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Francis X. Clooney. *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence.* Encountering Traditions Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013. 205 pp. $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-7681-3; $85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-7680-6.

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Francis X. Clooney's *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is the latest in a series of explorations in comparative theology in which he seeks to develop interreligious readings across Hindu-Christian theological boundaries. Having investigated the notions of "grace" and the "divine feminine" in some of his earlier works (*Beyond Compare: St Francis de Sales and Sri Vedanta Desika on Loving Surrender to God* [2008] and *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* [2005]), Clooney takes up a key theme that resonates across Hindu and Christian devotional universesâthe dialectic of divine presence and divine absence. The central texts are, on the Christian side, the *Song of Songs* and its commentaries by three medieval monks, Bernard of Clairvaux (1019â1153), Gilbert of Hoyland (d. 1172), and John of Ford (1140â1244), and, on the Hindu side, the *Holy Word of Mouth* by Satakopan (ca. 900) and its commentaries by Nanjiyar (1182â1287) and Nampillai (thirteenth to fourteenth century). Clooney artfully weaves these textual materials into a tapestry whose threads are the "theopoetics" and the "theodrama" of the divine intimacy and desertion, the divine abundance and desolation, and the divine consolation and torment that are experienced by two women in the *Song of Songs* and the *Holy World of Mouth* as they seek their beloveds, Jesus and Krishna respectively.

According to Clooney, such interreligious readings, which are rooted in particular faith commitments and yet explore the unstable spaces between traditions, can help us to transcend the binary of too much and too little religious belonging in our conditions of religious pluralism. In a sense, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is an extended meditation on how careful readings across theological universes can be carried out in a quiet inner space where the beloved is "presently absent." As we follow the lovers in the texts who wait upon the beloved who is free, unpredictable, and even apparently fickle, we may become involved in their drama, as we play out our own parts, with a restless heart amid the incompleteness of the world, in response to the beloved, whether Jesus (for Christians) or Krishna (for Hindus). Clooney's work therefore offers a challenge to Christian theologians to overcome their sometimes parochial engagements with biblical horizons and to seek out the Spirit, which blows where it wills, through gardens other than Gethsemane and on hills other than Golgotha. As we follow the travails of the two women, we become aware of a few common themes that emerge from his detailed textual readings.

First, both texts operate with a tension between an "eschatological" fulfilment and the present imperfect realization of the divine presence, and highlight the insufferable torment that the women undergo as they inhabit these in-between times. In both texts we encounter women who are forlorn, deeply distressed, and filled with a "holy anger" at their respective beloveds who seem not to have any pity on their miserable conditions. They find unbearable the alternation of a few moments of intense nearness with the absence of the beloved: they seek a "full presence," even if theological voices might caution them that this perfection is not possible within an earthly sphere. The medieval commentaries on the *Song of Songs* often remind the inebriated soul that the time is not yet right for the full manifestation of the divine glory. What the soul needs in the interim is an obedient faith: the soul must not intrude into the deep mysteries of God who dwells in inaccessible brightness. Nevertheless, the soul refuses to be consoled by the "high theology" that counsels such patience: in the midst of its afflictions, the soul that knows that divine comforts are in wait is yet unable to endure the slow passing of time. The brevity of the divine visitations is not sufficient for the soul, and it complains that it gets only crumbs from the marriage feast. The impatient yearnings for the divine also fill the commentaries of the *Holy Word of Mouth*: the woman cannot bear her separation, and complains that the Lord who is known for forbearance toward sins yet seems not to be concerned for her distress. Once again, the voice of "official" Vaishnavite theology reminds us that the finite self cannot have the completeness of the divine presence as long as the self is caught up in its earthly existence. Further, the Lord is metaphysically the inner controller of every finite self and hence is always accessible. Yet the woman refuses to be consoled: she protests that she is steadfast in her love, while her Lord is elusive and inconstant. In vain she sends messengers such as birds, as she plummets from joy and hopefulness to the misery of an experienced divine absence.

