

Metaphysics and/or History? David Bentley Hart, Traditionalism, and the Possibility of a Usable Past

Daniel A. Rober
Sacred Heart University

David Bentley Hart is, among other attributes, a skilled polemicist; in *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* he brings this skill to bear against Catholic traditionalists in particular at multiple points of his argument. In seeking to substantiate a deeper theology of tradition, Hart takes aim at those who give an extremely thin account of tradition in the name of preserving it. While affirming Hart's overall point concerning the vacuousness of traditionalism as an ideology, this essay will seek to expand on it. His argument's very breadth—and the breadth of his argument in the book as a whole—risks inadvertently giving cover to traditionalism by weighing its account of tradition so heavily to the metaphysical rather than the historical. As such, I will argue that Hart's argument can be strengthened by a fuller accounting of history in dialogue with thinkers in that discipline, particularly Robert Orsi's writing about the relationship between history and presence.

Hart does not cite Jaroslav Pelikan's famous dictum that "tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living," yet his book's treatment of traditionalism certainly embodies it.¹ His critique of Catholic traditionalists is twofold: first, he argues that their political fantasies are dangerous and completely unrealistic, particularly when packaged in the form of "integralism"²; second, he accuses them of hating Pope Francis precisely for embodying the Gospel rather than the historically-situated version of it they have canonized: "what offends them is his Christianity."³

Hart's critique of traditionalism is summed up in his argument that it lacks any "deep perspective upon the past" and instead equates the recent past with unchanging truth.⁴ The demolition of the "comforting illusion" of the static or wholly continuous notion of tradition results in romantic or resentful feelings, neither of which are productive.⁵ Traditionalism as an ideology thus develops a kind of allergy to the living tradition, devolving into what he calls an "ecclesiastical fetishism" focused on ritual and power.⁶ For Hart, traditionalism is not simply an incorrect approach to tradition, but

effectively its opposite, denying as it does the dynamism of the process of “handing on” essential to any tradition.

While Hart effectively demolishes the shallowness of traditionalism as an ideology, he does not sufficiently account for the depth of its appeal on a historical and psychological level. Hart understands its psychological appeal as pathological for understandable reasons, but its source and resolution merit further investigation. Furthermore, Hart’s helpful diagnosis of tradition as an eschatological reality and critique of thinkers, such as Newman, who seek to situate it as a historical or narrative reality risk abandoning the field of historical narrative to traditionalists and others with ulterior motives. It is with that space, and how to deal with it, that the rest of this essay will concern itself.

Hart devotes much ground in *Tradition and Apocalypse* to his critique of both John Henry Newman and Maurice Blondel’s approaches to tradition. For Hart, Newman’s attempt to chart a narrative of Christian tradition gives an admirable account of tradition as far as it goes but bases itself upon a weak chain of inferences.⁷ He accuses Blondel, on the other hand, of having a kind of circular or inevitabilist argument on behalf of tradition.⁸ Hart’s account of tradition on the whole thus skews to the metaphysical over the historical.⁹ He certainly acknowledges the necessary historical ground of Christian doctrine and validates the work of historical scholarship, but he effectively puts history on a parallel track to tradition as a metaphysical category.¹⁰

If, as Hart argues, tradition ought to be focused more on awe before the mystery of God than a historical account of doctrine, this leads to challenges in terms of settling between competing accounts.¹¹ For Hart, in the case of both universal salvation and the morality of capital punishment, an appeal to the Gospel and rationality offer the hermeneutical key rather than any kind of historical account.¹² Yet these disputes are not always (or often) clear; how to manage in these situations where traditionalism offers the comfort of a less-nuanced historical narrative than that of Newman?

Traditionalism and adjacent ideas of change (or lack thereof) in the church clearly rely on bad theories of history.¹³ Yet the challenge of these bad narratives—and those such as Newman’s which elide historical complexity in the name of a straightforward narrative of development—is not to abandon history but to find a more adequate concept of it. To avoid the dual threats of essentialist ahistorical accounts on the one hand and historicist accounts on the other, Hart sets up a world in which it is possible to avoid historical questions altogether while paying due respect to those who take them up. This would not be a desirable effect per se of his work (he criticizes it explicitly), but it is a possible one.

Tradition understood properly requires a hermeneutic of history that goes beyond mere respect for the discipline separate from its theological implications. John O’Malley has written extensively about the way in which

naming a historical period considerably impacts how its ideas and events are interpreted.¹⁴ O'Malley's interpretation tracks closely with Hayden White's claim that historical narratives have an "explanatory effect" by the kind of "emplotment" they embody.¹⁵ In other words, historical narratives tell certain kinds of stories that bind up the history itself with the way they are told. O'Malley and White also point to the fact that historical naming and narrative, even with their limits, are essential elements of the work of history. This tracks with Hart's critique of Newman, but contra Hart emphasizes the need for stronger historical narratives. In the words of Bernard McGinn, "the problem of history cannot be solved by avoiding it."¹⁶ While Hart would surely agree with this dictum and his vision of tradition does not intentionally avoid history, in embracing a basically metaphysical view of tradition he provides a path for doing so.¹⁷

