

Postmodern Jesus: The Vatican's quarrel with Roger Haight

by [Thomas P. Rausch](#) in the [May 3, 2005](#) issue

In February the Jesuit theologian Roger Haight, former professor at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, received notification that the Vatican had found “serious doctrinal errors” in his 1999 book *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Orbis) and that he was forbidden to teach as a Catholic theologian. The news did not come as a surprise. He had been involved for five years in an exchange with the Vatican and his Jesuit superior general over the contents of the book. He resigned from Weston in 2003 and has since taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

The controversy between Father Haight and the Vatican’s Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith raises a number of difficult and challenging questions. What was Haight trying to do? What were the CDF’s objections? How was his work received by the theological community?

Haight’s book insists from the beginning that theology must be done in dialogue with the postmodern world. He argues that in a postmodern culture with its pluralistic consciousness one can no longer claim the superiority of Christianity to other religions, or Christ as the absolute center to which all other mediations of salvation are relative. This means that the dogmatic statements of faith, particularly in the area of Christology, need to be rethought and reinterpreted in a cultural and linguistic context different from the one in which they were first formulated.

Key to Haight’s method is the concept of symbol, a created person, object or event that makes known or present the transcendent reality of God, which remains always beyond our direct experience. Symbolic language is poetic, imaginative and figurative; it does not provide objective knowledge about transcendent realities, though it mediates a certain experience of God. In this way, Haight seeks to avoid a “naïve revelational positivism.” His aim is to rethink christological doctrine and set it within the context of a “general theory of religion in terms of religious

epistemology.”

What emerges from Haight’s method is a disjuncture familiar in Protestant theology—the difference between the approaches of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth. Schleiermacher sought to situate theology within a general theology of religious consciousness, while Barth insisted on the special and particular character of Christian revelation. On the Catholic side, some see a similar difference between the work of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Schleiermacher and Rahner, like Haight, are seeking to theologize in conscious dialogue with modernity, even at the cost of cultural accommodation. Barth, with his focus on the Word of God, and von Balthasar, with his constant, contemplative gaze on the figure of the crucified and risen Jesus, take seriously the uniqueness of God’s revelation in Christ.

There is much to recommend in Haight’s approach; it could be said to be evangelical in the best sense of the word. It is an attempt to proclaim the good news of God’s salvation in Christ in language that people living in a postmodern culture can hear and understand. On the other hand, he may also have gone too far to accommodate a culture that flourishes only in the rarified atmosphere of the contemporary university. Indeed, although postmodernism is the ruling ideology of the academy, whether there are really any postmodern people is another question. In any case, theology should challenge culture as well as engage in dialogue with it, and it should be able to speak also to the church.

The CDF raised seven specific points in regard to Haight’s book. First, it had serious reservations about his theological method. While recognizing Haight’s attempt to establish a “critical correlation” between the data of faith and postmodern culture, it argued that his method actually results “in a subordination of the content of faith to its plausibility and intelligibility in postmodern culture.” It also charged that in asserting that the Logos should be understood in a purely metaphorical sense, Haight denied the preexistence and incarnation of the Word as well as the divinity of Jesus.

In regard to the Trinity, the CDF rejected Haight’s view that the Logos and Spirit are symbols representing two different historical, salvific mediations of the one God, rather than referring to the differentiated inner life of God. The Vatican also argues that Haight did not affirm the salvific value of the death of Jesus and the universal salvific mission of Jesus, and it raises questions about his presentation of the resurrection.

While Haight's book was widely acclaimed, receiving the Catholic Press Association's award as the best book on theology in 2000, some theologians did have serious problems with the work. Without denying that there were problems, the Catholic Theological Society of America's board of directors issued a statement protesting the CDF's intervention as threatening "the very process of serious, systematic, internal criticism which the congregation and the bishops have long been encouraging among theologians." The directors said that Haight's book "has done a great service in framing crucial questions that need to be addressed today," at the same time noting that the theological community has been in the process of engaging in a lively debate over the strengths and weaknesses of his speculative proposals.

