

# Artful Imagining: A Personal Insight into the Study of Religions after Vatican II<sup>1</sup>

Francis X. Clooney. SJ

---

**Abstract:** *Through an exploration of two classical religious texts, one Christian, the other Hindu, this paper explores the potential for interreligious dialogue made possible by the stance of Vatican II towards other religious traditions. It examines the further advances made in this area and the growing anxieties surrounding this topic through various Vatican documents. It argues that perhaps now is not the time for systematic theological conclusions about other religious traditions, but for more patient mutual learning to occur across traditions.*

---

**Key Words:** Vatican II; interreligious dialogue; *Nostra Aetate*; Song of Songs; Hinduism; *Dominus Iesus*

---

In the following pages I reflect on where we are in the Church regarding interreligious dialogue, as the fiftieth anniversary of Vatican II dawns. Although I do not ambition to say anything new, or very specific, about the Council itself, I will highlight some key features of the great change that took place and came to create and shape the situation in which I studied and have worked as a professor and scholar all these years. In the same way, I am also interested in how the situation affects — focuses, constrains — the work we do in the field of interreligious learning, how we have been affected by the opportunities and challenges arising with the Council. I will leave the larger picture to the histories, and simply use my own learning and writing as an example that captures something of the larger panorama. For I believe that the larger historical story is vividly manifest in the detail of the choices we make. The starting point for interreligious learning is small-scale and close-up, primarily and preferably in the study of texts. It could be Buddhist or Muslim, Jewish or Native American, or some other tradition. For me, it is been the Hindu. But in all such cases, it is a learning manifesting the insight that being Catholic means crossing the boundary. Being Catholic means going deep into the other, and this occurs best in the particular.

My example is specific, as I will be reflecting on the book I am finishing at the moment, *His Hiding Place Is Darkness*.<sup>2</sup> In this book I read the *Song of Songs* with its medieval commentators, along with some Hindu mystical poetry from South India, with its medieval commentators. I use it as a marker of the times, the epoch in which we find ourselves in 2012. I will use the book to chart a course through the past fifty years of

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of a presentation given at the Australian Catholic Theological Association on July 6, 2012. A still earlier version was given as the Loyola Lecture at Le Moyne College, Syracuse, New York, on March 14, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Forthcoming, Stanford University Press.

change in the Church, explaining why it is the kind of book I can manage to write at the moment, within the constraints of the Church as it is and has been. It may appear a bit of a puzzle, particularly when I call this somewhat unusual work a work of Catholic theology.

## READING ACROSS RELIGIOUS BOUNDARIES, FIFTY YEARS AFTER VATICAN II

*His Hiding Place Is Darkness* is first of all a book about the biblical *Song of Songs*, that most beautiful book of the Bible, love poetry that tells, indeed enacts, the story of this young woman and her beloved, their moments of intense union, their separations and her several searches for him. It shows us human love in all its frailty, the fragility of being together and being apart, seeking one another, having moments of unity and then it falling apart. It is all the more remarkable because it is a sublime religious text in which God is never mentioned. Yet, throughout the traditions of Jewish and Christian commentary from the early centuries of the Church, it has been taken to be the story of God and the soul. If you want to know what it is like to love God, turn to the *Song*. The intimate and embodied and unpredictable relationship the lovers share tells us something about what it means to love God. Absence and silence provoke a rich and wide sense of God's presence even in absence. If you ask where God is in the *Song*, the answer is that God, mentioned nowhere, is *everywhere*: everything she is, in all she says, in her words and those of her lover.

What has interested me in particular in the *Song* are the moments of search, loss, separation that repeatedly follow upon the beautiful scenes of union. Thus, after the intimacy of *Song 2*, the next chapter describes her effort to find him again:

Upon my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer. (Song 3.1)<sup>3</sup>

She goes out into the streets, she searches in the dark, and she passes the watchmen in the night. Finally, she finds him:

"I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares; I will seek him whom my soul loves." I sought him, but found him not. The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city. "Have you seen him whom my soul loves?" Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves. I held him, and would not let him go until I brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me. (Song 3.2-4)

There follows expression of their intimate union. Yet again, in *Song 5*, after scenes of intimacy, they again lose one other. He comes to the door unexpectedly; she delays; and then it is too late:

I arose to open to my beloved, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, upon the handles of the bolt. I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had turned and was gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but did not find him; I called him, but he gave no answer. (Song 5.5-6)

---

<sup>3</sup> I use the New Revised Standard Version of the *Song of Songs*.

She does *not* find him this second time around. She is accosted by the watchmen, knocked down by them, left on the ground. But suddenly, the women of the city appear out of nowhere, in the middle of the night, in the dark and they say to her, well tell us about your beloved and she has to look deep into her memory. She has to remember the times she and her beloved were together and in that memory find new, powerful words with which to speak of him. So, they ask her,

What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you thus adjure us?  
My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. (Song 5.9-11)

She continues describing him in detail, and suddenly, as she finishes her words, he is nearby again. By memory she has made him present again.

