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Book Review: The Human Icon: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Orthodox Christian Beliefs

Rico G. Monge
University of San Diego

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In Part II, the focus shifts from the church tradition to religious experience. The writers unequivocally acknowledge religious experience as a valid source of theology. In order to buttress their argument, they draw insights from both Evangelical and Hindu traditions as well as the writings of William James and Bernard Lonergan. They creatively and courageously point to sources of theology beyond the canonical documents and scriptures and skillfully demonstrate how these can contribute to the theological enterprise. For example, Michelle Voss Roberts draws from the Hindu aesthetic tradition and demonstrates how *rasa* contributes to one's understanding of and experiences with God.

Part III, the most inclusive, edifying, and assuring among the three sections, suggests ways to include the historically marginalized "Others" in the discourse. As promised in the section title "The Acknowledgement of Otherness," the five chapters in the section acknowledge the possibilities of learning from religious others and suggest ways to do so while rethinking interreligious dialogue. The writers challenge the claims of supremacy and parochialism within the Christian communities and admit the limits of human

knowing. Boldness to compare with and humility to learn from the social and religious margins mark the section.

This attempt to bring together those engaged in studying interreligious dialogue to critically examine this growing academic field and analyze the emerging trends within the Roman Catholic Church is much needed and commendable. The book certainly showcases conversations within the Roman Catholic Church and their possible contributions to the field of religious dialogue beyond the Catholic Church. It provides an engaging conversation between 13 highly respected experts in the field, mostly trained in comparative theology. However, alerting the reader of the scope of the conversation either in the title or in the introduction would have rightly and humbly acknowledged the growing and robust conversations about interreligious dialogue in other confessional and religious communities and thus subtly invited others to the field of interreligious dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church. This note aside, the volume is a tremendous gift to the study of interreligious dialogue.

James Elisha Taneti
Union Presbyterian Seminary

***The Human Icon: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Orthodox Christian Beliefs.* By Christine Mangala Frost. Cambridge, UK: James Clarke & Co, 2017, xv + 368 pages.**

IN her Prologue, Christine Mangala Frost indicates to her reader that *The Human Icon* sets out to achieve two primary goals. First, she wishes to map "the spiritual terrain" of both Hinduism and Eastern Orthodoxy Christianity, thus providing a model for how Hindu-Christian interreligious dialogue might proceed most fruitfully (1). Second, she

intends her study to be "an exploratory effort in comparative theology that is conducted thematically" (7), and, as one might expect, she explicitly engages both Francis X. Clooney and Raimon Panikkar on multiple occasions throughout the text. *The Human Icon* is thus an ambitious work in terms of its scope, and like most ambitious works it succeeds quite

well in achieving some of its goals, while leaving other aims unfulfilled or obscured.

In keeping with the dominant approach of those who work in the areas of comparative theology, the theology of religions, and interreligious dialogue, Frost autobiographically acknowledges her own relation to the subject at hand, as well as her own faith commitments. Born in India and raised Hindu, Frost possesses insider knowledge of Hindu beliefs, spirituality, and practices that she “pursued zealously” until this very pursuit resulted in her conversion to Anglican Christianity (1-2). Disillusioned with what she views as the “politicization of worship” within the Anglican Communion, she ultimately converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, which she now maintains “possesses the fullness of the truth” (2). Frost draws on resources within the Eastern Christian tradition to advocate for the position that the doctrine of the “fullness of truth” does not exclude other religious traditions from encounter with the divine and the possession of profound truth(s).

The Human Icon proceeds thematically, with each section exploring a prominent aspect of Hinduism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, or both. In Chapter One Frost seeks to describe phenomenologically what it means to “inhabit a Hindu world” (9-33). In the second chapter, she does the same with respect to Eastern Orthodoxy, but with the twist that she focuses primarily on the indigenous Indian Orthodox Churches, primarily the Kottayam school of theology. This chapter may be the most productively provocative in the entire book, especially in her embrace of the genuine “orthodoxy” of these non-Chalcedonian churches, even though she herself belongs to a Chalcedonian Orthodox Church and professes the articles of faith that these Indian Orthodox communities

reject. Even more provocative are her claims that the Indian Orthodoxy in general, and the Kottayam school in particular hold the keys to a Hindu-Christian dialogue that is untinged with Western (Protestant and Roman Catholic) Christian biases (35-63).

