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Francis X. Clooney

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A Response to Michelle Voss Roberts' Dualities

Francis X. Clooney, S.J.
Center for the Study of World Religions
Harvard University

DUALITIES is a serious contribution to Hindu-Christian studies, bringing fresh and challenging materials before us. It wonderfully brings together reflection on feminist concerns, attention to the metaphors by which we identify and organize natural and social realities, and critical attention to how linguistic and ontological categories, such as dualities and dualism, fluidity and fluidities, have effects of ethical and spiritual import.

As we read along with Voss Roberts, we enter the worlds of Mechtild and Lalleswari, the two medieval women poets and theologians whose works fill this volume with beautiful and difficult poetry and insight. Both are distant to us in time and culture and religious sentiment; Lalleswari in particular is difficult to pin down, and even the correct boundaries of her "canon" of literature are difficult to mark off. Voss Roberts negotiates these initial difficulties well and gives us a real sense of how both authors articulate an effective understanding of spiritual reality. In addition, Voss Roberts invites us now to read with a heightened sense of responsibility, not neglecting the world in which we live, not tiring in goals of inclusion, respect for the other, and protection of the environment. Surely there are guesses and leaps in interpretation with either writers' enigmatic verses, but it is fair that

such judgments be welcomed if, as here, the interpretive process is open for all to see. As a result the book opens a meditative space, in which we are enabled to read these two medieval authors with sensitivity to the whole of their writings but yet with due attention to each individual verse that is sensitively presented.

The theoretical framework of the book is very interesting. I appreciate how Voss Roberts offers fresh insight into the good as well as the bad effects of hierarchy, showing how hierarchies can subvert unjust structures. (p. 139) A key virtue of her work is that Voss Roberts gets us to think critically and with nuance about twos, dualities, dualistic thinking, and even fluidity itself. That both dualism and radical nondualism can be world-denying — or not — is in itself a theological insight worth emphasis. The moral conditions are important. Yet we can also ask how a study of this sort is dealing with the evils mentioned (on p. 2). Bias and exclusion of various kinds are mostly moral, about being good (or not) to other people. Are such virtues and vices really grounded in ontology? How do matters of the will — how we treat others, how we love or hate — intersect with issues of epistemology and ontology? How do ideas and virtues relate, for Lalleswari and Mechtild, if the issue can even be

Francis X. Clooney, S.J. joined the Harvard Divinity School in 2005 as Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology and has recently assumed directorship of the Center for the Study of World Religions. He earned his doctorate in South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. His primary areas of scholarship are theological commentarial writings in the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions of Hindu India, and the developing field of comparative theology, a discipline distinguished by attentiveness to the dynamics of theological learning deepened through the study of traditions other than one's own. Professor Clooney is the author of numerous articles and books, including most recently *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaiṣṇava Hindus* (Peeters Publishing, 2008), and *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). He recently edited *The New Comparative Theology: Voices from the Next Generation* (Continuum, 2010). He is a Roman Catholic priest and a member of the Society of Jesus; in July 2010 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy.

conceptualized that way? Would a person with a more fluid and body-sensitive view probably be a more virtuous person? And so it would be interesting to hear more on how the writings of Mechtild and Lalleswari shed light on what responsibility means, in light of or notwithstanding their different epistemologies and ontologies.

The textual concreteness and particularity of the book combined with its important and large theoretical frame prompts me to want to hear a bit more regarding how this project came about. Given the lively concerns engaged in the book — feminism, post-colonialism, dualism and dualities, comparison of religions, theologically — it might be the case that Voss Roberts identified those concerns and then looked around for authors who would help her to test the possibilities and concretely advance our thinking on the big issues. But one can also imagine how studying Lalleswari and Mechtild (encountering one first, then the other) might have led Voss Roberts first to commit herself to that study and then, wanting to draw it into the modern context, to seek out a context comprised of contemporary issues in light of which to read them individually and together. So were Lalleswari and Mechtild called into service to help think through several of today's urgent issues, or did they come first, and later guide Voss Roberts in identifying the contemporary issues meriting attention here? Either way — theme first, texts first — could be perfectly fine, but it would help to know about how the authors have been allowed to play an active role in the project that became this book. This also matters regarding comparative theology and Hindu-Christian studies. It is often the case that even with the best intentions, a problematic is brought forward from the realm of Christian theology, and then a Hindu thinker enlisted to contribute to an advance in our thinking, yet without being allowed to change the dynamics or generate new questions. But sometimes, the Hindu thinker is the one who creates the dynamic of the project in the first place.

