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Book Review

Reading the Hindu and Christian Classics: Why and How Deep Learning Still Matters

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Book Reviews

Reading the Hindu and Christian Classics:

Why and How Deep Learning Still Matters

By: **Francis X. Clooney, SJ**

Publisher: University of Virginia Press (Charlottesville, Virginia, U.S.A.)

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Reviewed by: Charissa Jaeger-Sanders, Graduate Theological Union

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Grab your favorite espresso and eliminate the distractions to engage this recent work that is not for the faint of heart! Modern comparative theology pioneer, Jesuit priest, and Harvard Divinity School professor, Francis “Frank” Clooney, invites us, in *Reading the Hindu and Christian Classics: Why and How Deep Learning Still Matters* (2019), to slowly and deeply read scholarly writings of different faith traditions side-by-side for a fuller understanding of one’s own faith tradition, which is enriched by the study of another. Unlike the rapid-paced world we know, this dense book repeatedly recommends a midrash-like “humble work of slow, patient study” (103) as Clooney calls for deep, transformative work that comes from the persistent engagement with challenging texts. “We are in danger of losing our bearings,” he cautions, “because we no longer have the patience, humility, and dispositions to read slowly, for as long as it takes, without any craving for immediate results” (xix). Clooney presents three pairs of often overlooked scholarly texts, each dyad containing both a Hindu work and a Christian text. Following a chapter format using an introduction to, excerpt from, and commentary on each text, Clooney methodologically engages and walks the reader through the slow-reading practice whereby one’s understanding of each work is enhanced and

deepened by studying the two texts together. The vocabulary and chosen manuscripts indicate this book is geared toward scholars; it requires exceptional discipline and the slow reading that Clooney is championing on a larger scale.

Because theology addresses some of life's deepest mysteries, Clooney encourages cultivating humility in theological work and acquiring a "methodological modesty and commitment to continuity" (57). Therefore, as readers and fellow theologians, we should practice humility and nurture a willingness to learn not only from within one's own faith tradition but also beyond. As the complex work of theology does not benefit from lack of nuance or essentializing, Clooney encourages us to refrain from the urge to "neaten-up" our own theological traditions as well as other traditions. He paraphrases a well-known Hindu adage: "The truth is one, but good people try to teach it doctrinally in various ways" (55).

Clooney offers challenging excerpts that support "hard readings that notably slow us down" (106). While he does not explicitly advocate reading these texts in their original languages, which is his method, that process would assuredly decelerate the reader and allow deep, transformative engagement. Clooney asserts that deep theology considers each doctrine from several angles "opening it to new thinking without abandoning the truth that is at stake. Tradition provides the repertoire of such angles and avenues of approach" (60).

Although Clooney does not specifically address it, I contend that we also need to look at who is not being heard or represented within the traditions and intentionally examine theological concerns and existing doctrines from these angles. As an eco-feminist comparative theologian, I would advocate that Clooney's method be extended to intentionally include more marginalized voices and seek for the flourishing of all persons and life, especially those who have most often been left out.

To be fair, though, Clooney does advise allowing for mystery, interpretation, and space for views that we may or may not hold. We must first assimilate what is stated before jumping to points of disagreement: "We may very well at some point reject what we have learned. But if we dismiss [one's] view before learning it, we will miss the opportunity to learn deeply from a religious classic of another time and place, and indulge

in learning *only* from people like ourselves” (99)—a timely word for our polarized societies. Clooney invites us to temporarily “put aside larger conceptual questions that are not of [the writer’s] interest” (106). In other words, we as the reader should tenaciously seek to understand the author’s perspective with humility and learnability and even be willing to reread.

Clooney’s first pair of texts are doctrine themed:

Jaiminīyanyāmālā: The Garland of Jaimini’s Reasons, a fourteenth-century Hindu casebook of ritual law written in Sanskrit; and *The Greater Catechism (Catechismus Maior)*, a Latin work written by Peter Canisius (1521-1597). The introduction of the Hindu ritual law text would have benefited from clearer definitions of legalese (like injunction and enjoined) and their particularity in this context. Enjoined can mean both to urge someone to do something and to prohibit someone from doing something, which can be interpreted in quite the opposite ways or in complementary ways contingent upon context and hermeneutic. Having a clear sense of how “enjoined” is being used is crucial to the reader’s proper understanding and interpretation. After a conversation with a lawyer, I trudged through the excerpts from *The Garland*, which turned out to have surprisingly rich material. Then, I studied Canisius’ doctrinal thoughts presented as catechism. The sequential reading offered illuminating insights of each text that one might not otherwise notice. The process of reading similarly themed texts side-by-side allows one to notice details that might not otherwise be apparent if one text was read on its own. In this practice, the texts start to be in dialogue with each other offering a rich and fuller understanding of one another.

The second set of instruction-themed texts were easier to navigate and proved equally abundant: *Collection of Right Perspectives on Position (Siddhānta Leśa Saṃgraha)*, a Sanskrit text by Appayya Dīkṣita (1520-1593); and *Sentences Articulated in Four Books (Sententiae in Quattuor Libris Distinctae)* a Latin work by Peter Lombard (1100-1160). Clooney writes, “Each of these classics of doctrinal theology aims at clarifying and teaching the consensus of its tradition and delving into [its] enduring truth” (17). Reading these texts, consecutively, invites the reader to engage the

concept of instruction more deeply and broadly and the concept of truth more profoundly.

Clooney then includes an excursus chapter that gives insights into his hermeneutical methodology before moving to his last pair of texts that showcase the importance of praxis: *The Admirable Secret of the Most Holy Rosary (Le Secret Admirable du Très Saint Rosaire)* a French text by Louis Grignion de Montfort (1673-1716) and *One Hundred Linked Verses on the Holy Word of Mouth (Tiruvāymoḷi Nur̥rantāti)*, a Tamil piece by Maṇavāḷamānui (1370-1450). In this section, Clooney demonstrates how the transformative work of slow and deep reading is enhanced by embodied practice through means like praying the rosary and textual recitation.

The book engages deep dialogue throughout—within and between texts. The studying of each text, consecutively, opens key learnings from each tradition that foster a dialogical, bridge-building approach between faith traditions with the power to change relationships between diverse religious communities. Clooney’s well-written book embodies his distinctive dialogical text-based approach to comparative theology inviting us to notice when studying outside our own faith tradition inspires us to think more deeply and broadly about our own.

Charissa Jaeger-Sanders is a Ph.D. student in the Theology and Ethics Department at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA. As an eco-feminist, dialogic comparative theologian ordained in the United Methodist Church, she works at the intersection of Christianity and Hinduism with an underpinning of philosophy of science.

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Decolonial Love:
Salvation in Colonial Modernity
By: **Joseph Drexler-Dreis**

Publisher: Fordham University Press (New York, New York, U.S.A.)