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A Rich And Holy Bewilderment

Steven P. Hopkins

Swarthmore College, shopkin1@swarthmore.edu

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BOOK REVIEW
“A RICH AND HOLY BEWILDERMENT”

A Review of Francis X. Clooney,
His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence.
Series: Encountering Traditions. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press,
2014. Pp.187.

Review By Steven P. Hopkins,
Swarthmore College

In *His Hiding Place is Darkness* Francis X. Clooney reads two long poems side by side, the Biblical *Shir ha-Shirim*, or “Song of Songs,” in its Latin Christian Vulgate form of the *Cantica Canticorum*, and the *Tiruvāymoḷi* or “Holy Word [of Mouth]” of the 9th-century South Indian Tamil saint-poet Catakopaṇ, more popularly known by his epithet Nammālvār, “Our Master,” with the word “master”—*ālvār*—also evoking images of one immersed or drowning (in god).

The Tamil poem is thoroughly religious, composed in praise of the Hindu god Viṣṇu in his many forms, from the majestic Nārāyaṇa to the Dwarf and the lover and child-god Kṛṣṇa, but is also rooted in purely secular literary motifs of ancient Tamil poems of love and war, whose roots go back to the first to the third centuries C.E. The original of the Latin *Cantica Canticorum*, the Hebrew *Shir ha-Shirim*, is a strange, rich evocative text, bereft of overt religious references, that is most likely post-exilic, dated around the third century B.C.E. The Song’s original Hebrew is obscure, and reflects a variety of languages and traditions—Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and even, interestingly, South Indian (there are several Tamil loan-words in the *Song*).

Both the *Song* and the *Holy Word* have inspired centuries of scholastic commentaries in Jewish and Christian and in Hindu Śrīvaiṣṇava communities respectively, from roughly the early “medieval” periods (tenth-eleventh centuries C.E.) right up to the present. The commentarial literature in both traditions

is rich, and covers multiple languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and various European vernaculars for the *Song*, and Tamil, Sanskrit, and the scholastic vernacular *maṇipravāla* (a mixing of Sanskrit and Tamil) for the *Holy Word*.

Clooney, however, is not writing a literary history of the *Song* and the *Holy Word* and their learned commentaries, nor is he attempting a study of “their reception in tradition” (147). Rather, Clooney’s book represents a contemporary contemplative commentary on both texts, read together, side-by-side, in the style of St. Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises* or Hindu Śrīvaiṣṇava *anubhava*, the scholastic and spiritual “relishing-experiencing,” savoring and “reimagining” of a root text. In his discussion of the *Song*, Clooney privileges, and cites in some detail, the medieval Latin commentaries of three Cistercian scholar monks from the twelfth-thirteenth centuries, Bernard of Clairvaux, Gilbert of Hoyland, and John of Ford, which as a group provides the reader of the *Song* with a continuous commentary of the entire text (19). For the *Holy Word*, Clooney follows most closely, and actively cites, the earliest twelfth- to fourteenth-century Śrīvaiṣṇava commentaries of Nāñjīyar, Nampillai, and Periyāvaccappillai (32). Thus Clooney’s voice is always accompanied by his medieval commentators, creating a complex sometimes dazzling sometimes confounding counterpoint: we have the dramatic lyric voices of the poetry, the sympathetic but rigorously theological ground-bass of medieval commentators, and the recitatives of our contemporary guide, with his own contemporary theological and literary sources.

The book is structured like a prayer book of sorts, with selected translated primary texts from the *Song* and the *Holy Word* presented first, then a thematic commentary that reads the texts side-by-side, utilizing the insights of traditional commentators. But it is more than that. Using the theological vocabulary of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Clooney has constructed a compelling “theodrama” in three Acts, with a Prologue, two Entr’actes, and an Epilogue (22-26). Clooney uses von Balthasar’s notions of “theopoetics” and “theodrama” as ideal preludes to any form of “theologic” to gain a “richer sense of how the poetic and dramatic can be integral to a fuller theological discourse,” and more concretely, how one might “draw on poetry and prose, narrative and theology, to discern in the works of imagination, with respect to the beautiful, the infusion of divine glory into human words” (23). Summarizing von Balthasar’s project, Clooney goes on to say: “Apprehending the realm of this glory, divine beauty shining with human experience, is not in competition with theology more strictly understood, but rather a necessary practice of attention that precedes effort to apprehend and state the truth of Christian revelation and tradition” (23-24). Of course

here the theological truth or truths that emerge will not only be Christian, but will be some kind of “Hindu-Christian Theopoetics,” to use the book’s subtitle, a contemplative vision that hovers above, lives in-between, or perhaps inheres in both traditions. As we will see, Clooney follows von Balthasar’s structural lead in placing emphasis on theopoetics and theodrama (a focus on the aesthetic, on poetry and the narrative dramas of love in his two companion texts), before he attempts to formulate a comparative “theologic” (however tentative) in Entr’Acte Two.

