Review Essay[*]

Finding God with–and through–the Other

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In a bold and complex book that refers to rigorous and close exegesis but progresses through cultivated intuition, Francis X. Clooney, S.J., the Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology and Director of the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School, locates himself—and asks his readers to place themselves—in a place at once secure and vulnerable, liminal and yet centered, the place at which traditions blur at their boundaries and insights grace us from all directions. I imagine that it can be an unsettling and off-putting read to anyone for whom faith is an undaunted rejection of multiple traditions and theology a xenologically bound discipline. But for those who look at the diversity of the human condition in wonderment and seek theological methods suitable for that diversity, it offers many lessons; these may be unsettling, but in a way that sharpens their own balance, and quickens their own search. The book as a whole seeks to provide a programmatic but grounded case for the discipline of comparative theology, which is in many ways a relatively recent field in the academy.

Clooney sets out from a recognition of religious diversity, through a brief history of theological attempts to respond to it, before turning to a conceptual and personal account of his own work, goals, and (tentatively yet elegantly stated) conclusions. As he acknowledges from the beginning, this is a book about rather than of comparative theology, although there are plenty of demonstrative examples from his own works. It is important to note the extent to which these remarks indicate the centrality of autobiography to Clooney's exploration of theology across boundar-

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ies; he persuasively shows how one's situation and experience are integral to even the most scholarly of research. This is by no means a postmodern deconstruction of objectivity; indeed, Clooney shows no interest in such developments. Rather, autobiography is a major methodological tool, along with exegesis, for the purpose of this book, which is to show how learning—both spiritual and intellectual—occurs in the undertaking of comparative theology. As such, the book is intensely particular in demonstrating how Clooney's own life-trajectory affects the scholarly content of his research, while also modestly drawing a larger lesson about comparative theology as a profound response to the recognition of diversity "around" and "within" us (as the titles of the opening sections of chapter 1 have it).

Part I, "Starting Points," has three chapters. In the first chapter, Clooney not only presents comparative theology as a response to religious diversity but also locates it in relation to other disciplines, like the study of religion, theology of religion, and interreligious dialogue. (He takes care to acknowledge the limits of this book, based on his own area of expertise, as a Catholic (Jesuit) who writes mainly on Srivaisnava Hinduism; although he hopes that what he has to say will be of relevance to, say, Protestant Christians, Saiva Hindus, Muslims, or Buddhists. In what follows, I will not belabor this point but will talk about comparative theology even if the examples, as given in Clooney's research, are from Srivaisnava Hinduism and Catholicism). Most readers will see, more or less intuitively, the differences involved, but it is worthwhile quoting Clooney's definition of comparative theology: it "marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition" (10).

With this in mind, he turns in the next two chapters to look at early Christian missionary encounters with Hinduism and nineteenth century Anglo-American works in one chapter, and contemporary research by both older and younger scholars in the following one. Now, Clooney is naturally inclusive (in the straightforward, ethical and colloquial sense of the term), frequently engaging with and commenting on a variety of traditions. But perhaps here, while offering a historical context that is relevant enough, he goes too far, even on his own terms, in including older scholarship within comparative theology. As he himself notes at many points, most of these figures might have sought to understand Hinduism (and other traditions) from a foundation of faith (the first half of his definition of comparative theology), but they usually meant to confirm Christianity's uniqueness and superiority—which flouts the second part of his definition. And he gives Max Müller a far too easy ride, taking the latter's claims for a scientifically detached study of all religions perhaps a trifle uncritically. Of course, we always have the benefit of hindsight and Clooney asks us to imagine what things will look like a hundred years hence; nevertheless, if comparative theology requires an explicit recognition of indebtedness to another tradition, then it has a much more recent history sensu strictu. A largely sympathetic

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portrayal of more recent work rounds off this part of the book, stretching from the late, inimitable Sarah Grant, RSCJ with her creatively theistic interpretation of Śaṅkara's Advaita, through the more schematic work of David Tracy, Keith Ward, and Robert Neville, to the necessarily evolving work of a few younger writers whose academic paths have crossed Clooney's.

Part II, "Doing Theology Comparatively," is the most expository part of the book: Clooney offers in chapter 4 a justification for close (and yet open) textual exegesis as a key comparative theological practice, before skillfully introducing Hinduism to a non-specialist audience in chapter 5. This leads him, towards the end of this chapter, to tackle the question of "Hindu theology," for in order to do any comparison, and since there is such a thing as Christian theology, there must be something to compare it with. Clooney is characteristically sensitive to the cultural context of comparison, and he tries to find a balance between his desire to have a Hindu theology with which to do comparison and his recognition that it has to be Hindus who have to agree whether there is such a thing as Hindu theology. Since, as I write, there has been a (good-) spirited discussion on the Religion in South Asia (RISA) list on precisely the question of whether Hindu traditions can properly be characterized as having theology, this is a live issue. I will return to the question of Hindu perspectives on comparative theology at the end of this review. For the moment, it suffices that he outlines his own experience as one in which "a Christian studies Hinduism."

Chapter 6, a wide-ranging and multicultural linking of theological visions, calls for a series of "intuitive leaps" (96) across specific cultural contexts towards an instinctively comparative vision. This may not seem appealing to the ratiocinative reflex of your average academic, but Clooney is quite aware of that. He ranges not only across his well-known areas of expertise in Sanskrit and Tamil texts on the female deity and on Catholic readings of Mary, but also, over Mary in the Qur'an and—in a different register—Sojourner Truth's astonishing account of her religious experience. This moving chapter does not strike me as particularly concerned with even acknowledging the question of why one should read in this comparative manner; but it offers a powerful guide to how one may widen theological vision in a way that one would not expect of the textually disciplined academic. Towards the end of the chapter, Clooney ruefully notes that his "hope, until now largely unfulfilled," is that the plenary address on which the chapter is based would "have instigated comparative theology at one remove," getting theologians to extend sets of "linked insights" across other traditions. One does indeed hope that the Catholic academy is inspired to do so, but it may ask why it should do so. I think it is fair to say that comparison as the intuitive linking of insights will appeal to those already predisposed to developing their spiritual understanding through this particular mode of reading, but it functions in a fundamentally different way from the program that appears to be suggested at the beginning of the book, where it seems that the fact of diversity in the world today is taken as the justificatory basis

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for comparison. Setting aside the "why" and looking at the "how," this chapter is a call to a particular form of spiritual discipline: despite Clooney's presentation of the links as occurring naturally and freely, it strikes me that it requires a great deal of thought, scholarship, and a virtuous open-mindedness for intuition to become so productive.

Part III, "The Fruits of Comparison," brings together the thoughts and claims of the previous two sections, with perhaps the exception of chapter 6. This final section is much more tightly focused on specific scholarly comparative explorations (as called for in chapters 4 and 5) and relies much less on the sort of intuitive linkages given in chapter 6. While presenting the scholarly comparisons themselves, Clooney also offers us a commentary on the intellectual and spiritual significance of these comparisons. He moves swiftly and deftly through some very ambitious comparisons (which can "shake up our own theological projects" (114)), although readers are pointed to previous books in which he has treated them at much greater length. Across these two chapters, he compares: the imago Dei (the view that we are created in God's own image) with Vedanta Desika's interpretation of the Mundaka Upanisad's statement that we obtain the "full likeness" of God upon final liberation; two forms of goddess worship (of Lakshmi, consort of Visnu, and the Devi, usually the consort of Siva) with Marian wisdom in Greek, Latin and Tamil Catholic hymns; and the implications of spiritual belonging and divine disclosure in a range of Srivaisnava poems and in the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. He also invites us to look at the startling possibility that the divine Srivaisnava name, "Narayana," might be contemplated spiritually by Christians. The golden thread that runs through these comparisons is the vision, as the sub-title of one section has it, of "multiple religious belonging, human but also divine" (146). Clooney suggests that, once undertaken, the human enterprise of moving across religious boundaries (in understanding a home faith more deeply through understanding another faith, and therefore locating oneself on the boundaries between them) may well be met with divine accommodation (150). If we seek God across traditions, then we may both find God and be found by God in those in-between places, in new situations and new ways in which God—who is unconfined by our accustomed traditions—may graciously consent to encounter us. So, in a profound sense, both we and God have multiple belonging. With a force of utmost gentility (akin to Gandhi's satyagraha), Clooney makes exclusivism appear ungodly, without ever claiming that God cannot be found by someone who is not drawn to comparison.

The book ends with some thoughts on the nature of the comparative theologian, as both writer and reader, looking in particular at the spiritual transformation that comparative theology can bring about, the marginal location of the comparative theologian, and the possibility of a community of comparative theologians. These ideas are reflections on the book as a whole, and I will try and engage with some of them, before ending with some thoughts on a Hindu response to this thoughtful and deeply humane book.

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Across the book, the major implication and the main purpose of comparative theology emerge. The implication is that we must recognize the fungible borders of traditions and our faith in them, not just in the sociological sense of a pluralistic world ("diversity around us"), but in the theological sense of multiple belonging ("diversity within us"). "Christianity" or "Hinduism" is not an impermeable religion sitting alongside others, but rather, part of a "matrix of significant theological insights" (152). Clooney does not deny that we may be located as Christians or Hindus; indeed, theological insights may be found inside or outside our "home tradition," so there should be traditions we can call home. Our sense of ourselves as Hindus or Christians—especially in our sense of belonging to a community, a thought to which I will turn later—is very important to him. But the traditions are themselves seen as equally capable of offering insights, and therefore of offering us the chance, if we apply ourselves, to find ourselves with more than one home. Seen in this way, it is impossible, Clooney says, to imagine that comparative theology cannot make substantive contributions to theology as such. If the theological enterprise as a whole is "faith seeking understanding," as the traditional Christian formulation has it, then comparative theology widens what we may understand while deepening our faith. This brings us to what Clooney takes to be the main purpose of comparative theology. Unlike such projects as may occur within a theology of religions, comparative theology is not about uncovering "a stunning deficiency in one tradition that will clear the way for the triumph of the other" (120); it is of "little use to those interested in deciding which religion is the best" (ibid.). Comparison does not seek to vindicate one's faith but intensify it through a practice of seeking "a disclosure of the widest meaning" (107) in any comparison. At once, exclusivism and relativism are both rejected, not primarily as intellectually problematic (although they are that as well), but as spiritually less encouraging. Clooney wants to say—perhaps simultaneously, perhaps alternatively—that comparison deepens one's location within faith and widens it to the boundaries of others, in both cases intensifying one's sense of encountering the divine.

It is when it contributes simultaneously to the deepening and widening of faith that comparative theology poses the most profound challenge to one's sense of self. Clooney is unambiguous about the impact of his version of comparative theology: at the border between two worlds, there is "a seeming multiplication of loyalties," and even without abandoning the home tradition, one is "likely then to remain a marginal figure" albeit valuable to both that home tradition and a religiously diverse society (158). Spiritually and socially, comparative theology can and will be significant, but its practitioner will have to accept a marginal identity, for after all, she would have "cultivated hybridity" (160) as a consequence of her discipline. This is an interesting and demanding ideal. It has, I think, three dimensions: the intellectual, the doxastic, and the communitarian. Clooney pays barely any attention to the first, although it would probably be the one that strikes people most naturally as the reason why the comparative theologian might be a marginal figure. The intellectual reason is

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that a lifetime given over to exploring how traditions can be crossed, cross-cultural intertextuality be realized, and novel forms of rigorously academic self-expression be brought out, can make for a lonely avocation. It will also make for an institutional life fraught with uncertainty over disciplinary location, social presence, even career progression. Not many will have a sufficiently well-resourced base from which to venture into thinking, writing, publishing, or applying for grants in an emergent field within a hotly contested space. What I mean here is that the disciplinary task of comparison may be not just intellectually but also existentially central to people, without it necessarily being a matter of their belonging to a faith or possessing one. The very complexity of our self-identity that Clooney is so careful to acknowledge is one that rules out also any simple distinction between those of faith and those without; and those without faith can very well be deeply committed to their task and the traditions concerned, in ways not always expressible as a matter of faith but equally important nonetheless. Here we wander into a larger question about what is required for "theology," and while I do not want to do more than express a different view of the matter, it seems to me that Clooney's own sensitivity to our many ways of being ought to allow for "faithless" commitments.

