A Usable Future

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Suppose that "traditionalists," one day, were to be a term referring to people whose minds are fixed on the future. Were David Hart's *Tradition and Apocalypse* to have the impact he might hope and that it well deserves, this might come to pass. His central argument is that what gives Christian tradition its coherence is something that lies ahead. Hart employs different terms in the course of the book for what this something is. By turns he calls it the tradition's eschatological horizon,[1] its "yet more,"[2] an always "fuller, more complete, more immediate knowledge of the truth yet to be achieved," "this invisible surfeit,"[3] the "final cause"[4] or "final causality" which casts backward its "clarifying light" so as to "[make] sense of the tradition as a genuine unity."[5]

The book's first half is a critical examination of the respective hermeneutics of John Henry Newman and Maurice Blondel. Both are found wanting—Newman's more egregiously than Blondel's—for supposing that what meaningfully holds tradition together can be found altogether by means of looking back at it, if only in the correct way. Hart does credit Newman for recognizing that the actual historical facts—for example, in the era of the ecumenical councils—are far too riven with disjunctions, reversals, and contradictions to yield up by themselves the meaning that dogmatic theology would purport to derive from them. He commends Newman for understanding that some other criteria are needed to say how or why theologians and councils deemed orthodox were such, and those deemed heterodox were not (if the latter were all, indeed, not—Hart notes the injustice of Origen's posthumous condemnation). Newman's seven principles for distinguishing between a true and a false development of doctrine comprised his attempt to provide such criteria. Hart regards it as a valiant attempt, but one that fails unequivocally.

Hart finds Newman's method circular. He argues that Newman tautologically sees heterodox continuities across time as proof of their heterodoxy, and orthodox continuities of their orthodoxy. Of the sixth principle, which holds that genuine doctrinal developments "exert a conservative action on the past," i.e., do not "contradict and reverse the course of doctrine which has been developed before them,"[6] Hart says it is "the most misconceived of the set."[7] Virtually all developments, Hart notes—true developments as well as false—conserve some things and eliminate or

forget others. "Here, as elsewhere, everything depends upon how the historical narrative reconstructs the past, reorders inherited emphases and tendencies, excludes contrary evidences, and consigns what were once perfectly palatable items of recognized orthodoxy to the calumnious status of 'corruptions' or 'heresies.'"[8]

Still more stinging is Hart's judgment of Newman's seventh criterion, which says that authentic developments exhibit "chronic vigour" whereas corrupt ones either die out quickly or undergo "slow decay." About this Hart observes that we might be able to have "considerably more faith in Newman's intellectual honesty if he were to admit that, if the various 'heresies' that have arisen in the course of Christian history have tended toward 'transience,' this would be mostly on account of the ecclesial and political coercion used to suppress them."[9]

Newman's success, "quite remarkable in itself," was "in making the topic of tradition a proper, recognized, and accepted part of theology's task,"[10] but his attempt to establish tradition's continuity, insofar as it sought to make sense of the past strictly within its own frame, could never succeed; indeed Hart says it can (and should) "be dismissed as merely an exercise in ideology and a collection of historical fables."[11]

In the hermeneutics of Blondel, Hart sees considerably more promise for achieving a proper synthesis wherein tradition, rather than being an ideological superimposition upon the past, may be seen "as the sacramental presence of Christ in the Holy Spirit in every age of the church, at once preserving and renewing the faith."[12] Blondel, like Newman, was responding to historicism's claim that dogma has nothing magical about it, no better claim to transcendent truth than any other contingent flotsam of history. Also, like Newman, Blondel did not wish to defend dogma by a fideistic ignoring or twisting of historical realities that did not fit with it. The latter approach Blondel designated "extrinsicism."

Blondel proposed that it is through the act of—that is, active life of—participation in tradition that history and dogma are reconciled. Blondel here pivots away from the objective approach Newman took in applying rational principles to historical events as though any reasonable person could then perceive by his or her natural intellect how the development of the church's dogmas differs from other historical developments. In Blondel's hermeneutics, which (at one level, at least) are more akin to Hans-Georg Gadamer's, there is no standing outside of a tradition, no objective perch from which to decipher history's true meaning. Hart agrees but also accuses Blondel of going suddenly "mystical" on us. Mysticism itself is not wrong, Hart grants, but if Blondel's treatise is to achieve its purpose then "[h]is concept of tradition must . . . offer some principle of critical judgment—some clear method of discrimination—that assures the believer of a real power of a living tradition to separate true developments from false," and it is just this that "Blondel fails to supply."[13]

Priming us for the solution he himself will offer, namely that tradition's genuine unity and meaning lie always in the "yet more" of the future, Hart concludes the section on Blondel by saying that as much as he surpassed Newman in his approach, he was still, "like Newman, looking backward, trying to justify the past by the past. He should occasionally have turned his eyes in the opposite direction."[14]

This makes for an effective segue, but it does not seem to do justice to Hart's own treatment of Blondel, whether in the many pages preceding or in the few further remarks he goes on to offer. He acknowledges, for example, that "Blondel invokes the future of belief more than once. A large part of his purpose in the treatise is to show that tradition, properly understood, is still a living reality open to the future."[15] So then where is the problem? Before looking at Hart's take on that, it will be helpful to consider one or two aspects of his own constructive solution to the problem of tradition, since by his own approach he purports to escape the pitfalls he charges Blondel with falling into.

Hart proposes that we can only justify the past by the future. Very well. But what future? That there is some mystical dimension here is not (to me) necessarily a flaw. But it should be acknowledged. As I was reading Hart's constructive account, in which he suggests that "[o]ne can certainly look back at many of the tradition's dogmatic statements and appreciate, in long retrospect, how powerfully they synthesized the richest elements of the past . . . and with how pronounced a faithfulness to that intrinsic finality of which I keep speaking,"[16] I was struck by Hart's apophaticism. About that of which he "keeps speaking" *he in fact says so little* that it put me in mind of the definition given by Vladimir Lossky of Tradition as a "margin of silence," which Lossky says "signifies that the revealed mystery, to be truly received as fullness, demands a conversion towards the vertical plane."[17]

I would ask in this regard: what is different between finding tradition's hermeneutical key up above, and finding it up ahead? Hart does show some advantages to the latter. In a gem of a passage of several pages on how Christianity might yet more fully realize itself through encounter with other faiths and traditions, Hart says that he would argue "that the whole rationality of the Christian tradition—*creatio ex nihilo*, divine incarnation, human deification, the vivifying Spirit of God breathed into humanity, and so forth—entails and requires a kind of metaphysical monism that has only sporadically manifested itself within the tradition, but that certain schools of Vedānta (not to mention certain schools of Sufism) have explored with unparalleled brilliance."[18] By seeing Christianity as less than fully realized in its movement toward a fuller future, those within it may enter more freely and fruitfully into dialogue with those outside or beyond it and discover depths it has yet to fathom in itself.

A second advantage of believing that it is ultimately tradition's "yet more" of the future that is binding upon us over and above anything set forth

in the tradition's past is that we are then better able to avoid "the damage that can be done, to a person's theology and emotional stability alike, by subordinating conscience to some seemingly greater dogmatic imperative"[19] handed down to us. Hart reflects here on certain respondents to his recent book[20] on universal salvation, some of whom he says have subverted their own moral intelligence "in order to defend the bracing doctrine of infinite divine vindictiveness or cruelty or (at the very least) moral dereliction."[21] Does the unity of faith and of the church across time really require cleaving to doctrines the church has taught, however definitively, that we would otherwise never want to hold? Not if that unity is unshakably grounded in what lies ahead. Hart urges us away from "unquestioning submission to an institutional apparatus that has so often and so grievously failed the moral requirements of that vocation, or to any supposedly 'finished' dogmatic synthesis,"[22] and urges us instead to "dare to be wise."[23]

I found *Tradition and Apocalypse* in need of recalibration or further reflection chiefly in two ways. One is a certain ambiguity about whether the future in which tradition is rooted is eschatological or temporal. The eschaton seems indicated most of the time. Yet in speaking of the tradition's "capacity for [a] future . . . as yet only intangibly and tacitly known," Hart says, "[i]t is a future that, from the present vantage of historical time, shades into eternity." Where does the future shade into eternity from? Necessarily, it would seem, from some actual temporal moment (far beyond the present vantage) into which the eschatological will have seeped or blurred. The notion of an eschatological inbreaking into history is all to the good, of course. The ambiguity concerns whether the eschatological fullness permeates future moments in history more than present or past moments. Hart seems at times to suggest this kind of gradual deification of unfolding human history after Christ. (At other times, he does not, as in his lament of Christianity's decline from its early apocalyptic pacifism and socialism.) He says of the Nicene synthesis, for example, that it "possessed an intrinsic rationale and meaning that had not yet been clearly stated or ever fully grasped because, until now, its full manifestation had still lain in the future."[24] Here again it is (i.e., was) a temporal future. "Once that antecedent finality was grasped—and even then only in part, as in a glass darkly—it could not fail to be discerned in everything that had gone before." Certainly, human beings receptive to truth do learn; and greater attunement to the mind of God can happen over an individual's lifetime, as well as in the course of particular arcs within history (e.g., as the church wraps her mind around new questions and controversies). But any notion that over the centuries history becomes increasingly illuminated by the eternal would have to be qualified, at a minimum, by a complementary notion that it also becomes darkened in ever new and more diabolically ingenious ways.

No period, it seems, including any moment's historical future, has more claim than another to be permeated by the eschatological future. If this is so, and if tradition's true rootedness therefore lies in a future beyond the temporal, then tradition might be understood as the dynamic presence of the future in the past. Hart's book sometimes points toward this idea. He says of certain centuries-old dogmatic statements of the church that one can see "how the final causality that calls them forth is revealed through them."[25] But in that case, how we come to be attuned to the transcendent fullness of the future, to have eyes to see it (if only in part, and through the glass darkly), is through a pedagogy of the past. We look back in order to learn how and at what to look forward, which then allows us again to look back but more freely and unworriedly, as Hart recommends. (Hart seems to me to practice this toggling back and forth between past and future in a more integrated way than he articulates it.)

This brings us to the second and more significant limitation I found in *Tradition and Apocalypse*. If how we learn to see the eschatological future is through what we receive from the past that reveals it (though never as mere inert historical data, for as Blondel has written, "the mystery of God could not be violated even by revelation itself"[26]) then the role of authority in the church may be seen in its real significance as pointing us toward those teachers and texts, figures and doctrines through whom and through which the future discloses itself. Hart accuses both Newman and Blondel of falling back on ecclesial authority when they have no other recourse. Blondel is faulted for arriving at the point of saying that the church "is proof of itself."[27] "The dogmas of the church, Blondel tells us, cannot be rationally justified by history alone, or solely through the dialectics we apply to sacred texts, or entirely through the efforts of individual scholars or theologians or believers; rather, all these forces converge in tradition, whose final authority, by virtue of divine assistance, is the church's highest organ of infallible doctrinal expression."[28] Hart's takeaway—namely that "the authority of tradition remains grounded in nothing but itself"—seems to reflect a misunderstanding. If I read Blondel correctly, it is not that tradition is grounded only in itself, but that it cannot be rationally proved as being grounded beyond itself, and therefore that believers are asked to give their assent to the dogmatic claims that authority makes. It is not that those claims are irrational or ahistorical, but that neither rationality by itself, nor history by itself, nor the two dialectically related to each other, are sufficient to orient believers—within the swirling cacophony of history's ongoing flow—toward the truth they contain without also the apostolic witness of the church to ratify them as indeed true.

Hart at times characterizes ecclesial authority as having run away with itself with claims "ever more extreme only as they have become ever more incredible,"[29] yet he also does not want to deny some proper role of authority in the church. The problem is that he offers no positive statement

of what such a proper role is or would be. He speaks of the need for "humility before the testimony of the generations"[30] and refers (rather uncomplicatedly here) to "the sources of the tradition"[31] without, I think, adequately recognizing how this testimony and this tradition with its sources have flowed within channels or banks that authority has played an integral part in maintaining. Even Hart's beloved Sergius Bulgakov, whom Hart deems "the greatest theological mind" in Eastern Christianity since Maximus the Confessor, had the infirmity of mind, as Hart might view it—though again it is hard to tell because Hart does not offer clarification on how ecclesial authority's proper purpose and exercise differ from its improper—to affirm an authority Bulgakov called "'infallible' in practice" in order to meet the needs of the church.[32]

It would be of interest to read what Hart might have to say in a more sustained reflection on the topic, but his scattered remarks in this book led me to wonder what the essential difference might be between including infallible authority as a legitimate criterion of tradition within history, as both Newman and Blondel do, and referring us instead to the future final causality as the only warrant for whatever in tradition is true. I am not so sure, as Hart appears to be convinced, that infallible authority in history contradicts the openness to that final causality that he is right to insist that we preserve. Blondel, in an evocative footnote on the very page on which he refers to a divinely assisted organ of infallible expression, writes as follows, having just observed that in the church one goes from faith to dogma rather than vice versa:

> [I]n digging a tunnel, even in the most crumbling sand, excavation always precedes consolidation. The fixity of arguments and definitions, in the moving depths of our life and in the obscurities of our passage to God, is simply part of the unavoidable masonry required in order to keep the road open and to permit further excavations which, in their turn, will require fresh supports.[33]

Perhaps in the end, Blondel and Newman were not cheating us out of our responsibility and answerability to the apocalyptic light of tradition by their "final, fatigued appeal," as Hart would characterize it, "to an authority that somehow already exists outside of historical causality."[34] Perhaps instead they were indefatigably affirming a gift within history by which that road we travel together in and toward the light remains open.

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[1] David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 94.
[2] Ibid., 103.
[3] Ibid., 105.

[4] Ibid., 125.
[5] Ibid., 126.
[6] Ibid., 60 (quoting John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, 199-200).
[7] Ibid., 60.
[8] Ibid., 61.
[9] Ibid., 64.
[10] Ibid., 66.
[11] Ibid., 45.
[12] Ibid., 70.
[13] Ibid., 76.
[14] Ibid., 92.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 160.
[17] Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 150.
[18] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse,* 183.
[19] Ibid., 176
[20] See David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
[21] Ibid., 177
[22] Ibid., 179
[23] Ibid., 180
[24] Ibid., 126.
[25] Ibid., 160.
[26] Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 246.
[27] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse,* 86 (quoting Blondel 269).
[28] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse,* 87 (citing Blondel 279).
[29] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse,* 94.
[30] Ibid., 142.
[31] Ibid., 59.
[32] Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church,* trans. Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 80. It is notable in light of Hart's mention of Bulgakov that in this book on tradition, Georges Florovsky receives no mention, apart perhaps indirectly from a single disparagement of the notion of any sort of patristic unanimity [179].
[33] Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics*, 279.
[34] Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse,* 170.