

Is There More to Tradition? Engagements with David Bentley Hart's *Tradition and Apocalypse*

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“To get away from old things passing themselves off as tradition it is necessary to go back to the farthest past—which will reveal itself to be the nearest present.”—Henri de Lubac¹

When we speak of ‘Christian tradition,’ what are we really talking about?”² David Bentley Hart describes this as an “enormous unresolved question in Christian thought lying quite conspicuously and troublingly open.” *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* is Hart’s characteristically “mischievously polemical, dauntingly erudite, and verbose” book-length answer.³

For this *Zeal* forum, Jon Sozek⁴ and I asked four scholars to respond to Hart’s boisterously unrelenting argument that the Christian tradition is sustained by what it anticipates: the promised transformation of all things in God. To Hart’s thinking, tradition is more forward- than backward-facing. Notably, Hart directs his attention, and his considerable argumentative skills, at the thought of John Henry Newman and Maurice Blondel. As all four contributors to this forum suggest, this relatively narrow focus opens up the possibility of considering who else might have something profound to say about what the Christian tradition is.

Our opening contribution by Will Cohen offers a careful and fair reading of the strengths and potential weaknesses of Hart’s *Tradition and Apocalypse* and challenges us to think about “A Usable Future,” a riff on the well-known idea of “a usable past.” Anne Carpenter’s⁵ essay challenges Hart regarding both the purpose and promise of the respective projects of Newman and Blondel, the primary thinkers he engages. By broadly considering how Christianity has responded to its inherent failures (perhaps both historically and in a contemporary reflective context), Julia Brumbaugh’s piece incorporates the thinking of both Johannes Baptist Metz and James Alison, extending Hart’s consideration of tradition in critically important directions for our contemporary moment. Finally, by examining the constellation of History, Metaphysics, and Tradition, Dan Rober’s reflection draws a focal attention to the “crisis of traditionalism” and returns us to the notion of “a usable past.”

Together, these four engagements with Hart's *Tradition and Apocalypse* reveal that indeed there are robust resources to draw upon within the Christian tradition as we continue to reflect on the concept of tradition itself, and on its future. All four, indeed, even gesture at and invite the pursuit of broader avenues of inquiry, respondent to Hart's charge that "Christian thinkers might...draw on resources outside the historical, cultural, and even religious continuum of the tradition as currently understood."⁶ May this forum be a worthy continuation of thoughtful reflection upon this important concept.

¹ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. Ernest Beaumont (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1897), 20.

² David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 2.

³ Thomas Albert Howard, "David Bentley Hart's Apocalyptic View of Tradition," *The Christian Century* 140, no. 3 (2023).

⁴ Jon Sozek is a member of *Zeal's* editorial advisory board.

⁵ For a book length treatment of how Anne Carpenter challenges us to think about tradition, see *Nothing Gained Is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022).

⁶ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 182.

