

RELIGIONS AS WAYS OF LIFE, PATHS OF STUDY, COMMUNITIES IN THE MAKING

Francis X. Clooney♦

Abstract: The thesis of this essay is relatively simple, familiar, but also challenging, if we take it seriously: religion is a constitutive and inevitable part of 21st century life and not a dimension that is option, able to be put aside in a secular society. All citizens, even those interested only in their own religion or not personally committed to any religion, must know religions well, for the common good of all people in a city, state, or nation. If we are to take religions seriously, we must be committed to thinking non-reductively about life's 'religious dimension,' retrieving a rich sense of being-religious, and affirming religion as a whole way of life, rather than one component among many. In particular, scholars and professors, their students, and the wider reading public need to cultivate practices of interreligious reading as a course of daily life in the 21st century. This thesis is explored with reference to the author's reflections on religion as a way of life, the vocation of teaching and the practice of interreligious teaching, and his own study of Hindu traditions as a Christian for nearly 50 years.

Keywords: Being-Interreligious, Christian and Hindu Traditions of Learning, Comparative Theology, Religions, Study as a Way of Life

♦**Francis X. Clooney, S. J.** is the Parkman Professor of Divinity and Professor of Comparative Theology at Harvard University. After earning his doctorate in South Asian Languages and Civilizations (University of Chicago, 1984), he taught at Boston College for 21 years before coming to Harvard. His primary areas of Indological scholarship are theological commentarial writings in the Sanskrit and Tamil traditions of Hindu India. He is also a leading figure globally in 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. His most recent books are *Reading the Hindu and Christian Classics: Why and How Deep Learning Still Matters* (University of Virginia Press, 2019) and *Western Jesuits in India: Tracing Their Paths, Reassessing Their Goals* (Jesuit Studies Series 28, Brill, 2020). Email: fclooney@hds.harvard.edu.

1. Humans Are Innately Religious

The thesis of this essay is relatively simple, familiar, but also challenging, if we take it seriously: religion is a constitutive and inevitable part of 21st century life and not a dimension that is option, able to be put aside in a secular society. All citizens, even those interested only in their own religion or not personally committed to any religion, must know religions well, for the common good of all people in a city, state, or nation. If we are to take religions seriously, we must be committed to thinking non-reductively of what the life's 'religious dimension' might be, retrieving a rich sense of being-religious, and affirming religion as a whole way of life, rather than one component among many, possibly related to the rest of life or, if one wishes, put aside. A religion is not an organization one joins or not, and indeed, it is not even just a way of life. Being-human is being-religious, and the religions religious people profess are outward signs of that essential inner orientation.

The preceding sentences are lofty and may be argued at length, but here they are meant to lead to practical insights rather than a theory of religion. If being religious is a way of life and a defining feature of being human, then it is a crucial dimension of any assessment and plan for a good society in the 21st century. If on the contrary we theorize an idea of 'religion,' we may, as some scholars do, easily deconstruct the idea, describing how the very idea of religion was invented (Tomoko Masuzawa) and then call into question its reality, or even characterize it as merely harmful, such that we'd be better off without it (Steven Pinker). Speaking of religion may then be replaced by speaking of culture, scientific progress, etc. Nor does the deconstruction stop there: once 'Hinduism' and 'Christianity' and 'Islam' are observed closely, these too are problematized, and not only pluralized, 'Hinduisms,' etc., but rather thoroughly sorted out into very many further sub-divisions, until 'religion,' 'Christianity,' etc., are properties of individuals without much social impact at all.

Some of us may think of 'religion' as an institution that allows for and often requires a kind of membership ("Which religion do you belong to?"), thus implying insiders and outsiders, and inviting a competition for members. The recognition that religions do take social forms as communities and institution is not entirely wrong. We are not merely individuals, but also social beings who are members of communities which inevitably have boundaries, such that belonging means something and not everything. But here too we may also get into trouble, since institutions rise and wane, membership increases and decreases, and people may, today especially, refuse membership and then get counted

among the 'unreligious' or 'post-religious,' even if they still hold the faith, but simply don't want to buy into the whole of the social organization. Institutions are not and ought not be all-encompassing, but pushing back against them may in some case turn out to be pushing back against religion itself: "I believe, but I am no longer a practicing Catholic" may become "I think there should be no Church at all."

