

BOOK REVIEWS

Hart, David Bentley. 2022. *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief*

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Reviewed by Cristian Sonea

David Bentley Hart's book explores the intersection of theology, history and eschatology. He provides a compelling argumentation for the relevance of the Christian tradition in contemporary society while also exploring the challenges posed by modernity and the looming threat of the apocalypse. With his characteristic erudition and rhetorical flair, Hart engages with diverse philosophical and theological traditions, from Church Fathers to contemporary thinkers. Whether you are an experienced theologian or simply curious about the future of the Christian faith, this book offers a stimulating and illuminating read.

The author initially addressed the topic of this essay in a lecture entitled "Tradition and Authority: A Vaguely Gnostic Meditation" at a conference on religious traditions and modernity held at Valparaiso University in April 2018. A version of the lecture was printed as an article in *The Idea of Tradition in the Late Modern World*, edited by Thomas Albert Howard. The original text was published in *Theological Territories* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020). I will briefly present each of the seven chapters of the book, in the hope that the review will turn into an invitation for other readers to engage profoundly with this work. Overall, the book offers a philosophical and theological exploration of the nature and role of tradition in Christian theology.

In the first chapter, "Tradition and Traditionalism" (11–45), Hart discusses the tension between traditionalism, healthy moral and intellectual growth, and the failure to synthesize the historical and dogmatic perspectives of modern Christian thought. He suggests that an unjustifiable fiction, such as "incurious belief" (36), eventually loses its persuasive power and can lead to disillusionment. He argues that it is only

through recourse to the “historical record” (41) that the legitimacy of the Christian tradition can be defended. Theology and Christian history were once a single science, but they have become rigidly separated in modern times. This failure to synthesize historical and dogmatic perspectives has led to an increasing divergence, with theological scholars avoiding early Christian studies and aspiring scholars of Christianity and Christian texts of late antiquity, ignoring the historically unchallenged statements of systematic or dogmatic theology.

In the second chapter, “Tradition and Causality” (46–76), Hart discusses the difficulty of applying the concept of causality to human affairs and history, as opposed to the physical sciences. He questions what constitutes a cause, how it can be distinguished from chance, and whether there is “a vital and rational unity to *any* stream of events” (47) that can be recognized as a tradition. He then warns against the danger of confusing physical and historical processes and the pseudo-scientific theories that arise from “careless conflation” (49), arguing that the unity of a tradition arises mainly from the intentional states of rational agents and must be deliberate rather than simply spontaneous agreement. However, such unity must remain invisible to the historical sciences and can only be judged by a “proleptic apprehension” (58) of the ultimate cause of that tradition. The author notes that historical development will always require creativity and selectively ignoring historical data that the “preferred narrative cannot assimilate” (59).

One of the main arguments of the third chapter, “Tradition and Development” (77–154), is that the development of religious doctrine involves an initial moment of belief and an ongoing process of rational validation. The author suggests that accurate religious adherence consists of a moment of an apocalypse, in which one is seized by a sense of seeing and knowing more than one can initially account for, only to be strengthened and enriched by reasoned argument and corroborating evidence. Hart argues that nothing is suspect or deplorable about this “‘apocalyptic’ priority of conviction *by faith*” over rational validation (78). Nevertheless, this reasonable justification of belief must become increasingly dependent on evidence as the journey towards understanding continues.

Hart discusses Maurice Blondel’s response to the crisis of modernity in the early twentieth century, particularly Alfred Loisy’s controversial treatise *L’Évangile et l’Église*. Loisy had argued that the Synoptic Gospels only recorded Jesus announcing the Kingdom but that the Church had arrived instead (111). This statement caused a scandal but would be considered relatively tame by today’s standards. Loisy also made claims about the historical accuracy of the early chapters of Genesis and the development of Israelite monotheism from earlier cults of divine figures. In response

to Loisy, Blondel's essay was written on a tightrope, attempting to navigate the thorny issue amid the ongoing crisis of modernity. While Loisy is often portrayed as having rejected Catholic ecclesial history, Hart argues that Loisy believed in the absolute necessity of the Church "as the living and necessarily the adaptable presence of the Gospel in history" (112).