Act One, “Missing Him,” begins with *Song* 1.1-7 and *Holy Word* 1.4.1-10. Both texts describe young women who have had some profound previous contact with a male beloved, and now find themselves alone, missing his presence. There’s a common tension in the Latin *Cantica* and the Tamil *tirumōḷi*: the “mix of nearness and absence that makes searching necessary even while calling its usefulness into question” (5). In the *Song* the girl passionately calls out for her beloved, who also seems to be quite near, even listening; there is a shift in tenses, from third to second person, in the very first two verses (those “kisses” and those “breasts”), indexing both intimacy and distance, and her beloved even gives her an obscure command at 1.7. We have instability, tension, and uncertainty in each line of these first verses. Love is certainly far from confident here. In Catakopaṇ’s long Tamil cycle, we have just left behind a preceding *tirumōḷi* (1.3) that praises divine accessibility (9), but are faced now with ten verses of agonized and frustrated searching.

Clooney notes that this kind of “abrupt shift in mood from praise to anxiety, intimacy to absence” is given no overt explanation (*ibid.*), though we see throughout Clooney’s study that this is a common motif in the Tamil saint-poet’s “girl songs.” One of the medieval Śrīvaiṣṇava commentators, Nañjiyar explains this agony of absence in terms of sickness and cure: just as a physician will forbid a sick person to eat anything, so the Lord wants to bring the saint to health through a curative withdrawal (*ibid.*). Nañjiyar adds that such an agony implies total dependence, and that this is why the saint-poet Catakopaṇ has chosen the persona of a young woman, for a woman in love is the very trope of suffering in union and separation (10).

Bernard of Clairvaux, in his commentary on the first verses of the *Song*, explains such oscillations of presence and absence with theological truths that speak of a god who is “ever-present” but can only be seen in partial guises: “Now, indeed, He appears,” Bernard says, “to whom He pleases as He pleases, but not as He is” (5). The girl needs a lesson in mortality, and the inevitable limitations of her human condition (8). This is theologically consoling perhaps,

though hardly an answer to the passionate, broken, and seemingly lost lyric female voice of the *Song*, never replaced in its sovereign primacy, even by the commentators. Ultimately at the end of this first Act, Clooney muses, we are left with doubt and uncertainty about the very object of our search, doubled in this case, because we have experienced love and particular loss in both Hindu and Christian guises (14-15). We have no firm ground to stand on, certainly not some systematic “a ladder of love” to climb, in either tradition.

Clooney remarkably evokes here, right at the beginning of his comparative study—and this is part of the book’s genius—a double sense of loss for the truly religious reader, and he is speaking for himself, as well as implying our own disorientation and confusion. If we (and this implies both Clooney and his readers, you and I) have read these lyrics side-by-side with real understanding and emotional commitment, with an eye to the fierce particularities of these voices and these claims of love, we will become more than “spectators,” we will now “share their loss and confusion” (15).

As Christians, we read the absence (or absent presence) of Jesus in the *Song*, but the other story also “lingers, attracting and disturbing us,” and we think that “perhaps the beloved is there (too) or (only) there” (ibid.) We learn also to “sorrow with this other woman who pines for her beloved Krishna.” And we presume the sensitive Hindu reader might feel the same in reverse. “It is,” Clooney continues, “in this cultivated uncertainty, the beloved lost twice over, that we are to imagine and find our way; more than spectators, we now share their loss and confusion. The beloved is more of a mystery than we had imagined. What is lost, and gained, now lies also in the denial of the comfortable adequacy of my own tradition’s singular account of divine absence and presence” (15).

The remainder of the book will develop this insight with a level of detail and nuanced close reading impossible to summarize in a review, so I will only highlight some of the later core insights of this unfolding drama. Entr’acte One, “Love In-Between,” articulates the theological and methodological ground on which the study stands, outlining von Balthasar’s categories, and with an emphasis on “theopoetics” and “theodrama,” Clooney points to one of the salient insights of von Balthasar on the love of god. When we love we are open, vulnerable, and like the poets’ young women, we enter uncertain and incomplete “in-between” spaces, impelled by “a continuous forward striving (*diastasis*),” and “the truth of the *cor inquietum*,” “of love and hope for what is absent” (25). Waiting and uncertainty rule this darkness, and strangely it is precisely here that we encounter the beloved, in his dark absence. After an excursus on the dizzying poetics of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the poet’s visions, in “Wreck

of the Deutschland,” of Christ’s “pitch” and “inscape” in the wreckage of this world, love as a foundering and disruptive process where we find ourselves lost, Clooney turns to the work, and the style, of a contemporary American poet, Jorie Graham (36-44). Quite an original touch, this use of a secular poet to speak of a way to *write* process, to inscribe “side-tracks,” “erring,” and uncertainty into one’s prose, into the very grains of one’s thinking to most productively “catch in words these two women, two loves that we read together” (36-37). Writing in failure, absence, impossibility, continual process, appearing and vanishing: these are aspects of Graham’s style, and though they do not mark the actual prose of Clooney’s book, they serve as a methodological frame for the points he makes about a theodrama that has as much to do about speechlessness and silence as it does about speaking. Reading *The Song* and *The Holy Word* together is more about getting lost than being found (46-47). “We need to avoid,” Clooney notes, “both an unreflective multiplication of words and names, and an amnesia that would paper over the manifold with a language of sameness,” and Graham’s style offers a us a way to “fail with difficulty, and productively” in “our writing of this beloved, now across two traditions” (36).

Act Two, “Spiritual Exercises In Times of Absence,” is a tour de force of side-by-side close reading of these two marvelous texts, Latin and Tamil, along with their medieval Christian and Hindu commentators, and I will leave readers to relish on their own these dense and profound pages, where we hear again from the young women who struggle with loss and absence, with a nearness to the beloved that is also far, a presence that is an absence, with momentary vivid lucid memories of the beloved’s beautiful body that vanish in an empty present. I will skip now instead to Entr’acte Two, “Writing Theology After the Hiding of the Beloved,” where Clooney utilizes von Balthasar’s work to articulate a “theologic” that is true to the spirit of our tumultuous and unresolved theodrama of human and divine.

After our detailed contemplative reading, Clooney writes that we find ourselves “in the open space of powerful yet discontinuous insights, suspended between two works of poetry, in the gap where no set of rules applies” (105) What to do, theologically? First he evokes Graham, with a nuanced reading of her poem “The Taken-Down God” from the collection *Never*, where the poet, and her poetry, her very poetic lines, break down, fracture, erring as it goes, as she witnesses, scribbling in her notebook, the vivid material action of the Jesus icon body taken down from its cross on Holy Saturday, to be hidden away in burial, in a small Italian church (107-113), then he turns again to von Balthasar for theological “advice” (113).

In good scholastic style, Clooney outlines three core themes that best “negotiate properly the transition from the theopoetic and theodramatic back to theology:” spirit, searching, and silence (115). In “spirit” we have the withdrawal of the person Jesus, a kind of material death and absence, but also the possibility of the indwelling Spirit as a kind of “absent presence” (116) arriving as the Son departs (117). In “searching” we make room for the “always more, not yet realized,” a process “permeated by potentiality” (119). This is the *diastasis*, the ever-forward motion, what the early fourth-century Christian Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa termed *epektasis*, endless “straining tension” toward the divine. To evoke Graham evoking Hopkins, “we hope to be afflicted with the impossibility of staying just where we are” (107; 126). Finally, we have “silence,” and Clooney cites the great and wise book of Max Picard to speak of “the more” that goes beyond the word, “the more in the word that must be realized in action” and the “plenitude of this more” (121). Such would be our potential theologic “after the hiding,” a theology that will not have buried the particular voices of women in our poetry.

There are a few questions that arise in my reading of this book, though they are minor questions. One has to do with the commentaries, and what I still see as tensions between poetry and commentary, primary and secondary texts, lyric and prose modes of discourse. As Clooney well argues throughout the book, both Christian and Hindu commentators are indeed agile and skillful in their improvisations, revising their methods as they trace the quicksilver changes in the moods of the young women in the lyric poetry, though the commentators’ answers, however vivid and sensitive to poetic context, and however they resist a merely flat language of sameness, remain distant from the pitch and “inscape,” to use Hopkins, of the poetry itself. By definition, they drift toward the more or less general, toward motifs of ascent, and take an often overtly moral tone toward the radically particular claims of the young women (21-22; 33; 97; 115; 147n.47). A more dialectical critical stance vis-à-vis the commentaries and their lyric originals would only underscore Clooney’s powerful argument about the persistent discontinuity and the irreducibly particular loves of our Christian and Hindu girls.