Chapters Three and Four concern themselves with the shared Hindu and Orthodox Christian goal of rendering the human divine, and thus she compares *Vedanta* and *Bhakti* with the Orthodox doctrine of *theosis* and Orthodox devotional practices. Chapter Five explores Hindu and Christian theodicy and thereby feels slightly out of place as it disrupts a consistent focus on the shared teachings of human divinization by Hindus and Christians that otherwise runs throughout the book. Chapters Six and Seven return to this focus by comparing the meditative prayer practices within *yoga* and *hesychasm* and by comparing the characteristics and function of the “holy man” within both religious traditions.

The book is highly successful in setting the parameters for dialogue and for accurately describing how metaphysical beliefs connect with spiritual practices in both traditions. It is also significant in that it will provide theological grounding for promoting openness amongst Orthodox Christians of the valid truths within Hinduisms (and, by extension, other religious traditions as well). At the same time, however, the book suffers as a work of comparative theology due to its resolutely inclusivist theology of religions, together with the attitudes of religious supremacy and triumphalism that are implicit in most, if not all, inclusivist perspectives. In Chapter Seven, for example, Frost rightly applies a critical eye towards the various kinds of Hindu “holy men” and suggests how an Orthodox perspective might help Hindus differentiate between genuinely “holy” gurus,

and those who are profiteers, egoists, and/or coercive and abusive to their followers. When discussing Orthodox elders, on the other hand, Frost waxes eloquently about their virtues, while failing to acknowledge that chicanery and abuse are rampant problems in the Orthodox world as well (311-312).

Because of these tendencies, the book ultimately fails as a work of comparative theology. Those looking for an Orthodox version of Catholic comparative theologians such as Raimon Pannikar or Francis Clooney will be disappointed. As Frost herself acknowledges, her book “provides a way to train Christians in the art of listening to Hindus and an opportunity for Hindus to ponder the life-changing implications of a Christian approach to God” (319). Instead of accomplishing the comparative theological goal of learning more about God from each other, Frost provides only a way for Hindus to learn from the Orthodox, while the Orthodox simply learn to be less judgmental and disparaging of Hindus.

The Human Icon is a skillfully written and well-researched text and should be of great interest to some readers, while somewhat disappointing for others. For Eastern Orthodox theologians and practitioners, it is a

welcome exploration of what Eastern Orthodox Christians and Hindus have in common, and it provides a roadmap for future efforts at interreligious dialogue between Hindus and Orthodox. Moreover, Frost’s inclusivist theology of religions will provide many Orthodox readers with ways to conceptualize how theological truths are not the exclusive property of the Eastern Orthodox Church. For non-Orthodox readers, *The Human Icon* will also serve as an excellent introduction to the comparison of Hindu and Eastern Christian beliefs and practices from an Orthodox perspective. On the other hand, readers who hold to a pluralist theology of religions may find this text limited in its analyses due to its underlying premise that Orthodox Christianity uniquely contains the “fullness of truth” in a way that Hinduism does not. Moreover, those working in the field of comparative theology may find that *The Human Icon’s* focus on theology of religions and interreligious dialogue ultimately undermines any positive comparative theological contributions the book may otherwise have had.

Rico G. Monge
University of San Diego

***Teaching Interreligious Encounters.* Edited by Marc A. Pugliese and Alexander Y. Hwang. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 368 pages.**

INTERRELIGIOUS encounters permeate our culture, the university, and many of the personal and public corners of our lives. As suggested in the title, *Teaching Interreligious Encounters* explores the art of teaching, including pedagogical theory, actual lesson plans and classroom activities, suggested texts, and narratives for how and why

particular approaches to teaching interreligious studies work. This multidisciplinary volume is the fruit of the American Academy of Religion/Luce Summer Seminars on Comparative Theology and Theologies of Religious Pluralism (2009-2013). The book is divided into five sections, each emphasizing a different method of encounter: