Keeping the Pluralist Hypothesis Alive in the Era of Interfaith Relations
A Response by Abraham Vélez de Cea to Aimee Light

(original article: http://irdialogue.org/journal/issue01/post-pluralism-through-the-lens-of-post-modernity"-by-aimee-upjohn-light-duquesne-university/)

According to Aimee Light, we live in a post-pluralist era that was "created by the demise of the pluralist hypothesis and the problems facing authors who follow in its wake."[1] In contrast, I would like to suggest that we live in the era of interfaith relations, where the pluralist hypothesis—that is, the idea that different faith traditions need not be in tension or in conflict, but express various experiences of the Ultimate or Most Important—still provides the best possible foundation for interreligious dialogue and comparative theology. Interfaith relations are leading many to reconsider both exclusivist and inclusivist views, thus leaving behind parochial, narcissistic, and condescending attitudes toward other traditions. In this age of interfaith relations, taking our religious and secular neighbors seriously and upholding our convictions with intellectual humility are no longer options, but rather imperatives indispensable for fostering harmonious and collaborative interfaith relations.

I do not think that considering one's religion the center of the universe, which is what both exclusivist and inclusivist hypotheses entail, is tenable in the era of interfaith relations. That is why it seems to me a bit premature to talk about the demise of the pluralist hypothesis precisely in this era of increasing religious diversity and interaction among the religions due to globalization. In what follows, I would like instead to propose a new formulation of the pluralist hypothesis that does not ignore postmodern insights, and that is not necessarily committed to the epistemological and ontological assumptions of John Hick's pluralism.

The pluralist hypothesis was originally formulated by Hick,[2] but it would be a profound mistake to equate his specific form of pluralism with the pluralist hypothesis. Just as Copernicus rejected that the Earth was at the center of the universe and that all the other planets turned around it, the pluralist hypothesis rejects that one's religion is at the center of the religious universe and that all the other religions are oriented towards or revolve around one's religion. Instead, the pluralist hypothesis assumes that religions are intrinsically interrelated, thus in need of constructive dialogue with each other, because they all revolve around a "common" sun, which is an open-ended symbol, not a fixed concept to be univocally understood across traditions.

When Light pronounces dead the pluralist hypothesis and advocates inclusivist positions that make use of the category of postmodernity, she is certainly not proposing a return to Ptolemaic, geocentric, mono-religiocentric forms of inclusivism. A mono-religiocentric inclusivist hypothesis according to which only one religion is the center of all the other religions would be premodern and, therefore, Light and I agree, totally inadequate for the postmodern era of interfaith relations in which we live.

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[1] Aimee Upjohn Light, "Post-Pluralism Through the Lens of Post-Modernity," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 1 (April 2009): 68.

[2] For a short and accessible introduction to the pluralist hypothesis, see John Hick, "Is Christianity the Only True Religion or One among Others" (a talk given to a theological society in Norwich, England), 2001. http://www.johnhick.org.uk/article2.pdf

Another alternative to the pluralist hypothesis would be a pluri-religiocentric hypothesis in which religions are compared to extremely distinct galaxies, each one with their own, unrelated, tradition-specific centers. But this hypothesis would also be inadequate for our times because it leads to either relativism or solipsistic particularism.[3] Only a pluralist hypothesis with a "common" sun shared by a multiplicity of different yet interrelated religious planets can avoid relativism and solipsistic particularism, thus providing a robust foundation for comparative theology and interfaith dialogue.

The sun of the pluralist hypothesis should not be thought of in essentialist terms as a common denominator or as a monolithic reality that is exactly the same across traditions. Rather, the pluralist sun is a symbol that allows for multiple tradition-specific interpretations. The pluralist hypothesis does not define the sun in absolute and universal terms, because the sun functions as a symbol, not as a fixed concept. The symbol of the sun stands for that which functions as the most important X within a particular religious tradition, where X may refer to the ultimate reality, goal, truth, value, etc., depending on the context and the tradition/s under discussion.[4]

When X refers to an Ultimate Reality, it should be noted that the pluralist hypothesis as such leaves open ontological questions about whether such Ultimate Reality is one and/or many, transcendent and/or immanent, personal and/or transpersonal. Similarly, the pluralist hypothesis as such is not necessarily committed to a particular epistemology. For instance, the pluralist does not need to assume that X is an unknowable "thing in itself" beyond the phenomena known by religions. Epistemological and ontological questions about the sun (X) must be answered by specific theologians within their respective traditions.

