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Book Review: "Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders"

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BOOK REVIEWS

Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders. Francis X. Clooney, Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, 176 + xii pages.

WINNER of the "Best Book in Hindu-Christian Studies" for 1994-96 and former president of the Society, the Catholic comparative theologian Francis X. Clooney is well-known to most readers of this journal. Last year's issue included reviews of not one but two of what now includes six major books in the field, not including several more specialized monographs, edited collections and innumerable articles. Now, as we near the twentieth anniversary of his ground-breaking *Theology After Vedanta* (SUNY, 1993)—characterized as an "experiment" in comparative theology—Clooney offers what he describes as "a book about comparative theology, the kind I have for years chosen not to write" (162, italics added).

The book sets out to unfold different aspects of a discipline that Clooney defines as marking "... acts of faith seeking understanding, which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition" (10). A first section establishes a context and some parameters for comparative theology (ch. 1), explores some its historical precedents (ch. 2) and surveys both established and upcoming scholars in the field (ch. 3). From this foundation, a second section attempts to offer substantive examples of the discipline in practice, from a very broad account of comparative theology as comparative reading (ch. 4) to a very specific attempt to encounter the Hindu goddess Devi (ch. 6), bridged by a broader survey of Hindu traditions and Clooney's own engagement with them (ch. 5). In his final section, entitled "The Fruits of Comparison," Clooney offers a Hindu and Ignatian theological defence of God's willingness to meet us—as searchers, as

devotees, as scholars—in multiple religious traditions (ch. 8), framed by an account of specific insights he has gained in his own studies (ch. 7) and an extended reflection on the complexity and marginality of the comparative theologian transformed by study of a tradition other than her own (ch. 9).

Clooney insists, at several points in this volume, that the best comparative theology aims in the first place for the transformation of the comparativist and is therefore "autobiographically grounded" (16). Hence, it may come as no surprise that Clooney's own life and career looms large across this introduction. He explicitly draws almost all of his examples from his own earlier work, and indeed two of the most insightful chapters were previously published elsewhere (chs. 6 & 8). It is quite different in this respect from other introductions which cover some of the same ground, such as Paul Knitter's *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Orbis, 2002) or Josephine Lombardi's *What are They Saying About the Universal Salvific Will of God?* (Paulist, 2008). Those who have followed Clooney's career are unlikely to find this tiresome; instead, the volume fills in some lacunae in this corpus and offers fresh insight into its author, ranging from the intriguing to the profound. Who knew, for example, that Clooney originally formulated the term "comparative theology" to bridge political divisions in the Boston College theology department in the 1980s, made it central to his innovative approach to theology in the 1990s and, late in the game, was surprised to discover that it actually had a "300+ year history" (19)? And, though many of the distinctions Clooney draws between comparative theology and other, related disciplines in chapter 1 will be familiar from other works, his final reflections on the existential consequences of such divisions for the theologian—no longer completely at home

either in the mainstream of her own tradition or in an academy that may happily tolerate “other biases” but exclude a robust faith (159)—paints a more pointed, candid and troubling portrait than we have seen before.

Precisely because Clooney so strongly emphasizes the autobiographical, his introduction to comparative theology is also necessarily an introduction to Hindu-Christian Studies. His reproduction of a 10-point sketch of “Hinduism” (71-73), developed as a Christian South Asianist for non-South Asianist students of theology, will be a gem for many teaching in the field. His defense of reading, commentary and textual study also stakes a clear claim in a friendly rivalry that has unfolded in this journal, particularly with such interlocutors as the late Selva J. Raj. “Texts are only part of a religion,” Clooney writes, “but in my view they remain the single best resource, among many good resources, for knowing religious traditions deeply and subtly. They are legitimately the main object of comparative theological study . . .” (67). The test of such a claim, for many readers, will be chapter 7, where Clooney tries to articulate very clearly what he believes he has gained from his Hindu-Christian inquiry: a more robust and complex theism; a deeper sensitivity to the “image of God” in the human person and

the ascription (or not) of gender to the deity; the possibility of praying to Narayana as a Christian; and the aesthetic power of careful reading to intensify such devotion. Some critics may sense that Clooney, having started with reading as a theological practice, may ultimately learn more about such reading itself than about God. Yet, his deeper point seems to be that we should not expect neat divisions between what we learn and the process by which we learn it – and this realization may in turn provide “clearer insight into what God is like” (151).

But does it succeed as an *introduction*? Having used it already in the classroom, I would venture the following. For a concise, accessible entrée to the discipline, I prefer Clooney’s essay in the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (OUP, 2007). For a strong, coherent model of comparative theology in practice, *Theology After Vedanta* is still the better book. But for a vivid portrait of comparative theology as an existential, lifelong and largely instinctive project which proceeds through passionate faith, sustained study and “intuitive leaps” (96), this is the work we have been waiting for.

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Christianity for Hindus. Arvind Sharma. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 2009, 110 pp.

ARVIND Sharma’s book fills an important gap between the academic study of Christianity and the need for an accessible presentation of Christianity that addresses the specific concerns of modern Hindus. Sharma condenses the essentials of Christianity into a concise presentation, often relating, comparing, or contrasting those essentials to relevant examples in Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Islam.

Sharma begins his presentation with a chapter on why Hindus should study Christianity. He details very practical reasons, such as Christianity’s impact on India and around the world. He also suggests that there are important moral and spiritual reasons for

learning about Christianity and points to some interesting connections between Hinduism and Christianity.

Chapter Two explains the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ. Sharma then outlines major Christian doctrines, including incarnation, atonement, and trinity. He presents the major branches of Christianity, with attention to their historical and theological differences. Sharma also explains Christian scriptures and shows how they are related to the Jewish Bible. Chapter Six is particularly helpful, as it details the long history of Christianity in India. Church historians and Christian theologians may quibble with Sharma’s