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Review

His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence, by Francis X. Clooney, SJ. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014. xvi + 187 pp. $85.00. ISBN 9780804776806 (hardback). $24.95. ISBN 978-0-8047-7681-3 (paperback).

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In this slim, yet dense, volume, Francis X. Clooney, arguably the premier exponent—if not founder—of the discipline of comparative theology, continues his work of bridging the universes of Hinduism and Catholicism, theology and South Asian studies, and scholarly engagement and spiritual endeavour. The book extends his earlier efforts at double readings of texts and traditions and follows upon his 2009 study of loving surrender explored in the writings of Francis de Sales and Vedanta Desika. *His Hiding Place is Darkness* shares much with that earlier book, particularly in method, erudition, and spiritual subtext. In this case, the focus is on divine absence, illuminated by parallel readings of the Hebrew Song of Songs and a sequence of poems found in Nammalvar's Tiruvaymoli.

Of course, the crux of any theological reflection on divine absence is the assertion of faith, and not just tepid affirmation of doctrinal claims, but a lived, felt, dynamic experience of God's love. For, if God *is*, God is *here*. Hence, absence, in the context of formal faith claims of God's ubiquity, can quite properly be read as 'perceived' absence. But simple cognitive awareness of a broader faith claim typically does little to assuage genuine anguish of felt separation. The polar dynamics of presence/absence and union/separation are empirically evident in various theologies and poetry of the world's religions, and Clooney aims to till the soil of research and inquiry in his double engagement with the Song and the Tiruvaymoli, as well as engaging the reflections of a host of commentators and thinkers, both medieval and modern.

Clooney, here as in his other work, begins with an unequivocal commitment to the central locus of Christian faith, in this case, singular faith in and devotion to Jesus Christ. And yet, it is precisely this 'concrete' and particular love that permits engaging, reviewing, appreciating, and exploring, the simi-

lar concrete and particular loves of other traditions. What emerges above all is not a watered-down faith or an insipid relativism, but a greater appreciation for the mystery of divine love(s). What is quite noticeable in the book—and I think counts as among its greatest strengths—is a repeated appeal to 'holy uncertainty', 'cultivated uncertainty', 'holy confusion', 'ambiguity', and even 'literary and spiritual indigestion'. This is no small contribution, because religious 'certainty' has done grave harm in the world, where 'truth' too often becomes a cudgel to hammer the benighted. To somehow move religious worlds gingerly away from epistemic arrogance and toward epistemic humility is a significant and important development and marks perhaps the best constructive potential of this book.

Now, concerning the presumed audience of the book. First, it could be argued that all scholarship is typically self-centered, though by no means necessarily selfish. In other words, a scholar's project naturally begins with her or his motivations driving specific questions and struggles; he or she then marshals the appropriate training and experience in order to engage, if not always fully resolve, them. If the work is done well, hopefully it becomes something useful and constructive to others. *His Hiding Place is Darkness* is in no way a mere intellectual exercise, any more than *Loving Surrender* was. Both strike me as deeply personal, though couched in highly sophisticated intellectual frameworks and methodology. But it seems to me that the current book would be strengthened by a more overt engagement with the personal dynamic that presumably served as motivation for the book.

Clooney, as always, ably demonstrates his brilliance, humanity, and erudition. In this book, he takes two texts, at least one of which (Tiruvaymoli) would be unknown to most Christians. He then relies on medieval commentators—Bernard of Clairvaux, John of Ford, Gilbert of Hoyland and Nampillai and Nanciyar—to illumine the Song and Tiruvaymoli. At the same time, he draws on the twentieth-century Swiss theologian Urs von Balthasar for an overarching apologetic for turning to poetry as a source for theology, while turning to the contemporary poet Jorie Graham (and, earlier, Gerard Manley Hopkins) for insights into the slippery play of language. His engagements with these thinkers are not without value, but often I found myself preferring to discover what Clooney thinks about these things, and, even more so, how his own life of faith and prayer has been challenged by any felt experience of divine absence. Certainly his viewpoints are evident in the book and woven *passim*, but I'm not sure the extended engagements with his selected thinkers are always helpful. For example, he chose to consider the approach of the poet Jorie Graham, whose work itself (at least that which is included here) seems rather highly abstract and philosophical in an unwieldy way, which is ironic, given Clooney's focus (and that of much good poetry) on the critical importance of the particular and 'concrete'.

This leads me to wonder who the specific audience might be for the book. I can't imagine doctrinal Catholic theologians, typically careful to outline tight

boundaries and conclusions, being particularly appreciative of *His Hiding Place*, but nor do I think many lay Catholics would be either, owing to a certain inaccessibility of the book. Very few readers can read the Tamil, Sanskrit, and manipravala works of Srivaisnava poets and commentators, while also being able to translate medieval Latin commentaries. There would be more than a few Christian readers who have not even heard of John of Ford or Gilbert of Hoyland. But as with good poems or stories, we need to ask why we need to know about any particular thinker or character. I'm not sure Clooney's reliance on his second-order thinkers was essential in every case or even generated trains of thought that could not be gained by reflection on the primary texts themselves. Moreover, his particular method—the double reading of texts—is by nature rather elite and, again ironically, exclusive—for few people are genuinely equipped to engage in such an exercise, at least in the model represented here. Is it possible simply to meet the texts on their own terms—and even in translation—to help bridge the gaps between diverse cultural worlds, divine love(s), and sacred wisdom(s)? I think it is, and I would also argue that it is necessary in a world riven by religious territoriality and patterns of cognitive control and objectification. It would be remarkable, for example, to hear something of Nammalvar's poetry in a Christian sermon on Sunday. Bringing to light shared and universal themes of faiths—particularly the agonizing experience of perceived absence—may help reveal the hidden God by generating solidarity and gently softening the cold hold of certainty.