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**REVIEW OF FRANCIS X. CLOONEY, S.J.,  
*HIS HIDING PLACE IS DARKNESS: A  
HINDU-CATHOLIC THEOPOETICS OF  
DIVINE ABSENCE***

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**Francis X. Clooney, S.J., *His Hiding Place Is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. xvi-179 pages. \$24.95 paper, \$85.00 cloth.**

For the past three decades, Francis Clooney's project has been to venture far beyond what many would consider the proper boundaries defining Catholic tradition into Śrīvaiṣṇava Hindu tradition as a way to re-imagine while re-confirming Catholic faith and commitment. The present volume is, he writes, his final work in this undertaking, following three previous volumes.<sup>1</sup> *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*, like his previous

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<sup>1</sup> *Seeing Through Texts: Doing Theology among the Śrīvaiṣṇavas of South India* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996); *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

## 2 Kenneth Valpey

works, is methodologically rooted in close reading of carefully selected texts in juxtaposition, one from each of the two traditions. In this case, one selection consists of excerpts from the biblical *Song of Songs*, and the other is the *Holy Word of Mouth (Tiruvaymoli)*, a long poem in the southern Indian Tamil language, generally dated from the sixth to nine centuries C.E. The point of connection between the two texts, and the point which is at the heart of Clooney's study, is the voice of an unnamed woman who pines for her absent beloved. In both cases, the respective rich commentarial Catholic and Śrīvaiṣṇava traditions interpret the works analogically in theological terms of love between human and God.

One might be tempted to say that the similarities between the two selected poems end there, but Clooney invites his readers to look more closely. His project is to guide readers through a patient, careful reading of both texts as an exercise in risk-taking that promises to open one to a deepened sense of what it means to love God. This exercise is meant to happen in such a way that one is encouraged to remain grounded in one's own tradition—whether Catholic, Hindu, or possibly another—but the aim is to open oneself to “theopoetic” experience. With the right spirit of patient and careful reading, this can happen by encountering the resonances and dissonances between these two expressions of love's unsettled nature. Such reading brings one away from the conventions of thought and practice that tend to circumscribe a religious tradition, and into the uncharted territory that the very particular love of God one pursues needs to inhabit in order to be truly a matter of love.

Clooney provides well-considered help along the way of such reading. First, there are three sets of selections from both poems, labeled respectively Act One, Act Two, and Act Three. Then, following each of the acts are “entre'actes” in which Clooney helps to unpack the poems more or less line-by-line, often drawing on the insights of early traditional commentators (Bernard of Clairvaux, Gilbert of Hoyland, and John of Ford, in the case of the *Song*; Nanjiyar and Nampillai for the *Holy Word*). The Christian commentators affirm the Christian reading of the *Song* to be about a follower of Christ longing for his or her beloved, Jesus; the Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators elaborate on how the woman longing for her

beloved Krishna in the *Holy Word* is the poet Nammalvar's expression of himself longing for God, identified generally as Krishna.

Further, the author draws on later writers—the Catholic poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, and contemporary Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Jorie Graham. Individually and cumulatively, these artist-thinkers aid in the process of unsettling oneself, pointing implicitly to the possibility and even necessity of such an interreligious exploration as the present one, and helping to ensure that the effort does not devolve into theological reductionism. Rather, they help the reader to conduct the effort along “theodramatic” registers of engagement with unpredictable divine encounter and absence that are also the basis and substance of a “theo-poetics” of interreligious language, meaning, and the limits of these.

Clooney notes several times that such an interreligious reading is fraught with risk, but it is the same risk that is intrinsic to authentic love: “If we are Christians, it is our love for Jesus that makes it so unsettling to hear of her [the woman in *Holy Word*] love for Krishna; it is because we love that our love risks losing its innocence and its purity” (87). Despite the risk, it will not do to retreat “to the more stable theologies by which such traditions live” (103). Rather, one must forge ahead, carefully: “In the face of all this, slow learning is at stake, and conceptual clarity ought not be the sole or first goal. We need also to preserve the wider imaginative and dramatic space won by our readings up to this point” (105).