The fourth chapter focuses on "Tradition and History" (155–79). Here Hart discusses the concept of doctrinal definition and the history of dogma. He notes that the development of doctrine is not simply a matter of "finding the right words" (174) to express beliefs already present in the community of faith but involves the generation of new and often "vague formulae describing unprecedented models of Christian confession" (175). Each dogma represents a synthesis and an innovation and can "radically alter the meaning" of previous beliefs and claims (175). This process inevitably involves an "a degree of willful historical forgetfulness" (176) and the invention of a new version of the past, purged of the complexities and confusions that necessitated a new dogmatic definition in the first place. The author argues that orthodoxy and heresy are retrospective and ideological constructions designed to reinforce each recent doctrinal decision by wrapping it in the mythology of a pure and exhaustive deposit of faith. But he also notes that this does not mean that innovations are false developments or corruptions but rather creative acts of "reinterpretation and reinvention" (178).

In chapter 5, "Tradition and Doctrine" (180–211), Hart discusses the power of the Nicene synthesis, which was formulated with vagueness and imprecision, allowing for a vast conceptual world and "numberless variations and developments" (208) in theological thought. The author argues that the historical record must prove any doctrinal synthesis's "correctness or incorrectness" (208). Yet the theological legacy of the Council of Nicea demanded and permitted a rich and fertile tradition, subordinating the evidence of the past to a finality whose whole meaning could not yet be known. The author suggests that the future of theology and doctrine is open and cannot be closed off and that traditionalists may hinder "healthy developments" (210) in theological reflection by resenting the chaotic and disruptive vitality of the living tradition. The author implies that the living tradition is a spiritual reality and that "the Spirit breathes where it will" (210).

In chapter 6, "Tradition and Apocalypse" (212–42), Hart argues that distinguishing the true Christian story from its many phantom inversions or caricatures requires discernment, especially in separating an "original 'orthodoxy'" from all "its simulacra and counterfeits" (233). The lines of demarcation become even more confusing and indecipherable as one engages in the hermeneutical and historical work of

identifying the original “orthodoxy”. The author claims that the apparent unity of a “dogmatic continuum is often much more credible when viewed from the present, as a *fait accompli*” (234). In the past, however, it looks more haphazard. The author argues that the tradition has always progressed by discovering new implications in what is currently understood as orthodox Christian confession and practice and by questioning, challenging and reinterpreting what has been before. Thus, the author argues for the integral unity of a living Christian tradition and the internal rationality of its history of dogmatic development; one must see it not only as a source of agreement and cogency but also “as a force of destruction, reconstruction, reinterpretation and unanticipated renewal” (240).

The final chapter, “Tradition as Apocalypse” (243–98), is dedicated to the future of the Christian faith. Hart describes it as an ideal dimension of Christian tradition, essential to its “coherence but inexhaustible by any of the configurations the tradition has assumed over the centuries” (243). He admits that he cannot claim he knows what lies ahead, but he believes that the Christian faith constantly evolves and even desires “its overthrow in a fuller revelation of its inner truth” (245). Hart argues against certain forms of traditionalism, dogmatism and fideism and rejects the options of extrinsic and historicism as “intellectually stultifying and imaginatively suffocating” (246). He proposes a rule for theologians to follow, which involves seeing doctrines as dynamic orientations of “reflection, desire, and imagination” (247) rather than fixed properties.

Hart also discusses the “final cause” or “ultimate intentional horizon” (265) of the Christian tradition, which is the goal or purpose of the rule. This final cause is pervasive in practice and transcends its historical configurations, allowing for the revision of foundational narratives and concepts of faith. The author argues that this final cause cannot be reduced to a simple sum of propositions but is the whole absolute future of the tradition. In other words, the last reason is a vision of a future reality in which all things are restored and reconciled to God. This vision of the future animates the Christian tradition and provides the ultimate ground of unity for believers.

In short, one of the book’s main arguments is that the development of religious doctrine involves an initial moment of belief and an ongoing process of rational validation. Hart suggests that accurate religious adherence consists of a “moment of apocalypse” (77). One is gripped by seeing and knowing more than one can initially account for, only strengthened and enriched by reasoned argument and corroborating evidence. The book is a stimulating and illuminating read, but it can also be challenging and thought-provoking. Hart’s exploration of the intersection of theology, history and eschatology requires close attention and a willingness to

engage with complex and sometimes difficult ideas. However, this book is well worth the effort for those interested in the future of the Christian faith.

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