Once listed as one among many components of society or as one kind of membership group, religion might also be accepted and honoured, seen as entirely optional, or problematized as interfering with other dimensions of society, such as the political or cultural. One can in the end imagine a purely secular society, such as (one would hope but cannot insist) still has strong moral values, supposed to be innate or chosen, after religion is erased from public life. But such views confuse historically limited conceptualizations of religion and religions with what I am arguing to be the deeply religious nature of human beings, by nature open to transcendent realities. We can be and live religiously, often best in communities, without relying on any unchanging institutional form of religion as an optional society.

'Religion' almost always exists as 'religions.' It is plural, possessed of particular features, histories, and beliefs. We belong to one or another among various religious communities therefore, and not to 'religion.' Being-religious ought to be personal, ought to be experiential, yet can also refer to social organizational structures such as churches, mosques, *sampradāyas*.

The challenge before us then is to rejuvenate the role of religion in individual lives and in society by fostering a richer knowledge of particular religions in our personal and communal, national, and global lives. To do this, as Stephen Prothero has pointed out, we must work toward religious literacy as an essential value in society today. There is much learning to be done on many levels, but key is to remember and understand what the religions say and value, do now and have done in past millennia. History matters. We must reject a 'presentism' that sees religion only now, at the service of the questions of today. Religions need to be relevant, but they also need to critique the uncritical moral consensus of society in any given era, by also judging the present in light of the past. We need to be able to remember and dip deeply into the riches of the traditions to which we belong, if we are to have any hope of finding resources that matter in the current generation. We need to understand the depth that exists in the sacred texts and traditions, practices, and rituals, and indeed, in all the ethical value and directives that enrich the core of such traditions. None of this turns out to be simple, but that is a good thing. No religion is reducible to the

propaganda voiced in favour of it or against it; without knowledge of our traditions, we are in danger of falling into sloganism. Consequently, there is an urgent need to deepen our knowledge of religions, both the religion we may personally cultivate as our own, and the religions of others.

2. On My Own Learning

When I stress learning and study, I am speaking personally too, and so a bit of personal context is in order as to where I stand and what I myself know about religions (beyond what everyone knows). I have one primary religious commitment, Roman Catholicism (in its Irish-American form) and as a scholar I have devoted myself to the sustained study of certain forms of Hinduism.

I think, write, experience, and write as a Roman Catholic Christian. We have a very long tradition of text and interpretation, reaching back to the Bible, and even the New Testament as a kind of extension of, comment on the Hebrew Bible. Catholics have long traditions of learning, and doctrines that bring spiritual wisdom and truths into focus. Catholics, like most other Christians, also have strong sense that the Word that is heard is also to be lived and integrated into worship as well. Now it is true that most Catholics do not actually read all the great theological books, and often have not studied the Bible either. Nevertheless, the study that takes place and the deep learning infuses the life of the Church, and thus has its effect in the lives of individual Catholics too. To disconnect living Catholicism from the great tradition of learning would be a great mistake. That someone might live virtuously as a Catholic simply by personal principles and intuitions is possible and admirable, but this does not mean that religion reduces to individualism. We are better Catholics, better Christians, if we know our tradition and live more fully and intelligently by it.

I have been studying, experiencing, and learning from Hindu traditions since 1973, when I travelled to Kathmandu to teach at St Xavier's High School in Jawalakhel, where all the boys were Hindu and Buddhist. My formal studies at the University of Chicago, which began in 1979, ultimately focused on the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, a reading of the Sūtras of Jaimini along with and in distinction from the normative commentary of Śabarāswāmi. Mīmāṃsā in its various schools was committed to the intelligibility of the vast canon of Vedic rites and texts, and its unity and coherence in practice. In defending the Veda, Mīmāṃsā intellectuals avoided any dependence on deities or external authorities or absolute realities or inner selves, in order to argue that śruti, as heard and obeyed, constitutes a web of words and practices that add up to a whole

of parts-in-unity, a plurality that does not reduce to unity. Mīmāṃsā is a today a rarified and little studied tradition and for no one, I think, a living faith. Like Sāṃkhya, though, another tradition that cannot be called a living religion, Mīmāṃsā still has a deep influence in Indian ways of thinking about this world and the higher, other world of transcendent realities. Its model of a harmony in diversity, as a matter of practice, still has much to teach us.

