

Francis X. Clooney SJ

His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence,
Stanford CA: Stanford University Press 2014, 187 p., ISBN 978-0-8047-7681-3,
price US \$ 24.95.

The Roman Catholic theologian Francis Clooney is widely known for various books he composed with sensitive and carefully considered analyses of religious and sacred texts belonging to the traditions of Hinduism and Christianity. He developed his own method, though in cooperation with other theologians including, for example, James T. Fredericks. Clooney called this approach comparative theology. The method later found a number of followers among other, mostly younger theologians, both Catholic and Protestant.

His new book, *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, is an analysis of the *Song of Songs*, which is part of the Hebrew Bible, and the *Tiruvaymoli* (Holy Word of Mouth), a compilation of Tamil Hindu poems dating from the 6th to the 9th centuries BC. As with his previous work, Clooney does not only read the texts themselves but also the commentaries belonging to the traditions to which these works belong. So he also consults the medieval commentaries of Bernard of Clairvaux, Gilbert of Hoyland and John of Ford on the *Song of Songs* and the *Bhagavat Vishayam* commentary edited by S. Krishnamachariyar as well as the one edited by Krishnaswami Ayyangar on the *Tiruvaymoli*. These editions contain all the medieval commentaries on this Hindu text including those of Nanjiyar, Periyavacchan Pillai and Nampillai. This time, however, Clooney also consults *The Glory of the Lord*, in which the Swiss Catholic theologian Hans-Urs von Balthasar expounded his theopoetics, theodramatics and theologic. Subsequently he consults the works of Gerard Manley Hopkins and some poems by Jorie Graham. Clooney does so to do justice to the poetical nature of the *Song of Songs* and the *Tiruvaymoli*, for Clooney's agenda is focused on more than on presenting his readership just the next magnificent analysis of two texts coming from two divergent religious traditions. This book has its 'Sitz im Leben' in Western culture in which many have a strong feeling that God has gone. He is absent.

Clooney shows that both texts are about a woman craving for her beloved, who is absent. The *Song of Songs* includes some fragments in which the beloved has come again, but mostly this is only for a moment, a time the lover always experiences as far too short. In the *Tiruvaymoli* the woman has only her memories of the moments her beloved was with her. According to the medieval commentaries on the *Song of Songs* the beloved refers to Jesus Christ, while the medieval commentaries on the *Tiruvaymoli* say that the beloved in this text alludes to Krishna. In other words, the absent beloved stands for the absent

God. These texts show that it is part of religious faith, both in Christianity and in Hinduism, that God is not always present. It may even be that His absence enforces the longings of the believers to Him and thus strengthens their belief. In the latter part of his book Clooney refers to John chapters 14-17 which only affirm that the Son has to depart if the Spirit is to come. The Spirit will always be with them. The absence of God and the longing to Him only makes the faithful realise that there is always more and that the world is a pilgrimage, which means that one is always on the way to God, who is not present in the place where one resides.

Thus Clooney contributes — again in a sensitive and carefully considered way — to the public debate of the culture in which he is teaching and living, helping people to overcome the suffering caused by the feeling that God is no longer present in their lives. ‘His hiding place is darkness’ means that human beings never will grasp God completely. There is always an element of Him eluding them.

Yet, there is also something I do not understand with regard to this book: its subtitle. Why is it ‘A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence’? I would have expected that it would be ‘A Hindu-Christian Theopoetics of Divine Absence’. If one uses the term Catholic, which refers to a section of Christianity only, it would have been more natural to use Vaishnava instead of Hindu. Why does Clooney formulate his subtitle like this? Is it because he has used medieval commentaries, which are not regarded as Protestant, and solely the works of Catholic theologians including, for example, Hans-Urs von Balthasar? I believe that the message of this publication is not only of importance for Catholics only; it can help all Christians. So I hope that the Protestants, Orthodox, Pentecostals and Christians belonging to indigenous Christian traditions everywhere in the world will not refrain from reading this book because of its confining subtitle.

Freek L. Bakker

Utrecht, The Netherlands