

## **“Poor Jesus: No Place to Stand,” a Response to Aimee Upjohn Light’s Essay: “Is Jesus on the Side of the Non-Christian?” By Lawrence A. Whitney**

We owe Aimee Upjohn Light a debt of gratitude for her identification of an important contemporary trend in interreligious dialogue and for her nascent articulation of a theological position to support this trend. In this response I aim to introduce some distinctions in order to render a more complex view of the sector of theology in which interreligious dialogue resides at present and to raise some concerns about Dr. Light’s theological position. But before turning to the response proper, allow me to register the ambiguous position of a respondent in the midst of an ongoing conversation between Light and John Hick:<sup>1</sup> one is wont to feel a bit the third wheel, so to speak. The role of a respondent, thus, is that of the awkward interjector seeking to disrupt the discussion such that the circle of conversation might be widened.

Light spends the bulk of the present article rehearsing a set of arguments and counterarguments within the pluralist position among theologies of religions. This sentence requires unpacking. First, Light is identifying a particular trajectory among pluralist positions. This is to say that there is more than one way to be a pluralist, and that the strain of pluralism Light takes issue with is that most closely associated with perennialism, and within the perennialist camp that associated with John Hick. Alternatively, it is possible to be a sociological pluralist, i.e. to simply recognize the fact of increasing religious diversity and interaction. Or one could be an activist pluralist and claim that in spite of their differences, members of religious traditions have enough in common to be partners in working toward a better world. My own proclivity is toward comparative pluralism, which acknowledges that religious traditions and their practitioners are similar and different in a variety of respects, and that both the similarities and differences are fruitful grounds for engagement. Other options are available as well. Critiquing the perennialist pluralist camp is hardly novel, and John Hick is singled out for critique in particular by Heim and others, perhaps most notably Gavin D’Costa.<sup>2</sup> Finally, writing off the perennialist pluralist position too quickly is likely a mistake given its historical strength in the mystical strains of so many of the world’s religions.

Second, Light engages with a number of thinkers across several related fields, the contours of which are important for understanding their goals and motivations. On the one hand there are philosophers of religions who are attempting to provide a philosophical framework for understanding the multiplicity of religious traditions and how they can best be rationally understood together. Hick is clearly in this camp, with his pluralist perennialism, as is S. Mark Heim in his early work, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*,<sup>3</sup> in which he provides the philosophical basis for the multiple religious ends thesis. There is an important distinction between this group, which seeks to provide a philosophical framework, and theologians of religions, who are instead trying to provide what Light would term a confessional framework for understanding the multiplicity of religious traditions. Theology of religions seeks to understand religions on the terms of the tradition the theology purports to represent. This is the work undertaken by both Dupuis and Heim in his later volume, *The Depth of the Riches*. It is important to note that Heim functions, alternately, in both camps, which is not to blur the distinction but rather to acknowledge that he can operate with different motivations and goals appropriate to the hat he is wearing at the time.

Neither philosophy of religions nor theology of religions, though, is necessarily intended as grounds for interreligious dialogue. They are, instead, what they claim to be,

namely attempts to understand religions in their diversity, as opposed to strategies to bring representatives of religious traditions to the dialogue table. An excellent example of what would constitute the latter is Catherine Cornille's recent book, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is not clear that the logical inconsistencies of perennialist pluralism necessarily require demurring from all theoretical, (i.e. abstract and ontological), considerations when attempting to interpret religions. The Cross-Cultural Comparative Religious Ideas Project hosted in the 1990s here at Boston University employed a proto-pragmatist methodology, (as opposed to the Rortian neo-pragmatist method Light rightly critiques), to develop a variety of vague categories that can serve as the basis for mutual understanding amidst both similarity and difference in multiple respects.<sup>5</sup>

Turning to the all too brief constructive section at the end of the article, Light is to be commended for her constructive appropriation of liberation theology into the project of theology of religions. (To be clear, I understand her here operating as a theologian of religions, not a theorist of interreligious dialogue). Nevertheless, there are two challenges to liberation theology that deserve attention. First, liberation theology is currently deeply out of favor, to the point of persecution, by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, thus calling into question whether it can serve as a helpful framework for Catholics to understand other religions, let alone as a basis of interreligious dialogue.<sup>6</sup> Second, and sociologically speaking, liberation theology at the moment is demographically a minority position within Roman Catholicism and Christianity more broadly; as Peter Berger likes to note, the Roman Catholic church opted for the poor, and the poor opted for Pentecostalism.

This leads to a final point that should be on the table for conversation out of Light's article. If the discipline of religious studies has taught us anything over the course of the past century, it is that religions are not monolithic. Not only do different people appropriate their traditions differently, but also a single person is likely to appropriate the symbols of their tradition (or traditions) differently in different circumstances. This means that throwing all of our eggs in the liberative Jesus basket risks leaving out the atoning Jesus, the cosmic Christ, and Jesus the teacher of wisdom, among other symbols of Jesus that have been integral to the Christian tradition to different degrees at different times and in different circumstances.<sup>7</sup> This is to say that Jesus is not any one thing only, and that Jesus cannot be said to stand in only one place. Neither can Jesus' followers interpret the world in light of Jesus in only one way, or be expected to share in any one common interpretation. The problem with confessionalism is not in its contrast with pluralism, but instead is that it overstates the ability of any tradition to speak with one voice, and of any theologian to represent the tradition as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> The article to which the present response is offered is the third installment in a conversation begun by Light in "Harris, Hick, and the Demise of the Pluralist Hypothesis." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. 44.3 (Summer 2009): 467-70. Hick

responded to Light in John Hick. "A Brief Response to Aimee Upjohn Light." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. 44.4 (Fall 2009): 691-92.

<sup>2</sup> Gavin D'Costa. *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000). ed. *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: the Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> S. Mark Heim. *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Cornille. *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*. (New York: Crossroad, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Cummings Neville, ed. *Ultimate Realities, The Human Condition, and Religious Truth*. (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001). See also the project website at [http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/proj\\_crip.htm](http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/proj_crip.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, the plight of Roger Haight especially regarding his book *Jesus: Symbol of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Robert Cummings Neville. *Symbols of Jesus: A Christology of Symbolic Engagement*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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