

Apocalypse and the Speculative Theological Tradition

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The truth is that I disagree with most of the things that David Bentley Hart writes in *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief*. But it is not very interesting to martial all my objections. So, instead, I will spend this essay reaching into the recent Catholic past. I will describe the major structure of Catholic theology in which the *Ressourcement* theologians of the early 20th century lived. These men read Maurice Blondel and John Henry Newman, Hart's central interlocutors; furthermore, these *Ressourcement* theologians argued for and placed a seal over the Catholic understanding of certain qualities of Christian tradition, doing so most of all in the Second Vatican Council's documents. But they were working to renew a Catholic theology whose structure we have since forgotten.

Ryan Hemmer's *Death and Life of Speculative Theology* argues that the so-called *nouvelle théologiens* understood themselves to be working on one half of a dual problem. Until very recently, the whole of Catholic theology was divided into two halves, positive theology and speculative theology. The first searched the past. It concerned itself with the texts and data of Christian revelation and its life in the Christian community in history.¹ Positive theology would eventually transform into what some call historical theology. Then there was speculative theology, which asked present questions. It asked how positive theology's gathered work made sense; it sought to understand; it grappled with the various relationships between what was believed (the *nexus mysteriorum*).²

The two halves of Catholic theology deployed different techniques to suit their different purposes. And this division in Catholic theology is important, because it is the Catholic theology that those *nouvelle théologiens* were brought up in and that was their native language, so native that they presume its existence by critiquing it and transforming it. *Ressourcement* as a technique or operation or strategy or point of view is fundamentally about transforming the techniques of positive theology.³

Newman and Blondel were useful in the renewal of positive theology because they asked how Christian tradition works. They did not set out to prove Christian tradition or its possibility of existence. That they take for granted. Therefore, their arguments and texts make the most sense as

explanations of Christian tradition's character. They ask not whether, but what it means to say that Christianity is intelligently and freely historical, and this is what they mean by Christian tradition.⁴

For, in addition to the problem of tradition, there is the problem of faith's understanding, of what we mean. We not only believe, but also want to know about our belief. This was the problem of what was called speculative theology. In its attempt to understand what faith believes, speculative theology did not try to invent doctrines, but asked about the rational coherence of faith's positive content.⁵ To perform its task, speculative theology relied on positive theology for the data it then classified; it relied on philosophical advancements; it developed theorems.⁶ Rather than being diachronic, speculative theology was synchronic. It was abstract.⁷

Then speculative theology went and died. Positive theology was transformed; speculative theology was not. It died. We forgot about it. Perhaps that was its necessary transformation, and perhaps it was not. Hart rightly points out that just because a thing happened does not mean it had to happen that way,⁸ a point that Blondel also makes.⁹ It is true that Christians believe everything that occurs in history is providential. But this is more a heuristic than it is a content. Just because we know that an event is providential does not mean that we know what providence intends or permits by its happening. Indeed, that is a wholly different question.¹⁰

Speculative theology died because it was born in a classical culture that has ceased to be. Positive theology survived because it was transformed to better meet the needs of a present culture. But theological coherence in its classical sense, in its sense as a single, normative theology for a single, normative culture, now sits in front of us as impossible hubris. Rightly do we judge it so. "It has become impossible today," Hans Urs von Balthasar says in *Razing the Bastions* (1950),

for anyone to do what was still just possible for an individual in the middle ages: namely, to have an overview, and to summarize everything in the synthesizing peak of theology: one could, at any time, from the highest watchtower atop the world-cone, look out, oneself unmoving, at all the movement (like Dante from Paradise, or like Camões' Vasco de Gama or the Mexican nun from her heavenly sphere).¹¹

Balthasar has in mind a culture of knowledge that has died. As I read *Tradition and Apocalypse*, I could not help but think of the book as an attempt to plunge into this realization and not despair.¹²

With the transformation of positive theology and the death of speculative theology, Catholic theology since has fragmented into many subdisciplines and into many cultures, where no single mind can ever

master it. Catholic theology has not figured out the nature of its coherence in the face of its new situation. Hart consistently suspects that behind many Catholic words lies the Catholic impulse to throw theology at the feet of magisterial authority,¹³ a thing that Catholic theology does, perhaps, in an attempt to secure its loosening hold on its own seams. If sense has fled, after all, power remains. But senseless power is arbitrary power. Anyone would be right to find suspect such a thing.

Hemmer suggests that there is, perhaps, a third way between power and apocalyptic. That third way is a recovery and transformation (which is to say, a *ressourcement*) of speculative theology. However fragmentary divine revelation in history is for the eyes of faith, still we can ask what it means. We can try to understand what we believe and shoulder the responsibility of judgment.¹⁴ And, since speculative theology is the product of human intelligence, speculative theology can be transformed and plied to new, present purposes.

