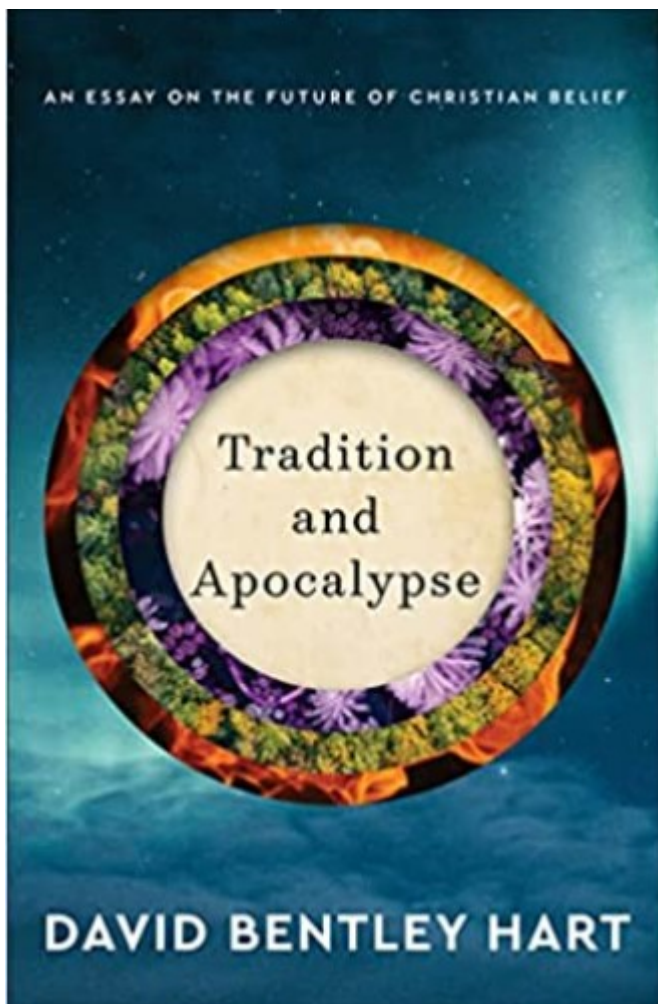


David Bentley Hart's apocalyptic view of tradition

Hart believes that John Henry Newman and those quick to invoke him rely too much on a gaze backward into the past.

by [Thomas Albert Howard](#) in the [March 2023](#) issue

In Review



Tradition and Apocalypse

An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief

By David Bentley Hart

Baker Academic

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David Bentley Hart does not get out of bed in the morning to take on small projects. In his most recent volume (which is, as usual, mischievously polemical, dauntingly erudite, and verbose), he sets his sights on John Henry Newman's conception of tradition as expressed in his landmark work, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845, revised 1878), the publication of which precipitated the Victorian scholar's conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism and arguably now serves as a major pillar of the Catholic Church's self-understanding. The Second Vatican Council did not really change church teachings, Newmanists insist, so much as it effected the development of doctrine.

Hart scoffs even as he admires Newman's intelligence—seconded and improved upon, Hart thinks, by the French philosopher Maurice Blondel—in sizing up the theological problem embedded in the “incorrigibly obscure” concept of tradition. In short: How can we simultaneously assure ourselves of “an essential immutability in Christian confession while also offering . . . a credible apologia for all the transformations through which that confession has manifestly gone over the centuries?” Put differently, how might the faithful invoke Vincent of Lérin's bold phrase *ubique, semper, et ad omnibus* (everywhere, always, and universally), while also recognizing significant transmutations over time—say, the Catholic Church's ostensibly novel embrace of religious liberty and interfaith dialogue at Vatican II or even, going back much earlier, Tertullian's notion of *trinitas* or the innovative use of homoousion (consubstantial) at the Council of Nicaea?