I have also for years studied the Upaniṣads and Brahma Sūtras, and the commentaries arising thereupon. Vedānta helps us to see the One, and to resist flat monism. It was fairly easy for me to move from the study of Mīmāṃsā to the study of Vedānta. We all know that there is no unified and single 'Vedānta religion' to which all Hindus do or should belong, but multiple Vedāntas, identified with specific teachers such as Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Nimbarka, and others. The Vedānta traditions are, like Catholicism, great interconnective traditions that weave together all that is and can be known, on the basis of text and reason, practice and experience. Advaita Vedānta is famous for drawing on the Upaniṣads to confirm that all is one, ultimately the Brahman that is Ātman. Rāmānuja's Vedānta too proposes that all is one, but as existing within the greater reality of God on whom all else is dependent, like body on soul. Although Vedānta remains deeply rooted in the Upaniṣads and upholds high standards of learning, it manages today also to assert a certain universality, pointing to the one beneath the many. All of the schools of Vedānta exist in elite intellectual forms, but they also are presented in ways that are more popularly accessible. Many a person who has not studied Vedānta sees the world in a Vedānta way, the one in tension with the many, all parts subsumed into the whole. Swami Vivekananda articulated a kind of universal Vedānta, even for the West, and it is an excellent starting point, provided one eventually goes back to the classic texts of ancient times.

Finally, I have for decades also studied the Śrīvaiṣṇava traditions of Tamil Nadu. I have learned from the devotional tradition of the ālvār poet-saints, and from the Vedānta read anew in the light of the Tamil sources. Śrīvaiṣṇavism is proudly Tamil and south Indian even if it adheres to the Vedānta of Rāmānuja and claims a universality for its truth claims again Śrī Nārāyaṇā as the one Lord of the universe. The tradition's truths and values are woven in with many features of south Indian culture, and so it is 'all-Indian' only by way of its connections with the other Vaiṣṇavisms of the north, most notably the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism of Bengal — and more simply, by being local as most Hindu traditions have local roots. When one studies this tradition of beautiful

poetry and imagery, one is drawn into it ever more deeply, in an intensification of love of God.

One could go on and on talking about individual traditions West or East. I have not mentioned the rich variety of the Syriac Christian Churches in India, or the Protestant communities. And of course, there are so many Hindu traditions in all parts of India that deserve attention as well. Indeed, it is important to remember that there is such a diversity, that these traditions are different, and very interesting in their individuality. But whatever the religion, we must cultivate greater knowledge of the sources, and not just their present forms.

The preceding paragraphs are meant to alert readers to my background and my areas of study. I have studied these traditions individually and also made innumerable experiments in comparative learning, as I explain in *Comparative Theology*. My experience of religion clearly tends toward educated, literate traditions wherein learning matters. These are traditions that merit attention even today, and my readers can point to many others as well, Christian and Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh, and in all the local and vernacular forms in which all these religions flourish.

I am a scholar, and my instinct is to say that we must study our own tradition and other traditions deeply. My point is not spoiled if I admit, as I readily do, that most Catholics do not spend their time reading the classics; yet they live in a Church informed by the learning and spirituality of those classics. Neither does it detract from my insistence on learning the Hindu traditions, if I readily admit that only a few Hindus know much about Mīmāṃsā, and that many know Vedānta only through Swami Vivekananda (with or without actually having read him) and other modern teachers. Śrīvaiṣṇava faith is lived, recited, taught within the community and education in the faith is stressed, but my impression is that many Śrīvaiṣṇavas have not studied their great commentarial tradition, rather benefitting from the learned discourses of those who have studied. Indeed, the point of having scholars immersed in learned traditions is that we ought always to have some among us who know the past well, and bring it to life in the present, thus resisting the temptation to reduce religions to what we happen to know of them today.

3. The Vocation of Teaching Religions as a Civic Duty

I have thus far argued that religious and interreligious knowledge is essential. If so, we have a lot of work to do. We need to know our own traditions, and we need to know in some depth about the traditions around us.

As individuals we need to learn our own tradition: the history, the ideas, the literature, the practices, and we need to come to a mature relationship to the tradition, choosing it. If we drift or deal with tradition in only a fragmentary way, we can hardly expect much of the tradition, or blame it as irrelevant. If our knowledge is superficial, it may seem that the religion itself is superficial, either merely superstition, or myth, or authoritarian structure, and thus not worthy of preservation. Education prevents us from so casual and reductive an attitude. If we do not know our own home traditions, they lose their efficaciousness and power to make a difference in life, reduced rather to what people happen to do right now. Sometimes religions may live on and even have many followers, but in distorted and undisciplined forms, doing more harm than good. If people of faith are largely uneducated in their own religions, they may stand by helplessly when others distort them out of ignorance or to cause trouble.

What is true of the individual must be true of the society as a whole. Mature civilizations ensure education even in religion, with respect to the past of the traditions, and even if living traditions naturally and rightly take on forms that are not merely extensions of what was known earlier. (We cannot fossilize the present, to make it merely a replica of the past!) We need then to do better in the work of education, aiming at a greater commitment to the study of philosophy and religions in public and private institutions at all levels. I return to this point below.

