Book Review: Learning from Other Religious Traditions: Leaving Room for Holy Envy. Edited by Hans Gustafson

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1775
is CT a distinct discipline or merely a particular approach) questions. Her conclusion, in brief, is that CT shares the same goal of ‘faith seeking understanding’ with other ‘classical’ areas of theology, but differs in the material it engages – i.e. the textual and ritual data of other religious traditions.

Readers of this journal may be especially interested in Cornille’s reflections on why CT as it has developed so far is predominantly Christian (though she sees no particular reason why it should be in the future) and in the important implications of postcolonialism for CT – not least as this relates to the contentious category of ‘Hinduism’ in ‘Hindu-Christian’ comparative theology. In summary, Cornille has done a great service to the discipline by writing a book which will stimulate reflection and discussion amongst experienced practitioners, as well as offering a ‘textbook’ introduction to the field (the detailed endnotes to each chapter and extensive bibliography are extremely helpful) for those less familiar with it.

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THE phrase “holy envy” has long been part of a standard trope in the narratives of spiritual seekers describing their attraction for aspects of doctrine, ritual, or experience found in the “religious other.” Part of the phrase’s appeal is in its wistfulness. It expresses the desire for another religion ineluctably destined to remain “other,” yet there is in that desire a real encounter with that very dimension of otherness in the search for religious wholeness and completion. Hans Gustafson, Director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning, edited a volume of essays to thematize this category more explicitly and articulate how “holy envy” draws scholars and practitioners beyond the limits of their own religious traditions. The late New Testament scholar and Lutheran Bishop Krister Stendahl’s coinage of the phrase, dating from a public statement issued in support of the construction of a Latter-Day Saints temple in Stockholm, provides historical context and rootedness for the evocative metaphor. In the foreword, eminent scholar of inter-religious theology Paul Knitter ties Stendahl’s use of the term within the latter’s epochal project of overcoming Christian supersessionism in Christian-Jewish relations, and by extension, other religions. Knitter offers a suggestive and compelling attempt to systematize Stendahl’s vision of non-supersessionism and the more positive concept of “holy envy” to contemporary Christian theology. It is unclear, however, whether such a “Rubicon-crossing” paradigm shift is necessary for those whose experience is best described by “holy envy,” or whether Stendahl’s use of the term is most aptly tied to his ground-breaking work in Christian-Jewish relations. There, the priority was exegetical exploration and contemporary social-historical consciousness and praxis, rather than a felt sense of connection to a dimension of contemporary Jewish synagogue worship, for example. Both may have emerged from a consistent spiritual
and theological stance, but in different ways and for different reasons.

Gustafson’s “Suppressing the Mosquitoes’ Cough: An Introduction to Holy Envy” is a programmatic introduction that situates the concept of “holy envy” in the context of the essays of the book. He also shares an experience of grief and loss where his family began to gather in a way evocative of the Jewish practice of sitting shiva, which for Gustafson was made explicit in media res, yet in a way that activated a kind of “holy envy” for an analogous tradition in Christianity. The chapter also introduces the reader to “holy envy” as both a metaphorical symbol of personal engagement with the “religious other” and an entryway into a more precise hermeneutical engagement with other religions. This is at times a tension in the book, as the richness of “holy envy” as an experiential event is sometimes limited by its function as prelude to a constructive theological project. Nonetheless, the critical value of “holy envy” resides in the way its paradox of immediacy and remoteness is protective of the other, whose internal mystery and identity defies easy attempts at appropriation and demands the dignity of what Panikkar called inter-independence. At the same time, there is real transformation, as one’s own religious and spiritual recommitments are re-appropriated in ethical ways that nonetheless evince a trace of that which remains “envied,” thereby serving as an ongoing catalyst for re-calibrating one’s stance toward self, others, and Reality.

Parts of the book read like a collection of essays in comparative theology, and at times, it is difficult to distinguish whether “holy envy” is simply a cipher for comparative or interreligious learning. At other points, the essays depart from the more decidedly scholastic approach into personal reflection and reminiscences, often revealing how that which is “envied” is the result of spontaneity, surprise, and struggle, rather than a well-developed and pre-determined religious appetite and sensibility. Tracy Sayuki Tiemeir’s “The Ritual of Everyday Life: Hindu Women’s Rituals, Mujerista Theology, and the Catholic Theology of Gender,” and Harrison Blum’s “Buddhists, Get Your Prayer On: Reflections on Christian Spontaneous Prayer by a Buddhist Chaplain” in particular witness to a process of finding in the “religious other” a spiritual resource that both challenges and enhances not only one’s own spiritual practice and discipline, but relational and communal dynamics within their religious social bodies. This is not in reference to community as a tradition of received teaching but rather in how religious and spiritual power is mediated and shared among gendered persons, religious others, insiders and outsiders. Another essay of interest for this readership is John Y Cha’s “A Hindu Gift of Bestowal: Sankara’s Concept of Grace in a Buddhist Context,” where the meaning and function of theistic categories like “grace” is explored within strictly nondual philosophical and theological accounts of reality.

The book is coherently organized aside from the curious absence of an essay on Chinese Jewish monotheism that is mentioned in the introduction but does not appear in the volume. Gustafson’s musing on Taoist spirituality toward the end of that same introduction would have been a welcome chapter in its own right. There is also a laudable representation of various religious and spiritual voices across contextualized identities interacting with lesser featured religious traditions beyond the more familiar inter-religious couplets and pairings. A small weakness of the book is that it does not adequately phenomenologically describe and
reckon with the event of “holy envy” itself. One wonders what difference it would make if the focus was less about the gnoseological outcome of “holy envy” than the interior process itself that may disclose data for mystical and theological reflection. Stendahl’s remarks on “holy envy” as events where we “recognize something in another tradition that is beautiful but not in ours, nor should we grab it and claim it…” seems to move in that direction. (3) I recommend the book for graduate courses in religious studies, theology, and pastoral ministry, all of whom may benefit from engagement with dimensions of the book. It also speaks to the growing consensus that theological reflections on interreligious themes be grounded in friendship, history, and practice, rather than abstract discussions of truth.

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FRANCIS X. CLOONEY’s Reading the Hindu and Christian Classics, which began as a series of lectures he gave at the University of Virginia, is the recipient of the 2020 Best Book Award from the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. It is a brief, idiosyncratic, and challenging book, one that only a scholar of Clooney’s erudition and linguistic breadth could have written. It is also a work that goes against the grain of current trends in the academy. At a time when sessions devoted to textual studies at scholarly conferences are becoming less common, Clooney’s book calls readers to return to a method of slow learning and attention to textual detail that he claims earlier Hindus and Christians understood as central to their respective religious traditions.

To exemplify this method of slow reading he chooses three pairs of books, each pair consisting of one Hindu and one Christian text. The first pair, Mādhava’s “Garland of Jaimini’s Reasons” (Jaiminīyanyāyāmālā) and Peter Canisius’ “Greater Catechism” (Catechismus Maior), he classifies as “instruction.” The second pair of texts, Appayya Dīkṣāta’s “Collection of Right Perspectives on Our Position” (Siddhāntaleśasamgraha) and Peter Lombard’s “Sentences Articulated in Four Books” (Sententiae in Quattuor Libris Distinctae), represents “doctrine.” The third pair, Maṇavāḷamānunī’s “One Hundred Linked Verses on the Holy Word of Mouth” (Tiruvāyomoli Nurrāntāti) and Louis Grignion de Montfort’s “Admirable Secret of the Most Holy Rosary” (Le Secret Admirable du Très Saint ROSAIRE), is about “participation.” Clooney anticipates that some readers will find this list strange. That was my first reaction: the logic or necessity behind these choices eluded me. They were written from the 12th to the 18th century in four different languages (Sanskrit, Latin, Tamil, and French). The three texts on the Hindu side come out of different, and arguably rival, traditions: Mīmāṃsā, Advaita Vedānta, and Śrīvaiṣṇavism. By contrast, the three Christian texts all have Roman Catholic authors. What is it about these texts in particular that makes them candidates for slow, patient reading? Could we have