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Book Review: "Bringing the Sacred Down to Earth: Adventures in Comparative Religion," Corinne G. Dempsey

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books in four years on Abhishiktananda's life and thought challenges this, and also points to possibilities for future research. For instance, Bäumer's essay (Skudlarek 2011, 31-46) leaves one wondering how the Kashmiri Shaivite influence on Abhishiktananda developed and how it intermingled with other influences on him. Similarly, Gianfreda's essay leaves the reader wanting to know more about the specifics of Abhishiktananda's changing approaches to Christian liturgy (Skudlarek 2011, 103-29). Likewise, Cheruvally's book leads one to want to know the specifics of how Abhishiktananda developed the TSC and how it was eclipsed by the SAC. Finally, the contrasting perspectives found among these four books show that Abhishiktananda's experiences and conclusions point to fundamental issues that go far beyond his life and example, and that these diverse perspectives need to be met head on and wrestled with. Still, although further research remains to be done, it is true that the area has been generally mapped out—the four books spend a lot of space covering material that has been covered in many earlier studies.

The lackadaisical response on the SHCS listserv may point to a different issue than

whether or not the area of Abhishiktananda studies is exhausted. Abhishiktananda was a representative of an era in the encounter between Hinduism and Christianity when Advaita was considered by many scholars to be the summit and essence of Hinduism. Advaita was thus a main focus of efforts at comparison and dialogue. However, while Advaita continues to be a central interest the field of Hindu-Christian studies has expanded considerably. This is seen, for instance, in Francis Clooney's steady output on Śrī Vaiṣṇavism and Michelle Voss Robert's recent comparative study of Kashmiri Śaivism. However, before dismissing the area of Abhishiktananda studies, one should ask not only the question of whether the area has been exhausted but the question of whether the lessons of his life have been integrated by the churches. While Abhishiktananda's life has generally been mapped out, the process of integrating the lessons of his life into the churches has only just begun.

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***Bringing the Sacred Down to Earth: Adventures in Comparative Religion.* Corinne G. Dempsey. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 199 pages.**

IN *Bringing the Sacred Down to Earth*, Dempsey, former president of the society that publishes this journal, and author or editor of some of the most important recent works on Indian Christianity and American Hinduism, enters directly and explicitly into the project of comparative religion, as well as into scholarly debates about its utility and legitimacy. While the author acknowledges that comparative projects tend often towards essentialism and involve the scholarly imposition of foreign or anachronistic terms on contextualized, lived religious phenomena, she yet maintains hope that “by working contextually—and perhaps brazenly—across religious and cultural divides, the [chapters in the book] demonstrate

instances in which concepts and performances of the sacred, when brought down to earth, can dismantle impositions and abstractions” (5).

The latter part of this quotation prefigures the author's emphasis, in each of the book's four comparative chapters, on the “dialogue” between “established hegemonic systems (asserted through colonialism, nationalism, scientism, and institutional religion) and localized religious expressions (found in folklore figures, democratizing theologies, and embodied and landed sacrality),” that, Dempsey argues, “talk back” (11). Put another way, Dempsey aims to diminish the danger that comparison will lead to unhelpful essentialisms and impositions by focusing “upon the ways

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earthbound religious beliefs, practices, and experiences complicate and resist religious, political, and epistemological abstractions and generalizations” (13).

These are bold, risky, and unapologetic ambitions, indeed, and the book succeeds in achieving them, at least partially. Dempsey demonstrates, as always, an eye for illustrative, meaningful, and often humorous anecdote. She is also very much *at home* in the text, by which I mean she is openly, honestly, and unself-consciously engaged, involved, and implicated in her interactions with religious people and phenomena. The comparisons she chooses to highlight, in addition, are unexpected, curious, refreshing, and contrast favorably, in my view, with Eliade’s influential and magisterial (but also magisterially distant) view-of-the-earth-from-a-spaceship brand of comparative work.

Chapter 1 compares the (usually drunken) wandering Irish Catholic priest with the suffering Indian nun, both of which appear, within their institutional frameworks, as “inverted colonial stereotypes” (16). Chapter 2 juxtaposes the unconventional liberality of Aiya, the fascinating Hindu priest/guru featured in Dempsey’s *The Goddess Lives in Upstate New York* (OUP, 2005), with Latin American liberation theologies. In Chapter 3, Dempsey turns to a comparative exploration of the “utopian” tendencies of the Rajneesh community in eastern Oregon with what she considers the more realistic and potentially fruitful, layered, “heterotopian” sacred terrain of diasporic Hindu communities in North America and elsewhere. Chapter 4, the final comparative chapter, brings together Indian Neo-Vedanta with Icelandic Spiritualism, showing how both met the challenge of turn-of-the-century scientism, in the context of independence struggles, with a blurring of the distinction between science and religion.

In her career, Dempsey has conducted serious and extended fieldwork among (at the

very least) Indian Christians, American Hindus, and Icelandic Spiritualists, and the book’s most engaging passages draw upon this ethnographic work. In three of the book’s four comparative chapters, however, religious contexts and phenomena with which Dempsey is familiar through ethnography are juxtaposed, for comparative purposes, with contexts and phenomena she knows primarily through primary and secondary texts. As a result, even though the comparisons are clearly justified, and their value proven by the insights they kick up, they feel, in some cases (to me, at least) somehow slightly out of balance. For better or worse, this sense of imbalance not only throws into sharp relief Dempsey’s keen ethnographic abilities, it also proves, in an odd, indirect sort of way, her point about the potential for scholarly work on “earthbound” religion to mitigate or ameliorate the potential pitfalls of comparison. Attending to earthbound belief and practice is primarily, after all, the special preserve of ethnographers.

Despite frequently engaging in conversation with theoretical and methodological issues in the study of religion, Dempsey’s presentational style is easy and accessible. While the substance of the text may at times lie beyond the grasp of undergraduates, therefore, its prose does not. And, in fact, individual chapters of *Bringing the Sacred Down to Earth* could be profitably assigned to upper-level undergraduate majors in religion. Chapter 1, “The Suffering Indian Nun and the Wandering (Drunken) Irish Priest: Orientalism and Celticism Unplugged,” is a particularly wonderful essay—my favorite of the collection—and demonstrates that the comparative project, despite its liabilities, still holds the promise and potential of discovery, delight, and surprise.

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