Where has your beloved gone, O fairest among women? Which way has your beloved turned, that we may seek him with you? My beloved has gone down to his garden, to the beds of spices, to pasture his flock in the gardens, and to gather lilies. I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine; he pastures his flock among the lilies. (Song 6.1-3)

Such passages captivate me for the insights they offer, for the expectations they raise, and even for their ambiguity, for they leave open an imaginative space that we ourselves must fill. He and she do indeed love one another, but they keep losing one another. Somehow this tells us about God and us. Read theologically, her story is an account of a God who comes and goes, a God who, though near and present, is also absent, in hiding. To be faithful and loving is not simply to possess God all the time, but rather to be in the presence of a great mystery: God is also like the lover who comes in the night — or, expected, fails to appear.

And this has fascinated me as a theme for commentary in the Christian tradition. I have been reading the *Song* with the commentary/sermons of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Gilbert of Hoyland, and John of Forde. These are medieval Cistercian monks who found that the song is not simply a historical account or lovely poetry or a theory about God's presence but wonderfully instructive about what God and the relation of God to humans is. And so they gave very many sermons on the *Song*, taking each word seriously. Their reading tells us about what spiritual progress is like, what it means to look for God. In their view, everything that the woman goes through, the absences as well as the moments of presence, are intrinsic to her experience of God. Bernard and his successors are representative of the tradition to which we belong. We need not and ought not forget such deep learning in the face of religious diversity, for their sermons teach us how to go deep, using all the powers of our imagination to enter the *Song* in its place right there, in the heart of the Bible.

With their monastic audiences before them, Bernard, Gilbert, and John open for the reader a deeper meaning of the *Song*, for here and now. They open it for those who listen, for the Church and every individual in it, regarding how we are to seek after God. In this process, in this dynamic of looking for the lover, they write a theology deep-rooted in the *Song*, and bring it back to life as a spiritual path that does not disrespect the otherwise important questions of doctrine and the tradition's claims about truth, but is not entirely

bound to those questions either. If one starts with a text like the *Song* and is sensitive to its images and rhythms and poetic insights, one is nourished by it, compelled by it, and drawn into participation in its drama. Drawn right into the midst of it, we are forced to question what we mean when we say that God is present or absent, so very close to us, or is rather, or also, someone for whom we need to search. These medieval commentators did not neglect the intensity of divine presence and absence, they did not settle for history or literary matters. Nor were their sermons a (poor) substitute for systematic theology. Rather, theirs was a practical and performative theology that tells us about who we are now. While we cannot merely imitate Bernard and Gilbert and John, we can learn again to read with such specific and loving attention, with a vulnerability like theirs.

But all of this, though formidable, is just part of my book, given how I understand the positive constraints under which I write my theology today, fifty years after the Council. I have also realized that I need to write interreligious openness into my work, bring the religious “other” inside it, during a project and not just after reflection on Christian tradition. For this, I need to cross the uncertain, even closed borders by also studying another tradition in a way very much like the way I would study my own tradition. From early on in my scholarly career I have found it best to enter upon the careful reading of texts of other religious traditions, with a reverence analogous to how I treat the treasures of my own tradition. I have always recognized the value of doing this reading in detail, in this case, reading poetry across religious boundaries.

In the context of studying Hinduism as it flourishes in the southern part of India, the Tamil-speaking area, in particular I have been reading great texts of the Srivaisnava community, which worships Shri as the Goddess and Vishnu as the great God. Beginning in the seventh century, there was a flourishing of beautiful poetry, written in the Tamil language, about what God is like. The greatest of these poets was Shatakopan, known for his poetry and particularly for *Tiruvaymoli* (the *Holy Word of Mouth*, henceforth the *Holy Word*). That work is comprised of 1,102 verses in praise of Vishnu and Sri, one hundred songs that offer praise, explore the divine nature, rework mythological themes, celebrate specific temples, and retell the story of human love. He dedicates about nearly thirty of those hundred songs to a voice of the young woman in love. Like the woman in the *Song*, she too has no proper name and her entire life is given over to this passionate love for God. God may be Rama or Krishna or the transcendent Narayana, but in all this she herself is distinguished by her longing for God: in almost all of these 300 verses in the voice of this young woman, her beloved is deeply loved and remembered — and absent. Here are some of her very first verses:

Your fortune is to be with your wives, graceful swans,  
 He came as a small dwarf, and by His wits he begged the earth, that trickster,  
 Because of Him I've lost my wits.  
 Will I ever be done with my stubborn deeds?  
 I am alone, my wits in disarray, I am bewildered — so will you speak for me?

