a promise whose fulfillment and ultimate meaning are yet to be unveiled”—not in the sense that the Church awaits the fullness that is to come and that dogmatic propositions, while true, are always inadequate to divine realities, but in the stronger sense of appealing to “a future apocalyptic horizon where the tradition’s ultimate meaning is to be found” and rejecting “any reduction of that final revelation to whatever formulations of belief happen to be available at any given stage of doctrinal development.” Hart depicts Christian tradition as an active transmission of a gift that remains fundamentally hidden and unknown. He invokes the image of “the impartation of a gift that remains sealed, a giving always deferred toward a future not yet known.” There is a giving, but this giving is “always deferred,” its future is “not yet known,” and the gift itself “remains sealed.” Hart argues that the “gift must remain sealed until the very end, so that the glory will not dissipate into ordinary time, whose atmosphere is incapable of sustaining and nourishing it.” Time—history—cannot sustain or nourish the divine gift, and so it must be “sealed” until the end of time; and yet it can be known “in and as” ever-changing, historical tradition.⁸

Tradition accomplishes this handing on of the sealed gift, says Hart, through its “ceaseless flow of . . . intertwining variations.” Hart adds with regard to historicity and to “the animating impulse of the tradition”: “Once that vital force has moved on to assume new living configurations, the attempt unnaturally to preserve earlier forms can achieve nothing but . . . the perfumed repose of a cadaver.”⁹ The “earlier forms” that once

⁵ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 42.

⁶ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 141.

⁷ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 19.

⁸ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 139–40.

⁹ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 140.

contained the "vital force" must constantly be reconfigured within tradition's "ceaseless flow."

Hart pictures a destabilizing "play of tension and resolution, stability and disintegration," and he holds that we must possess a "positive desire for moments of dissolution" if we are to be faithful to "whatever is most original and most final in a tradition." Only thus can whatever is "most imperishable in a tradition . . . be fitfully perceived, or at least sensed," by those few persons spiritually and intellectually able to do so. By comparison, I would suggest that the core realities of faith can be much more than "fitfully perceived" or "sensed"; I think dogmatic formulations serve, in the assent of faith, to make the realities of faith knowable as true. In addition, I would argue that "dissolution" is not applicable to the core meaning of a true dogma. Hart sums up: "Only in that ceaseless flow of construction, dissolution, and reconstruction is what is truly imperishable in the tradition intuitable."¹⁰ I deny the implications of this rhetorical claim, because it seems clear that dogmatic teachings such as those of Nicaea and Chalcedon are "truly imperishable" and can be known as such by believers without an ongoing "ceaseless" flow inclusive of real "dissolution."

By means of the above images of fluidity, obscurity, concealment, dissolution, and so on, Hart portrays a Christian "tradition" that will be intelligible only to those with eyes to see, and that is not currently intelligible to any Church (Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant). Although he occasionally refers to "stability" and "dogmatic deposit," he so joins these terms to disintegration and deferment that the "deposit"—insofar as it goes beyond an apocalyptic "vital force"—can bear little weight. As noted above, Hart argues that the "living tradition" is "essentially apocalyptic" in the sense of being knowable only "in light of God's final disruption of the historical (and cosmic) future."¹¹ He adds that tradition's "abiding truth never suffers itself to be reduced to mere propositional certitudes, but rather testifies to itself in large part by its power to disorder even the temporal forms it has assumed in the course of its pilgrimage through time."¹² In this disorder, rupture, and rejection of any reduction to "mere propositional certitudes," there is somehow an "abiding truth"—one that somehow makes itself known (though not to any Church, whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant) by disordering its own "temporal forms."¹³

¹⁰ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 140–41.

¹¹ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 142. There are resonances here with Karl Barth, Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., and others.

¹² Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 143.

¹³ For similar directions, see Karl Rahner, S.J., "Yesterday's History of Dogma and

Whatever his intentions may be, it seems to me that Hart opens the door to the rejection of the propositional content of the Church's dogmas. Celebrating "the living tradition's often chaotic and disruptive vitality," Hart argues: "From the time of Jesus himself to the present, there has always been a struggle within the tradition between the guardians of religious and social stability and the apocalyptic ferment of the Gospel. But, of course, the Gospel is nothing if it is not apocalyptic."¹⁴ Hart suggests that we cannot really know what kinds of changes or even seeming reversals of our current understandings of dogma may be in store. He affirms that the Nicene tradition itself "exists as handed over to that abiding end [the eschaton], and so as handed over to future elaboration, reconstruction, adaptation, and reconceptualization. It would be foolish . . . to suppose that one could foresee the forms it might yet assume, the accords it might yet strike, the discoveries it might yet make—both within and beyond itself."¹⁵ It follows logically that

Theology for Tomorrow," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18, *God and Revelation*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 3–34; Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., "Towards a Catholic Use of Hermeneutics," in *God the Future of Man*, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 1–49. For a quite different path, see Schillebeeckx's collection of his pre-conciliar writings on divine revelation: *Revelation and Theology*, vol. 1, trans. N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967). See also Hans Urs von Balthasar's persuasive response to Rahner's "Yesterday's History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow" in Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, trans. Mary Theresilde Skerry (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 74–87.

¹⁴ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 131.

¹⁵ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 130. See Rahner, "Yesterday's History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow," 30–31: "The history of dogma and theology remains history: that is, in the last resort unpredictable and not under the control of human beings or of the Church's authority. . . . In the Christian view it is true that the history of faith and dogma is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and certainly has its supreme entelechy in that Spirit; but the Spirit is effective in this history because he is also the secret and, for us in the last resort before the end of history, the inscrutable innermost principle of history as such. That is why it is not possible to make unambiguous and secure prognoses for the future history of dogma and faith. In view of the 'single line' course of this history, we are certainly bound to assume that truths once grasped with an explicit and absolute assent of faith in the Church cannot simply be 'forgotten' again, since the Church's ever present sense of faith reasons the same only by retaining also the memory of its own history. But this tells us little in regard to the future about the existential and consequently theological status which such a truth will retain concretely in the Church's sense of faith and in its practice. . . . We cannot really foresee the future history of dogma and theology. If however we attempt with a little futurological imagination to form a picture of humanity in the coming centuries, to envisage its quantitative, economic, sociological, mental, and political changes, there can be no doubt that the Church's history of faith and dogma will bring with it changes which we can scarcely imagine today."

tradition might go so far beyond itself, and assume such new forms, as to be unrecognizable: "Christianity is filled with an indomitable and subversive ferment, an inner force of dissolution that refuses to crystallize into something inert or stable, but that instead insists upon dispersing itself into the future ever again, to destroy what confines it and to start anew, to begin again in the formless realm of spirit."¹⁶

This apocalyptic element, emphasizing vital force, subversion, dissolution, dispersion, destruction, and beginning again in "the formless realm of spirit," is consonant with Alfred Loisy's emphases regarding development and tradition. No wonder, then, that Hart expresses some sympathy with Loisy. Like Loisy, Hart deems that Jesus of Nazareth had no special knowledge; Jesus preached the imminent arrival of the kingdom, which failed to arrive. Hart deems that Loisy's positions are, "by the standards of today's serious Catholic scholarship . . . at most only slightly provocative, and for the better part not even that."¹⁷ Correctly, Hart perceives that Loisy's views have been widely adopted in the contemporary theological academy. As Hart says, today Loisy "might be comfortably ensconced in some Catholic university's department of theology, and even perhaps regarded as a little on the conservative side theologically."¹⁸

For Hart as for Loisy, Jesus did not reveal much propositional content, but what he did reveal was his "apocalyptic consciousness, subsisting entirely in a moment of absolute interruption."¹⁹ Jesus, says Hart, was "a man of his time and had surely not walked through the Galilee and Judaea of late Graeco-Roman antiquity like a demigod with some perfect consciousness of the future history of the church or of the full catalogue of later Christology."²⁰ What Jesus offered his followers was his apocalyptic "absolute interruption."

Hart subtitles his book *An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief*. Taken at face value, Hart's proposals would imperil the future of Christian belief. For Catholics, John Henry Newman's and Maurice Blondel's understandings of dogmatic development have been moved forward by Yves Congar and Joseph Ratzinger (among many others) and have been secured by the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*.²¹ Hart's rhetoric in *Tradition and Apocalypse*, much of which

¹⁶ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 137.

¹⁷ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 67.

¹⁸ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 68.

¹⁹ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 136; cf. Hart's summary on 135.

²⁰ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 67–68.

²¹ For discussion, see Andrew Meszaros, *The Prophetic Church: History and Doctrinal*

will sound familiar to Catholics who have followed the debates from Loisy onward, should function as a guide for how not to proceed with respect to the theology of tradition. N.V

Development in John Henry Newman and Yves Congar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Guy Mansini, O.S.B., "Newman and Ratzinger and the Development of Dogma," in *John Henry Newman and Joseph Ratzinger: A Theological Encounter*, ed. Emery de Gaál and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming).