

A RESPONSE TO FRANCIS X. CLOONEY

INTRODUCTION

First, let me thank Dr. Clooney for his rich and evocative essay by which he led us to vicariously experience his intellectual, spiritual, and affective journey as he stood before the shrine of the Hindu goddess Laksmi, read a hymn to the goddess Devi, encountered Mary through the prism of the Hindu goddesses and the texts of the Koran, and, finally, literally returned to his geographic home to discover in historical texts his sister New Yorker, Sojourner Truth, and her profound mystical experiences of a self-revealing God.

The background theory¹ that illuminates Clooney's hermeneutical method is that of Hans George Gadamer as describe in his classic, *Truth and Method*.² Throughout the text, Clooney, steeped in his studies of South Asian languages and civilizations, moves with "insight and instinct" to bridge the religious horizons of Hinduism, Catholicism, Islam, and Black Protestant Christianity. He allowed diverse texts to evoke his participatory interpretation as he searched for the meaning of the role of the feminine in the human encounter with God (p. 4 of Clooney).³

The following remarks will be in three major categories: first, an interpretive summary to ascertain from Dr. Clooney whether or not I understood his method and purpose; secondly, a critical comment; and, finally, some questions to initiate the discussion.

AN INTERPRETIVE SUMMARY: THE FUSION OF RELIGIOUS HORIZONS

Clooney's presentation illustrates how the hermeneutical method applies both to experiential encounters with texts and in ritual encounter allows one to cross the thresholds from one's known context of faith to the unknown faith of "the other" as a method of illuminating, expanding, and thus deepening one's understanding of one's own faith tradition.

Clooney asserts unabashedly that "*seeing* beyond the limits of the predictable . . . allowing such moves to the edge to happen, without being afraid of what we *see and hear*," then expressing such experiences in words so others can share the vision is the *vocation of the theologian* (emphasis mine).

We *see* for a greater distance and greater breadth; we learn to let go of and then return to the things we'd *seen* at the beginning; we *see ourselves* anew in light

¹Here I am using the term as discussed by Francis Schussler Fiorenza, "Systematic Theology: Task and Methods," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 1-87.

²Hans George Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

³Numbers in parenthesis indicate pages in the manuscript of Clooney's text.

of the other, in a vision of self and other stripped of illusions, clutter, confusion.

One is struck by Clooney's repeated use of the word "seeing." For Clooney, theology is an ocular and auditory process. His seeing is not the occasional glance but a deep participatory act which conditions his experience of "the other" revealed in ritual or text. His seeing is an epistemological method that not only informs his understanding of the texts but also expands his understanding of his Christian faith and thus transforms who he is. What Clooney discovers by his participation in the texts is not only that which is different from his familiar horizon but that which is in common with and which enriches his understanding of his own tradition and self.

His presentation not only reported his experience and interpretation, but he helped me see and share the richness of his experiential encounter with the goddess Laksmi and his textual encounter with the goddess Devi. Clooney's understanding of the meaning of Laksmi and Devi for the Hindus seems to have been a product of what Gadamer describes as a "fusion of horizons." Gadamer explains the "fusion of horizons" by suggesting that the encounter with a text is similar to having a conversation. The goal of a conversation is to come to a mutual understanding. Each person suspends his own view and accepts the dialogue partner's view as valid. One transposes into the other so one can understand more fully what is said. What is accepted is the "substantive rightness" of the other's opinion so we can be "at one with each other."⁴ One who engages a text engages it by translation or interpretation and via a "hermeneutical conversation." One transposes himself or herself into the text to discover the substantive meaning of the same. In all conversations, including hermeneutical ones, the translator/interpreter finds a common language which "coincides with the very act of understanding and reaching agreement."⁵

Though he protests that he did not worship Laksmi, because "Christians don't worship goddesses," it seems to me he nevertheless sought refuge in this shrine several times a month drawn by Laksmi's maternal, compassionate, life-giving welcome of strangers and the poor. He sought in the dark, inviting place of her temple a home away from home. In these trimonthly ritual encounters and more frequent dialogues with Hindu texts, Clooney participated in a process of mutual gazing which allowed him to discover new meaning in the shrine to Laksmi and to interpret the hymns to Devi.

Perhaps through this process he found a common language that was very distant but oddly familiar. Could it be that the alienation which all travelers feel when surrounded by unfamiliar sound, customs, and languages was assuaged by the similarity between contemplative moments in the Spiritual Exercises, which is part of his Jesuit tradition, and the distinct contemplative depth experienced

⁴Gadamer, 385.

⁵Gadamer, 388.

by worshippers of Laksmi? In exploring Hindu gods and goddesses in the context of India, perhaps Clooney had to let go of his Christian horizons to see and listen to the Hindu shrines and texts. However, he also rediscovered in the depths of contemplation the common language of both religions—contemplative seeking for union with the Divine.

Clooney's "seeing and listening to" the texts of the Hindu goddesses and perceiving the indispensable role they played in the Hindu pantheon brought him back to "rediscover" Mary, the human Mother of the God-man Jesus, who is a key woman in our Roman Catholic tradition. By looking at Mary anew, by studying traditional Marian texts in a manner similar to his study of Laksmi and Devi, he discovered new aspects of Mary. Clooney's textual encounter of the *Stabat Mater* made it clear to him that Mary is not a goddess. Yet, Christians through the ages and in many cultures have turned and continue to turn to Mary to mediate their encounter with the God of Jesus Christ in ways similar to the Hindus' turning to Laksmi and Devi to fulfill their desires and to assist them in their efforts to encounter other Hindu deities. Mary is, after all, honored in our Roman Catholic tradition as the Mediatrix of All Grace.⁶

Clooney also deepens his appropriation of the Christian Marian experience by being attentive to the Muslim sacred text, the Qur'an, and its narrative of the conception and birth of Jesus and Mary's mediation of Jesus' encounter with the people. Clooney is moved by the Qur'an's view of Mary's total openness to God and both Mary's and Jesus' total submissiveness and dependence upon God alone. Mary's life is an example and model for those who want to live a life in total dependence on God. Mary is a secondary model for the human encounter with God, while, for Christians, Jesus Christ remains the primary sacrament of our salvific encounter with God.

Finally, Clooney returns to the social location of his family of origin, the now racially and culturally diverse geographic Catholic community of New York City. In his effort to explore African American theology he discovered some primary texts of Sojourner Truth, a nineteenth-century Black Protestant woman who was a former slave, abolitionist, and advocate of women's rights. Sojourner, like Hagar in the Old Testament and Mary the Mother of God, must depend directly on God. According to Sojourner Truth's *Book of Life*, which Clooney quotes, this black woman was a mystic and social reformer. Her biographical reflections and prayer give evidence of the three stages of John of the Cross's spiritual encounter or Mysticism and its fruit.

Quoting from Clooney's text one notes references to purgation, illumination, mystical union, and social transformation. (His fourth aspect is characteristic of

⁶See more on this tradition and popular devotion to Mary Mediatrix of All Grace online at <<http://vatican.nlb.mondosearch.com/catechism-grace.html>>, <<http://www.usccb.org/catechism/text/pt1sect2chpt3art9p6.htm>>, and <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/MARY/MEDIATRI.htm>>.

black spirituality and other mystics, although often it is omitted in popular interpretation of mystics and saints.)⁷

Purgation. “. . . ’t was God all around me. . . . I was so wicked, it seemed as ef it would burn me up.”

Illumination. “[And then] I felt it was *somebody*—that came between me an’ God; an’ it felt cool. . . . I begun to feel ’t was somebody that loved me; an I tried to know him. . . . [After a time of confusion and doubt she stammers] 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!”

Mystical Union. [She experiences “a new light, a living, material divine presence.” —Clooney commentary] “An I began to feel sech a love in my soul as I never felt before—love to all creatures.”