Hart charges that, in the final analysis, Newman's work has saddled Christians with a beguiling tautology. It beguiles because Newman's argument appears as a syllogism—a long chain of sound, careful deductive steps—but says little more than that what counts as acceptable teaching is what the church has decided to designate as such, and what it has designated as such must be acceptable teaching. It further beguiles, Hart believes, because it rests throughout on a misleading organic metaphor. Newman likens the church to a living organism (such as an acorn becoming a tree, to invoke a shopworn analogy), when in fact it is a complex

historical entity buffeted by and encumbered with numerous accidents of time and place that are not necessarily essential to its being, even if they are often obdurately held to be so.

Newman and those quick to invoke him also suffer from a surfeit of retrospection, Hart believes. That is, their conception of tradition relies too much on a gaze backward into the past. This willingness to accord primacy of importance to earlier periods, not least the patristic era, was beloved by thinkers of the Oxford Movement, Newman's own ilk before he swam the Tiber. Hart has far worse things to say about Catholic traditionalists—he characterizes them as “integralists” who are infatuated by a return to Christendom and all things Tridentine but ultimately worship a “perfumed . . . cadaver bedizened by mortuary cosmetics.”

An Orthodox theologian with a special predilection for Origen of Alexandria, Hart certainly does not despise Christianity's past. But the central lesson he draws from it—and, not least, from his reading of the New Testament—is entirely unsettling if one cherishes theological peace of mind and is inclined to conflate tradition with mere preservation.

For Hart, tradition, properly understood, posits that the church is nothing if not profoundly future-oriented, eschatological, living toward an unknown future kingdom for which it longs: a revelation-vouched final end, or an “antecedent finality,” that is at once utterly compelling, inexorably necessary, and profoundly mysterious. Any adequate conception of tradition must incorporate this dimension if it is to pass theological muster. The living Christian tradition, Hart elaborates,

is essentially an apocalyptic: an originating disruption of the historical past remembered in light of God's final disruption of the historical (and cosmic) future. One might even conclude that the tradition reveals its secrets only through moments of disruption precisely because it is itself, in its very essence, a disruption: it began entirely as a *novum*, an unanticipated awakening to something hitherto unknown that then requires the entirety of history to interpret. Its abiding truth never suffers itself to be reduced . . . to the temporal forms it has assumed in the course of its pilgrimage through time.

Or, allow another passage:

In a very real sense, the tradition exists only as a sustained apocalypse, a moment of pure awakening preserved as at once an ever dissolving recollection and an ever renewed surprise. Any truly faithful hermeneutical return to the origin of the tradition is the renewal of a moment of revolution, and the very act of return is itself a kind of revolutionary venture that, ever and again, is willing to break with the conventional forms of the present in order to serve the deeper truth.

As one might gather from my resort to quoting, it is always better to read Hart himself than secondhand commentators. But permit several final considerations.

Even as I find myself nodding in agreement when reading passages like these, I cannot shake from my mind the fissiparous specter of modern Protestantism, which has suffered many fools casting themselves as prophetic revampers of the faith, witnesses to putatively new truths, to say nothing of myriad unhinged pronouncements about the actual end of days. So, whose apocalyptic messages should we go with? Those of the Baptists, Ranters, Fifth Monarchists, Muggletonians, Quakers, Shakers, Diggers, Christian Scientists, Plymouth Brethren, Millerites? Invariably appealing to a new work of the Spirit, apocalyptic truth-bearers, historically viewed, have afflicted the body of Christ with countless divisions. “Let them be one,” our Lord thus prayed in vain?

And this, of course, raises the thorny question of whom or what body or what office gets to say when an apocalyptic disruption is valid or not—prophets, saints, bishops, the laity, academic theologians, one’s own conscience? Ever a churchman, Newman nonetheless memorably called conscience “the aboriginal vicar of Christ,” even as he tepidly accepted, holding his nose, the outcome of Vatican I.

Finally, are we bereft of knowledge about this mysterious final end, the antecedent finality, toward which the church is called? Here, I’m fairly confident Hart would thunderously answer no, even if now we see only through a glass darkly. In this glass, we glimpse that “in the end, faith and hope will both pass away, or rather pass over into perfect love—which is, at the last, another name, and perhaps the highest, for that final horizon that calls all thought and all of creation to itself.”

One might wish, too, that this horizon includes a celestial seminar in which Newman and Hart amicably sort out their differences—or at last benefit from an impartial judge.