

Learning Interreligiously: In the Text, In the World. Francis X. Clooney, S.J. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018. 370 pp. ISBN: 9781506440132. \$19.00, paperback.

This book is a compilation of blog posts written by Francis X. Clooney for the *In All Things* website of the Jesuit journal *America*. As a Jesuit priest who has studied and experienced Hinduism for over thirty years, Clooney is a prolific writer of comparative theology, a creative professor at Harvard Divinity School, and a dedicated pastor to his parish in Sharon, Massachusetts. *Learning Interreligiously* offers glimpses into each aspect of Clooney's life in an inspiring way as he provides a living example of his exhortation to learn.

Learning Interreligiously is divided into two sections. The first section follows the Christian liturgical calendar and demonstrates Clooney's hallmark method of closely reading Christian and non-Christian—mainly Hindu—texts. Clooney prescribes knowledge, which is “expected of us by God,” as the antidote to ignorance, which is “a moral and spiritual failing,” making a compelling case for believers to learn interreligiously (xii).

Clooney's goal is to expand the knowledge base of those who follow a narrowly defined Christian, particularly Catholic, tradition, and he challenges readers to be open to non-Christian traditions. Thus, the use of phrases like “the *samadhi* of Jesus” (55), “yogi Jesus,” (43) or “the *Gita* can shed light on the Gospel” (72) may be discordant to some readers, especially since he is writing for Christians without experience in non-Christian traditions. However, he navigates such comparisons expertly. While affirming that Jesus is “revered as without any exact parallel in other religious traditions” (79), he also points out that it would be a delusion to think “that only we Christians have meditated on or found meaning in the crucified Jesus” (97). Of non-Christians, Clooney thus insists that “we can learn from their wisdom” (15) since “the unique, irreplaceable truth of Christ cannot be damaged by genuine, vulnerable appreciation for the wisdom and insight” of non-Christian traditions (9).

Reading *Learning Interreligiously* has a myriad of consequences, the most obvious being an impact on the reader's faith. The book is a compelling devotional read that provides inspiration for personal reflection throughout the liturgical year. Clooney offers new acts of contemplation for the reader to incorporate into his or her practice, like meditatively processing one's response to babies along with the image of the newborn Christ and baby Krishna in order to imaginatively enjoy the stories of another religion and get past insurmountable questions of doctrine (20).

To inspire the study of Islam, Clooney points out that underlying President Trump's ban of Muslims is ignorance of the tradition. He advocates eradicating this illiteracy through the *Study Quran** (157). Here Clooney extends his prescription of interreligious knowledge to combat political ignorance, making religious learning a decisively political act. This section concludes with reflections from Hindu contributors to his blog. He subsequently provides space for other Hindu voices to ask questions and to respond to his writing so as to exemplify the title of this book. Clooney's hope is that the posts compiled in the book “prompt further reflection and confirm the point that while understanding is not the foundation of the spiritual life—love is—it is a very good

**The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

thing to keep an open mind and insist on the importance of learning as intrinsic to the life of faith” (xiii).

The second section of the book continues this theme, beginning with “So What, If Barack Hussein Obama Were a Muslim?” (205). This section is a chronologically ordered litany of current events, including those concerning American politics, Catholic Church politics, and the lives and deaths of prominent religious figures. The section focuses on important documents and religious figures to demonstrate the necessity for interreligious learning. Clooney points to the doctrinal basis for interreligious learning that is within the Catholic Church, since “the post-Vatican II openness to religions is real, true, and irreversible” (229). However, he also demarcates the limitations to such openness when he addresses *Dominus Iesus* and the boundaries articulated within it, for “it is possible to go too far in learning from another religion” (285). Clooney exemplifies this particular openness by inspiring the reader to be “more yogic, more Hindu, less Catholic navel-gazing, . . . and unafraid at a diversity that we cannot control yet that does nothing to harm the uniqueness of Jesus” (271). In this way we can “learn, in companionship, to be better Hindus and Catholics” as we journey toward God (357).

For Clooney, the focus on interreligious learning should draw the reader into interreligious action, as in the example of fasting, which “can become a powerful tool, resistance to evil great and small, and a force for unity and community” (354). Clooney acknowledges that the headlines tend to depict a world of clashing cultures, but he maintains that understanding and accord are actually much more prominent. He concludes the book with a reflection on Ramanuja, and the exhortation that “we must be careful, but we must also be bold” as we learn across traditions without becoming syncretists and yet resisting the culture of divisions (370).

The only caveat of this work is that the reader is left wanting more. Each chapter, or blog post, is merely a starting point for further dialogue and lacks the depth of engagement the reader might expect from Clooney’s work. Moreover, the chapter about Sai Baba (299–301) would benefit from added insight of the author, especially with the mentioned allegations of Sai Baba’s use of magic and abusive treatment of young men in the ashram (although he was never convicted). Clooney himself was “worried” about students’ complete devotion to this figure, so clarification of the impetus behind including this controversial figure in his book is necessary (301).

Pedagogically, this book serves as a rich resource for those teaching about Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Mormonism, or any other topic listed in its extensive table of contents. This is not a completed theological work, but prepares the reader to construct one that is meaningful.

Learning Interreligiously includes a breadth of topics impossible to delve into throughout even a lifetime. It is imperative personally as a believer and politically as a citizen to take up this book, read it yourself (as Clooney so often advises), and act upon this knowledge in order to overcome ignorance. Clooney demonstrates that interreligious learning has the power to change the person, the traditions that are involved, and hopefully the world.

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