The intellectual dimension of comparative theology is not something that Clooney has much to say about, despite his instinctive sympathy for young scholars and others perhaps institutionally vulnerable for the intellectually risky work they do. (Thankfully, the risk is only intellectual in America and other places; there are other, much worse risks involved in other parts of the world, in speaking across religious traditions.) This is because, I venture to suggest, he does not think of theology other than as an undertaking founded on faith; he does not think of it primarily as an intellectual discipline howsoever existentially vital to the practitioner. This brings us to marginality and faith, something about which he does have something to say. For Clooney, theology always conforms to the formula of "faith seeking understanding," and comparison is the construction of "a path of religious belonging that suits our own spiritual imagining" (130). Comparison is a balance between what is in our home tradition and what has become available to us in our time. Here, the significance that Clooney attaches to faith is brought out: it is not purely an intellectual matter or even a matter of our own spiritual discipline, that we develop a sense of new belonging as "we cross religious boundaries"; for vitally, "God agrees to meet us there too" (ibid.). This dimension of faith is, beyond the intellectual, truly a challenge to Christian theologians (for it is they Clooney primarily addresses, since he counts himself as one of them). For Clooney, theological work across boundaries, which is to say, comparative theology, is pursued in the faith of finding God there where one might not heretofore have expected to meet God. The God of the liminal is also the God of the boundaries traversed in comparative theology. This is the unsettling view of God that I mentioned at the beginning of this review, for Clooney is challenging a secure but exclusivist faith not through the rejection of faith but through an

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intensifying of it. The mystery of God's omnipresence is read as implying God's presence at the margins as well as at a traditional centre.

I have so far bracketed two elements of this compelling narrative with which I have some trouble. The first is the overwhelming importance Clooney attaches to the community of the theologian, which concerns the communitarian dimension of comparative theology that I mentioned earlier. He is hypersensitive to the possibility that theology may become "simply a matter of words and concepts and systems respected in isolation from the religious communities for which they were articulated and in which they have been passed down" (100). He requires that comparative theology "remain in living connection with the tradition and faith experience of particular communities" (114) in order for the comparativist's work to be theological. I am not in total disagreement with a communitarian conception of comparative theology. For one thing, it is salutary to remember that the theologies compared, especially those that are not from one's home tradition, are of living significance to communities. For another, especially from the particular Catholic perspective of a Jesuit, it must be extremely important to remember that a perspective, even if radical and original, is still derived from a life lived in a community.

Nevertheless, I would prefer there to be less emphasis on the community's authority. It seems overly restrictive and prescriptive for those—Christians and Hindus alike—who may not have an organic location within a community, may be in the process of resisting the compulsions of their community (communities get that way), or simply feel comfortable in hybrid identities—which Clooney himself, after all, urges on us—that do not map on to real communities. (Thomism may attract without Catholicism; Nyaya was always a system of thought without a community; and so on.) Sometimes, the critical freedom required for transformative comparison may require (or cause) a rupture with a home community; and then Clooney would not want to say that what resulted was not theology. Furthermore, there is also his intriguing notion of "a liminal religious community that seeks to understand faith that is complexified by comparative learning" (161-2). Surely, if comparative theology results in a new community, then a commitment to an original home community as a sine qua non of doing theology is no longer obvious; but if it be thought that dual belonging is possible, then my original point that one need not have necessarily to belong to one community is strengthened. Despite this objection, I must still note that Clooney's innate commitment to theological communities is a creative restriction, since the constructive provocations of comparisons are made sharper precisely when, say, Christians are asked to contemplate on 'Narayana.'

The other worry I have is one rather late in the day to express, for I fear it will look like I am having my cake and eating it. It is that Clooney assumes too easily what he means and what we will take him to mean by "God." I too have helped myself to his assumption, although I could argue that I have been, as it were, quoting him. At a time when we have had at least a century of debate (perhaps longer, going

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back to Nietzsche) about the postmodern God, about the relationship between God and Being, about the weakness and vulnerability of God, deconstructions of "God," God and différance, and so on, I would be reluctant to approach even Christianity with any sense of what "God" means, let alone the dizzyingly varied signifiers of the Hindu traditions. But perhaps I am looking in the wrong place, or at any rate, a different one, for the originality of Clooney's work lies in starting with an intuitive sense of divine plenitude and progressing into textually realized cross-cultural manifestations of it.

This book, therefore, is a wonderful and provocative one. One provocation it makes is of Hindus. As Clooney says, "it must honestly be added" that amongst "traditional and contemporary Hindu intellectuals," it is "difficult to notice the need and desire to inquire and to learn from the other" (82). Some might argue that the very notion of a theology, let alone a comparative theology, is a deeply Christian one. It may also be that the particular history of Hindus, especially under the conditions of modernity, has left a disjoint between the fact of pluralistic co-existence and the theory of engaged pluralism. The institutional history of India, at once modern in its suspicion of the academic study of religion and pre-modern in the persistence of traditional forms of religious authority, is not a promising background for comparative theological scholarship. On the one hand are those who might at most describe themselves as of "Hindu background" who can only contemplate the study of religion as a social science; and on the other are deeply committed adherents of traditions, who struggle to express in fresh terms their own distinctive transition into modernity and regard existing Western/Christian models of pluralist engagement with suspicion (the hyphenated conflation is revealing, of course).

But things change. In India too there is a growth of institutional forms that resemble American ones, and the theological study of Hindu texts and life is becoming possible in America. So let us assume that over the coming years, there will be a sustainable Hindu theology and, thence, a comparative theology. And therein lies the rub. Can there any longer be Hindu theology that is not conceptually comparative? Certainly not in English or other languages long the vehicles of Christian theology; but perhaps not even in Sanskrit, if the theology is to speak to a globalised and often diasporic set of communities. The challenge for Hindus (or Hindu theologians) is how to reconnect with the linguistically and historically ruptured past, when living in a world determined by Christian theology's conceptual pervasion. Hindu theology has at some level to always be comparative for a variety of reasons. First, it must avoid sounding anachronistic in its English (or other Western)-language usage. Second, it must not strive to re-invent the wheel and ignore the great reconceptualizations of theology that have occurred in Western post/modernity. Third, it has to locate English-language Hindu theology within a pluralist world whose very pluralism has already been theorized by Christian theology—and it has to do this first in order to recover the precious resources of its

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own historical pluralism. And finally, it has to offer a reciprocal understanding of its intellectual and spiritual benefits to Christian theology. Anyone seeking to write Hindu theology is already doing comparative theology, but this is no weakness; it is not some slur on the richness and promise of Hindu traditions. We are where we are, and history has happened, and from that comes great promise. But to recognize where we are is a desideratum, if we—who do comparative theology—are to come to terms with asymmetries of institutional and conceptual power. Anger and rejection will not do. So long as there are those like Francis Clooney, who come out of a tradition with a long and doubtful history of hegemonic reflexes and yet, with deliberation and consideration, make themselves liminal, then so too should Hindu theologians (in whatever way they take themselves to be Hindu) reciprocate with glad boundary crossings. And that is just the start. As Clooney acknowledges, comparative theology's textuality is elitist; and a Srivaisnava brahmin at home in the West is at least as badly qualified as a Jesuit in making pronouncements about hegemonic reflexes. But one has to start somewhere, and working with the fact that comparisons move unequally across boundaries is a good place for considered Hindu responses to start. This marvelous book should stand as an invitation to many. I very much hope that it is taken up.

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