Another way to think about the origins and depths of this project is to turn to the issue of comparison itself. Early on in the book Voss Roberts draws attention to Jonathan Smith's

model of comparison — description, comparison, re-description, rectification of the categories (p. 3). But all of this marks primarily the objective side of the process, while the person of the comparativist and her intentions might remain unnoticed by that model. Since Voss Roberts' book does go work with a richer model of comparative work, we have occasion to think more closely about the place of the subject and the role of the author's commitments in the comparative project. Where does Voss Roberts position herself on the terrain of her book? To what extent does she align herself — at the start, at the end — with either of the traditions of which she writes?

It is interesting, possibly a virtue of the book, that it is not clear whether *Dualities* is a work of Christian theology. It would be easiest to presume that Voss Roberts begins with some affiliation to Mechtild's world and from a Christian perspective reaches out to Lalleswari's world, thereafter relating it back to her Christian context. But it is hard to find any explicit admission of this in the book. Since Voss Roberts is very fair-minded, even neutral in her writing, it is hard to decide the extent to which *Dualities* is to be marked as a *Christian* contribution to Hindu-Christian studies, or rather as a contribution that cannot be traced narrowly to a single tradition.

This question comes to a head at the very end of the book. On p. 159, Voss Roberts is moved to find abounding in the Christian tradition an abundance of the images of fluidity. Once we have immersed ourselves in the rhythms of Mechtild's and Lalleswari's texts, we notice unfamiliar, hitherto neglected images even in a tradition that is more familiar to us. This is a wonderful point that reminds us of the deep fruitfulness of comparative study. In addition, though (pp. 160-161), Voss Roberts meditates again on the images of fluidity that permeate Hindu tradition, particularly the Ganga flowing through Siva's hair. The last page very beautifully places Voss Roberts herself as it were at Rishikesh, on the Ganga, flowing along with Lalleswari. She writes, near the very end:

What is the relation of the divine to itself?
Divinity mixes with divinity. What is the

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status of the world to the eternal? It flows from it and returns there again. How does the individual soul experience this return? It mingles while remaining whole — but not before it flows out to others, whose bodies also flow, in all their differences. Relation oscillates, defying dualism. Three-in-one. Two. None. And two again, in relation. (p. 161)

This paragraph is a lovely way to end the book, but it is hard to tell where it leaves her, in this project and as a theologian possibly beholden to a tradition or traditions. Perhaps this lack of a definitive ending is deliberate, even necessary at such a book's end. Perhaps the prolonged study of Lalleswari and Mechtild necessarily makes one fluid in relation to tradition. But the immediate price then to be paid would be still less clarity regarding the Hindu and Christian dimensions of this Hindu-Christian project, if it is best conceived as embodying a cultivated marginality that itself is a kind of poetry rather than a systematic work from and for a tradition.

It is easiest to read the cited paragraph from p. 161 as indicating that Voss Roberts dwells in the confluence of the two religions. She is, or has become, a sister to both Mechtild and Lalleswari, and ever equally vulnerable to both their texts. If Voss Roberts finds herself in such a creative inter-space, between traditions, this is a very interesting site for reflection and for further writing. *Dualities* opens a new space for Christian reflection and for Hindu reflection

even as distinct disciplines, since Lalleswari's rich and elusive body of poetry cannot readily be grasped and fixed within settled, predictable Christian categories; yet Lalleswari too is not immune to Mechtild's vision of the world, and how we read her too changes in the course of this wonderful project. Especially if Voss Roberts is indeed writing as a theologian grounded primarily in the Christian tradition, the reader hopes she will undertake a follow-up project, in which to tease out the further implications of this study for Christian theology. The audience is ready; we are certainly willing to hear more from a theologian who has so carefully and deeply meditated on Lalleswari and Mechtild.

But all the more so, Voss Roberts was right in insisting at the book's start that this experiment has normative implications: "The chapters that follows engage in this sort of back-and-forth reading, but they also risk a normative gesture... if comparison offers viable alternatives to the hierarchical dualisms that deny justice and care, theologians should consider incorporating these insights into their systematic theologies." (4) It is a better book because it promises to be rich in insights and truths that make continuing demands on us. But which theologians, systematizing insights within which tradition? It would be good to hear more about those demands, assuming they go beyond encouraging a more inclusive, more just vision of human society and religious learning.