Also, following Graham’s mode of working, Clooney might have distinguished with more attention, and with more self-consciousness, the various, sometimes discordant, fractured voices in the Latin and Tamil literary texts themselves. The *Song* of course is not written by a woman, and has its own plural, dispersed voices—that of the Shulammitte, the Daughters of Jerusalem, the Beloved—along with first, second, and third person shifts in the text that

disrupts its stable lines. This is particularly true of Catakopan's *tirmolīs* that, as Clooney himself remarks, are fractured into discontinuous bits: "'she' is the 'he' of the poet's voice erupting between the songs in the voice of the woman" (133-134; 171). This, and those pesky *phalaśrutis*, the eleventh verses in the *Holy Word* decads that focus on the instrumental uses of the poetry itself, drawing the reader "a step distant from the drama" (165n.132; 178-179n.36). To integrate these discordant intertextual voices into our reading would further evoke the confused and unsettled in-between spaces of love, the abrupt shifts in mood, from confident nearness and presence, the efficacious power of our words, to sudden helpless passivity.

Finally, a point of translation. The Tamil translations in the volume are fluid and accurate, though, in the spirit of Graham's musings on style, they might be adjusted a bit to reflect the sometimes oceanic flow of the originals, the long stretches of phrases linked by gerunds and participles, the studied wave-like suspense of literary Tamil. Adhering more to the original structures in old Tamil of single long phrases or sentences might make an effective literary rhyme with Graham's experiments with her own "longer than breath" line (176n.41).

But these are questions more than critiques. They are the musings of a reader who continues to "read beside" the author of this marvelous book. And in this spirit, I conclude with a kind of recapitulation.

If Francis X. Clooney's new book is about darkness, then it is a qualified darkness. A darkness jostling with brightly or dimly lit presences, discrete and particular but somehow resonant with one another, that offer themselves to the reader as they do for the author, for here both reader and author are on a journey, though that journey seems to end midway, we are left hovering in the dark, because perhaps we have finally taken flight, though our airy itinerary remains a mystery, and we are left with what Clooney himself describes as "a rich and holy bewilderment" (62-63). We search, we find things, we follow clues, and we get lost (46). We seem to end as we began, with Jesus, in full and loving particularity, an "intense and local" love, though with obscure hints about love's garden, the "drawn shadows of our vigils" and "endless wandering" (140). But between the Jesus of our prologue and that of our epilogue, our paths cross with a variety of distinct and individual personages and *personae*. There is the South Indian Tamil girl who longs for an absent Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, growing weak and pale, her bright bangles slipping from her thin wrist, madly crying out to the cuckoos, the geese, the mynah birds, the little striped bee, to her close friends, to the very fields and clouds and teeming temple towns for her beloved lover-

god. This girl speaks Tamil to a Tamil god, the pan-Indian Krishna in his specific Tamil regional world. And there is the shepherdess of ancient Israel in another passionate pastoral, the dark-skinned Shulammitte who longs for her beloved's return amid her flocks of sheep, lost among the lilies and cooing doves, gazelle and aromatic gardens, addressing her friends, telling them of memories of his extravagantly beautiful body, of how he descended into her garden and tasted her, of how he came to her in the darkness, his head full of dew and his hair with the drops of night, making her drip with choicest myrrh, and how he left her alone. Her songs leave off mid-stream, in a paradoxical call and farewell. Several medieval scholastic theologians, Hindu and Christian respectively, try to make sense of these girls and their impossible loves, and we listen to them as best we can. We also listen, in the winding in-between spaces of the darkness, to a nineteenth-century English Jesuit poet, his search for the pitch and dazzle of Christ in every thing, to a modern German systematic theologian, and to the tentative, side-tracked, erring, uncertain, fragile and fragmentary verses of a contemporary American poet as she watches the Jesus body being taken down from its cross for Holy Saturday in a small rural Italian church.

All these voices are irreducibly particular, and their loves—and their languages of love—are particular. But it is the measure of the excellence this book that we as readers are also made aware of theological patterns in these particularities, and the potential to affirm—even while we hold to our own particular love—the plurality of the “intense, vivid loves” of others (147), and even identify with, and perhaps confuse, those particular loves with our own.