Freedom from the body's wheel of births, He is life's breath and everything else,  
 He appears in the ocean's depth too, and there He sleeps.  
 If you see that Lord whose weapon is a discus, tell Him all this —

But don't leave me, deep simple heart, until despite my deeds I am one with Him. (I.4.3, 10)<sup>4</sup>

Thus she embarks on a long quest for her beloved, suffering confusion and distress at his absence. Even in one of her last songs, she is still distressed:

Evening has come, but the dark one does not come,  
 Their great bells sounding, the lovely cows gambol near their strong bulls, alas,  
 Cruel flutes sound, alas, and buzzing bees circle  
 Amidst the bright forest jasmine, malabar and musk jasmine flowers, alas,  
 The sea resounds, echoing to the sky, alas.  
 But what can I say apart from him, how can I survive? (IX.9.10)

And yet, the poetry is beautiful, and the rendering of her pain in separation is a testimony to the intensity and purity of her love.

Here too I am reluctant to read alone, and so I am also reading Satakopan with the great commentators of the Srivaisnava Hindu tradition of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, Tirukurukkai Piran Pillan and Nanjiyar, his student Nampillai, and so too his, Periyavaccan Pillai and Vatakkutiruviti Pillai. Like Bernard and his successors, with great reverence these commentators too meditate on her words and disclose great depths of meaning in them. They too are my teachers, showing me how they have read her words, and drawing me into the world of the poet, of the woman, and of the tradition built around it. While they do not think that every reader can become the woman, they do think her words are a cure for every soul that longs for God not enough, or too much.

In both traditions, the same crisis of love erupts, counter to the way either tradition's theology predicts that things should work out, if God is ever faithful, true, and present. In both, the issue is neither faith nor unfaith, nor whether God exists or does not exist. In both, our experience of God is always going to be filtered in part through this pattern of coming and going, this finding and not finding. Reading these texts together in a sense intensifies the experience. It is a practical chemistry. The interreligious reading works, even aside from any overarching theology about religions. That venture, despite its general pertinence, would stand in the way of this particular learning, because it is "about" rather than "engaged in." The task I set myself then is to respect my own Catholic tradition and this Hindu tradition together, without settling for a generalization or a theme larger than them both, and without, in our reading, diminishing either merely to glorify the other. Such an approach allows us, in the free space where the two traditions meet poetically and dramatically, to contemplate the possibility that God has also gone away, is missing and in hiding.

## WRITING SUCH A BOOK IN THE CONTEXT OF THE POST-VATICAN II CHURCH

Writing this book in this way also manifests my refusal to accept any dichotomy between dedication to my own tradition and intensely interest in another as well. The point is to go deeper into my tradition while also taking another tradition to heart, as a Catholic paying

---

<sup>4</sup> Translations from the Tamil are my own.

attention to both. By this approach, a product of my own Vatican II era reflections on how to do theology, we can intensify our own spiritual and theological traditions in taking seriously other traditions. In what it does and does not do, this book is a symptom, the child of its times — in search of tradition, imaginatively rather than systematically. It is a certain kind of Catholic response, by a theologian of a certain age and generation, to the possibilities of the post-Vatican II Church situation, where certain factors have shaped the context in which I have ended up writing this book in this way. Of interest then, in this context, is how it is that I came to write this kind of book, decades after the Council.

First, it is important to take stock, and understand what is not the case. I am not aiming at a theoretical explanation of the religions. My work is not merely positive, just as it is not merely negative. Getting into it, so to speak, is the point, not any particular conclusion. There is really no generalization to follow from this book, not even a denial of the notion that completion is possible. Like this paper, the book project — and the theology it displays — end inconclusively. I am not seeking a higher viewpoint whence to view the religions from the outside. I do not seek to step outside the material, during or after the process, in order to say something about it. Certainly, there are those who wish to speak from outside, but there is no requirement that one do so, and the point has to be made by someone, that speaking-inside has its enduring value and is in fact more timely today. All this is written in response to and after a far more expressive and capacious poetry, but my writing is not poetry. I would like to think of it as prose chastened by poetry, opened up, held back from smooth conclusions, and still sensitive to multiple meanings even on its last page. Even as a Catholic theology, it does not lead to a systematic rationale meant to govern the significance of other religions. Nor does it strive toward final judgment upon the religions.

Let us put it all in perspective, to see how it came about that I should write in this way. Throughout my adult life (I was born in 1950), we have been living in a time when change has always been in the air, be it welcomed or distrusted. I am old enough to remember vividly the Church before the Council, and young enough to see the Church change a great deal in a short time; intellectually, we were formed as students in the Church of the post-conciliar period. We have grown up in a period of intellectual openness, having to ask what it means to be a Catholic, and what it has meant to think about other religions in the last half-century.

