

*The Human Icon: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Orthodox Christian Beliefs.* Christine Mangala Frost. Cambridge: James Clark and Co., 2017. 349 pp. ISBN: 9780227176351. \$44.89, paperback.

*The Human Icon* qualifies as a critical comparative text through its value of being a lived experience of the author, thus enlightening her scholarship. Christine Mangala Frost, a guest lecturer and research associate at the Institute for Orthodox Studies in Cambridge, was born in India and raised Hindu. After first converting to Anglicanism, she converted to Orthodox Christianity in 1997. Through critical spiritual and theological comparison, Frost shares the way in which Christian–Hindu dialogue and human–human encounter manifests in her native India, as well as in the West.

As someone who is Eastern Orthodox, and has studied various religions of the world, I was impressed by Frost’s work, which notably represents Christianity and Hinduism, specifically through accurate points of theological/spiritual convergence and divergence. In the realm of interreligious studies, both in academia as well as through human encounter, it is crucial to view both positive and difficult aspects of a religion with an open perspective, thus encouraging an opportunity for personal growth and new understanding. *The Human Icon* creates a space for discussing contemporary issues regarding the religions of the world such as the secular vs. the sacred, trending patterns in religious affiliation such as “the spiritual but not religious” group, and the infatuation of Western culture with Hindu pillars, for example, guru instruction and yoga. *The Human Icon* will be beneficial to both interreligious studies and dialogue because it offers an energizing example of how to have interreligious conversations, as well as how to approach religious differences tactfully.

The first section of the book encompasses chapter 1: “Introduction: What it Means to Inhabit a Hindu World,” and chapter 2: “Orthodox Christianity in India: A Dialogue of Life.” Through observation of the Thomas Christians and Hindus in Kerala, it is evident that an appreciation of another faith is not only possible, but actualized. It is observed that “there is something unobtrusive, almost seamless, in the way Orthodox Christians in this part of India have become an integral part of the dominant Hindu culture” (43). This section offers insight into the way that common culture can foster interreligious dialogue and engagement, perhaps more seamlessly than a setting wherein both culture, and religion, are unaligned. This was further exemplified through shared cultural celebrations, and community support, by both religious groups in Kerala.

In moving from appreciating culture and religious tenets, the next section is chapter 3, entitled “The Quest for the Divine: Divinisation (‘Tat tvam asi’) in Vedanta and Deification (Theosis) in Orthodox Christianity.” This section seeks to answer the varying practices of “knowing God” in an authentically human capacity, as well as identifying how a personal relationship with God carries over to a relationship with creation and self. This chapter attempts to highlight points of convergence within Hinduism and Christianity regarding the human process in learning about God. The author appropriately witnesses that despite attempts of twenty-first-century Christian theologians, however, there is also a strong divergence between the religions. This divergence is explored in the book’s concluding section, which delves deeper into Advaita (non-dualism). Two crucial examples are as follows: In Hinduism, the intellect and the heart are perceived to be ignorant to truth (80). In Orthodox Christianity, the understanding of being psychosomatic beings emphasizes the intrinsic relation of heart–mind–soul. The second example is a teleological step in

Advaita, wherein the individual “self” “vanishes” (80). Again, in Orthodox theology, the self does not vanish, but rather becomes fully united to God, through theosis.

In chapter 4, “The Quest for the Divine in the Bhakti Tradition: God, the Lover of Mankind,” there is explanation and scriptural support for articulating Hindu Bhakti and Orthodox Christian similarities. Frost opines “in other words, dialogue may, through comparison, stimulate self-questioning and self-appraisal, producing philosophical understanding and practical solutions that are more generally relevant” (151). Overall, this chapter engages in the ability to encounter the divine, personally, and what methods of spiritual practice accompany the human–divine relationship.

Chapter 5 is “The Problem of Suffering and Evil: Karma and the Cross.” This section explores the ageless topics of human suffering and the existence of evil in the world. There is a strong divergence in the approaches to understanding suffering, particularly in one’s responsibility for being the recipient of hardships (Karma) as opposed to viewing the world as fallen, leading to the hope of salvation (through the cross and the resurrection). Karma and Dharma are discussed in regard to sin and suffering (188–89), and foster a new understanding of how this perspective may enlighten Christians’ view of Hinduism. By this, Frost explains the connectedness an individual has to sin based on previous life experience, dharma, and how these historical actions or defects attribute to the current situation of someone who is living. Frost responds to this important Hindu tenet through explaining the practice of *Ascesis*. The Christian parallel identifies how sin is naturally a part of one’s experience in a fallen world, and increases through word and deed. The antidote displayed is the practice of asceticism, because it enables one to move from sin, to new life.

Following fundamental components of faith including suffering and evil, chapters 6 and 7 (the third quarter of the book) explore the twentieth-century fascination with spirituality. Spirituality is explored more deeply in chapter seven, “Signs and Wonders: Orthodox Spiritual Elders and Hindu Holy Men.” Furthermore, this chapter establishes an opportunity and guide to authentically proceed with religious dialogue based on theological discourse, as well as the human experience. In a subsection on holiness, Frost combats the overgeneralization by Christians and Hindus alike, stating that “a second indicator for separating the genuine from what is possibly ‘demonic’ is whether what ‘holy men’ in the Hindu and Christian Orthodox traditions teach and exemplify is an enrichment of life or a depletion” (310). It was intriguing and inspiring to read the section “*Yoga and Orthodox Hesychasm*,” which undoubtedly challenges the reader to reconsider popularized notions of yoga as merely a meditative form of exercise, null of spiritual implications. This section speaks to what extent a non-Hindu practitioner could conceivably perform yoga positions without entering into the spiritual realm, even if accompanying mantras are not recited. Frost speaks against the complete dismissal of yoga by Christians, in particular, while remaining sensitive to reasons of disapproval, which include concerns about worshipping through rituals of another faith. In speaking of faith and grace, Frost acknowledges the inception of Christian skepticism regarding yoga and meditative mantras, through identifying:

why any conversation about meditative *yoga* is bound to be fraught with misconceptions, misdirections and serious unease. And yet the process of engaging in such a “conversation” may reveal the riches of the *hesychastic* tradition to Christians and non-Christians alike, at a time when many seem attracted to *yoga*

and yet flounder in uncertainty. (256)

For those who are unfamiliar with Eastern Orthodoxy and Hinduism, as well as academicians, this is a valuable resource that should find a home on all bookshelves. I commend Dr. Frost for her approach to the topics included in the text; however, there were instances that seemed to be too explicit of an attempt to establish equality within the spiritual practices of both religions. Readers who might not be deeply attached to one of the religions, or not previously aware of the differences in theology and praxis, might conclude their reading with a general understanding that Christianity and Hinduism are two sides of the same coin. Nevertheless, Frost does encourage an openness to Scripture and wisdom, found within sacred and modern texts of both religions. Throughout the book, she seeks to show that it is essential to consider the “other” as valuable in establishing dialogue and respect, growing appreciation for other religions through one’s very own religious experience and praxis. Regardless of someone’s geographical location or demographic makeup, there is an ability, indeed a necessity, to move out of one’s comfort zone to engage the other. It is hopeful that “to adopt, adapt, and imitate in this manner is one way of showing respect to the ‘host tradition’”(45), rendering the experience mutually beneficial through promoting understanding and appreciation of similarities and differences. While this certainly seems like a fitting goal for the lay audience, for the academically inclined, this book tantalizes the mind with critical historical and theological insights that delve into the realm of comparative theology, as well as practical theology, within a well contextualized lens.

One minor critique of this book is that I would have appreciated learning if Hindus seek cultural understanding and acculturation, in predominantly Christian settings, similarly to the manner in which Westerners seek Hindu spirituality and yoga practice. Additionally, while it was immensely helpful to observe the blending of Christian/Hindu culture in India, I would have been interested in reading more about the personal situations of interreligious families, perhaps more even from the author herself. This book was a positive learning experience, by being thought provoking from page to page. I hope that this will be the same sentiment shared by others who choose to challenge their preconceived notions, or enlighten their already informed perceptions.

Philip J. Halikias

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