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Book Review: Learning Interreligiously: In the Text, In the World

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This book is appropriate for those interested in twentieth century mystics and contemporary expressions of Advaita. All scholars of Abhishiktananda should have it. Riyeff relied, in part, on the work of Judson Trapnell, whose research on Abhishiktananda's poetry was cut short by his

untimely death in 2003. It is good that these poems are now readily available and that Trapnell's work has new life in Riyeff's.

Edward T. Ulrich
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***Learning Interreligiously: In the Text, In the World.* By Francis X. Clooney, SJ. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018, xiii + 370 pages.**

AROUND the time I read this book, I visited the Van Gogh Museum's exhibit, "Van Gogh and the Sunflowers." Visitors to the popular Amsterdam destination view the evolution of the famous painter's treatment of the large, bright blooms. Sketches and multiple versions convey a sense of the artist's process and technique. The sunflowers appear in different lighting; singly, in vases, and in fields; blooming and dropping their petals. The artist's letters to peers and family members disclose his thoughts about his craft and his feelings about the work.

Francis X. Clooney's *Learning Interreligiously* impresses the reader with similar glimpses into the inner workings of the artist behind his comparative theological masterpieces. This collection of posts from his blog at the "In All Things" website of the Jesuit journal *America* spans nearly a decade, from November 2007 to December 2016. During that time, in which Clooney published six monographs and edited volumes and wrote numerous articles, the blog posts reveal comparative theological sensibilities at work in daily life—while preparing weekly sermons, contemplating significant events, and commenting in a distinctive way upon religious and interreligious controversies as they arise.

The first half of the book consists of various series of blog posts classed as "interreligious readings." Some of these sets of reflections coincide with a liturgical season—reading about Krishna during Advent, for example, or reading the Yoga Sutras or the Bhagavad Gita during Lent. Other series contemplate Hindu readings of Christian texts and themes, such as Yogananda's interpretations of passion week and Swami Prabhavananda's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Still others consider Christian themes alongside their parallels in non-Hindu texts: the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon. At times these pieces serve as a kind of digest of larger comparative theological projects. Characteristically, though, Clooney presents them not as settled conclusions, but as discrete acts of reading in two traditions in order to learn from them and ask new kinds of questions.

The posts in the second half of the book are more occasional, taking contemporary events such as key anniversaries, papal statements, controversial publications, deaths of notable figures, and matters of interreligious significance as their point of departure. Like a thread running through this section, Clooney returns to the themes of how a reader can approach unfamiliar material, avoid falling into the stereotypes or polemics

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of others, and respect others without necessarily agreeing with them.

Who is the intended audience? A glance at the cover shows Clooney speaking to a group of approximately eight ochre-robed monks of the Swaminarayan community in Sarangpur, Gujarat. They sit, barefoot, in a circle of chairs in a room with pictures of deities and gurus on the wall. For readers aware that Clooney's monumental scholarly books both display and emphasize a high degree of preparation to do comparative theology well, the photo recalls the fairly elite nature of the discipline and of many forms of interreligious dialogue.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the book is primarily for professional scholars or ordered monks and priests. The posts are intentionally accessible. Longer than a typical popular blog (two to four pages), they are not as theoretical or extensive as blogs exclusively for a scholarly audience. The tone is thoughtful and inviting of non-experts and laity. One frequently glimpses Clooney the homiletician, as he draws the reader into the Christian texts he is contemplating for his Sunday sermon, and Clooney the pastor, as he recommends practices for prayer and spiritual formation.

Furthermore, in these short pieces, Clooney is not always in the position of the expert. He quickly admits when he is unequipped to comment on some aspect of current events. He acknowledges in his posts on the Qur'an and the Book of Mormon, "My goal ... has been to show that one can pick up a book of another religious tradition, read it carefully, and draw some meaning from that reading, and that this reading does not require a lifetime of study, such as I have devoted to Hinduism." Clooney teaches by demonstrating how to approach unfamiliar material through "careful amateur reading" with the assistance of good commentaries (193).

Finally, unlike the audience pictured at Clooney's presentation in Gujarat, Hindus are not the primary audience of this book. He appeals frequently to a "we" among the audience: he draws upon presuppositions and questions that Catholics are likely to share in relation to interreligious dialogue, and the posts in the first part of the book are structured around a shared liturgical year. Although he engages comments posted by some Hindu readers, and he occasionally turns over his platform to a Hindu guest blogger, the readers of America are mainly American Catholics—both ordered and lay.

The title, *Learning Interreligiously*, not only describes what the reader witnesses Clooney doing in this book, but it also hints at pedagogical uses for the text. Teachers might excerpt entries or series of entries as examples of the comparative process, or to introduce a comparative angle into a particular topic or text. For this purpose, the reader should rely on the table of contents, which lists the title of each short piece separately. The book lacks an index, which would be helpful for tracking some of the features that cut across sections, such as the author's musings on the interreligious statements of popes and US presidents over this significant decade.

In this genre, we see the artist in the thick of life, where things are not as settled as some might expect from theology. Clooney reflects on how theology often comes after prayer, and how it does not "easily translate into exactly right practice" in relation to religious neighbors (247). He muses on the possibility of "learning from" another religion, without converting to it or praying to another deity (254). Similarly, he points to the early days of the church, "when the mystery of Jesus was still stark and raw and the church had not yet found its language about its boundaries" (319); and to the "unruliness of language" that can

be a source of grace in dialogues about God (324). The stuff of life calls for patience and attention, study and reflection—in a word: learning.

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***Infinite Paths to Infinite Reality: Sri Ramakrishna & Cross-Cultural Philosophy of Religion.* By Ayon Maharaj. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xii + 350 pages.**

IN this compelling text, Ayon Maharaj critically explores the implications of the life and teachings of Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) on contemporary theories of divine infinitude, religious pluralism, mystical experience, and theodicy. This monk of the Ramakrishna Order and scholar of cross-cultural philosophy battles misunderstandings about the Master both within and outside the academy. Maharaj's bright philosophical mind and methodically researched efforts shed new light on what he calls Sri Ramakrishna's *Vijñāna Vedānta*, a path of "intimate knowledge" that both ascends to spiritual union with the Impersonal Absolute, yet descends in equal measure to knowledge, selfless service, and devotion to the Personal Śakti, who is present as the dynamic play (*līlā*) of all forms.

Maharaj primarily uses *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* and the biography *Sri Sri Lilaprasanga* for philosophical and theological exegesis, both of which were written by close disciples. He places these in critical correlation with many relevant western philosophers and theologians. Maharaj's book is divided into four parts. Part I, "The Infinitude of God," is chapters 1 and 2 in which Maharaj argues for *Vijñāna Vedānta* as the lens through which we should interpret Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, which points to his understanding of divine infinitude that is both personal and impersonal, immanent and

transcendent, theistic and non-theistic. He then brings his interpretation into dialogue with western conceptions of divine infinitude, including Nicholas of Cusa and his idea of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, Benedikt Paul Göcke and his notion of "paraconsistent logic," and Jean Luc Marion's thought on "conceptual idolatry."

Part II, "Religious Pluralism," which includes chapters 3 and 4, builds upon his framework of *Vijñāna Vedānta* to describe the Master's latent theory of religious pluralism. Maharaj argues that both theistic and non-theistic religions can be seen in this theory as equally salvific paths. Salvation is "God-realization," a term that Maharaj provocatively keeps undetermined but also limits in ways that require more critical investigation. His engagement with John Hick's early and later view of religious pluralism rounds out this part of the text. Hick's early view relies upon Sri Aurobindo's "logic of the infinite," which Maharaj argues is akin to Sri Ramakrishna's (since indeed, Sri Aurobindo was influenced by the Master, though important differences could be brought forward). Maharaj argues that Hick mistakenly abandons his Aurobindonian theory for a quasi-Kantian one since it fails to grant full ontological reality to each world religion's conception of divinity, whether theistic or non-theistic.