One of the founding statements of interreligious energies of our era was of course *Nostra Aetate* (1965). A document with its own extraordinary history and original intentions, certainly much more concerned with Judaism and Islam than Asian religions, it turned out to be a kind of Magna Carta regarding all religions, a declaration of the value of being open and being Catholic at the same time. One key section is very familiar:

The Catholic Church rejects none of the things that are true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere attentiveness those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless by no means rarely reflect the radiance of that Truth which enlightens all people.

This is a foundation, not a closing judgment but a beginning:

Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (*John* 14:6), in whom humans may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself. (NA 2)

This passage — not alone of course, but in keeping with all that the Council said in this regard — opened the way for a whole different attitude in the Church toward other religions. Texts like this gave permission to Catholics to develop a new and non-threatening attitude toward other religions. It became acceptable to say, even with some reserve — *Nostra Aetate* is cautious, after all — that the light of Christ’s truth shines everywhere, arising deep within religions too. One can look for that radiance and rejoice in it. The Church found that it had no reason to turn away from that truth, or be afraid of where God speaks in the world. God is present, shining forth, in other religions, which are not merely demonic constructions or rivals to the Church. Openness and welcome become the ideal. We could thus learn to be a Church engaged with other religions in a different way, not chained to strategies meant only to control or convert. We were opening the door to new possibilities. Such was the hope that marked the Council.

This openness was of course not a one-time sentiment of the Council. After years of practical efforts to foster dialogue, the 1991 document *Dialogue and Proclamation* (from the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) consolidated this openness. It insisted that both proclamation of the Gospel and a Christian engagement in religious dialogue are intrinsic to the identity and mission of Catholics in the Church today. The Church is committed to both, without one being a detriment to the other. There is no need to choose between dialogue and witness to Christ; rather, all are to proclaim the Good News, and all are to be in dialogue. Or consider the more recent 2007 *Doctrinal Note On Some Aspects Of Evangelization*, which retains a positive tone even as it is also deeply traditional:

Evangelization does not only entail the possibility of enrichment for those who are evangelized; it is also an enrichment for the one who does the evangelizing, as well as for the entire Church. For example, in the process of inculturation, “the universal Church herself is enriched with forms of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life... She comes to know and to express better the mystery of Christ, all the while being motivated to continual renewal.” (*Doctrinal Note*, 6, quoting John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, 6, henceforth RM)

For the Christian, this mutual enrichment is the context in which the mystery of Christ is shared, in accord with the obligations of truth that can only be sought in freedom:

The Second Vatican Council, after having affirmed the right and the duty of every person to seek the truth in matters of religion adds: “The search for truth, however, must be carried out in a manner that is appropriate to the dignity of the human person and his social nature, namely, by free enquiry with the help of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue. It is by these means that people share with each other the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in such a way that they help one another in the search for truth.” In any case, the truth “does not impose itself except by the strength of the truth itself.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to lead a person’s intelligence and freedom in honesty to the encounter with Christ and his Gospel is not an inappropriate

---

<sup>5</sup> The inner quote is from *Dignitatis humanae*, 3.

encroachment, but rather a legitimate endeavor and a service capable of making human relationships more fruitful. (RM 5)

And so the obligation to learn must cut both ways:

Evangelization does not only entail the possibility of enrichment for those who are evangelized; it is also an enrichment for the one who does the evangelizing, as well as for the entire Church. For example, in the process of inculturation, “the universal Church herself is enriched with forms of expression and values in the various sectors of Christian life... She comes to know and to express better the mystery of Christ, all the while being motivated to continual renewal.” (RM 6)

This is an immeasurable change in the emphasis and perhaps even substance of the Church’s attitude toward the world around us: to be Catholic need not come down to choosing between openness and rootedness, but one must rather be learning a skilful balance of depth and openness.

I cannot help but note a short passage from “our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue,” a key document of the Jesuit 34th General Congregation (1995):

An open and sincere interreligious dialogue is our cooperation with God’s ongoing dialogue with humanity. “By dialogue we let God be present in our midst, for as we open ourselves to one another, we open ourselves to God.”<sup>6</sup>

Dialogue is a matter of truth, of human exchange, of witness to Christ who is the truth, and our participation in the dialogue of God with the human race, and to it the Church committed itself at Vatican II and in the ensuing period.

It is in this context that I have pursued projects such as *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, which attempts to go deep into the Bible and medieval tradition, and likewise into the wisdom of another tradition. Let me quickly add that I too can readily admit that the picture has not been entirely positive. But before turning there, I wish to mention some factors that complicated the openness that followed upon the Council.

## IN THE STILL WIDER CHURCH — IN AN EVER WIDER WORLD

First, we know that the Church itself changed in ways the Council did not predict, and one of these changes was, as Karl Rahner would put it,<sup>7</sup> the coming of a world Church. This too was new. If you look at the old pictures of Vatican II, you will notice something about the thousands of bishops who were gathered there in Rome: they are almost all European or North American. With such images in mind, we can think about how the Church has changed over the past fifty years and come to be recognized as a global Church. Even if the Vatican is still the centre of the Church, and even if the majority of cardinals are still from the West, nevertheless, there is a recognition that most Catholics live outside the West,

<sup>6</sup> “Our Mission and Interreligious Dialogue,” 1995, citing, John Paul II, “Address to the Leaders of non-Christian Religions,” Madras, February 5, 1986 (AAS 78 [1986], p. 769 f.)

<sup>7</sup> See Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 40.4 (1979): 716-727

and indeed below the Equator. In the decades after the Council, it became increasingly clear that the Church is growing and thriving in parts of the world far from the West. Vatican II was giving us permission too to open the doors to a wider world, but at the same time, the Church had to catch up with the fact that it was becoming a Church that no longer spoke only the language of the Western Church, nor imagined itself only in the West's cultural terms. This also pertains to the Society of Jesus to which I belong. In the '60s and '70s we too were beginning to realize that we are very much an international organization that does not merely move from the West to the rest of the world. By now, most Jesuits are outside the West, and the largest number is in India.

It would have been one thing if the Church was changing, but also controlling the change, in a relatively predictable and stable world. But in a way that by now surprises no one, changes in the Church took place in a changing world, and were accentuated by changes in the world around us. The religions too changed — or rather shifted — in ways the Council did not predict: the *people* of those other religions also arrived here, in the countries of the West. If I may speak for a moment from an American perspective: in 1962 or so, to the average American, the people of other religions seemed far away — primarily in Asia or Africa. But starting in the 1960s, with new immigration laws, there were enormous waves of immigrants coming to America. An increasing number of people from around the world arrived, bringing with them their religions, so that those religions have taken root in our own cities and neighbourhoods. When the Vatican Council encouraged openness, perhaps the bishops did not understand how far-reaching and nearby those religions would be, even in traditionally Christian countries. In this new situation, the “other religions” could no longer be thought of as tidily far away, in places that we can choose to visit or not, as it suits our purposes. That they are here as well changes the dynamic. We have, in a good sense, lost control of where we encounter the other. It can no longer be a Christian America or Europe or Australia — to which then other religions elsewhere are added or visited. We do not live in cultures that can be determined to be Christian in a fixed and lasting way. If you want to meet people of other religions, you just walk down the street; if you want to do Zen or Yoga, you find the possibilities in your neighbourhood. If you want to experience how people pray in a mosque, you can go in town and you'll find a mosque on Friday, where you can observe or even join in that prayer. This change is of interest theologically, but also practically, since people of the other traditions are very present in our daily lives, in business, in healthcare, in education, on our campuses. All of this intensified and made all the more necessary, and even ordinary, the openness which Vatican II praised: learning with and from other religious traditions has become part of life, and of all the things we do, even before more dedicated intellectual and theological work begins.

Even the quantity and quality of what we know has changed. Our potential for knowledge of each and every tradition has grown incredibly. Information about these traditions is easily available. Books coming out every year deepen and complicate how we might think about other religious traditions. Nobody who has any time to read has an excuse for a simplistic or caricatured view of other religions. All of us can and should know so much more about other religions than we did before. The scope of possible knowledge of religions has expanded so very greatly since Vatican II, and so “openness” is a more demanding and formidable task than might have been imagined in 1965.

And *how* we know has changed: our knowledge and rules about knowledge have themselves become more complicated, and sensitivity to issues of politics and power have accentuated suspicions about how we know and how we fix and make use of our knowledge. The fact of religious diversity convinces many that religious truths can only be relative truths. The search for historical truths has become, in the popular imagination, a rival to settled traditions, as it uncovers the power and politics underlying their expressions of truth and values. Communal structure may in the extreme be reduced to their political dimensions. We know too that the modern university works with a strong sense of the politics of knowledge. Authority — and authors — are questioned, and what is held up for praise is subjected to extra scrutiny. What is not said, who is not mentioned, who does not get to write the book — these too are the subject of interrogation. Of course, much of human knowledge has been and must be elite knowledge, deeply politicized. Now many of us tend to suspect that the people who wrote the so-called great books are simply the winners in difficult debates, who by their victories are able to decide who is to be remembered or who is to be forgotten. Other specific critiques too have taken root — concerns about gender, male domination, race and the domination of the West.

And so, not only was the Church becoming more open, but people were pushing the boundaries and questioning the means of knowledge and the authority structures that would ascertain what was true and real. My turn to poetry in *His Hiding Place is Darkness* is in part a strategy by which to destabilize some of the built-in power structures of our Western and Christian ways of knowing, giving new priority to the imagination, the dramatic, and the participatory.

As real concerns multiply in an atmosphere of hyper-sensitivity, the questioning could go too far, when every question could be asked but none ever answered to everyone's satisfaction. This new intellectual climate is irreversible, and to an extent all the tough questions are salutary correctives, real and important. But such changes were not well-anticipated at the time of the Council, and perhaps few realized how a new openness in the Church just at the time when everything was being opened up and examined with a critical eye would affect the Church on the inside, unsettling our theology and philosophy, calling into question our apprehension of the truths and values of our traditions. My goal, in reading the *Song* and the *Holy Word of Mouth* together, is to find a way, through poetry and commentary, to get beyond our suspicions for the moment, to a place where learning can indubitably take place, however critically the monitors of knowledge may raise suspicions.

## ANXIETIES

And so right away, in the rich and expansive era of the post-conciliar Church, there was sure to be a pushback, new ecclesial scepticism about the value of the manner and pace of change. The new questioning and new pluralism provoked a conservative reaction. It would clearly be misleading were I to say to you that the past fifty years have been simply the benign opening of windows in the Church. We need also to take into account another theme, that of anxieties and hesitations, even the desire for reversal. We all know that there has been genuine worry in the Vatican and among many Catholics about how far can we afford to be open if we are to remain Catholic. Questions abound regarding how far one

can go in being open, in not-judging, without falling into a kind of relativism. In a postcolonial discourse, there is really no limit to what can be questioned, and as academics, theologians ask the tough questions. If so, then in a more suspicious Church, asking questions to which the answers are not already known, or studying texts of which the significance is not already clear, may be viewed with suspicion. The question of boundaries is politicized, and openness to other religions has come to be taken as a sign of being too liberal. If we turn to the issue of religious, we can observe that some of the pushback against too much openness is from people who have little familiarity with other religions. Some fear that if you are open to other religions, the charge is, you are less a Catholic, or if you keep talking about *Nostra Aetate* as encouraging openness to the other, you are actually watering down the faith. In this context, Hinduism and Buddhism, and openness to them, become political footballs, testing grounds for different versions of Catholic fidelity. The theology of religions may be *about* other religions, but its intellectual inquiry turns out also to be a battlefield inside the Church, about how relativistic, how open-minded, how liberal or traditionalist we should be. This too has been the history of the past fifty years. One might argue that the fear of secular culture, hyper-critical analyses, questioning that pushes too far, are not just Catholic fears, for these are the fears of people who care about their religious traditions. Hindus have the same worry, as do Jews and Muslims. All of us are asking, what does it mean to be a faithful religious person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

As a signpost for this new hesitation and concern, we can turn to *Dominus Iesus*, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000. There is much that is good in this document, but it also manifests the post-conciliar anxiety all the more clearly. The familiar positive note is still there, but now the signals are mixed:

Certainly, the various religious traditions contain and offer religious elements which come from God, and which are part of what “the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of peoples, in cultures, and religions.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, some prayers and rituals of the other religions may assume a role of preparation for the Gospel, in that they are occasions or pedagogical helps in which the human heart is prompted to be open to the action of God. (21)

There are “elements” from God, instigated by the Spirit in human hearts and in human history. But all the sharper is the caution, as *Dominus Iesus* (henceforth DI) goes on to say,

One cannot attribute to these, however, a divine origin or an *ex opere operato* salvific efficacy, which is proper to the Christian sacraments. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that other rituals, insofar as they depend on superstitions or other errors (cf. *1 Corinthians* 10:20-21), constitute an obstacle to salvation. (DI 21)

Though they contain elements that come “from God,” they lack “a divine origin.” Their superstitions and other errors are presumably to be interpreted in light of the cited *1 Corinthians* text, which merits reading again:

No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup

---

<sup>8</sup> RM 29.

of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. (I Corinthians 10.20-21, NRSV)

This text surely would not have been quoted for this purpose in the days of Vatican II. While I do not think we can conclude that *Dominus Iesus* thereby manifest sheer hostility to the other religions, the very idea of the preparation for the Gospel is now dampened down.

As for dialogue itself, there is likewise a caution that may in the end make dialogue seem nearly impossible. On the one hand,

Inter-religious dialogue, which is part of the Church's evangelizing mission, requires an attitude of understanding and a relationship of mutual knowledge and reciprocal enrichment, in obedience to the truth and with respect for freedom. (DI 2)

On the other, a great caution has crept in, that makes dialogue in any ordinary sense nearly impossible:

"Because she believes in God's universal plan of salvation, the Church must be missionary."<sup>9</sup> Inter-religious dialogue, therefore, as part of her evangelizing mission, is just one of the actions of the Church in her mission *ad gentes*. *Equality*, which is a presupposition of inter-religious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the parties in dialogue, not to doctrinal content, nor even less to the position of Jesus Christ — who is God himself made man — in relation to the founders of the other religions. Indeed, the Church, guided by charity and respect for freedom, must be primarily committed to proclaiming to all people the truth definitively revealed by the Lord, and to announcing the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the Church through Baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (DI 22)

Such passages from *Dominus Iesus* set a tone of great caution.<sup>10</sup> I am pointing all this out to you not to debate the points raised, but simply to highlight another key dimension of being a Catholic today. The confidence and hope of the Council, now received in a more complicated interreligious world, is also to be tinged with doubt and hesitation. Interreligious learning is caught up in hesitations and suspicions about where dialogue might lead.

