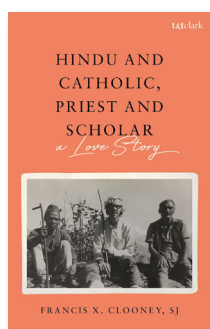


BOOK REVIEW

Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story

By Francis X. Clooney, S.J. London: T&T Clark, 2024. 208 pp. ISBN 978-0-567-71023-9. \$24.95 (paperback).



In the title of this autobiographical book, Francis X. Clooney—Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard University, prolific exemplar of textually oriented comparative theology, and leading founder of the modern field itself—outlines the key components of his identity and how they have shaped his scholarly trajectory. He writes this book because of the interconnectedness of his life and work, where one will not be clear without the other. His goal is to “provide exercises, work to be done by readers themselves, inquiring into the deep currents of their own lives,” in a very Jesuit way, he supposes, as he sees “all life as a series of intellectual-spiritual exercises” (18).

Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story is a deeply personal, vulnerable, and revealing text. Clooney discusses every aspect of his life chronologically, from his childhood, his personal experience of the divine, his vocational call to priesthood and the Jesuits, his transformative encounters with the Hindu tradition, to his professional pursuits of comparative theology within the academy. He was “touched by God” at age fifteen, became a Jesuit at eighteen, a priest at twenty-seven, and a professor at thirty-three. The next forty years of his life are spent pursuing a particular line of comparative thought as a scholar, ministering to parishes as a Catholic priest, and deepening his own relationship with God amidst Hindu and Catholic practices. Chapter one begins with his birth, in 1950, and he concludes the book by gesturing beyond himself, in gratitude that comparative theology and his monumental contributions to this field will outlive his lifetime. This book is a love story, he says, “because love is the key to all that I have lived, been given, struggled to keep alive and honest and vulnerable” (176). Clooney begins and ends his book with a discussion

of love: the love of the divine and the presence of this divine, of love in all things.

At the age of fifteen, on July 6, 1966, Clooney experienced the “defining religious experience” of his life, that he calls “a single instance of God-touch” (9). He was alone, and nothing extraordinary preceded or followed this revelation where he felt God at once entering him, and also already deep inside of himself. His language in describing the event mirrors mystics across time and tradition, finding resonance with the writings of Teresa of Avila and Mirabai, for example. Clooney’s response to this visitation was “You who have come to me—you who have touched me—you, within me—to you I give my all, irrevocably this night” (10). In fact, he describes his life as a “Yes” to this one moment, about seeing the presence of the divine everywhere, though particularly of course, in Clooney’s method, in “moments of quiet study” (10).

Upon becoming a Jesuit in 1970, the three vows Clooney professed have given him a sort of freedom, “both desperate and joyful,” where he experiences transcendence deep within himself, and not externally (32). He draws a parallel from entering vowed Jesuit life to the formation he receives a few years later, when he begins his decades of learning Hindu traditions (33). It is through his Jesuit formation, part of which sent him to Nepal for his regency, serving as a teacher at St. Xavier’s School for grades six to twelve for two years, where he first encountered Hinduism and experienced deep resonances with his Catholic tradition. The first meaningful encounter is at a temple dedicated to the goddess Kali, while witnessing animal sacrifices. While theologically, it is impossible to account for his “deep intuitive openness” to this deity, he felt “connection and harmony” with his own Catholic upbringing and rituals (47–48). Perhaps most surprising of his disclosures about religious life is his vulnerability around sex and sexuality, insights into the life of a Catholic priest that are rarely discussed in academia. He includes this aspect of his identity “simply to show how like every vowed religious I am a celibate with a complicated identity... Like poverty and obedience, chastity, practiced over a long time, reshapes body and soul” (32). This discussion so early in the book sets a tone of honesty and openness; and while sexuality is certainly part of his identity and thus worth including, it is not a driving force for him. His brief mention is of note, however, especially at a time where our Church and our country are particularly occupied with questions around sex and sexuality.

Throughout the book and intertwined with his religious vocation as a Jesuit, Clooney references much of his own work and traces the development of his scholarship in comparative theology. For those new to the field, this

offers a clear introduction grounded in the personal accounts of a scholar who is constantly pushing the boundaries of theology and of his own faith, calling others to the “transformative spiritual implications of study” (88). Clooney even advocates for comparative study as a kind of conversion that “saves us from our many blindnesses” (89). He acknowledges that many in the academic field of theology do not necessarily share this view of comparative work, and gives passing mention to colleagues who balked at the initial inclusion of comparative theology at Jesuit institutions of higher education.

In one example of Clooney’s personal transformation through comparative study, he references the Dvayam or mantra of the *Śrīvaiṣṇava* Hindus, which he prays with Jesus’s final cry from the cross. Both prayers are of complete surrender; for him they “intensify one another, doubled without becoming a single prayer” (146). He describes other such instances of allowing his studies to enter into his prayer life. He even finds that both Sanskrit and Greek verses come to him at odd moments throughout his life. The Dvayam comes to him in church, for example, and the words of Jesus from the cross come to him in temples (150). This insight is not shared in order to make sweeping theological claims, however. Clooney is clear that he shares these practices because his identity is not simple or reducible to only Christian or only Hindu, nor is he asserting a double belonging.

As director for Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions 2010–2017, Clooney set out to bring six themes to life: “tradition, text in context, translation, comparative study, (still) faith (still) seeking understanding, and awareness of suffering” (156). Though he remains unsure of an evaluation of his time as director, or indeed the purpose of the Center itself, he is clear that these six themes are essential components of his scholarly and personal trajectories. This book is useful for all scholars in reflecting on their work and its potential impact as inseparable from their lived and embodied realities. May we all be inspired by *Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story* to read and experience deeply across preconceived boundaries and to be open to the transformation of ourselves, and thus the world.

Katie Mahowski Mylroie
Boston College



The views, opinions, and positions expressed in all articles, essays, and other contributions published in the Journal of Interreligious Studies (JIRS) are solely those of the respective contributors and do not necessarily reflect or represent the views, opinions, or positions of the JIRS publishing partners, the JIRS editorial staff, editors, editorial board, or the employees, officers, board of directors, advisory board, affiliates, or financial sponsors of Interreligious Studies Media (ISM).