



Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies

Volume 30 *Yoga and God: Hindu and Christian Perspectives*


Article 24

2017

Book Review: *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*

Francis X. Clooney
Harvard University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Hindu Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Clooney, Francis X. (2017) "Book Review: *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 30, Article 24.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1676>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the [Society for Hindu-Christian Studies](#). The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

Part IV of the book unfolds the relevance of Raj's works in the post-Selva period and includes chapters that celebrate Raj's contribution to the field of religious studies. Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 stand as enduring examples which show how a scholar's ground-based notions and theoretical insights can be revisited and found by other scholars 'working in cognate fields' (xxi) as useful analytical tools to study other contexts, be it cultural (chapter 11 by Dempsey), ecclesial (chapter 12 by Kent) or trans-national (chapter 13 by Narayanan and Chapter 14 by Bilimoria).

This book is definitely a very compelling narrative of Tamil Catholicism written by Selva J. Raj—one of the greatest contemporary

scholars of Indian Christianity—whose humanity and scholarship were perfectly blended to study the unstudied and to taste the waters of popular Christianity untouched by many others. But Raj deep-dived into the waters and drank it stomachful to quench his intellectual thirst and, in the process, produced very insightfully many such theoretical tropes as lay ecumenism, ritual dialogue, dialogue on the ground etc., that have become a trend-setting lens through which the lived-religion of the common folk in India would be looked at for many more years to come.

James Ponniah
University of Madras

Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions and Innovations. Edited by Marianne Moyaert and Joris Geldhof. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. ix + 262 pages.

RITUAL Participation and Interreligious Dialogue is a superb collection of essays addressing with boldness and acuity three turns in modern theology and the study of religion: the turn to religious practice in all its forms as a topic of study, attention to what people actually do, as distinct from theologies and rules about what ought to happen; sensitivity to the interplay of practice and theology, each influencing the other; a new sensitivity to the phenomenon of interreligious participation in religious practice.

This exploration of “the phenomenon of interreligious ritual participation” is shaped according to several categories noticed by Moyaert in her introduction: “types of ritual participation” (institutionally organized

encounters; simpler instances of extending or receiving hospitality), “reasons for ritual participation” (by invitation; by family connections; for learning or in solidarity; personal spiritual journey); “shared belief as a precondition to inter-riting;” “the transformative power of ritual performance,” as participation affects even faith commitment; “ritual as identity marker” (marking insider and outsider status); “changing patterns of religion” (when, for example, young people choose participation by subjectively guided choices).

The bulk of the volume divides into four sections: “philosophical, theological, and phenomenological observations,” “Muslim and Christian-Muslim perspectives;” “Christian and East Asian Religious Perspectives” (a slight

misnomer, given the presence too of South Asia); “Jewish and Jewish-Christian Perspectives.” The general focus is on participation in public or communal rituals, usually in places of worship. Our authors ably distinguish occasional and exceptional participations from the circumstances and inclination to regular engagement, habits that might muddle or break down communal boundaries. They are sensitive to the generative but sometimes awkward dynamics of hospitality, as both visitors and hosts seek to balance openness with respect for hesitations (on either side) making full participation unwise. Some attention is given to more individual practices, such as taking refuge with the Buddha as a part of learning with one’s teacher, as Maria Reis Habito reports; yet once done, such acts may enhance one’s disposition to participate in other traditions as well. One could go farther: what Moyaert refers to as the “ongoing personal religious journey” might be conceived also as response, being drawn to find God calling out even from the worship of another tradition.

That declining full participation is not merely backward is raised most notably in the Jewish-Christian section of the book, where the awareness of what Jewish tradition termed idolatry and *avodah zarah* (“strange worship”) remains alive. Rachel Reedijk notes how interreligious participation may distance one from one’s own community; Anya Topolski reflects on the theological and affective difficulties of interfaith bereavement rituals; and Ruth Langer reports on her many opportunities for interfaith encounter in her many years at a Catholic university, but also her conviction as an Orthodox Jew that there are

boundaries not to be crossed, because one cannot detach practice from faith.

Each section of the book merits close attention, as encounters among different traditions have different dynamics. Given that this review is for the *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, I focus now on the essays drawing more substantively on the dynamics of Hindu-Christian engagement, in particular the Advaita Vedanta perspective. In “Offering and Receiving Hospitality: The Meaning of Ritual Participation in the Hindu Temple,” Anantanand Rambachan gives a superb overview of both the Hindu theology and Hindu practical understanding of temple worship, a perspective grounded in his own long commitment to Advaita Vedanta. From a very common Hindu perspective, influenced by Advaita even when devotional and theistic, all are welcome in temples. Except for political reasons, it seems, Hindus rarely have a problem with interreligious participation, given the deeper reality behind and within every act of worship.

In “Toward an Open Eucharist,” Richard Kearney indirectly draws on Advaita in order to advocate an open, inclusive Eucharist, ultimately among all persons and beings. He appeals to Swami Abhishiktananda (Christian monk Henri Le Saux) and his Advaitic Christian theology and spirituality to argue that most restrictions on Eucharistic participation are unacceptable. He quotes here Abhishiktanda’s bold words: “A restricted Eucharist is false... Whoever ‘loves’ his brother has a right to the Eucharist.” While this desire for an open Eucharist is noble, another implication of Abhishiktananda’s Advaitic-Christian witness is that the way of openness is also exceedingly deep, for the few. His Advaita Christian theology demands much from its practitioners and is not

for the faint-hearted. That he would open the Eucharist to all, all the time, seems highly doubtful.

In “On Doing What Others Do: Intentions and Intuitions in Multiple Religious Practice” S. Mark Heim offers a typically subtle reflection that is both substantively theological and intimately personal, on the theological and personal dimensions of participation, including accounts of his own visits to temples in India and the United States. Interestingly, because he recognizes the close parallel of Vaisnavism to Christianity, he is therefore *less* comfortable in participating in Vaisnava worship since “particular devotion to a Hindu deity would intrude on space that I devote to Christ,” and perhaps re-define him as a Hindu. (30) So Heim too prefers an Advaita terminology that sees the deities as symbols of a greater reality beyond them. It would be interesting then to explore further how the Christian-Vaisnava

phenomenon offers a deep resonance and sacramental resonance that creates different possibilities and difficulties than considered here.

In his succinct summation at volume’s end Joris Geldhof notes that complexity is still the order of the day, perhaps all the more so after these essays have done their work. When we become aware of the complexities of participation, the multiple individual and communal perspectives on every manner of encounter, and accordingly the daunting challenge to theologians to make sense of all this, the list of possibilities, questions, and concerns will only grow. But for now, this timely and valuable volume helps us to move forward in addressing a key phenomenon of this century.

Francis X. Clooney
Harvard University

***Dancing Bodies of Devotion: Fluid Gestures in Bharata Natyam.* By Katherine C. Zubko. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014, xvii + 251 pages.**

NOT only does *Dancing Bodies of Devotion* deal with performative art—bharata natyam, an Indian dance form—but it is also a tour de force in itself. In this theoretically and methodologically sophisticated presentation, Zubko contributes a genuinely novel composition to the study of Indian religions, performance studies, aesthetics, and interreligious engagement.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this work is what Zubko brings to it: her preparation as a dancer, which she puts to work learning bharata natyam herself. Her training positions her to interview dancers and choreographers

and to analyze their performances with an extraordinary level of detail. (An illustrated glossary of gestures accompanies the text.) More significantly, training in bharata natyam enables her to understand and theorize her subject matter through a method she calls “embodied ethnography.” The embodied process of learning unfamiliar gestures immerses her in the cultural and religious dimensions of the art form in a unique way. This method lends itself to an engaging writing style, in which narrations of the author’s experiences and of particular dance pieces draw the reader