In this context, theological clarity on other religions, systematically worked out, seems all the more elusive. As a theologian and in this context, I have thought a great deal about the 2001 "Notification Relative to the Book Of Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology Of Religious Pluralism*." This document questions in general terms the theology of religions proposed by Jacques Dupuis in his *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. That effect was, in practice if not by intention, to make more difficult the very kind of focused theological reflection he had undertaken. Dupuis went to great lengths and with great learning to find a more definitive resolution to dilemmas in the Catholic view of other religions. He did so by drawing on distinctions basic to Catholic doctrine for millennia: Jesus, the Christ, the Word, the Son, and the Spirit. Such distinctions, which are not divisions or separations, serve as the vocabulary at the disposal of the Church in

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 851.

<sup>10</sup> See Francis X. Clooney, SJ, "Dominus Iesus and the Practice of Interreligious Learning," in *Sic et Non: Encountering Dominus Iesus*, Charles Hefling, Jr. and Stephen Pope (eds) (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 157-68.

nuancing its views of Christ in relation to other religions. Instead of encouraging his most expert and most honest effort to get the tradition straight by drawing in tradition, the judgment seems to suggest that no such effort to get right the Christian relation to other religions will really work. Safer is a return to an older and more ambiguous “both/and” position that asserts God’s universal love alongside an insistence on the unique saving power of Christ, without entirely explaining how the two are related. This “both/and” dampens hopes about the work of theologians and experts in dialogue.

From my perspective, given the abundance of new possibilities inside and outside the Church, and the new prevalent cautiousness, it appeared to me that nothing is to be gained by trying simply to write a better theology of religions, even if one devoted enormous times to reading every ecclesial document and theological essay on the topic. My guess is that in the short run no one is likely to construct or be pleased with solutions to the problems of pluralism. So at this point in the life of the Church after the Council, I am doubtful that doctrinal and systematic theologies will be the instruments of furthering the openness aspired to by the Council. And so I have written *His Hiding Place is Darkness*, a book very different from the work of Dupuis, and in it I hardly touch on the issues to which he so deeply devoted himself. I have stepped aside from the theology of religions, away from the doctrinal considerations of salvation inside and outside the Church, in order to learn more directly and vulnerably across the boundaries, with an emphasis on the imaginative and poetic, dramatic and participatory dimensions of encounter, leaving “for later” the work of systematization. I do not dispute the right of others to engage in the theology of religions, but neither at this time do I seek to contribute to the debate myself.

But this can also be put positively. My book speaks to how we can imagine, put into words, and bring into being what it means to be a Catholic intellectual within the constraints of the Church fifty years after the Council. Large questions remain, but the maxim is true: *solvitur ambulando*. The point is to be able to do this very intentionally and specifically in a religiously diverse world that is growing more and not less diverse, and where the foundations of sure knowledge are contested, under debate — and to enter upon that world without being paralyzed by the great issues of our day. We thus need to be able to write with a greater agility, in a way that we do keep the faith but without betraying the heritage of Vatican II. *His Hiding Place is Darkness* is a way to do this, and in this way is a child of situation that is the Church in today’s world, fifty years after the Council.

#### CONCLUDING ON A NOTE OF UNCERTAINTY

I wish to end on a note of necessary uncertainty, just as I end my book that way. It is a particularly important thing, as I finish, to say that the figure who dominates my book is that woman, that woman who has the beloved, who knows the beloved, the woman who has had tender moments of union with that beloved and constantly finds that she is losing the beloved. The beloved comes and goes. The beloved is present. The beloved is missing. One time, she seeks for him and then she finds him. Another time, she seeks and she does not find him. All of these mysteries of his coming and going or, as in the Hindu poetry, she keeps waiting and waiting and waiting for him to come back and he does not. She keeps waiting for him to be with her and she does not know if he is ever going to come back at all

and this woman, who is unnamed, is the woman of the *Song*. She is the woman of the *Holy Word*, the Hindu text.

While this is not likely to be satisfying for all, it is one of the better, viable forms of theology in our generation. And it is open-ended. For the logic of my proposal is that our theology needs to be deeply unfinished and in a way uncertain, if it is to meet all the needs before us in our era. In fact, both the *Song* and the *Holy Word* (as far as the woman is concerned) conclude with a certain openness that is also an ambiguity regarding the sequel, what happens in the long run to the woman and her beloved.

