

Turning to the Cross: Thoughts on Finding God in History

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David Bentley Hart's incisive book *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief*, which lays bare the risks entailed in modern fundamentalisms, calls to mind the aching question put so well by Annie Dillard: "*Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us.*"¹ Dillard, too, contends with questions about God's relationship to history, and to human beings, who keep casting around for a sense of the whole in the face of history's contingencies and our own intellectual and moral inadequacies.

Hart argues for a restoration of a properly eschatological account of tradition as a response to challenges to Christian tradition in light of the truth Dillard points to, which is that we cannot get around the fact that it is "only us." Hart's account entails a posture of awaiting a revelation of the full rational unity of Christian tradition in apocalypse. His argument is powerful and liberating. This rich account of tradition as the inner energy of history being drawn to fulfillment by divine design reframes dogma and dogmatism and loosens the grip of current (and historic) forms of Christian life and practice, doctrine, and theology. I want to raise two questions and propose some ideas for dialogue about those questions. The first is, does Hart adequately account for the failures in Christianity and how we face those failures within the contingencies of history; and the second is, in light of those failures, what are some resources from the tradition which we might bring to bear as life-giving alternatives to the false certitudes of various fundamentalisms?

The first question is whether Hart's turning to the future allows us too easily to gloss over the failures and sins, the false starts and dead ends of the Christian past and present. If we are oriented to the future in the search for the meaning of Christianity, what does that mean for our collective responsibility for the past and for how the past continues to shape the present? Hart is clearly concerned about the failures and contradictions in Christendom that are visible to us in ways that were not usually clear to people within it, and he is likewise concerned, for example, about the rash judgments and condemnations that mark the history of Christianity. He

proposes an orientation to the apocalyptic fullness of truth yet to be revealed and challenges believers in the present to resist condemnations and uncritical certitudes. And yet, I wonder whether this turn to the future risks the same kind of mistake that Johann Baptist Metz accused his teacher Karl Rahner of; that is, of positing a future fulfillment that allowed the losses of history to be passed over, of reaching for the end and in doing so to bypass the concrete challenges of the present.

Metz illustrates his criticism of Rahner through a description of the “hedgehog trick.”² He suggests, through this tale, that Rahner’s transcendentalization of Christianity bypasses the real historical threat to its existence. In order to be for real people, the salvation Christianity offers cannot exist in the mode of “always already.” How is it possible to speak of salvation, asks Metz, if “the very notion of history constituted by concrete subjects is overlooked?”³ He goes on:

Finally, should the salvation of the whole of history that has been promised at the end of time be reduced to a harmless, teleological history of meaning in which it is no longer possible to consider seriously, let alone provide a conscious theological assessment of, the catastrophic element that is present in that history?⁴

The universality and integrity of Christianity is not, Metz contends, in its transcendentality and its apocalyptic goal, but in its praxis in history through discipleship. For Metz, the space between the “always already” of Rahner’s vision of the transcendental victory of grace, on the one hand, and the slow, halting, and fragile process of Christian history, on the other, is gaping.

Anne Carpenter’s recent work on tradition drives home Metz’s questions about the relationship between the final end of Christianity and the present. She uses Black scholars M. Shawn Copeland and Joseph Flipper, among others, to draw questions of the tradition back to the concrete and to concrete persons, thereby forcing the seeker of truth to discover the eschaton “in the struggle of the poor in history, which is also God’s struggle.”⁵ More broadly, with respect to tradition, she seeks to account for the church’s tradition in ways that account for how, in recent centuries, it has enacted and continues to embody, as part of its very self, colonialism and the dehumanizing anthropology of racism.

Within history, constrained as we are by entangled social worlds, by both divine accompaniment and sinfulness, the great crises of Christianity contend with the historical contingency that Hart focuses on, but also those resulting from sin, failure, loss, and death, and for which we are called to repentance. Many people yearn for a trustworthy goodness in the midst of so much brokenness. Behind, I believe, the dangerous, ahistorical dogmatism Hart so rightly criticizes, are often human beings desiring a

way to live that is neither pernicious nor corrupt in itself, but seeking goodness, however faulty the object. If he is correct that the ahistorical legitimization strategies of inerrancy and dogmatism are unworthy of authentic Christian faith because they short-circuit a fuller truth and they weaponize the gifts of scripture and dogma, then the theological and pastoral alternatives offered in their places have to be worthy of people's yearning for goodness. Yet, in this essay at least, Hart does not rise sufficiently to this need. He begins to make an offering in this direction, writing:

Only in the ceaseless flow of construction, dissolution, and reconstruction is what is truly imperishable in the tradition intuited. Alas, there is no single formula for doing any of this well or any simple method for avoiding misunderstanding. Such rules of interpretation as there are can never be more than general and rather fluid guidelines.⁶

But this is precisely and urgently where we need to apply our energies, as scholars like Metz and Carpenter would argue. Hart is right to resist making final or absolute judgements on the past or on our current situations, and he is right to encourage the humility, patience, and openness he describes; but we must also seek guidance from the sources of faith for how to live in the midst of the questions about Christianity's complacency in the face of evil, and even more so, its participation therein. The answer must include an undermining of the false certitudes that clamor for our devotion as Hart does here, but there must also be more to the positive path by which we follow Christ in the midst of the contingent, broken world.

One source for ideas about how to live out of Christian tradition in the midst of sin and collapse comes from the work of James Alison, which is rich in pastoral insights. Lifting up only one example, I suggest Alison's proposal to attend to "changes in the tone of the voice of God" he describes in his essay "Strong Protagonism and Weak Presence."⁷ In this essay, Alison describes how so much modern religious posturing aims at making God, and the group God supposedly backs, appear strong in ways that have power in the world.⁸ It is easy to see how the falsely solid group belonging supported by reactionary fundamentalisms try to enact this kind of strength, a strength that Hart rightly argues is in fact both fragile and false (i.e., not of God). Alternatively, Alison points to the pattern of divine revelation in the person of Jesus, who had no worldly power and who became a victim of those powers. It was in this way by becoming weak, as weak as possible, that God, who is the source of all that is, breaks through to beloved human beings so as to speak a word of love to us.

In a world of so much trumped-up power and noise, the much subtler, gentler, and apparently weaker alternative of following the poor

man from Nazareth can hardly “compete.” Competition is obviously the wrong term because the God of life is the source of all that is. In other words, God is the only real protagonist. Rather than being one of the many things contending for our attention, God is the source of our ability to pay attention at all and is the ultimate horizon against which all the would-be rivals sunder. But, in this context of contending authorities, Alison reminds us to listen to the voice of God spoken from the cross of Jesus, and we might add, from the many people on the many crosses the world still builds.

Of course, there is no way of coming to hear that voice [of Jesus on the cross] which doesn’t include going through the process of being forgiven. If God’s whole way of being present in our world is precisely the strong protagonism of weak presence, then it reaches us as the process of our finding ourselves wrong, bound, and tied to other protagonisms and other dynamics in the degree to which we allow ourselves to be addressed by the strength of that generous weakness. And it is starting from our reception of that being forgiven, which takes the form of us finding ourselves being set free, loosened for freedom, that we enter into the process of noticing the changes in tone of the voice of God.⁹

This changing voice of God, Alison argues, opens up a new ecosystem of meaning for listening to the word of God. It is an ecosystem in which the image of a strong protagonism he offers as a way to understand God’s abiding closeness to human beings is available in the ways we least expected, but which invites us to draw near in love. In Alison’s writing, there isn’t just one image pointing to how God, coming toward human beings in the person of Jesus and the Spirit, leads to new life. However, an experience of disorder and reordering around a new center, following a new pattern, a pattern of discovery and conversion is at the heart of all of them. In every generation, the church must learn again to hear the voice of Jesus, in the midst of the cacophony of the world, in a process that involves as much unlearning as learning, and which will always be marked by discovery and the attendant repentance and rebirth that new life involves. And isn’t this at least in part what Hart is pointing toward as well? If Hart emphasizes awaiting a startling future, Alison and others attend to the broken world, and to Jesus’ voice therein, so that we may more humbly do together the incredibly hard work required: the scholarly work to tell honest stories, and to think through the way false ideas and sin have infected our tradition, and the spiritual work of grief, of the breaking of hearts, the repentance, and conversion required by the commandment to love?

¹ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper Row, 1977), 56.

² Johannes Baptist Metz, S.J. “An Identity Crisis in Christianity? Transcendental and Political Responses,” in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner, S.J.* ed. by William J. Kelly, S.J. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 169–178, at 173.

³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Anne Carpenter, *Nothing Gained is Eternal: A Theology of Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2022), 180.

⁶ David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 140–1.

⁷ James Alison, “Strong Protagonism and Weak Presence: The Changes in Tone of the Voice of God,” online at <https://jamesalison.com/strong-protagonism-and-weak-presence/>.

⁸ See also: Alison, “Monotheism and the Indispensability of Irrelevance,” in *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-in* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 1–32.

⁹ Alison, “Strong Protagonism.”