In short, while many theologians continue to have serious reservations about Haight's Christology and agree with the CDF's critique, there is a general sense that the CDF moved too quickly on the case and did not respect the debate already taking place in the theological community.

My own sense is that Haight's choice of a Spirit Christology, rather than the traditional Logos Christology, makes Jesus a unique mediator of the Spirit but not the incarnation of the Word. This leads in turn to a diminished doctrine of the Trinity, with a "unitarian" understanding of God. According to Haight, God is manifested in history as Father, Son and Spirit, but this language does not say anything about the divine inner life.

Some theologians, like Joseph Bracken, argue that Haight's Christology, while radical in some senses, is not radical enough, as it fails to see that relationality—the trinitarian communion of persons—is at the very heart of the Christian understanding of God.

A particular strength of Haight's book is the effort he makes to rethink the doctrine of salvation. Protestant theology, particularly evangelical theology, has canonized Anselm's theory of satisfaction, which appears again for Catholics in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Many find Anselm's theology inadequate for both theological and pastoral reasons, in that it suggests God's justice can be satisfied only by the death of an only beloved Son. Eastern theology, with its doctrine of divinization, has avoided this doctrine, which seems to reduce salvation to a transaction. The patristic and indeed the biblical traditions are much richer.

I think Haight is correct in arguing for other mediators of salvation, including both non-Christian religions and secular realities—something recognized by mainstream Catholic theology. Building on Vatican II, Pope John Paul II acknowledged in his encyclical *Redemptoris missio* that the Spirit can affect “society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.” At the same time, few Catholic theologians would want to move so far as to suggest replacing a christocentric theology with a theocentric one. Haight’s Jesus is a teacher and exemplar but not the sole, universal savior, and Haight’s apparent inability to find any positive value in the cross seems to me a weakness in his work.

The case of Father Haight raises a number of questions faced by all churches: What is the authority of scripture, what is the relation between theology and church authority, and what is the role of academic theology in seminaries, divinity schools and undergraduate university programs?

Haight’s approach to scripture differs little from that of other mainstream theologians. He argues that the way scripture was used by the Council of Nicea (325), which presumed it to be “a source of directly representative information, like facts or objective data, about transcendent reality,” is no longer acceptable. He understands biblical language as “symbolic of experience that is historically mediated.”

So he warns about reading the “poetry” of the prologue in John’s Gospel in a literalist manner and sees the empty tomb and appearance narratives as not so much historical narratives as “ways of expressing and teaching the content of a faith already formed.” Without denying that the resurrection was a real, eschatological act of God on Jesus, many theologians would agree with Haight on these points.

The earliest tradition, the Easter kerygma, simply proclaims that God raised Jesus and that there are witnesses. The later Easter appearance narratives are stories created precisely to help members of early Christian communities to recognize the presence of the risen Jesus in their midst, “in the breaking of the bread” of the Eucharist (Luke 24:35) or without seeing him themselves, as in the story of doubting Thomas (John 20:29).

The CDF’s insistence that “the appearances of the risen Lord and the empty tomb are the foundation of the faith of the disciples in the resurrection of Christ, and not vice versa” seems to take the appearance narratives as historical accounts. This

seems difficult to reconcile with the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 instruction "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," which criticizes fundamentalist interpretations for rejecting critical research, for historicizing material which never claimed to be historical, and for not taking into account the development of the gospel tradition. But while reemphasizing the importance of the historical-critical method, the instruction also insists that biblical interpretation cannot be reduced to a hypercritical analysis, but must always take place within the living tradition of the church—its liturgical life, its contemplative reading of the sacred texts (*lectio divina*) and its pastoral care.