I end my book with the woman's last, uncertain words in the *Song* and the *Holy Word*. The *Song*, finishes its eighth and last chapter with her striking command:

Flee,<sup>11</sup> my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!  
(*Song* 8.14)

There is no indication of how he responds. There is no clarity at the end of the *Song*, but only her command: Flee. Commentators ancient and modern have speculated that she is suggesting they flee together, or that, since she is that mountain of spices, she is really urging him to come to her. But these are only speculations, since the *Song* ends with her words.

In the *Holy Word*, the last words of the woman are also uncertain in their effect. She has been begging Krishna who has finally come to her — before these verses, in a scene that does not make it into the poetry — not to leave, but to stay with her:

These slender shoulders have grown so thin.  
Alas, without noticing at all how I am alone and grow so thin,  
The lovely cuckoos still coo, alas, the gathered peacocks dance together, alas.  
A day when you go out to herd the lovely cows is like a thousand ages, alas:  
But right now with your lotus eyes you pierce me, alas.  
This is not compassion, no compassion at all, Krsna.

Don't go, it will be calamitous for them and you — mark my word — oh!  
See, brawny demons are gathering by evil Kamsa's order,  
they roam about, disturbing even ascetics —  
yet your going it alone is so important to you,  
you don't want even your brother, you don't move about even with him.  
I keep saying all this and my soul burns inside me: more than heaven you prefer  
herding cows — Your lips full and red, O smiling cowherd God. (*Holy Word*, X.3.1, 10)

In the first verse, the paradox recurring through the *Holy Word* becomes all the more intense: she continues to pine, lament and decline, even when he is with her, since she fears he will leave — as he does every day. She feels abandoned, even as he is looking directly at her. In the second, she is trying to frighten him with the prospect of danger in the seemingly tranquil pasture to which he is heading. And yet as she speaks, he is standing there smiling at her — and this, the commentators suggest, is why she mentions his mouth. We are not told what to make of this, and in any case we do not know whether he stays or goes.

---

<sup>11</sup> Instead of the NRSV's "Make haste."

Both the *Song* and the woman's songs in the *Holy Word* conclude in uncertainty, reminding us not to pin down the things of the Spirit. However we seek after God, God will still be a mystery. We need to live with that ambiguity, on the edge between saying too much and too little. This sense of uncertainty and the awkwardness of words seems right, particularly as a way of responding to and meditating upon the complicated encounter of religions today. We never really get even to say fully who Jesus is, and we never exhaust the mystery of God, and so have simply to keep going deeper and reaching out.

Meditating on the *Song* and the *Holy Word* urges us to greater love but also to equanimity in the face of the beloved's ambiguity. For a Christian reader, these uncertain endings may well intensify our commitment to Jesus, the beloved. A Hindu may be inspired to a more absolute, unconditioned love for Krishna. But neither love inures one us to that other woman's longing and anguish. We have no immunity that would shield us from her dilemma, so that its images and drama, disappear from our minds. We remember her and to some extent share her story. If the beloved is free, then our deepest convictions do not warrant forgetting the other woman in her encounter with the utterly free beloved. Perhaps the beloved will go away and test our faith, or perhaps stay close by, exposing our secret desire for the comfort of a little more distance from God. Christ still goes as he wishes, playing and hiding within our world of many religious possibilities.<sup>12</sup>

All this, I suggest, also leaves us in a good place, one that is in keeping with the best of Vatican II, without going too far into a relativism that would lose sight of Christian particularity. Such words are inconclusive, and thus well best suited to the situation in which we find ourselves fifty years after the Council. The Council opened up many possibilities, and its message became implicated in a whole series of changes in Church and society that had greater effects than anyone had anticipated. Even as many doors were opened, some were soon shut again, some needed to be shut, but some were prematurely closed out of fear of losing control. This may not be the age of great theological syntheses, and kind of double reading I have described is, I propose, a very good post-Vatican II way of remaining faithful to the heritage of the Council while yet getting around and beyond some of the roadblocks and dead-ends that have become all the clearer in the Council's aftermath. It is, as it were, a quest to lose control of things, deep inside the poetry of the Bible and a single Hindu text. But neither is my approach any ending to the story. How things will look at the one hundredth anniversary of the Council surely remains to be seen.

---

**Author:** Francis X. Clooney, SJ, is Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard University. His primary areas of scholarship are theological commentarial writings in the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions of Hindu India, and the developing field of comparative theology, a discipline distinguished by attentiveness to the dynamics of theological learning deepened through the study of traditions other than one's own. In 2012 he was Distinguished Visiting Research Fellow in the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy, Australian Catholic University.  
Email: [fclooney@hds.harvard.edu](mailto:fclooney@hds.harvard.edu)

---

<sup>12</sup> This paragraph is drawn from the last words of *His Hiding Place is Darkness* in its current draft.