
When an inattentive reader reads the title of this book, he might think that it is a commentary on John 14:6, where Jesus asserts that he is the way, the truth, and the life. The careful reader, however, will discover that the order of the words is different. The title of this book starts with the truth. Its contents will show him that this is deliberate, since the book is not a commentary on a Christian verse, but on three Hindu ones, the three holy *mantras* of the Shri vaishnava Hindus. These three sacred formulae, which are called the *tiru mantra*, the *carama shloka*, and the *dvaya mantra*, respectively express the truth, the way and the life of the Shri vaishnava tradition. Only once the writer refers to John 14:6, on p. 93, but, remarkably enough, this reference is not included in the index of Biblical references on p. 203, which only underscores the minor role this verse of John plays in the study.

Francis X. Clooney (b. 1951), who already has built up a great reputation with regard to comparing texts derived from Hinduism and Christianity, follows a well-reflected fixed procedure in this book, in which there is not really space for a discussion of John 14:6, for the author’s focus is on the contents of the three Hindu *mantras*. They are (p. 7):

*Aum*, obeisance to Narayana! (*tiru mantra*)

Having completely given up all *dharma*s,  
to Me alone come for refuge . . . (*carama shloka*, 1st line)  
I approach for refuge the feet of Narayana with Shri.  
Obeisance to Narayana with Shri (*dvaya mantra*).

. . . from all sins I will make you free. Do not grieve (*carama shloka*, 2nd line)

The quotation above reveals that the second *mantra*, the *carama shloka*, is divided into two and that the second half of this formula is put at the end.

In four chapters Clooney analyses these three *mantras*. The number of the chapters is four, because the author devotes one chapter to each half of the *carama shloka*. In his procedure Clooney begins with presenting the concrete text of the formula. Then he gives the separate words, of which each is followed by its meaning. Subsequently he informs the readers about the background of the *mantra*. In the case of the *tiru mantra* he relates how Tirumankai Alvar, who was a robber, heard the *mantra* and felt himself compelled to follow god Narayana. Next Clooney presents the comments given by Parashara Battar in his short commentary entitled Ashtashloki. The Ashtashloki counted only eight verses. Subsequently Clooney gives the elaborate comments of Vedanta Deshika (1268-1369). In fact, Vedanta Deshika was his title; his real name was Venkatara. Deshika belonged to the incipient *vada-kala* school of the Shri vaishnavas. His Shrimad Rahasyatrayasara (*Auspicious Essence of the Three Mysteries*) included an extensive commentary on these three holy formulae. Clooney intersects the text of his chapters with so-called reflections, in which he gives his own comment as a reader of Christian background. Most of these reflections consist of associations...
with Biblical and other Christian texts, prayers and theological parallels. In the next stage Clooney compares his findings with a longer Biblical text. In the case of the *tiru mantra* he chooses Romans 8 concentrating his analysis on the word *abba*. Subsequently he ties in with the comments of Henri le Saux in his book, *Prayer*, in which Le Saux recognized a parallel of *aum* in the word *abba*. Finally Clooney concludes that the words ‘*Abba*, Father’ reflect a similar religious and theological world as the *tiru mantra*; they are ‘likewise evocative of a fundamental orientation to God and yet too intimacy with that God’ (p. 69).

Following the same procedure Clooney analyses the two lines of the *carama shloka* and the *dvaya mantra*. The story behind the *carama shloka* is the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, as the *carama shloka* is identical to Bhagavad Gita 18,66. The Christian commentary he uses is Bede Griffiths’ *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita*, which compares the content of this verse with the thoughts of the apostle Paul in Galatians 5. Clooney finds deeper resonances even in Matthew 11:28-30. But the idea of giving up the *dharma* in the *carama shloka* brings him to an association with Matthew 19:21, in which Jesus asks the young rich man to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Then he will have a treasure in heaven. Subsequently Jesus asks the man to follow him.

When Clooney analyses the *dvaya mantra*, he does not use a Christian commentary. Instead he gives an impression of what the *mantra* means and concludes, after a discussion of some other Biblical texts, that the words of Luke 23:46, ‘*Father*, into your hands I commend my spirit’, come nearest to what is expressed in this sacred formula.

In the final chapter the author presents a theological reflection of what he attempted. It reminds the reader of the introduction of the book, in which Clooney explained that in ancient Greece the philosophical schools also knew the habit of writing commentaries. The school regarded the truth found by the founders as something divine that had to be transmitted carefully to others, for example, by writing a commentary. In this final chapter Clooney pleads for postponing the drawing of systematic conclusions about the relationship between Christianity and Hinduism or Roman Catholicism and Shrivaishnavism, and for comparing first and foremost the important religious texts of both traditions. ‘A durable theology of religions’ has to be ‘constructed from the ground up, in reflection on specific points in their dialectical relationship to Christian faith, theology and commentary’ (p. 184).

Clooney wrote a very rich and thoughtful commentary, which, by the way, gives deep insights in the religious world of Shrivaishnavism. He is very careful in his theological argumentation and he only comes to conclusions after elaborately discussing all possibilities for an opening. At the same time he keeps an open eye for aspects in the theologies of both traditions that prohibit more openness. He realises and also makes explicit that Narayana with Shri is not the same as Jesus Christ. Nonetheless he tries to demonstrate that there is also something universal and comparable.

In spite of the great sympathy the present reviewer cherishes for Clooney’s approach, he also has some points of critique. The weak point of Clooney’s procedure is the selection of the Biblical parallels. He does not make explicit on which arguments he selects them. It seems that they often are chosen on the basis of association. Every Christian text that offers a parallel can in principle be suitable. Later he defends that this must not be altered, for