

# The Vatican levies further penalties on Jesuit Roger Haight

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Posted by [David Gibson](#)

Jesuit theologian Roger Haight, whose writings on Christology, especially in his 1999 book "Jesus: Symbol of God," led the Vatican to bar him from teaching in Catholic institutions, has received a further punishment: The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) has barred Haight from writing on theology (he may continue a work in progress on Ignatian spirituality) and he is forbidden to teach anywhere, even non-Catholic institutions. That means that at the end of the coming semester Haight, who resides at America House in New York, will stop teaching at Union Theological Seminary in Upper Manhattan.

The CDF began investigating Haight, 72, in 2000, which led the Vatican's education office to bar him from teaching at Jesuit-run Weston in Cambridge, MA. Haight began teaching at Union, a leading Protestant seminary, as an adjunct professor of theology in September 2004. A final negative verdict on Haight's work from the CDF, [reported by NCR's John Allen in February 2005](#), meant the teaching ban at Catholic schools would not be lifted and Haight remained at Union.

The latest sanction takes the discipline against Haight to a new level. The news seems to have emerged first in a German Catholic news service report a few weeks ago; I saw it in [a French agency report here](#), and the details were later confirmed for me by other church sources. Haight himself would not comment. One can only imagine what this action means to Father Haight personally, and I think even critics of the Jesuits or Haight's work would have to give him (as well as other Jesuits, like Tom Reese) credit for the kind of obedience and graciousness that is too often overlooked in criticisms of the order.

Haight's work has been critiqued and criticized, including in these pages by fellow theologians like John Cavadini and Luke Timothy Johnson. In a piece two years ago, [Paul Lakeland defended Haight's work](#). Clearly there is a legitimate range of opinion on Haight's work, including tough questions from those who would be sympathetic to him and his larger project.

But the latest Vatican action does not address the substance of Haight's work or provide any explanation as to what spurred the CDF to take such a drastic action now. "It appears to be purely punitive," one Jesuit source told me. The notification was apparently issued last spring, but Haight only found out about it last summer. As usual, he has never heard directly from Rome, only through his superiors. He was not told why this action was taken, and his responses to the list of CDF criticisms during the earlier investigation have never been answered by Rome.

Some will see this as the institutional church being the institutional church, either doing what it needs to do to defend orthodoxy (or what it considers orthodoxy), or yes, doing it ham-handedly but, as Rome has always done. So don't exaggerate, the reasoning goes: "Nothing to see here, just move along." I also think there is a great—and unfortunate, in my mind—degree of habituation to this kind of Vatican action, which has become the norm over the past 30 years under John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict. There is in some corners a kind of "Stockholm syndrome" as well, as those who work within the church fold can come to identify with their overseers. Above all, I think this extends the "big chill" not only on Catholic theology but on all kinds of discussion and debate within the church. Conservatives often see themselves as a victimized minority, but in ways large and small, I see church officials and institutions shying away from hiring or inviting to speak anyone who might run afoul of Vatican sensibilities. Religious orders and the Catholic theological community itself seem to be finding ways to accommodate this dynamic, understandably, I guess.

But I think a few points regarding the latest penalty against Roger Haight are important to make:

**One** is the continuing lack of any due process or the merest nod at some kind of transparency in CDF procedures. "Draconian" is an overheated word. Would "extraordinary rendition" be a more apt and contemporary analogy? No hearings, no explanations, just harsh penalties communicated by indirect means. Wasn't this was supposed to change?

**Two**, the ban on teaching even at a non-Catholic school seems particularly broad. Is that unusual? I know the Vatican often punishes Jesuits because they can—because the Jesuits have a particular relationship to the pope (which has been harshly reiterated in recent decades) that enables the pontiff to enforce orders that might be ignored elsewhere. But Charles Curran (a diocesan priest) and others teach at places like SMU without sanction. Moreover, as Union is a Protestant institution (though with a number of Catholic students), who is the Vatican protecting from Haight?

**Three**, while many will just dismiss this as "business as usual," actions like these reinforce—and it is not an unfair impression—the view that

the Catholic Church is unjust, that it is not a place where one can step out of line (or even know where the line is) without receiving a blind-side smack that comes off as mean-spirited. Does every injustice, like that against Galileo, have to wait five centuries to be rectified? That won't wash with today's Christians. Moreover, this kind of action seems to undercut Benedict's focus on love and charity and the beauty of the Catholic faith. Catholics and non-Catholics will measure Benedict's words against his actions, and many will see a disparity that can only hurt his credibility (and that of the wider church) in trying to point out the failings of the world beyond the Vatican precincts.

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