How scripture is to be interpreted remains a critical issue. With the collapse of the Reformation's "sola Scriptura" principle in the post-Enlightenment period, Protestantism has too often been left with the alternatives of a fundamentalist literalism, with its modern doctrine of biblical inerrancy or infallibility, and theological liberalism. Many conservative Protestant churches, lacking an effective magisterium, cling to their inerrantist approach, fearful of what they see as the slippery slope toward liberalism (as I learned from my five years as a participant in conversations between Catholics and Southern Baptists). Catholic theologians affirm the role of the magisterium in safeguarding the church's faith, as the Catholic Theological Society of America's board of directors did in its statement on the CDF's intervention in the case of Haight.

As Christianity becomes ever more diverse, given its incredible growth in Asia and the global south, noted by Philip Jenkins in *The New Christendom*, the need for a truly collegial, universal magisterium becomes ever more apparent. The alternative is a further fragmentation of the global Christian community. Tensions between newer churches and more established ones are already evident.

For example, the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in the southern hemisphere and of nontraditional African churches, variously known as African Indigenous or African Independent Churches, means that the Protestantism of the future will reflect the more participative free-church tradition. The worldwide Anglican Communion is presently experiencing tension and possible schism over the ordination of a noncelibate gay bishop by the Episcopal Diocese of New Hampshire, which has been strongly protested by the Anglican bishops of Africa.

The Catholic churches of Asia are showing a new maturity, with their own sense of how to address their issues. Peter Phan notes that at Bangkok in 1982 and Bandung,

Indonesia, in 1990, the Federation of Asian Bishops' conferences sought to construct an ecclesiology that makes not the church but the reign of God the center of Christian life. At the 1998 Synod of Bishops for Asia, representatives objected that the Roman-drafted outline document for the synod was too Western in its approach. Much of the controversy centered on how best to proclaim the gospel in an Asian context. The Indian bishops argued for the right of local churches to develop their own approach to evangelization. Their concern was with how Christ is proclaimed.

Many objected that the Roman emphasis on proclaiming Christ as universal savior was not a good starting point in an Asian context, viewing it as ignoring the considerable experience of their conferences and putting other religions at a disadvantage. Their own approach emphasizes a "triple dialogue"—with other religions, with cultures and with the poor. In his exhortation "Ecclesia in Asia" Pope John Paul II sought to incorporate some of the bishops' concerns. But remaining tensions resulted in the 2000 declaration of the CDF, *Dominus Iesus*, which stressed that the fullness of God's revelation is to be found in Christ, that it is not complemented by other religions, that members of other religions are in a "gravely deficient situation," and that Christ has an absolute and universal significance.

Finally, the case of Father Haight raises with a new clarity the question of the role of academic theology. The dilemma faced by the CDF is not unique to the Catholic Church. Professional theology has both a critical and a speculative function; it probes the adequacy of the church's language and seeks to find new, more effective ways to express its timeless truths, precisely for the sake of the church's mission.

But the question of how theologians teaching in seminaries and undergraduate universities carry out their responsibility to bring students to an adult appreciation of the faith, both intellectually and pastorally, has not always been adequately addressed. It is not sufficient to argue that theology is different from catechesis, as many academic theologians do. Do not these theologians have an obligation to hand on the faith itself and not just the speculations of an academy too often driven by the need to publish? Do they have no responsibility for the religious development of their students?

The department in which I teach is strongly committed to the religious mission of our university and its members to the life of the church. In an age when many have called attention to the religious and theological illiteracy of many young adult Catholics, a recent comment of our students is very telling. When surveyed by a

faculty committee reviewing the program for theology majors, they responded that they “had been better instructed in modern and postmodern developments and critiques of the tradition than in the tradition itself.”

If the CDF’s decision to prohibit Roger Haight from teaching as a Catholic theologian is troubling, it is worth noting that he has not been silenced; he will continue to do research and to publish. His *Jesus: Symbol of God* remains a work that other theologians will have to deal with.