The engagement of history and theology on this point is not one-sided. Robert Orsi's historical analysis of presence connects to Hart's in perhaps surprising ways. Orsi is concerned about the way in which, as he puts it, "Scholarship serves to contain ontological 'vertigo'" and thus makes religion "safe" for the modern world.¹⁸ Orsi here is critiquing historical and social-scientific scholarship that seeks to reduce religion to other factors. As such, he is effectively arguing for historical scholarship that pays attention to the metaphysical while not losing sight of its work as history.¹⁹ When Orsi claims that he wants history to acknowledge presence over absence (which has typically dominated), he is making an argument similar to Hart's dialogue with Eastern religions: historians must engage with reality where it can be found, not simply in the safe places where they have been trained to look for it.²⁰

Orsi's account of "abundant history" offers a way of thinking about tradition "from below" that effectively complements Hart's metaphysical account. As Orsi puts it, "The past may act upon us in such a profound way as to erase our intentions of remaining outside of it."²¹ From this point of view, tradition exercises a psychological influence on everyone who encounters it, not just traditionalists. This is an attraction, but also a danger, as Orsi's attention to the ongoing scandal of sexual abuse makes clear.²² For Orsi, history cannot avoid the metaphysical dimensions it engages and must be up front about them; in this way he opens up a rapprochement between Hart's vision of tradition and the historical approaches which he validates yet sidelines. Traditionalism appeals to deep human needs in a deeply misguided manner, and Orsi's vision helps reconcile its appeal with the work of serious, honest history.²³

The combination of the Second Vatican Council and cultural changes since the 1960s have, as Mark Massa points out, challenged Catholics to think pluralistically (because historically they had not) about the church.²⁴ This as much as anything brought about the crisis of traditionalism and indeed challenged more moderate visions like Newman's. Hart's vision of

tradition accounts for this pluralism and indeed provides resources (particularly a less rigid account of historical development) for dealing with some of the more unexpected elements that pluralism forces the church to engage.²⁵ His reliance on reason and metaphysics allows for great flexibility within a tradition; the correctives discussed above seek to keep them grounded in history as well.

Tradition, then, provides a form of usable past that need not, as Hart rightfully points out, be construed as definitive. Done well, it opens out to a kind of Ricoeurian second naiveté in which tradition can be reappropriated after and through the work of criticism.²⁶ Done poorly, it becomes an idol, as Pelikan has laid out.²⁷ Hart's work on tradition effectively points to the danger of an overly comfortable vision and challenges it with the eschatological radicalism of the Gospel. This intervention has attempted to broaden Hart's account of tradition while accepting its basic parameters. Engagement with Orsi's work in particular points to a vision of history that opens itself to religious experience and theology while refusing to be controlled by them, as does Hart's theological vision vis-à-vis history.

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 65.

² David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 141–42 n.1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20–21: “All Christian doctrinal claims are also historical claims...”

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

¹² *Ibid.*, 176–78.

¹³ Garry Wills, *Bare Ruined Choirs: Doubt, Prophecy, and Radical Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), 18: “History was a thing it did not have to undergo.”

¹⁴ John W. O'Malley, *Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 4–5.

¹⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 12.

¹⁶ Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xii.

¹⁷ Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse*, 155: “I believe that history really is the realm of spirit...”

¹⁸ Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 64.

¹⁹ Ibid., “In the abundant event and all that follows it, a certain kind of intersubjective receptivity and recognition may become possible...”

²⁰ Ibid., 8.

²¹ Ibid., 71.

²² Ibid., 217–18. Orsi articulates the way in which desire functioned in Catholic pedagogy such that it could be put to a bad end: “a deep psychological and devotional intimacy between adults who wanted to awaken in their young charges desire for God really present, and children, who desired to please these adults by feeling in their bodies what was expected of them.”

²³ Hart’s own work on the natural desire to see God, while also skewering traditionalist Catholics who do not truly understand their own tradition, coheres well with Orsi’s account of abundance. David Bentley Hart, *You are Gods: On Nature and Supernature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 4–5. Orsi is arguably pushing back against a kind of “pure nature” within history as regards religion. This work of Orsi also connects to Hart’s discussion of Jean-Luc Marion on saturated phenomena, Ibid., 28-29.

²⁴ Mark S. Massa, S.J., *The American Catholic Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 144.

²⁵ Stephen Schloesser, “‘Dancing on the Edge of the Volcano’: Biopolitics and What Happened after Vatican II,” in Paul Crowley, ed., *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting a Catholic Future* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2014), 3–26.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 350: “The dissolution of the myth as explanation is the necessary way to the restoration of the myth as symbol.” Hart has engaged with this question in an unpublished talk, arguing that “I agree with everything except the naïveté part of that, because I don’t believe that there ever were naïve readings within the intellectual tradition of the Church.” Hart, “The Second Naïveté?”, online at <https://journal.orthodoxwestblogs.com/2019/01/16/the-second-naivete/>.

²⁷ Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition*, 55.