



November 2014

## On the Scholar's Contribution to the Contemplative Work of Hindu-Christian Studies

Francis X. Clooney  
*Harvard Divinity School*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Clooney, Francis X. (2014) "On the Scholar's Contribution to the Contemplative Work of Hindu-Christian Studies," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 27, Article 3.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1575>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact [cbauman@butler.edu](mailto:cbauman@butler.edu). For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

# On the Scholar's Contribution to the Contemplative Work of Hindu-Christian Studies

Francis X. Clooney, S.J.  
Harvard Divinity School

THE following contribution to the *Journal* is admittedly out of the ordinary. While inscribing my actual contribution to the panel, "Canons and Contemplations: The Intersections of Scripture, Contemplation, and Community," within this slightly larger document, it also reports on my contribution to email conversations among the panelists beforehand, and reproduces extracts from the prologue and epilogue of my new book. It is a multilevel document, aiming at a multilevel reflection on how we write from either side and across the

Hindu-Christian religious and scholarly borders. There are two introductions: "the preliminary comment" written for the readers of the *Journal*, and the "introductory comment" from my panel presentation itself. I am grateful to Brad Malkovsky, Editor, for his inclusion of this unusual article with its several levels of writing and reflection.

## Preliminary Comment

As my opening and closing comments from the panel itself will indicate, the goal of my

---

Francis X. Clooney, S.J., is Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard Divinity School and, since 2010, director of the [Center for the Study of World Religions](#). After earning his doctorate in South Asian languages and civilizations (University of Chicago, 1984), he taught at Boston College for 21 years, until coming to Harvard. 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. He has also written on the Jesuit missionary tradition, particularly in India, and the dynamics of dialogue in the contemporary world. Clooney is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* (Georgetown University Press, 2008), *The Truth, the Way, the Life: Christian Commentary on the Three Holy Mantras of the Srivaisnava Hindus* (Peeters Publishing, 2008), and *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). He edited *The New Comparative Theology: Voices from the Next Generation* (Continuum, 2010) and co-edited *European Perspectives on the New Comparative Theology* (MDPI, 2014). His most recent monograph, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford University Press, 2013), is an exercise in dramatic theology, exploring the absence of God in accord with the biblical *Song of Songs* and the Hindu *Holy Word of Mouth (Tiruvaymoli)*. His new book project delves into the Mimamsa tradition of Hindu ritual theology, as a study of the fourteenth century *Jaiminiya Nyaya Mala* of Madhavacarya.

4 Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

contribution to the panel was to place front and center the fact of our writing as scholars, and to subject that writing itself to scrutiny by holding it up to view in the clear, cold air of an academic meeting. It is one thing to write about scripture, contemplation, and community—the themes of the panel—with respect to the theologies and practices of one or more traditions; it is another to write in a way that itself contributes to the meditative, contemplative heritages of the pertinent traditions: to achieve a writing that, while respecting academic protocols, is itself contemplative, border-crossing, and helpful to the formation of a community that forms around the reading of scripture across the Hindu-Christian borderland. The bulk of what follows is my reading from my book, just published at the time of the panel in Baltimore. I did this not to hold it up as the very paradigm for this constructive, contemplative task, but in the hope that readers will assess my writing by the standards and in accord with the questions instigated by the panel papers, such as now appear here in the Journal. All our writings that do cross or seem to cross the interreligious border need to be subjected to this scrutiny, by author and readers alike. If I have achieved something of what I intended in the book and the panel presentation, fine; if not, the reader will want to ask whether a different intention in writing the book, a more compelling style of writing, and a different mode of presentation at the panel, might have contributed more efficaciously to the longer term goals of Hindu-Christian scholarship of the sort to which this Journal is dedicated.