Interreligious study too should be a bedrock commitment for a better future world. It is ambitious enough to say that we must learn our traditions, but that is not enough. But we must study and learn beyond a minimal level the traditions around us. India, like the United States, is religiously very diverse, though India's diversity is much older and deeply rooted. Many have written about the deep habits that have served Indians for centuries in living together, affected by one another, adapting, without using one's deeper identity. But in the modern context, as ancient networks are broken, we cannot take for granted any longer that being good and respectful neighbours is enough, or even that we will be good neighbours simply because we use to be good neighbours. When ignorance abounds, then religion can be used for political purposes, as fundamentalists stir up communal hatred and secularists caricature religions in order to exclude them. Governments are responsible to preserve civil order, the rights of all, and to protect minorities from majorities. Religious education is a key value that governments must support and foster, and without merely favouring one religion over others. Among all the problems arising in a society, ignorance is a great fundamental evil, the source of many other evils. It is necessary then for

individuals and communities to commit themselves to being informed about what others believe, understanding why they eat and dress and sing as they do, why they worship in certain ways on certain days, what they live for and are willing to die for, and how they view outsiders to their traditions. Even what seems to be problematic in religious traditions is rarely a matter of pure malice, and by understanding the traditions' sources and values, we can put in context what has gone wrong in this or that instance.

4. Dare We Teach Religions Well?

Teaching religions well is not easy, even if we leave aside the practicalities of library and online resources, proper offices and classrooms, etc. Traditions that stretch over thousands of years are complex, and open to multiple interpretations. Presenting religious scriptures accurately, without distortion but without overlooking difficult passages that raise issues of truth and value, is hard. Knowledge is required and so too honesty, and the exercise of a critical faculty that respects all religions but whitewashes none. It is appropriate and necessary to insist that the religions to which we belong are to be cherished, studied, and given a fair place in society today. But this does not mean that they are to be presented as entirely pure and true. Nor does it not mean that the goal is to show that one is much better than all the others. Histories must be told honestly, for no tradition is comprised of believers who are entirely innocent and blameless. Believers are, as Christian tradition puts it, also sinners, and Hindus know very well the impact of ego and selfishness, anger and fear. A believer may personally believe that her or his religion is indeed the superior faith, but the classroom is the place for critical exchange, not mere defenses of faith.

If religions are to be taught properly for the good of society, then society is responsible for making that teaching possible. The furthering of religious knowledge needs to be part of every country's educational system, at the national, state, and local levels. We cannot exclude the teaching of religions from schools, colleges, and universities, even on secular campuses. Commerce and the sciences are not so important as to push aside the study of religions. The role of educators is to make sure that everyone knows what she or he is talking about. For this, teachers at every level need to be educated and taught how to teach them in an educational setting. But then too there need to be at least Masters level programs in the study of religions and in the teaching of religions in almost all colleges and universities. Needless to say, such departments will require trained faculty. Once there are such departments, this fact

will encourage talented young people to think of pursuing higher degrees in the study of religions, their own and others.

I am aware that there will be some reluctance to give the study of religions important space on campus, even on the part of those who agree that religious ignorance is a major problem. Some may be suspicious of religious zealotry on campuses or think that education should cover everything but religion. Others may wish simply to maintain silence on religions, in order to keep campuses free of religious strife. It is certainly true that the modern classroom is not the place for proselytization. Teachers have to be professional, able to present all religions, those of others as well as their own, with respect and a certain objectivity. Students have to be free to think, question, and decide for themselves what religion then means at home and in the community. But the best antidote to zealotry is not silence and disregard for religions, which allows ignorance and hatred to fester off campus, but learning. Studying religions, knowing their histories, actually reading the scriptures, great theological texts, important law codes, and bringing to the study of them a respectful but honest and critical eye — all of this is the great antidote for ignorance and bias.

If all of this is in place, the reality of religions' playing a constructive role in society becomes all the more real. Educated students who know their own religions and those of others can also, in a society that respects free thought and free speech, speak up for sanity and respect regarding religion and politics, religion and the state, and the host of other points that otherwise, when free speech and free thinking are repressed, quickly become allergic and painful. Those who do not even know their own traditions will hardly be convincing voices for respect and harmony in societies where religion is neither enforced nor marginalized.