The second major theme that stands out through this interreligious reading is the close intertwining between "knowledge of self" through self-purification and "knowledge of God" through intensification of love for the divine. The common trope of the "night" when the lovers experience an utter "desolation" is a further variation of the dialectic of divine presence and absence. The medieval commentators of the *Song of Songs* often remind us that the soul must be "cured" before it can be taken up into the beloved's presence. The soul that has now become "distant" from the beloved because it has lost itself in the wilderness of the world has to recover its "resemblance" to the beloved, a recovery that is actualized through the grace of the beloved who calls the soul back to its source. In this manner, the soul becomes evermore inflamed with love for the beloved, Christ the bridegroom, who pierces the soul and purges it of its worldly loves. However, the soul is not yet fully "prepared" for this encounter and faints in the divine presence, a fainting that it experiences, in effect, as a divine absence. Crucially, we are told that this high drama is carried out in the interiority of the soul not during daytime, when the soul is lost in its "outward" worldly attachments, but in the stillness of the night when the soul turns "inward" to meet its bridegroom. In these moments of the soul's "internal ascent" (a theme that these commentaries ultimately inherit from Augustine), it is carried away by its love for the beloved Christ, who alone can truly pacify that spiritual unrest. The repeated note in these medieval Christian commentaries that the search for God and the search by the soul for its true origin are intertwined processes recurs throughout the Hindu commentaries, which emphasize that the woman who pines for her Lord must undergo purification before she can experience more fully the divine presence. When the woman is unable to see the Lord in the world around her, she seeks her beloved in the spaces of her remembrances, and this momentary attainment only increases the desire for the beloved. She cannot understand the divine tricks that the beloved seems to be playing on her, and in his absence she complains that even the peahens, the nightingales, and the cool breezes torment her. The night becomes a never-ending stretch of dark and unbearable torment as she waits for her Lord who is supposedly compassionate and the protector of the whole world. She is "consumed" by her Lord, and yet the Lord leaves just enough in her to prolong her yearning and deepen her love.

We can highlight a third theme that is implicit in the above paragraphs: the "inordinate" love for the divine which is impetuous, inordinate, transgressive, and excessive. The soul's love is violent and impetuous, and disregards all measure and order. Indeed, through its ardent love, the soul seems to have Christ under its control: "Where will You go, good Jesus, from the face of such passionate desire?" (p. 71). In the *Holy Word of Mouth* and its commentaries too, the woman's love is intemperate and her mind is fevered with love. Thus the songs and the commentaries often have abrupt transitions and end with the drama unresolved.

Through this theological reading, Clooney highlights the centrality of silence in trying to hear the multiple

voices of the Gospel and of speechlessness in trying to develop a theology that will be adequate to the Word of God. The Christian God is a "mystery" who will not be circumscribed within the formulaic structures of our theology: there are no easy summations, stabilized meanings, or seamless conclusions. One of the great riches of *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is Clooney's engagement with themes drawn from Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, 5 volumes [1988â98]), Gerard Manley Hopkins (*The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Norman H. Mackenzie [1989]), and the American poet Jorie Graham (*The Errancy* [1997] and *Never* [2002]) as they try to point toward God who outstrips human discourse. Von Balthasar reminds us that the icon of Christ is not an immobile secure possession to be grasped by us as mere spectators; rather, we are challenged to respond to this vision of the divine who continually recedes from our gaze. This theological topic is affirmed in more poetic ways by Hopkins: God is, as it were, the shipwreck of our explanatory systems, for God is the unpredictable and uncontrollable "object" that continually pushes our theologizing beyond settled interpretations. Even more emphatically, Graham shows us the power of poetry that upsets the linearity of thought; that is faltering, broken, and hesitant; that does not seek transparency or coherence; and that may enable us to live with a creative tension between loss and rediscovery.