It may, of course, be thought somewhat unsatisfactory to put before readers such brief excerpts, with the hope that they are able to

glimpse the whole of the book signaled by them. The book's Prologue is meant merely to introduce *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*,<sup>1</sup> and its Epilogue simply to collect our thoughts at the end of the volume. The proof of the project lies in the intervening explorations and meditations, such as draw on the Biblical Song of Songs, a text that most readers will know already, and the Srivaisnava *Hindu Holy Word of Mouth*, the most important of the works of the mystic poets of 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century South India known as the alvars. Each body of poetry is large, deep, and full of many possible meanings; as the title of the book implies, I focus in it on the theme of absence, a beloved who is seen and felt all the more intensely in times of absence. And yet, of necessity, that very large middle section of the book can be only minimally represented in what follows.

The book's title is a quote from Psalm 18, itself imbedded in a passage by John of Ford, a Cistercian monk who wrote sermons on the last four chapters of the Song: "I feel the Lord visits me all the more often as He realizes I need visitations of this kind more frequently. If between these visitations, anyone asks me, still numb from the feelings of devotion experienced a few days past, and complaining of my Lord's delay, where He has gone or turned aside, the only ready answer I can find is: 'He has made darkness His hiding place.' (Psalm 18.11) A cloud, not of light but of darkness, has taken Him from my eyes, and now that my love has grown so cold again, I feel I have good reason to fear that perhaps, after all, He has turned away from His servant in anger..." This is an apophatism of a vivid, dramatic source: the beloved has been intensely present and who will come again, but for now chooses to withdraw, to hide from the

lover. Words work, except when this Lord chooses to vacate them, and then they can speak only in their penury.

In the book, as is hinted at in the Prologue excerpts reproduced below, I read both bodies of poetry with some of the most important pre-modern commentators of each tradition, masters dedicated to contemplative study — the intellectually acute but ultimately spiritual practice sometimes, in the West, termed *lectio divina*. Desiring to nurture and keep alive that practice today, I frame my study of the texts by guidance from two very different figures, the Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the contemporary American poet, Jorie Graham. It is so very easy to wither and desiccate poetry, including mystical poetry, by writing heavy prose on top of it, that I admitted my need to learn from them how to keep alive the poetic, and thus too the spiritual, in writing of the Song, of the Holy Word, and of the two of them together. Balthasar and Graham, however, do not appear in the passages excerpted below, but their wisdom does stand behind the writing as it has turned out. The passage read during the panel and included below are, in the book, intended to prime readers so that they know what to expect in the pages that follow. In the panel, they served to indicate, as a token, the project that is the book, and the great effort we make to write in a way that is true to the letter and spirit of each and both of the traditions we study.

### Opening Comment at the Panel

In preparation for this panel, the four of us (Brad Bannon, Holly Hillgardner, Graham Schweig, and myself) exchanged emails rather extensively. This helped us greatly in planning the very brief 90 minutes we had for our four

presentations. From our emails I gleaned (and edited) a basic question I had raised in the course of those exchanges: “Does the work we do, of which we are presenting instances tonight in these papers, create a contemplative space, grounded in scripture, such as still crosses religious boundaries?” I was also hoping that a larger goal would be achieved as well. “In other words, tonight we might simply be examining in a scholarly fashion the question of scripture and contemplation as an important topic in both the Hindu and the Christian traditions and across their borders. Or we might be also ambitioning to insure that the interplay of scripture and contemplation, Hindu and Christian together, as studied by people like us, advances the work that draws people to the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies in the first place.” I added more personally, “I confess that my writing aims to do this much of the time; but I am not sure whether the books I complete create the space for others to advance the contemplative synthesis more easily than they would if they had just the primary texts I use in a book. Perhaps a book such as my new book is primarily for my own satisfaction and consolation, while others might do well just to read the primary texts I use.”

To deal with these issues in the context of this panel, I decided that it was best to read some passages from the preface of the new book, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, of which I received the first copy just yesterday, November 21, 2013. I want to read from the book not because I didn't prepare in advance, but to highlight the question of the status of our own writing, how it is to be weighed and valued in the context of reflection on contemplative reading with each tradition and

6 Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

across the boundaries between them. So the following pages are comprised largely of several long excerpts from the Prologue and Epilogue to the book: contributions to the theme, with emphasis on the contribution of the written, published word and its limits.<sup>2</sup>

### A Reading from the Prologue

Love and the absence of the beloved matter most, but in the first instance *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is a reading of the Biblical Song of Songs (*Shir ha-Shirim*) and the Hindu Holy Word of Mouth (*Tiruvaymoli*).