We must still remember to respect individuals even if, as I have suggested, religion is a basic dimension of being human, not something to be casually added or dropped. Many people today do not identify with any particular tradition, even the one into which they were born. It will do no good merely to say that people ought to belong. If they have no bond, no faith, belonging cannot be merely turned on. In the 21st century, in freer societies and (often) in urban settings, individuals define personal paths, act spiritually by their own instincts, or resist religion entirely. India is of course used to nonconformism, and even millennia ago there was more fluidity than in the traditional West. This respect for the individual who will not conform is no excuse to again reduce religion to the private and the marginal. Even when religious freedom and freedom of speech and action are thoroughly respected, honest discussions on the importance of religions in public life ought still occur,

with a clear understanding of religions, society and politics, and the very meaning of being human.

Likewise, of course, diversity on a larger scale matters too. No single religion as such deserves to be the one and only religion for India or the United States in the 21st century. It would be very unwise and out of touch with reality to claim that any country would be better off if we returned to an imagined ancient golden era, when everyone followed just one religion. It would be senseless, and indeed wicked, to try to force minorities today to convert and adhere to the dominant religion. Diversity is here to stay, and for us all to survive, we need to live with respect for all traditions, choosing once more to live next to one another in harmony, even while noticing differences.

5. Letting Whole Intellectual and Spiritual Persons Come to Be

Much of this reflection has had a decidedly intellectual and academic edge to it. Such is, I presume, the best contribution I myself am able to offer. Other will have very different views of all this. That is good, since a fuller range of views, honestly proposed and honestly considered, will do us all well.

That said, I do believe we would all be better off, in every faith tradition, were each of us to commit ourselves to some regular study of the great scriptures of our own traditions, and of at least one other tradition as well. Thus, I as a Roman Catholic, need to study regularly the books of the prophets *Isaiah* and *Micah* to learn more deeply the roots of justice and love; the *Gospel of Luke*, to learn how to imagine Jesus and imitate him more intimately in my own life; and the Gospel of John, to see the depth of the mystical experience to which we are all called as children of God. Based on my many years of experience, I am also delighted to return regularly to the wisdom of the sage Yajñavalkya in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*; I learn more and more of detached and selfless action from the teachings of Lord Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhagavad Gītā*; and I see more clearly the heights and depths of union with God in the songs of Nammālvār, the great Vaiṣṇava poet-saint. I can also expand my horizons, learning too from the holy *Qur'an* and the Hadith of the Prophet, and from the venerable *Guru Granth Sahib* of the Sikh tradition. I will not presume to tell my readers in Hindu or Muslim or Sikh (or other) traditions what to read of their own traditions, except that you too ought not to take for granted your holy texts without ever studying them. Listen to the wisdom of others, but find it also on your own. So too, by your own preferences and on the advice of others, you too can step beyond your own tradition, to read parts of the Bible and other holy texts of your neighbors across the many religious communities of India. In

urging this study, I do not mean to say that suddenly we should all be scholars at our desks, since the study I have in mind need not be strictly academic. Good translations can be used; short passages read, daily or even once a week; simple moral applications explored for our everyday lives. But the goal is clear: every home should have in a place of honor some holy books, of our own and other faith traditions, and they should be put to good use regularly by individuals and families.

But I close by returning to my opening observation that religions are not add-ons to human society, or merely institutions; neither are they just collections of ideas or of good intentions. Rather, religions are indeed ways of life, intellectually but also morally and spiritually cultivated and sustained, by individuals, in families, communities, and other social groups. Our difficult 21st century needs whole persons, in whom intelligence and spirituality are evident in material and spiritual ways, and from whom truth and virtue overflow into society as a whole, religious goodness and holiness manifest in ideas, words, and service. It is tempting to say that we need saints and mahatmas, but such people cannot be manufactured upon demand. Rather, the job of teachers is to keep creating the humane and spiritual conditions in which whole persons can grow and flourish and then show by their lives why it is that religion really is a necessary and beneficial part of being human.

For all of us, I insist, knowing our traditions makes us more fully formed and developed people of faith; knowing other people's religions too also helps us to be not only more widely literate, but also more deeply and more intensely engaged practitioners of our own faith traditions. This I know by my personal experience, as a Catholic priest who has studied Hinduism for nearly 50 years. I am a better Catholic and better priest because of the Hindu wisdom I have imbibed over the decades. In the end, the main thing is to look forward. If Hindus of the various schools and Christians of the various traditions can lead the way in creating spaces for young people to grow up as intelligent and spiritually committed persons of faith, then we will have succeeded in envisioning anew a necessary and life-giving place for religions in the societies for decades and even centuries to come.

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