The wider imaginative and dramatic space that is won ultimately promises the discovery of deeper love: “But as we plunge deeper into both women's deep loves, it is also the case that the abandonment of passionate deeper truths becomes less likely than ever: we are lost, but we are caught; we are lost, because we love more, not less. Where innocence used to be, instead we find a rich and holy bewilderment, lament at the hiddenness of the beloved” (63).

A deep irony seems to emerge from the attempt to listen to the two women languishing for their respective lovers. In both cases, it is precisely the exclusivity of their loves that makes them what they are—so intense and so fragile. And yet, the intensities and fragilities of these two loves are

magnified and made more acute by the proximity created through parallel reading. Such magnification by juxtaposition inevitably brings the reader to re-examine his or her own location in terms of one's (religious/devotional) love's exclusivity. In the case of the present author, as he declares from the outset, he is situated in the Catholic tradition. As he writes in the epilogue, this means for him that "nothing matters more than Jesus, in the distinctiveness of his personhood, as the truth that is beautiful, right here; he is the beloved" (140). And yet, such faith "is a gentle song that does not deafen us to other such words of love, as if there are no other reports of the beloved, or as if one love defeats all others" (141).

This affirmation of Jesus leads me, reading the book from a Vaiṣṇava Hindu perspective, to reflect on how the book's exercise might best "work" for a careful reading by a Vaiṣṇava, for whom it is likely to be Krishna who is the all-in-all—not just as Bhagavān, the absolute Lord, but as the embodiment of ever-expanding love that is ever surprisingly (and often playfully) enacted and just as painfully hidden from view. Suffice it to say here that one challenge for the Hindu might be to resist the temptation to settle for easy parallels as some sort of confirmation that "it is actually the same thing." For the Hindu to experience a similar opening of space to the Catholic tradition of loving Jesus would require a similar readiness to be unsettled and to suspend a broadly Hindu (or neo-Hindu) tendency to enfold the other into the self. Rather, a Vaiṣṇava, true to Vaiṣṇavism's insistence on the distinction between self and God that preserves relationship in *bhakti* (devotion), would be called to extend the distinction to honor the different yet equally intense relationality between Jesus and those who regard him as their only beloved. To this end, a Hindu might want to search for Hindu (or more broadly Indic) resources—serving in similar ways as Hopkins, von Balthasar, and Graham—for thinking through the ramifications, or the possibilities and opportunities, that the reading together of the Song and *Holy Word* could bring. To this end, the premodern north Indian *bhakti* poets come to mind, especially Kabir, with his sharp words against sectarianism and religious pretensions. Also, as a possible counterpart to von Balthasar, one might

look at the sixteenth-century Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava theologian and playwright Rūpa Gosvāmin, with his extensive development of theopoetics rooted in classical Sanskrit *rasa* (emotional relish) theory, as an aid to further appreciating the Song of Songs in juxtaposition with the *Holy Word of Mouth*.

The author's purpose is, namely, to open up a space for the possibility of deepening love of God in the contemporary world, with its pluralistic forces for privatization or negation of specific religious sensibilities. As one would reasonably expect, however, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness* seems to address mainly a Christian—especially Catholic—readership, which is surely well served by this careful reading of two similar yet disparate poems of sacred love. Yet, whether one identifies as Catholic, as Hindu, or as neither, readers are well challenged by this book to reflect deeply on the nature of love as such. Even from a purely secular perspective—as Clooney hints in his discussion of Graham's poetry—attentive readers may be enriched by such nuanced reflection on the nature of love in the juxtaposition of two theistic traditions. Indeed, one may well conclude that this work points the way to a practice of scriptural reading that is vital to the future well-being of a pluralistic society such as we live in today.