All that follows in this book is entirely in the debt of this Biblical and Hindu poetry, and proceeds as reflection more particularly on the experience of a woman whose beloved has not returned and seems nowhere to be found. It is this experience of love and absence that in more than one culture has been taken to manifest what loving God is all about. It is a drama of love and loss that has been written about abundantly, over and again.

In this reading, therefore, I attend especially to the absence of the beloved as this has been imagined, suffered, and turned back into presence in several strands of Hindu and Christian tradition. I do so in order to write about the real God who can be absent, a real beloved whose real absence makes life impossible. But it is also true that this absence is a particularly powerful site for encounter with God...

To encounter (or not) the God who at times hides from us may be first of all recognized as an intimate event, personal to the seeker, even private. But the absence of God is also a matter of public concern and interest, in an age when a multitude of religious possibilities abound and when any particular religious love stands near

to religious and secular alternatives. As such, the particularity of God and the possibility that God is real enough to be absent are also matters of public import, if we are still to think and talk about God in an intelligent way.

Quite apart from arguments about the existence or importance of God, there is room here for the work of the imagination: for the individual and for society, God may be most real when it is uncomfortably noticed—felt—that the beloved has gone away, as if into hiding, no longer to be found in familiar places, no longer responsive to ways of speaking and acting that worked in the past. This is a more passionate love of God that cares about this beloved's coming and going.

In this sense, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* speaks to the matter of a deep love for a real beloved, noticed most vividly when suffered in absence. In the pages that follow I also argue—by way of a single extended example—that more particular and specific faith commitments enable rather than deter our learning from the images and words, events and surprises, of other religious loves, in religious traditions other than our own, and in the gaps no tradition can quite manage...

To love deeply and affirm deep truths in a world where many loves flourish in the particular, we need first of all to be grounded in the specificity and particularity of our own enduring love—for this author, in Jesus Christ. This is particularly so in an age when the centrality of this beloved, or any, is by no means evident. Confident rhetoric about God and God's presence will be to many of us unconvincing, particularly if a true love is supposed to exclude all others. Love has its own reasons, but at our moment in history it does not translate into a truth that rules out every

exception, every alternative.

It is better, then, to honor the fragility of this passionate and particular truth about Jesus—or Krishna, or the beloved known by still other names—while admitting that this claim “speaks for itself” only in particular places and times. No matter how universal the truth, what we say is still the tale of the comings and goings of a beloved whose presence cannot be conceptualized as simply universal. To speak to the truth and love central to our faith bears with it an acute awareness of the failures and gaps that make claims to faith more fragile, vulnerable—and only in that way more convincing. The more evident and difficult the failing of our words, the deeper their truth. This book is not an elegy about the end of theology, but rather a plea that we leave room for the silence that comes upon us when we stretch our words beyond their capacity, mindful that we are speaking of just one love even when others are nearby.

Ours is an era that both celebrates and tames religious diversity. It privatizes religion and shifts the deepest experiences to the realm of the inner life. It is difficult now for a Christian to speak and write openly of the intense, singular fact of Jesus, the concrete and universal Reality at the heart of the Christian faith, without also giving the impression that she does not really understand or have room for passions aflame in other traditions too.

A Hindu in a devotional tradition likewise faces a challenge nearly the same as that of the Christian: one love surrounded, impinged upon, by many loves, in a world that might well be satisfied with less of such loves. It is good then that committed members of faith traditions insist upon the concrete, universally significant particularities of their faith, provided we view

honestly and without amnesia the myriad intense and concrete religious possibilities so evident around us.