Social Transformation. “ ‘Dar’s de white fools that have abused you, an’ beat you, an’ abused your people—think of 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

CRITICAL COMMENT FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Now let me turn to my critical observations. Although Clooney logically draws parallels between his understanding of the goddesses with other women who have mediated or been powerful witnesses of God’s power and presence, my reading of his texts also discovers parallels between the goddesses and God in the persons of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The goddesses are female but they are also gods in the Hindu tradition, and in some ways they parallel our understandings and encounter with the Triune God. The two goddesses Clooney describes to us resemble Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

As one who has never studied any goddesses I was struck in the written text by the descriptive parallels to my Christian horizon. The Jesus of History exhibited many of the traits Hindus attribute to the goddess Laksmi. As a teacher and prophet, Jesus was intimate with God, reminding those who listened to his preaching of God’s graciousness, love, and compassion for those perceived as sinners and outcastes (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus’ patterns of relationship, healings, and teaching were a source of hope for the poor and marginalized.⁹

⁷Alton Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change: The Social Witness of Howard Thurman* (pbk. ed.: New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1992) and *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet Ruffing (pbk. ed.: New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001). See also Jamie T. Phelps, “Black Spirituality,” in *Taking Down Our Harps*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, O.S.B. (New York: Orbis Press, 1998) 179-98.

⁸All quotes from the Sojourner Truth’s *Book of Life* are as cited in Clooney’s text.

⁹See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus* (New York, Continuum, 1979) 140-271.

In a similar way I was struck by how the goddess Devi's descriptive text parallels the role the Christian tradition attributes as similar and dissimilar to the Holy Spirit. Clooney noted that

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. . . . She is power itself, energy and life. Unlike a god, Devi does not exercise power, because She is power.

Both Hinduism and Christianity have female images of God, as has been demonstrated in much of our contemporary feminist theology.¹⁰

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION OF CLOONEY'S METHOD

My last observations regarding the feminist imaging of God lead to my questions regarding Clooney's understanding of the role of the theologian in his or her coming to and articulating new understandings and interpretations of the Christian community's beliefs and actions. My questions touch many areas: God; Church Mission; Personal, Spiritual, and Theological Insight; Christian liberation from divisive patterns of oppression and alienation within the Church; and, finally, the implications of this work for overcoming the sociopolitical and religious divisions among believing communities and in the world at large.

1. As a Catholic theologian, how do you engage the question of truth and its implications for doctrine, spirituality, and Christian living? What are your criteria of truth as you explore world religions?
2. How does your study of the Hindu gods/goddesses illuminate your understanding of the God of Jesus Christ?
3. Do you see ways that your experience of entering into diverse religious horizons can facilitate the Church's mission of creating unity both within the church and in society as she embodies her self-understanding of Church as Communion?
4. Specifically, how can your work be helpful to the realization of communion within the U.S. Catholic Church in the context of her racial-cultural, theological, and religious diversity?
5. Historically, when members of dominant culture encounter "the other," at worst they assimilate or conquer or subjugate them; at best they use them as a nonparticipating catalyst for self-development or wealth (financial, intellectual, or cultural).
 - a. How has your encounter with the religious other enhanced your personal, spiritual, and theological self-understanding?

¹⁰Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is* is perhaps the most extensive Catholic exposition of the feminist image of God as Sophia. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

- b. How has your encounter with other religions and cultures by way of textual interpretation enhanced your personal, spiritual, and theological self-understandings of the Hindu and others you have encountered or studied?
- c. How has expanding your theological vision and understanding changed your patterns of relationship to your "religious and racial, cultural, and gender other"?
- d. Given that India, like other parts of the world, is currently embroiled in human conflict and division occasioned by the struggle over land, religious sites, and human rights, how does theological work, which has enhanced your ability to encounter "the other" with respect and genuine affirmation, contribute to these struggles? (I am thinking now of the contemporary religious struggle and divisions between Hindus and Muslims and the longstanding denial of full human dignity and rights to women and Dalits or "outcastes.")

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