

LEARNING TO SEE: COMPARATIVE PRACTICE AND THE WIDENING OF THEOLOGICAL VISION

NEAR A GODDESS

The Vedanta Desika Koil is a rather old Hindu temple in the Mylapore section of Chennai, India. During 1992–1993, I used to visit it several times a month. Inside, to the right, and at the side of the main shrine for Lord Visnu, there is a smaller yet imposing shrine for the goddess Laksmi, Visnu's eternal consort.¹ The shrine is dark, quiet, and attractive. It has a kind of aura to it. I also knew from my reading that in the Vaisnava tradition Laksmi is presented as the perfect spouse who gives life to Her husband, Visnu. She is a maternal figure, gracious and compassionate, welcoming strangers and outsiders, a friend to the poor. I felt oddly, entirely at home at her shrine. I used to stop in and stand there for a few minutes when visiting the temple, as long as I might stay without attracting too much more attention than a foreigner usually does in India.

To visit this temple and stand before the goddess Laksmi opened for me new possibilities of vision beyond what I had seen or thought before. I was face to face with a reality—a kind of real presence—from within a living religious tradition other than my own. I knew that according to the Hindu tradition I was also being seen by Her. I did not have, nor do I have now, some easy words by which to explain this concrete and in some ways very foreign moment of encounter. There is no room for Laksmi in Christian theology, no easy theory that makes sense of her presence. Seeing and reflection ought to lead to an appropriate response. I suppose I might even have worshipped Her, because I was already there, as it were seeing and being seen. But Christians do not worship goddesses, so I did not. I just stood there, looking.

Where there are visions and moments of contemplation, there are also powerful words that keep on echoing and evoking what we have seen. Standing there, I could also recollect traditional prayers offered to Laksmi, verses as heartfelt as these twelfth-century verses:

Your lotus feet,
One dangling, ready for my reverence,
The other tucked beneath you;

¹On the theology and cult of Laksmi, see P. Pratap Kumar, *The Goddess Laksmi: The Divine Consort in South Indian Vaisnava Tradition* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997).

You sit on the middle of a lotus throne,
 Your lotus hand gesturing fearlessness.
 O mother, may we see you every moment;
 Your pleasing, beautiful face
 Carries surpassing, wide waves of compassion
 Flooding forth from the corner of your eyes.
 Your sidelong glances—
 Are comprised of bliss and
 By them Lord Visnu, drenched up to the neck in love,
 Becomes intoxicated, indolent—
 Because of them,
 People like us fill up with tender love,
 Rivers overflowing their banks,
 We drown in your compassion—
 For each and every drop of which
 Actors like Brahma the world-creator fight, and due to which
 Even persons whose dominion is on the rise stammer—
 By your glances, O Lotus, protect me,
 I have no other refuge.²

These words are beautiful, but such words too can be hard. Hymns want to be listened to, understood, adopted, and uttered as real praise. But it may be impossible for us to utter such verses as Christians. We can hear them more clearly, little by little, we can read them with learned commentaries, but we may still feel perplexed, we may still want to evade or resist the world they show us. We do not want to speak them as our own words. Perhaps we cannot.

When we are theologizing properly, I suggest, we often find ourselves in this situation, seeing beyond the limits of the predictable and permissible, standing at the point where we begin understanding things we cannot easily put back into words. This is an awkward situation, but a good one. It requires allowing such moves to the edge to happen, without being afraid of what we see and hear. Then too, if possible, it is also about turning such experiences into words, even imperfect and incomplete words, by which others can share the vision. Such, I believe, is the vocation of the theologian. The following reflections are dedicated to exploring how seeing anew can turn into powerful words that change things we have already seen and heard throughout our lives.

²*Guna Ratna Kosa* vss. 38, 41; my translation. For a complete translation of the *Guna Ratna Kosa*, see Nancy Nayar, *Praise-Poems to Visnu and Sri: The Stotras of Ramanuja's Immediate Disciples* (Mumbai: Ananthacharya Indological Research Institute, n.d.) 277-305.

DEVI'S BEAUTY, DEVI'S PLEASURE

For me, at least, scholarly work is indeed a way of turning experiences and things I've seen into words. I work with texts and commentaries. Accordingly, as a kind of sequel to my temple visits, I have been writing a book entitled *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*.

I will comment below on the comparative aspect of this book, but first of all it is a book about how for millennia Hindus have theologized the significance of female deities, even when male deities are also available for worship and reflection. The Hindu theologians reflecting on these goddesses are almost all males in a male-dominated society—but who nevertheless chose to worship goddesses and to place those goddesses above gods, even when there was no compulsion to do so. This is, in my view, very interesting.

Because the issues are large, this is also a book about just three goddess hymns, the Vaisnava *Guna Ratna Kosa* ("Treasury of Her Qualities"), the tantric *Saundarya Lahari* ("Flood of Beauty"), and the Saiva *Apirami Antati* ("Linked Verses Honoring the Beautiful One"). They are respectively from the twelfth, eleventh, and eighteenth centuries, more or less. These hymns are lovely poetry, rich in vivid imagery and adorned with elegantly balanced claims about the goddesses in relation to well-known gods. They offer constructive insights into goddess-oriented paths of knowledge and devotion. Each is enriched by classical and modern commentaries that show us how it has been traditionally understood and valued. These hymns, 261 verses in all, are of course only small instances within a broader religious context of Hindu reflection on goddesses, still other images and practices explained in systematic discourse. But read properly, they are richly evocative of that wider context. Studying them with an eye toward their full meaning produces deeper, more luminous insights into the dynamics and significance of goddess worship in its intellectual, spiritual and ritual concreteness.

These hymns not only speak about goddesses, but they also enable the devout reader to approach those goddesses most intimately. They are acts of living speech, generative of worship: each tells us about its particular Goddess, but also addresses Her directly, and so initiates the attentive listener into the realities of which it speaks. If the hymns are carefully heard and allowed to have their full effect, both the believing author and the listener are drawn into praise and encounter with that goddess. All of this can begin to happen to us as well, even if we think we are just doing some research.

Take for example the first of the hymns, the *Saundarya Lahari* or "Flood of Beauty." This hymn of a hundred verses praises the great goddess, Devi, supreme ruler of the universe, daughter of the mountain, beautiful consort of Siva. At the same time, it also clarifies who She is, and how She is to be encountered. Right from the first verse, claims about Her are superlative:

Only joined with Power is Siva able to rule,
 Otherwise he cannot even quiver—
 O Devi, You are worthy of adoration
 by Visnu, Rudra, Brahma, and all the rest—
 So how dare I—
 Who've done nothing meritorious—
 Reverence and praise You?³

Devi is Siva's consort and virtuous wife, yet she is also the one on whom he depends entirely. She is transcendent, yet approachable and irresistibly desirable to Her spouse and to devotees wishing to praise Her. She is power itself, energy and life. Unlike a god, Devi does not exercise power, because She is power. She is subtle—not a warrior goddess who asserts Herself violently to dominate, even for the sake of defeating evil. She is life, vitality, beauty, desire, She conquers by Her presence, simply because of who She is. It is only when Devi acts out Her pleasure that other beings live. On Her depend the gods and goddesses, all lesser conscious beings, and the entire universe.

But conceptual theology is not enough. The author of the hymn desires to gaze on Devi's figure in loving detail, and so he prays, "May you stand forth before us!" He wants to see Her materially as well as with a spiritual eye. The major part of the hymn is about how to see Her properly. (Before going any further, I must confess one thing: How women are to relate to Devi is not explained. My impression is that women are idealized as being already with Devi, in Her company, and not in need of contemplative practices leading to union.)

For the male author, in any case, Devi must in some way be seen, and he chooses to start looking with conventional standards of female beauty in mind. Devi is at first presented according to rather standard cultural norms. Her figure is full. She dresses better than anyone else. She wears the finest jewelry and flowers in Her hair. But Devi also surpasses every conventional image and expectation about female beauty. Seeing Her must therefore be purified, stripped of cultural accretions. The devotee must purify conventional expectations, and experience Devi in pure touch, sight, and sound. And so, She is manifest most intensely in pure centers of physical and psychological energy known as *cakras*. She is seen most finely in the geometric detail of diagrams known as *yantras*. She is heard most purely in the utterance of the pure sounds of Her secret sixteen-syllable name.

³*Saundarya Lahari*, vs. 1; my translation. For a complete translation, see *Saundarya Lahari: The Ocean of Beauty of Sri Samkara-Bhagavatpada*, trans. S. Subrahmanya Sastri and T. R. Srinivasa Ayyangar (Wheaton IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1992); for a brief overview, see Francis X. Clooney, *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998) chap. 6.

This purification of the senses prepares the way for a second and more important visualization of Devi, carried out over some fifty verses. She is now contemplated, a second time, head to toe. Each verse focuses on a particular detail of Her material form as a sacramental sign expressive of a spiritual reality: Her hair, vermilion forehead mark, eyebrows, eyes and glance, ears, nose, teeth, smile, throat, hands, breasts, navel, waist, hips, thighs, feet, toes, nails, Her manner of walking. The poet looks intensely, passionately, and the attentive listener too is being taught to look closely, to analyze and seek the origins of beauty. We are invited to see, all the more vividly, everything we had noticed only conventionally at first glance.

Devi returns, and She arouses an ever deeper contemplation that travels from bliss to beauty to bliss. In the hymn's final verses, the repeatedly deferred intimate pleasure of Siva and Devi seems to reach a climax that is just beyond what words can say. It finally becomes possible for the poet to imagine, imperfectly and in a teasingly incomplete fashion, the blissful union of Devi and Her Siva. Devotees are invited to enter Her inner precincts, to enjoy all beauty and bliss. But no more is said about what happens then. You have to go there, the experience is something you have to find for yourself. Seeing leads to words, words to action, action to participation and bliss.

REDISCOVERING MARY

I have spoken of the *Saundarya Lahari* at length because it illustrates the method for a way of theologizing today that is based on insight and instinct, prolonged attentiveness, beauty and bliss, going broad by going deep. It is of use as we learn to be better theologians by way of the study of religious traditions other than our own. We see for a greater distance and greater breadth; we learn to let go and then return to the things we'd seen at the beginning; we see ourselves anew in light of the other, in a vision of self and other stripped of illusions, clutter, confusion. Then we can look more broadly yet again, to see everything afresh and newly alive, and so to write accordingly.

Of course, learning from verses praising a Hindu goddess after visiting a goddess temple is only the beginning of this practice of wider vision. I have found my study of goddesses also deeply connected to an awakening of other areas of theological interest for me, including a look back into my own Catholic tradition. There are no Christian goddesses, but there are inevitable, fruitful parallels that crowd in upon the mind's eye.

For instance, and by an intuitive move I cannot fully justify, I have felt a connection between reflection on Laksmi and Devi and renewed attention to the Virgin Mary. The study of India has enabled me once again to see an aspect of my own tradition in a new light—to see anew the Marian devotion all but lost to me as I went through high school and college in the late 60s and early 70s. Seeing Laksmi, seeing Devi, it becomes easier to see Mary.

We know that the cult of Mary remains important for many people today, in the Orthodox traditions and throughout the Roman Catholic world. Even if the veneration of Mary is necessarily understood within the constraints of Christian faith, creed, and theology, there is still much that stands parallel to Hindu language about goddesses in India, waiting to be noticed attentively. Mary is the one who is both "not a goddess" and yet also "like a goddess." We can try gazing upon her appropriately, with a critical eye, alongside Laksmi and Devi. Her personality, her materiality as the person in whom the divine and human surprisingly meet, her role as mother, her being a woman physically, psychologically, intellectually, spiritually—all of this makes her vividly like Laksmi and Devi.

I say all this with due caution. Like you, I know that today we are discovering a renewed Trinitarian theology and an inclusive ecclesiology. We are committed to reappraising the roles of women and men in the Church. In light of these changes, much about the traditional cult of Mary seems antiquarian, mistaken, or downright harmful. Nevertheless, there is no reason to turn away entirely from that tradition. Even if we do not anoint Mary a "Christian Goddess," we can nonetheless learn more than we imagine from looking at her side by side with Devi and Laksmi.

Here too, I try to work locally, with texts, on a small scale. In writing my book, I have accordingly also studied just three Marian hymns: the Greek *Akathistos* hymn from the fifth century, the nineteenth-century Tamil *Mataracaman Antati*, and the famous medieval *Stabat Mater*. Let us for a moment consider just the last of these.

The *Stabat Mater* envisions Mary, vulnerable and at the cross, contemplating the death of her son; we watch her watching him. The hymn insists that she stands upright throughout; it finds in this most honest and terrible moment the source of her power to act as the agent of our own journey with Jesus through death to a resurrected life. She weeps, but she is the one to whom we turn in desire, as we hear:

O mother, font of love, make me feel the force of sorrow,
 that I lament with you,
 Make my heart burn in loving Christ, God,
 that I might be pleasing to him.
 Holy mother, do this, fix the wounds of the crucified
 firmly in my heart.
 Share with me the punishments your so worthy,
 so wounded son suffered for me.
 Make me truly weep with you, sorrowing with the crucified
 as long as I live.
 To stand near the cross with you,
 to be with you gladly, wailing—so I desire. . . .⁴

⁴Vss. 9-14; my translation.

The more we contemplate Mary as she stands there facing death, the more we see her power grow. By the hymn's end, Jesus is dead, and she stands there alone, now the font of hope for those who wish to live.

I did not find in the *Stabat Mater* a theory about how Mary, her son, and God are to be understood. Rather, after thinking about Laksmi and Devi, I found a path of transformative vision. We look upon God to the point of God's own death. We see Mary in grief, yet strong enough to resist violence, to remain standing. Our vision of God and humanity are stripped to their basics in the face of death. We gain hope along with Mary, after the Son of God has died.

In a peculiar way, the *Stabat Mater* is therefore like the *Saundarya Lahari*: "He" recedes, "She" comes to the fore as the source of life and hope; seeing Her empowers the one bold enough to look, opening the way to salvation. The *Saundarya Lahari* is about beauty and bliss while the *Stabat Mater* is about death and resurrection, but in both cases, the fulfillment of desire becomes possible.

Encountering Hindu goddesses in temple and text is not therefore a diversion or detour, but a way into our own past, this time with our eyes more widely open. Encountering goddesses, we also see Mary, her son and her God all the more clearly. However we sort out our Catholic Marian tradition in the 21st century, we will do this better because we have been freed from some of our misconceptions about how other people in other religions have contemplated the divine feminine.

Laksmi in her temple, Devi on her couch, Mary at the cross: these are but three figures approached in three specific contexts. Quite a bit, but there is no end to the set of such particularities. There is also no grand narrative that tells us how to see them, what they mean. Rather than generalize about religions or even about gender in religion, it is better to go forward by intuitive leaps, according to instinct. How this further widening of theological vision works in practice occupies the remaining portion of this presentation.

MARY AND HER SON JESUS, THROUGH MUSLIM EYES

First, I turn to an issue that already occupies our attention. We are all mindful of the sometimes troubled and unhappy relations between the West and the Arab world, and in addition to that, logically or not, the uneven relationship between Christians and Muslims in many places today. Many issues come to mind: Iraq and the war; the aftermath of September 11th, the tension and confusion that terrible day brought to Muslim-Christian relations; bias against innocent Muslim Americans in the current atmosphere of suspicion; tension and conflict in Indonesia and parts of Africa; the role of Europe and the United States in the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. None of this reduces to questions about "Islam in itself" or "Christianity in itself." There is certainly no simple or merely objective "problem" for us to solve. But the world

situation certainly makes those of us who are not Muslim ponder more intensely our relationship with our Muslim sisters and brothers.

We are theologians, and we also know that there are theological questions to be faced as Muslims and Christians listen and learn from one another. We know for instance that the *Qur'an* highly reveres Jesus but denies that he is divine or that he died on the cross. Christians cannot agree with such a view of Jesus. Similarly, Christians do not believe that Mohammed voiced a revelation surpassing that announced in and by Jesus. I presume that Muslims cannot accept the Christian claim about the insurpassibility of Jesus. Such differences can by themselves cause misunderstanding and bring conversations to a halt. We may be tempted to sidestep them for the sake of polite conversation and keeping the peace.

But we can do better. If we turn back to particular things that Muslims and Christians care about religiously, new insights become possible, new doors are opened. To be sure, it is not necessary or inevitable to connect the first part of this paper—Laksmi, Devi, Mary—to seeing through Muslim eyes. But I suggest that opportunities arise if we remember what we have already seen, and if we are willing to make yet another intuitive leap beyond the ground thus far occupied. To put it briefly: Laksmi, Devi, and Mary open a way to connect with the Qur'anic tradition, by thinking about Mary from yet another angle. Mary is an important presence in the *Qur'an*. She is the only woman mentioned there by name, and one of the most frequently named persons of all. By patiently reading the *Qur'an*, we find a new way to see Mary and her son Jesus.

Consider just one text. In Sura 19 of the *Qur'an*, we find reflection on a variety of prophetic figures—Zechariah and Jesus, Abraham and Moses. Along with them, much attention is paid to Mary. In the middle of Sura 19, the angel Gabriel visits Mary and speaks to her in words like those found in *Luke*. The angel announces God's intention that a son be born to her. Mary receives a powerful divine word that makes her a mother by virgin birth. This is simply a matter of divine power.

Similarly, what Mary does after the angel leaves also dramatizes the power of God:

When she conceived him, she went away to a distant place. The birth pangs led her to the trunk of a date palm tree. "Would that I had died before this," she said, "and become a thing forgotten, unremembered." Then (a voice) called to her from below: "Grieve not; your Lord has made a rivulet gush forth right below you. Shake the trunk of the date palm tree, and it will drop ripe dates for you. Eat and drink, and be at peace. If you see any man, tell him: 'I have verily vowed a fast to Ar-Rahman and cannot speak to any one this day.'"

Then she brought the child to her people. They exclaimed: "O Mary, you have done a most astonishing thing! O sister of Aaron, your father was not a wicked person, nor your mother sinful!" But she pointed toward him. "How can we talk to one," they said, "who is only an infant in the cradle?" "I am a servant

of God," he answered. "He has given me a Book and made me a prophet. . . ."⁵

Remarkably, as the infant Jesus continues, he too declares his submission to the one true God. As Mary, so Jesus.⁶

Most powerful for me is how Mary is held up in this Sura as a person entirely open to God's word. She and her son have no support other than God alone. She is very much in isolation, bereft of family and friends. She is in a strange and desert place, alone and in distress. There are no shepherds, no angels, not even a Joseph. She cries out, "Would that I had died before this, and become a thing forgotten, unremembered." But God has not forgotten "this thing." He feeds and shelters her at this most difficult moment. And then he sends her back to her people, a voiceless messenger to them.

She may be voiceless, but Mary is not simply a foil to Jesus, a woman measured by the standard of the Son of God. Instead, both Jesus and Mary are measured entirely by their submission to God's will. Gender does not radically distinguish Mary from Jesus, or God from humans. Attention to gender—looking at Mary, looking at Jesus—indicates rather how a man dependent on God and a woman dependent on God both live by faith, in submission to God's will. Jesus is venerated, but so is Mary. By their absolute dependence on God, they signify what it means to know, love, and serve God in this world.

Much changes as we reflect on the *Qur'an's* austere and powerful reading of Mary and her son Jesus, as we let Muslim wisdom jostle against how we traditionally have seen Jesus, Son of God, and Mary, God's mother. After the *Qur'an*, we may remain Christian and confirm the Creed, but we also see Mary differently, as a woman who shows us how God changes the way we live. We see Jesus as the son of Mary, like unto us in all things, a hope for what we can become, if we too admit our humanity and utter dependence on God. We may not know at first what to do with all this, since the theological and historical problems will not have disappeared. We are offered a very particular common ground much older and deeper than American politics and Middle East disruptions. Whatever else Mary may be, however we envision her in this new millennium, she nonetheless mediates a spiritual insight shared by Muslims and Christians alike. But we will be better off for having seen Mary and Jesus through Muslim eyes, outside our accustomed ideas and words. In turn this

⁵Sura 19.22-30, as translated by Ahmed Ali, *Al-Qur'an: A Contemporary Translation* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁶Jane Smith and Yvonne Haddad have thoroughly explored Muslim perceptions of Mary, as pure, virgin, true believer, and prophet, and in comparison and contrast to Eve and Fatimah. See Jane I. Smith and Yvonne Y. Haddad, "The Virgin Mary in Islamic Tradition and Commentary," in *The Muslim World* 74/3-4:161-87. See also John Kaltner, *Ishmael Instructs Isaac: An Introduction to the Qur'an for Bible Readers* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) chap. 5.

insight into Mary is mediated by first reflecting on Laksmi and Devi, all the better yet again.

LIBERATING GOD

The world is very large, and my brief reflection on the Qur'anic tradition serves only to suggest, by way of a single example, an array of potentially endless possibilities around the world of other such intuitively related insights into other traditions. This path of comparative reflection—seeing, reflection, intuitive leaps to other possibilities, new insights into what we had seen previously—is a winding one: from Hindu goddesses to Mary, and Mary in two traditions. I have thus followed a single thread through a sequence of religious contexts. None of this has been done very deeply here, and perhaps I have gone far enough for one presentation.

But there are still other steps to be taken, still other things to be seen, other intuitions to be followed. Going forth also means coming home again. Being a Christian is simple, but we have to keep trying to do it right, inside and outside our accustomed communities. I also know that I need to transform my Christian identity by listening to what other Christians are saying, close to home. Here then is just one more example.

Like you, I know that American Catholicism is already richly diverse, and changing even as we meet. I know that Native Americans, Asian immigrants, Latinos and Latinas, and African-Americans are bringing new life and diversity to the notion of "American Catholic." I also know that "American Catholic theology" ought not to be neatly separated from a wider theological conversation in the Christian community, Protestant as well as Catholic. I know a little about the various living Christian theologies growing out of these communities and conversations, and I know enough to respect them greatly.

But I also know that knowing about these things is not really enough. Much depends on how you know, the energy you invest in learning, the price you are willing to pay for keeping your eyes wide open. Much of the new and varied theology I know about often ends up being simply words and concepts and systems I respect from afar, as other people's theologies, cared about by people somewhere else. I can nod, approve, and then go back to my office, to go on reading my texts and writing about India in relation to my favorite Christian theologians. If so, comparative theology risks becoming something white guys do in their offices, while most of the Church happens elsewhere. That is not acceptable.

In preparing this presentation, I therefore stopped thinking about India for a moment. I started reading around in all the different theologies I've just mentioned. Like finding my way in Chennai, India, or learning Sanskrit, or rediscovering medieval Christian piety, or reintroducing myself to Mary and her son Jesus in the *Qur'an*, I've had to listen yet again to new voices expressed in unfamiliar styles and tones. I've had to learn new religious grammars, to think

about God from a different place, in light of a Bible proclaimed and practiced in other voices, other rhythms, other ways of worship.

And again I got very specific. By chance, while looking for useful accounts of African-American theology, I stumbled upon the *Narrative* and *Book of Life* of Sojourner Truth. She was a fellow New Yorker, even if her family came to New York under tragically different circumstances than did my ancestors, and even if she lived out both her slavery and freedom in nineteenth-century New York, before most of my ancestors got off the boat at Ellis Island. Born Isabella in an enslaved family in New York State, she reclaimed her freedom in mid-life. She became a preacher and a defender of the rights of defenseless women and men, and a powerful witness to Christ's liberating power. Though of course she was a product of her time, she was also an early proponent of women's rights. She offered a fresh and honest interpretation of what it means to be a Christian, how the Gospel is to be spoken in American society. God even spoke to her, God gave her the name by which we know her—she became a sojourner, destined to speak the truth in season and out. She reminded those who flocked to hear her—and now reminds me—of how people living near to one another can have very different lives, even very different American Christian lives, even right in New York. God spoke to her as God has not yet spoken to me, and I need to listen.⁷

So I found my way through her *Narrative* and *Book of Life*—sorting out layers of text, reports about her, words attributed to her, editors' improvements on her—all as distant to me as 150 years can be. Here too, as I paid attention, I began to connect intellectually and imaginatively with a world previously not my own. One example from her *Book* must suffice to show what I mean.

A central moment is her account of her real liberation, an unexpected encounter with God that transformed her familiar world, all in a flash, a moment of remarkable discernment. One day, at a relatively low and dry point in her life after gaining her freedom, she is planning to visit her old master's home. But she is stopped in her tracks:

Well, jest as I was goin' out to get into the wagon, *I met God!* an' says I, "O God, I didn't know as you was so great!"

She is overwhelmed by this sudden encounter with God, and she runs to her room:

⁷Sojourner Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (including the "Narrative of Sojourner Truth," her "Book of Life," and "A Memorial Chapter"), edited and introduced by Nell Irwin Painter (New York: Penguin Books, 1998). For an analysis, see Erlene Stetson and Linda David, *Glorying in Tribulation: the Lifework of Sojourner Truth* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994). See also, among many other resources, *Classic African American Women's Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); included is the "Narrative" of Sojourner Truth.

An' I turned right round an' come into the house, an' set down in my room; for 't was God all around me. I could feel it burnin', burnin', burnin' all around me, an' goin' through me; an' I saw I was so wicked, it seemed as ef it would burn me up.

An' I said, "O somebody, somebody, stand between God an' me! for it burns me!"

Suddenly, she realizes there *is* someone there, but she does not know who it is. This makes her look more deeply into her experience to identify the stranger who is already with her:

Then, honey, when I said so, I felt as it were somethn' like an amberill [umbrella] that came between me an' the light, an' I felt it was *somebody*—that came between me an' God; an' it felt cool, like a shade; an' says I, "Who's this that stands between me an' God? . . . *Who* is this?"

She does not know, and so must enter on an exercise in discernment:

An' then, honey, for a while it was like the sun shinin' in a pail o' water, when it moves up and down; for I begun to feel 't was somebody that loved me; an' I tried to know him. An' I said, "I know you! I know you! I know you!" An' then I said, "I do n't know you! I do n't know you! I do n't know you!" An' when I said, "I know you, I know you" the light came; an' when I said, "I do n't know you, I do n't know you," it went jes' like the sun in a pail o' water.

Her discernment culminates in enlightenment:

An' finally somethin' spoke out in me an' says I, "*This is Jesus!*" An' I spoke out with all my might, an' says I, "*This is Jesus!* Glory be to God!"

This insight infuses the whole world around her with a new light, a living, material, divine presence:

An' then the whole world grew bright, an' the trees they waved an' waved in glory, an' every little bit o' stone on the ground shone like glass; and I shouted an' said, "Praise, praise, praise to the Lord!" An' I began to feel sech a love in my soul as I never felt before—love to all creatures.

Thus ends her account in the more polished, presumably more widely known version of it. But in the version I have been following, the account goes a step further, breaking another social boundary. Sojourner's insight resists even the violence of slavery and the bitterness arising from it:

An' then, all of a sudden, it stopped, an' I said, "Dar's de white fools that have abused you, an' beat you, an' abused your people—think o' them!" But then there came another rush of love through my soul, an' I cried out loud—"Lord, Lord, I can love *even de white folks!*"⁸

⁸Narrative of Sojourner Truth ("Book of Life"), 107-108.

Sojourner found God in a most peculiar way, and learned to calm the waters, to look up from the dazzle of distractions, to turn from reflections to the light itself in order to see beyond the boundaries of her life as she had lived it up to that point.

Sojourner's enlightenment and her words about it are not systematically developed, but they can hardly be surpassed in their power to illuminate the whole of our Christian experience. She explains to me very clearly what we Jesuits have been trying to say for centuries about the discernment of spirits and the freedom God gives to those who pay attention.

She is, of course, also one of the mothers of American Christian theology, our ancestor in the work of speaking Christ in this country. She is in a way like Mary at the cross or in the *Qur'an*—a woman alone, just a woman—who nonetheless lives by the word of God and makes God eloquently present to her people, slave and free, male and female, family and stranger alike. She is not, to be sure, a goddess, but like Laksmi, she offers a refuge outside the normal power structures for those with nowhere else to go, nowhere else to hope. By reading her book and finding her voice in the midst of so many voices, I have started learning to see differently yet again, this time along with Christian sisters and brothers whose lives and faith have rarely intersected with mine. The worlds of comparative theology and African-American theology begin to be worlds not entirely separate from one another.

ALL IN CHRIST, BUT STILL ALL

All of this—Laksmi, Devi, Mary, Mary and her son in the *Qur'an*, Sojourner Truth testifying—constitute a very wide, imaginatively linked range of reflections. My examples, tumbling against one another, could keep on multiplying. I could go on tracing other analogies and echoes, reading other texts, reflecting on other holy encounters and extraordinary witnesses, incorporating a yet wider range of practices, images, and relationships that make up living religions far and near.

You may wish to compliment me for my openness: black and white, slave and free, male and female, old and new, god and goddess, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Christian—it is all here. Perhaps, though, I've lost my way. You may wonder whether there isn't something more, and simpler, to the Christian Gospel and Christian theology. I have been going broad; you may be wondering when I will go deep. It is a matter, after all, of returning to the core of our faith, our encounter with Christ, to die and rise with him.

Take for instance the familiar and powerful text from *Galatians*, where Christ changes our categories and transforms how we relate to one another:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are

Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.⁹

In Christ God has changed everything. Many differences are now behind us, some mistaken or out of date, some irrelevant, some evil. The difference that matters lies in Christ and our emerging Christ-consciousness. Or as Paul says earlier in the same letter, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."¹⁰ To put on Christ, to see Christ in myself and my neighbor may shatter the ordinary categories by which I do my work. This too is the vocation of the theologian.

Attention to the infinitely wide religious possibilities of our world is no reason to ignore Paul's insight. Our appreciation of Laksmi and Devi, Mary at the cross and in the desert place, and even Sojourner Truth's brave resistance to bitterness—all of this may sit uncomfortably next to Galatians, which makes a simpler demand on the theologian. This is not a bad situation. There is no reason for a theologian to think according to a single, comprehensive insight. Even if the pieces do not fit together—seeing everything just as it is, in itself, yet also seeing everything in Christ—we still need to see Laksmi and Devi, Mary—twice over—and Sojourner Truth, all in light of Galatians, as if it really is Christ seeing through our eyes.

Going deep in Christ cannot mean going blind. It would be a mistake to erase the slender imaginative path we have been travelling through different religions, the divine and the human, the female and male, the slave and free. Neither words nor the Word should blind us to the living realities that stand before us when we open our eyes. Christ crosses the boundaries of difference, but this crossing means more if we are actually seeing all those real and holy differences that will not disappear in this millennium either. It is rooted in Christ that we traverse the boundaries of Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free, divine and human. It is in Christ that we encounter Laksmi in Her temple, read our way into the presence of the beautiful Devi, stand with Mary at the cross or in the desert, walk with Sojourner Truth into uncharted freedom.

Paul is right then to remind us that even after new birth in Christ we remain heirs to the promise of Abraham and Sarah. Our heritage becomes wider, not more narrow, over time. As Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote,

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his. . . .¹¹

As heirs and as God's children we remember, we keep the faith, and we see with our eyes wide open.

⁹Galatians 3:27-29 RSV.

¹⁰Galatians 2:20a RSV.

¹¹From the poem beginning "As kingfishers catch fire . . .," poem no. 115 (p. 141) in *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. Norman H. Mackenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

VOCATION

In this reflection, I have traced a winding path of intuitively connected examples. I have implied that there is no overarching narrative that explains, already and in advance, how we are to make our own the multiple religious insights and experiences of the human race. I have not proposed a theory about God and the world, I have not suggested a new theology of religions. I have not methodically uncovered my own presuppositions. I have not acknowledged all the theologians here tonight whose words make possible my words tonight. Such things can be done, of course, and should.

But the skills I have suggested—loving attention to concrete particularities, keeping our eyes open, a willingness to leap intuitively from one possibility to the next, seeing ourselves differently in light of the new—must keep coming first, if we are to have something worth stating in more theoretical terms. To live and write and act and worship with our eyes open is essential to our vocation as theologians today, even when it puts us in situations where words fail us. To be a Christian is simple and startlingly clear. We focus on Christ, we see everything.

But if so, we lose control. Every now and then, we find ourselves standing anew before God, in faces, voices, and words we did not know before. It may be a Laksmi in her temple, reminding us how the holy feels close up. Or the most beautiful Devi teaching us to see the divine clearly, materially, blissfully. Or Mary giving us hope by her brave witness, standing there at God's death, or teaching us what it means to be not God, having no voice but God's word. Or Sojourner Truth telling the stark truth about loving our neighbors, every one of them. Or Paul seeing Christ, right through all the separations we make. Or all the other things we see because we have seen these things first.

It looks, in fact, as if we've barely begun the work of theology God has given us. This is a vocation to give our lives to, a vision to live for.

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