The challenge is to find a way to speak of and from the specificity of our faith—our faiths—even as our religious imagination wanders uncertainly across myriad religious possibilities. As we read carefully back and forth, sensitive to the literary possibilities and not just to the ideas, this practice accentuates the problem of particular, passionate engagements. We learn and remember multiple commitments, while yet learning our way beyond the dichotomy of too much and too little religious belonging. But this is difficult. Our way forward lies not in stepping back and theorizing the other, but in greater particularity and more refined, carefully considered instances...

Reading is a wonderful way to do this, so in these pages we will be reading of the absence of the beloved in the Song and the Holy Word.

That we read and how we read therefore become inseparable questions. In *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* I will be reading the Song guided by a single medieval Christian tradition of good reading, that of Bernard of Clairvaux and Gilbert of Hoyland and John of Ford, three monks who over many years produced a complete series of sermons on the Song, each beginning where the previous had left off. One could spend a very long time learning from these sermons, but I pay particular attention to the situation of the woman at those moments when her beloved is absent.

Along with the Song, I read also the songs of another woman in love, similarly bereft of her beloved in the Holy Word, and here too I am guided by its medieval interpreters, particularly the revered teachers Nanjiyar and

8 Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

Nampillai. Each tradition of reading opens up poetic and spiritual possibilities in an unanticipated yet deeply engaging way, and all the more so by the double reading itself, as the songs cohere in a still greater Text. Not that any of this will be easily achieved. The Song and the Holy Word are similarly intense in their love and love's particularity, and both care about the problem of divine absence, but in the distinctiveness of their poetry and the intensity of the love driving them, they are not easily susceptible to the work of comparison. Yet, as poetry, they also cannot resist the play of imagination—so in the end these utterly distinct works yield a shared reading.

In this shared reading, there is more at stake than either text provides on its own. To negotiate the possibilities and gaps arising in this sacred poetry with respect to this beloved who hides from us—we need to imagine ourselves falling, mostly by choice, into the somewhat obscure and unstable space lying between traditions.

For the beloved hides from us in each text, in both, and at the point where they meet but neither has the final word. If we find ourselves reading and writing of a love that is both intensely focused yet laced with ambiguity, we do well not to retreat to the ready answers of relativism or exclusivism. Instead, we find ways to suffer the adventures of our imagination, moving to theological judgments only when we have found the right words, words arising in the midst of today's mix of uncertainty and longing.

In pondering the God of absences, my writing is not an innocent bystander, since the double reading essential to comparative study most often accentuates a sense that the beloved is present somewhere but not here, ever

remembered even if never known in some definitive way. *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* thus pushes to a still greater extreme the necessary risk of interreligious reading that lies at the heart of the practice of comparative theology. It is dangerous work, love's burden, for we are now implicated in the dilemma arising when one finds that the texts studied—such as these songs of loss in love—deepen the reader's own loss in love, not by less concreteness and intensity, but by more than we can handle. There is a holy abundance in the beloved's departure. Yet when his absence is acutely, painfully noticed, the prospects of his return become all the more intense...

#### **On the Comparisons in the Book Itself**

In the major portion of *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, I read back and forth between the Song and the Holy Word, by loose pairings of texts at least partially parallel:

- a. *Song 1, Holy Word I.4* – initial doubts
- b. *Song 3.1, Holy Word V.4* – alone in the night
- c. *Song 3, Holy Word V.9* – searching and finding (or not)
- d. *Song 5.2, Holy Word VII.3* – on the holy desperation of not finding
- e. *Song 5, Holy Word IX.6* – moments of discovering, encounter, and loss
- f. *Song 8, Holy Word X.3* – final uncertainties

For each of these pairings, I first offer the texts alone, without comment; I diligently explore context and historical-critical features of relevance, and put all this information in the endnotes; I read each text with teachers of its tradition, so as to be taught how to read by medieval masters, Hindu and Christian; and I meditate, at the end of each section, on the

confluence of imagery and emotions from the two poetries now read together, as a sense of divine absence, now envisioned across two traditions, intensifies in a way neither tradition by itself could entirely manage.