I do not think that theological coherence is a lost dream any more than I think that the intelligence of Christian history is. The fact is only that our present theoretical instruments and methods are not yet adequate to answer the questions theology now faces. Where Hart sees hopeless contradiction, I see a Catholic theology still at work to solve its problems. To borrow a phrase of Bernard Lonergan's: belief is not in crisis; culture is.¹⁵

The major standard of speculative theology was intelligence.¹⁶ And human intelligence is complex. It is a spontaneous, dynamic, transcending structure of operations that do not resemble one another.¹⁷ Perhaps this is where Hart and I most fundamentally disagree. Again and again, Hart asks us how the various Catholic claims about tradition form a single, coherent logic. But I do not think that tradition is a product of logic.¹⁸ Therefore, it will not yield its secrets to logic. Tradition is a product of human beings in their intelligence and their freedom. Human intelligence and freedom are polymorphic. So Christian tradition will be as we ourselves are, and it will yield up its nature only in the ways we ourselves do. Hart asks a genuinely urgent question with the wrong standard of its adequate answer; then he rattles the bones of Newman and Blondel as if they are blameworthy for understanding better.

Theological understanding itself is in the midst of its own transformation. A renewed speculative theology that assists us in our present and burdensome theoretical tasks will have to be adequate to new problems. So, Hemmer argues, a renewed speculative theology will be about the coherence of a fundamental theological polyvalence; or, in its Balthasarian register, speculative theology will be about theological symphony.¹⁹

Labor is now underway to rise to the level of our time.²⁰ Catholic theology itself is underway. There is in Catholic theology now this recalcitrant right and now that disparate left.²¹ But that we do not yet know

how to be adequate to our situations and our problems does not mean that we never will be, or that our incomplete solutions are in error. Certainly it does not relieve us of the burden of being on our way in that living way that Hart so elegantly describes. What will matter is patience and breadth and grace enough to follow through our many labors. So, if Hart would argue for an existential stance for theology, an apocalyptic one, then I would argue that a stance is not an answer, but only a beginning. It is not yet understanding, and still less is it yet responsibility for the world that we find ourselves in, and for which we are answerable to God, under the infinite light of his grace.

¹ Ryan Hemmer, *The Death and Life of Speculative Theology: A Lonergan Idea* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Press Academic, 2023), 2–3, 5.

² Hemmer, *Speculative Theology*, esp. 5–6, 32–37.

³ Hemmer, *Speculative Theology*, 5–6. “The coupling of positive [theological] method with modern historiographical research yielded undeniably progressive results. In patristics, generations of researchers have been aided by the production of critical texts of the Church Fathers published in the *Sources Chrétiennes* series, founded under the editorial leadership of de Lubac and his Jesuit confrères Jean Daniélou and Claude Mondésert, while the early monographs of Hans Urs von Balthasar catalyzed decades of renewed scholarly attention to Greek theologians like Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor” (6).

⁴ Both men make arguments about the nature of human rationality and its quality as free. For John Henry Newman, it is *Grammar of Assent*. For Maurice Blondel, it is the sweeping *L’Action* (both its earlier and later versions). I could not help but notice that Hart does not deal at length with any of those texts. Hart does at least mention Newman’s illative sense. See David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 105.

⁵ Hemmer, *Speculative Theology*, 22–23, 38–39.

⁶ Hemmer, *Speculative Theology*, 29.

⁷ Hemmer, *Speculative Theology*, 39.

⁸ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 59–60.

⁹ See Maurice Blondel, “History and Dogma,” *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 238–41.

¹⁰ As argued in the upcoming book by Jonathan R. Heaps, *The Ambiguity of Being: Lonergan and the Problems of the Supernatural* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, forthcoming 2024).

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Razing the Bastions* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 72–73.

¹² See esp. Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 102–107.

¹³ The subject of Hart, “Chapter One: Tradition and Traditionalism,” *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 1–22; cf. criticisms on pp. 69–70, 84–87, 94, 133–34.

¹⁴ After Hemmer's phrase, "accept the responsibility of judgment," *Speculative Theology*, 38.

¹⁵ Bernard Lonergan, "Dimensions of Meaning," *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 4: Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 244–45.

¹⁶ Hemmer, *Speculative Theology*, 34: "Logic is thus subordinated to intelligence"; cf. 41–44.

¹⁷ Bernard Lonergan, "Cognitive Structure," *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 4: Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 224–40.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 21–24, 30, 44–45, 82–83 (here: "rational unity," but not used in its Blondelian sense), 97–101.

¹⁹ An all too brief summary of Hemmer, *Speculative Theology*, 89–117.

²⁰ Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 14: Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 333–38, esp. 338.

²¹ Lonergan, "Dimensions of Meaning," 245.