At the same time, Clooney's interweaving of a few medieval commentaries of the *Song of Songs* with these more recent voices is also a theological exercise carried out in the spaces of religious pluralism. Readers of Clooney's text may find some resources to negotiate these spaces in the theme that the love "of" God produces in the human heart a "holy turbulence" that upsets its settled patterns of thinking about the divine, unmoors it from its habitual ways, and impels it to seek the divine in somewhat unexpected places. Clooney phrases the problem in this manner: "How is one to speak passionately of God after pluralism has seeped deep inside even the most resolute and confident believer?" (p. 39). In *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* as well as in his earlier works, Clooney criticizes one response to this problem which lies in developing a "theology of religions" that proceeds in a somewhat a priori fashion from theological axioms to pronouncements on the religious significance of the "other religions." Clooney argues that such pronouncements must await patient and careful study of the texts of these religious traditions, as we immerse ourselves in the unsettled, messy in-betweens of interreligious boundaries while remaining committed to our distinctive visions of the divine. In the present case, this is how the creative tension between inhabiting one theological universe and searching for the divine in another may work: "Taking to heart the *Holy Word* and its medieval Hindu readers, we wander off a straight Christian path only to find a Krishna intimately, passionately nearbyânot our beloved, but very close by. A Hindu reader given over to Krishna may find Jesus, the other beloved, likewise unpredictably nearby" (p. 46). Thus, Christian theologians who wander off into the Vaishnavite lifeworlds opened up to them by the *Holy Word of Mouth* might be surprised to learn that the stereotypical representations of Hindu thought as "Pelagian," "pantheistic," and "monistic" do not quite apply to these traditions.

In the light of these caveats, let us explore, through a biographical sketch of three fictional characters, Edward, Gayatri, and James, the contours of the practice of interreligious reading. Edward believes that the only theological perspective that the Bible provides on religious diversity is an "exclusivism" which states that such diversity is a consequence of human sin. Therefore, the sort of detailed interreligious reading that we find in *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* cannot be accommodated within a Christian theological space. Gayatri was born and raised in a Vaishnavite family in Tamil Nadu, India. Later in life, she encountered some of the classics of Christian theology. She often practices a form of interreligious reading in which she moves back and forth between the foundational texts of Vaishnavite and Christian theology. Often, she finds herself troubled by the question: "How shall I name *my* belovedâas Krishna or as Jesus?" James was born and raised in an Anglican family in Cambridge, United Kingdom. He is now studying to be a priest in the Church of England. Through a series of coincidences, he became interested in Tamil Vaishnavism, and now he reads some of its texts along with the classics of Christian theology. Like Gayatri, he too often finds himself troubled by the question: "How shall I name *my* belovedâas Jesus or as Krishna?"

In the light of these biographical statements, we can see that we may need to spell out, in a manner that would be more explicit than in *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, the theological presuppositions of interreligious reading. To begin with Edward, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* can respond that the Spirit continues to be the interpreter of the Word in the interim between the resurrection of Christ and the second return, and that the Spirit may blow along avenues that are yet unexplored. If this possibility is not ruled out in advance through a "theology of religions," which in effect would seek to constrict the divine

freedom into human straitjackets, Christians may follow the promptings of the Spirit into somewhat unexpected places. However, when we move to Gayatri and James, it is difficult to say precisely what response *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* can offer to them. Unlike Edward, Gayatri and James have carefully worked their way through the textual material, and are responsive to the promptings of their own beloveds, Krishna and Jesus respectively, in their ventures to the "far country" of religious pluralism. Their "theological turmoil" is over the troublesome question of truth-claims: "who is the ultimate Name of the beloved, Krishna or Jesus?" Clooney clarifies that *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is written with a Christian commitment, but does not spell out any "reasons" for this commitment as he weaves his readings through certain Tamil Vaishnavite texts. Readers who have been taken out to the "no woman's land" in between the *Song of Songs* and the *Holy Word of Mouth*, where they speak, if at all, in a faltering manner, may wish to know *why* Clooney returns, at the end of day, to a Christian universe. However, in defence of Clooney's interreligious reading, one can argue that conclusive and universally compelling "reasons" for Christian (or, for that matter, Vaishnavite) commitment cannot be provided by any theology, whether it stays close to the text or moves through the terrain of metaphysics, epistemology of religious belief, and so on. Therefore, the questions "*why* Jesus in a world of religious pluralism?" or "*why* Krishna in a world of religious pluralism?" are ones that admit of no easy solutions. One of the great merits of *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is that it highlights the human predicament, in a world of religious pluralism, of searching for the beloved who constantly upsets all human certainties.

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