### **A Reading from the Epilogue**

I closed my presentation at the panel by reading more briefly from the Epilogue, to give the members of the Society a sense of whether and how I carried through on my original intentions:

After all the wandering experiments of this study in love and the hiding of the beloved, it is important to note that the concerns raised in my Prologue have by no means gone away. The particularities and passions of our love still cannot be denied or explained. It is still wrong to put the dilemma behind us, and it is still the case that nothing is gained by backing away from the concrete, specific loves that give life to faith and religious living. If we understand this stubborn lover's commitment and are patient with the theopoetic and theodramatic possibilities opened up in patient waiting, then we can also still notice those other holy loves.

All of this happens in the particularity, the concrete instance that is also universal. It is by an intense and concrete love that Christian insights into the Song arise; one does not languish in love for ideals that cannot be really present or really absent. Nor should a Srivaishnava Hindu retreat to a vague language that dilutes this tradition's intense specificity.

We need not abandon our first love or deny what we have read, meditated upon, and not forgotten. This doubling of memories intensifies rather than relativizes the deep yet fragile commitments of our singular, first love. As long as sure confessions of faith and stout

theologies do not suffocate the imagination, we are in the difficult right place to be, still admitting that the beloved can go missing and hide from us and may bewilder us by showing up in unexpected places, even near to other lovers in other gardens.

For the Christian, the desired incompleteness of our words mirrors the hiddenness of the beloved who is Jesus. In remembering Jesus this way we now find not merely mythic similarities that might be explained (or explained away), but also echoes, whispers, scents of the love story of Krishna and the young woman who was dying of love for him when he did not return.

For the Srivaishnava, Krishna too will be absent, even if he too is never entirely gone and forgotten. Such remembrances come to mingle in our imaginations, if we resist the temptation to sort things out neatly, as if Krishna were the same as Jesus, or as if the two of them are merely examples of something more interesting, or as if they are entirely unrelated because a connection between them is forbidden, inconceivable.

We may of course sometimes still wish for a more secure garden which the other woman has never visited, wherein the name of no other beloved has been heard; but today there is none, and so we must leave room in love's affirmations for gaps and shadows and secrets. If we are lucky, we will be unable to immunize ourselves against the words—and images and dramatic scenes—by which other traditions have loved God...

### **Closing Comment**

After reading from the book, I returned to our email exchanges, to pinpoint again some of the thoughts that guided my participation in

10 Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

the panel, and I close with some further quotes from my emails. I admitted that “I still wonder whether a self-consciously responsive and dependent contemplative reading such as my book presents also promotes a communal sharing and conversation across the Hindu-Christian religious border.” On the one hand, “the opportunity is in principle clear, a modern writing that is a cross-reading, honoring both traditions but also letting them interact, affecting each classic by the reading of the other and the writing of both.” On the other, “does this work out in practice?” Do our books achieve the goals we have in mind, or are we always still on either side of the Hindu-Christian borderline?

Perhaps it is the case that what we write is for our own sake more than the benefit of our readers: “My book is, after all, singularly my work, the fruit of my reading. So too your writing, your books. It could be that such works clear a fertile ground for a community that reads together, welcoming and not worrying Christian or Hindu identities. Or not.” But then the real challenge is a practical one: “At stake then is the quest to find, or rather convene, a community of Hindu and Christian readers who first take seriously even our academic writing as a contemplative practice following upon our reading; second, to allow that reading and writing to affect how similarly well-disposed Hindu and Christian readers approach their own and other work in the field; and third, to create the conditions by which “there emerges all the more clearly a Hindu-Christian community of readers who commit themselves to the reading of both the primary texts we receive and the secondary texts we produce, for the sake of spiritual fruits not entirely indebted to either tradition alone, nor to

modern academic habits and procedures alone, but to both.” I could not resist closing with a still more difficult, elusive challenge: “Even if such reading might occur, and for a moment or longer draw together a community that is indebted to both the Hindu and Christian traditions, it remains also to be seen whether it will be truly *contemplative*.”

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> I have in some places made minor changes for the sake of clarity in this presentation, though some points will inevitably remain imprecise in lieu of a reading of the whole book.