The pluralist hypothesis as such does not specify the nature of the sun (X) nor the exact amount of knowledge that religions and secular traditions may possess; the hypothesis simply states that there is a "common" sun whose light (salvific wisdom, good, truth, beauty, grace, transformative power, presence, revelation, etc.,) is shared to a lesser or greater extent by diverse religious planets.

By assuming a "common" yet not necessarily identical sun shared differently by different planets, the pluralist hypothesis cannot be accused of failing to respect differences or the particularities of specific traditions.[5] For the pluralist, there are irreducible differences among traditions and the particularities of each tradition truly matter precisely because they provide unique and irreplaceable insights into the "nature" of the sun and its rays of light. But differences among the traditions presuppose a fundamental similarity, at the very least that they all relate to each other inasmuch as they share a "common" source of light. This combination of relative similarity and relative difference among traditions, characteristic of the pluralist hypothesis, allows for cross-cultural comparisons and meaningful interfaith communication. Traditions are

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[3] For a sharp critique of solipsistic particularism, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (SCM Press: London), 146-196.

[4] For a justification of a non-essentialist and non-equivocal understanding of X and its application to comparative theology of religions, see Abraham Vélez de Cea, *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* (Routledge: London, 2013).

[5] For a response to this and other common objections against pluralism, see Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Religious Pluralism and the Need for an Interreligious Theology," in *Religious Pluralism and the Modern World: An Ongoing Engagement with John Hick* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19-33.

intrinsically interrelated because they all share a "common" sun, thus they are in need of dialogue with one another not only for practical reasons but also in order to refine and enhance what they perceive of the sun from their unique and irreplaceable perspectives.
The pluralist hypothesis affirms a plurality of different religious and secular planets that share a "common" sun. However, the pluralist hypothesis could also be formulated as affirming a plurality of different religious and secular galaxies with multiple centers, but adding that such multiplicity of centers are somewhat "concentric" or at least part of the "same" universe. That is, the pluralist hypothesis presupposes the interrelatedness of traditions, a "common" X underlying the irreducible differences that exist among them.

It is important to clarify that regardless of the particular formulation one may adopt, the pluralist hypothesis is primarily about rejecting religiocentrism and affirming the interrelatedness of religions. This conception of pluralism is substantially different from the prevalent conception advocated by Hick, Knitter, and Schmidt-Leukel, which emphasizes the equal validity of religions and the absence of superiority claims. I do not think that the pluralist hypothesis requires the absence of superiority claims or an affirmation that religions are equally valid or equally true or equally good. Pluralism is not about believing that all religious planets are equal, that all the planets are equally close to the sun, or that the light of the sun is equally present in all the planets.[6]

Light contends that inclusivism is the theology of religions most appropriate for our postmodern times. In her words: "Inclusivism then becomes our most consistent option, but only as a temporary measure…anything we say must be acknowledged as partial, and as serving a finite, fallen agenda."[7] I must admit that I fail to understand what putting forth an inclusivist position as a temporary measure actually means. If she means mono-religiocentric inclusivism, which claims that one's own religious planet is the absolute center of the universe, how is it possible to hold such a claim as a temporary measure? If she means pluri-religiocentric inclusivism, which claims that each religious galaxy has its own, radically different, non-concentric center, then why should we bother to hold our respective inclusivisms as a temporary measure? It is only because we live in the "same" galaxy with a "common" sun or in the "same" universe with a "common" center that it makes perfect sense to hold our convictions with more intellectual humility and with greater openness to what other religions have to say from their unique and irreplaceable perspectives.

Light mentions two objections against pluralism as if they applied to all forms of pluralism, and as if the objections were fatal—that is, as if pluralists had nothing else to say in response to such objections.[8] The first objection is that pluralism misrepresents religions because it posits another religious object beyond what religions take themselves to be worshipping or be in a relationship

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[6] It could be said, however, that traditions are "equal" in the sense that they all "equally" share a "common" sun, but such "equality" does not need to mean that they share the sun equally in a literal sense, that is, from the same perspective and to the same extent.
[7] Light, "Post-pluralism," 69-70.
[8] John Hick himself addressed a great variety of objections; see for instance Harold Hewitt Jr. (ed.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion. Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1991); John Hick, *Dialogues in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2001, reissued in 2010 with a preface by Perry Schmidt-Leukel); John Hick, *A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths* (Louisville: WJK Press 1995). I am indebted to Perry Schmidt-Leukel for this reference.

with.[9] As I understand pluralism, it would be a mistake to understand the sun of the pluralist hypothesis as another religious object beyond the religions. Rather, what pluralists emphasize is a neglected aspect of the sun, namely, its ineffable and incomprehensible aspect. It is precisely that ultimately mysterious or not-yet-fully-known aspect of the sun which encourages pluralists to learn from and be enriched by other traditions. It is that mysterious aspect that allows the reconciliation, without logical contradiction, of conflicting yet complementary perspectives of the sun. What pluralists posit is the aspect of the sun that transcends words and concepts about the sun, not another religious "object" beyond the actual "objects" of the religions.

The second objection that Light mentions is that pluralism claims to affirm the truth of multiple religions but affirms only itself as the correct metaphysical worldview.[10] Again, the pluralist hypothesis is called hypothesis for a reason, i.e., it is not to be misunderstood as the true metaphysical worldview which replaces the less perfect worldviews of religions. Even Hick states that pluralism is intended to be held within specific religions, i.e. by a Christian pluralist, a Jewish pluralist, a Buddhist pluralist, and so on.[11] Pluralists are not in the business of affirming pluralism independently of religions because that would turn it into a new religion. Holding the pluralist hypothesis within specific religions does not create a new religion but rather a new interpretation of one's own religion, an interpretation that takes seriously other religious perspectives and upholds one's own convictions with intellectual humility, i.e., without claiming that one's own faith is the center of any other faiths.

I fully agree with Light in that theologies of religions today need to take into account the critiques of post-structuralism and post-modernity, adopting "a self-critical attitude towards speech and knowledge" and "applying the attitude of suspicion to our supposedly universal, absolute, and exclusionary truth claims." But this is precisely the whole point of the pluralist hypothesis and its emphasis on the ultimately ineffable and incomprehensible aspect of the sun. If anything, pluralism and the pluralist hypothesis relativize absolute and universal claims about one's own religion.

Adopting the pluralist hypothesis need not be inconsistent with the orthodoxy of religions. For instance, a Christian pluralist may still believe that Jesus Christ is central and universally relevant, but not the center of all the other religions, unless someone would like to hold the unorthodox belief in the eternal existence of the historical Jesus. Likewise, a Buddhist pluralist may still consider the Buddha's teachings central and cosmically significant, but not the center of all the other manifestations of the Dharma, unless someone would like to hold (as necessary parts of the Dharma) unscientific Buddhist beliefs about the universe, i.e., that there can be only one Buddha per cosmic period, that non-Buddhist enlightened beings cannot exist in the same

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[9] Light, "Post-pluralism," 68. "Pluralism claimed to represent all the religions by suggesting the existence of a religious object behind "God," Yahweh," "Allah," "Brahman," and so forth, but pluralism is now seen to misrepresent the religions by positing a religious object which is other than what Jews, Christian, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists take themselves to be worshipping or in relationship with."

[10] Light, "Post-pluralism," 68. "Pluralism claimed to affirm the truth of multiple religions, but instead affirms only itself as the correct metaphysical worldview—the one beyond Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism."

[11] John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Yale University Press; 2nd Revised edition, 2005), 2, 378. I am indebted to Perry Schmidt-Leukel for this reference.

universe in which Buddhas and Buddhist traditions exist, that Mount Sumeru is the center of the universe, and so on.

The pluralist hypothesis is intended to be held from the perspective of different religions, never in competition with them. For instance, a pluralist Catholic may understand the Sun as referring to God. The pluralist Catholic will not contend that the Christian planet, i.e., historical Christianity, is the center of all the religions. Rather, the Christian pluralist would contend that the rays of light that derive from God fall directly on multiple planets in different ways, and without being necessarily dependent on the light that falls on the Christian planet. By saying this, the Christian pluralist does not need to compromise the necessity of Christ, or to separate the eternal Word from the incarnated Word, or to posit several independently valid economies of salvation. Similarly, a pluralist Buddhist may interpret the Sun of the pluralist hypothesis as the Dharma. The pluralist Buddhist will not say that the Buddhist planet is the center of all possible manifestations of the Dharma. Instead, a pluralist Buddhist would state that the Dharma is not the monopoly of Buddhist traditions and that the light of the Dharma may in principle shine outside and independently of historical Buddhism. By saying this, the pluralist Buddhist would simply be restating the traditional Buddhist self-understanding according to which the Buddha rediscovered rather than invented the eternal Dharma.

Aimee Light affirms that "invariably, authors following in pluralism's wake have retreated into forms of inclusivism." As instances of post-pluralist inclusivists, she discusses the theologies of Jacques Dupuis and Mark Heim. However, I find this assessment of contemporary Christian theology of religions problematic in two ways.[12] First, I do not think it is fair to describe Dupuis' and Heim's theologies of religions as a retreat into inclusivism. Rather, Heim and Dupuis seem to be best understood as attempting to transcend inclusivism, but without going as far as pluralism. That is, Dupuis and Heim represent a new intermediate position between inclusivism and pluralism. Perhaps the terms "pluralistic-inclusivism" or "inclusive pluralism" can be useful to capture this new in-between position of a growing number of theologians including Dupuis and Heim. In the new typology that I have developed to facilitate interfaith dialogue and comparative theology of religions, I characterize pluralistic-inclusivism in terms of openness not only to similar aspects of X in other traditions (open inclusivism), but also to new/different aspects of X. Unlike pluralists, pluralistic-inclusivists constrain their genuine openness to new/different aspects of X with non-negotiable dogmatic claims.[13]

Second, I do not see enough evidence to affirm that authors following in pluralism's wake have retreated into inclusivism. Rather, what I perceive is a growing number of pluralistic-inclusivists or inclusive-pluralists who are trying to open up the still prevalent exclusivism and inclusivism of their respective traditions. I attribute this greater openness toward the possible contribution of other religions not only to globalization and more awareness of religious diversity, but also to the challenging influence of pluralist theologians.

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[12] For a still useful account of contemporary Christian theologies of religions see *Christian Approaches to other Faiths*, eds. Paul Hedges and Alan Race (London: SCM Press, 2008).

[13] I truly appreciate the positive reviews of my book *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* by Amos Yong, Peter Phan, and Rita Gross, as well as the discussion of my work by Paul Hedges. However, I humbly believe that understanding theologies of religions in terms of different degrees of openness, and distinguishing between views and attitudes toward other religions, still have much to offer to contemporary discussions.

We do not live in a post-pluralist era, not only because the pluralist hypothesis continues to make more sense than exclusivist and inclusivist hypotheses, but also because there are still many respectable forms of pluralism that are far from being dead or passé. It is true that John Hick died in 2012, but there are still many convergent pluralists like Paul Knitter, Alan Race, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel who are flourishing; they continue to publish influential books, they are invited to deliver prestigious lectures all over the world, and they continue to participate in first rank international conferences. Likewise, Raimon Panikkar died in 2010, but his complete works are being published in several languages, and there is a growing interest in his comparative theology as well as in his greatly unappreciated understanding of pluralism, which is primarily an attitude towards reason and dialogue. The same could be said about the "deep pluralism" of David Ray Griffin and John B. Cobb Jr.; the "Pluralism Project" and Diane Eck's conception of pluralism as a process to be constructed by each generation; Roger Haight's postmodern pluralism; Paul Hedges' radical openness, etc. These Christian expressions of pluralism as well as other forms of pluralism outside Christianity must be kept alive in the era of interfaith relations, so that interreligious dialogue and comparative theology can continue to flourish.

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