Culture
Book Reviews
Rain clouds form during sunset in Kathmandu, Nepal, Aug. 31, 2020. Jesuit Fr. Francis X. Cloo

Rain clouds form during sunset in Kathmandu, Nepal, Aug. 31, 2020. Jesuit Fr. Francis X. Clooney's time in Nepal "fundamentally shaped the rest of his career," writes Greta Gaffin. (CNS/Reuters/Navesh Chitrakar)

by Greta Gaffin

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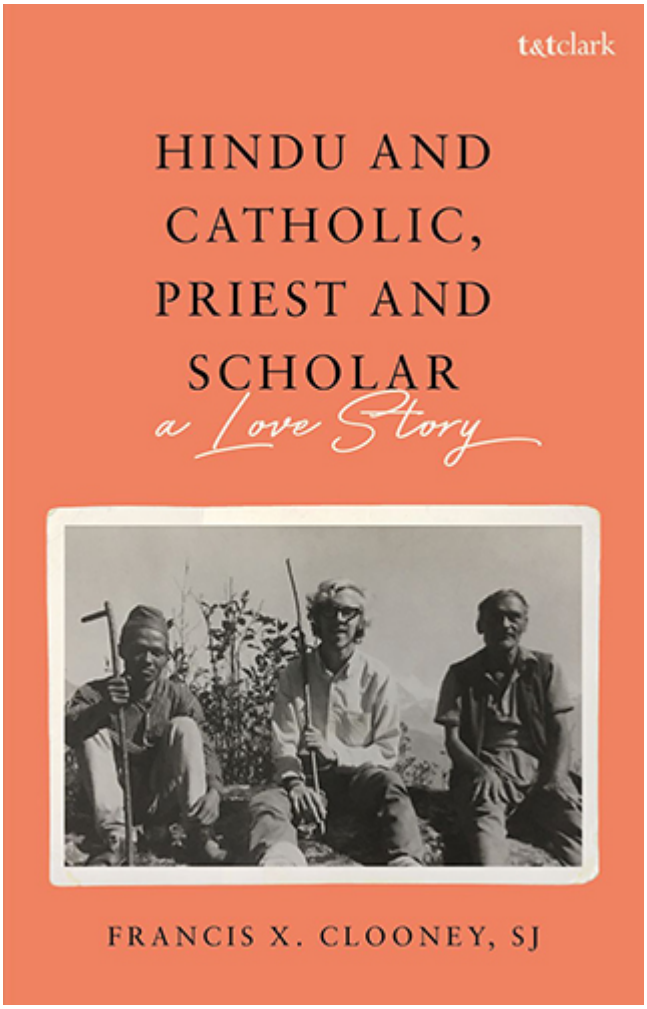
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Jesuit Fr. Francis X Clooney dedicated his life to the study of Catholicism and Hinduism, driven by a passion for fostering knowledge of Hindu belief and practice among Westerners. His clerical memoir, Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story, offers intimate insight into a priest's life and devotion.

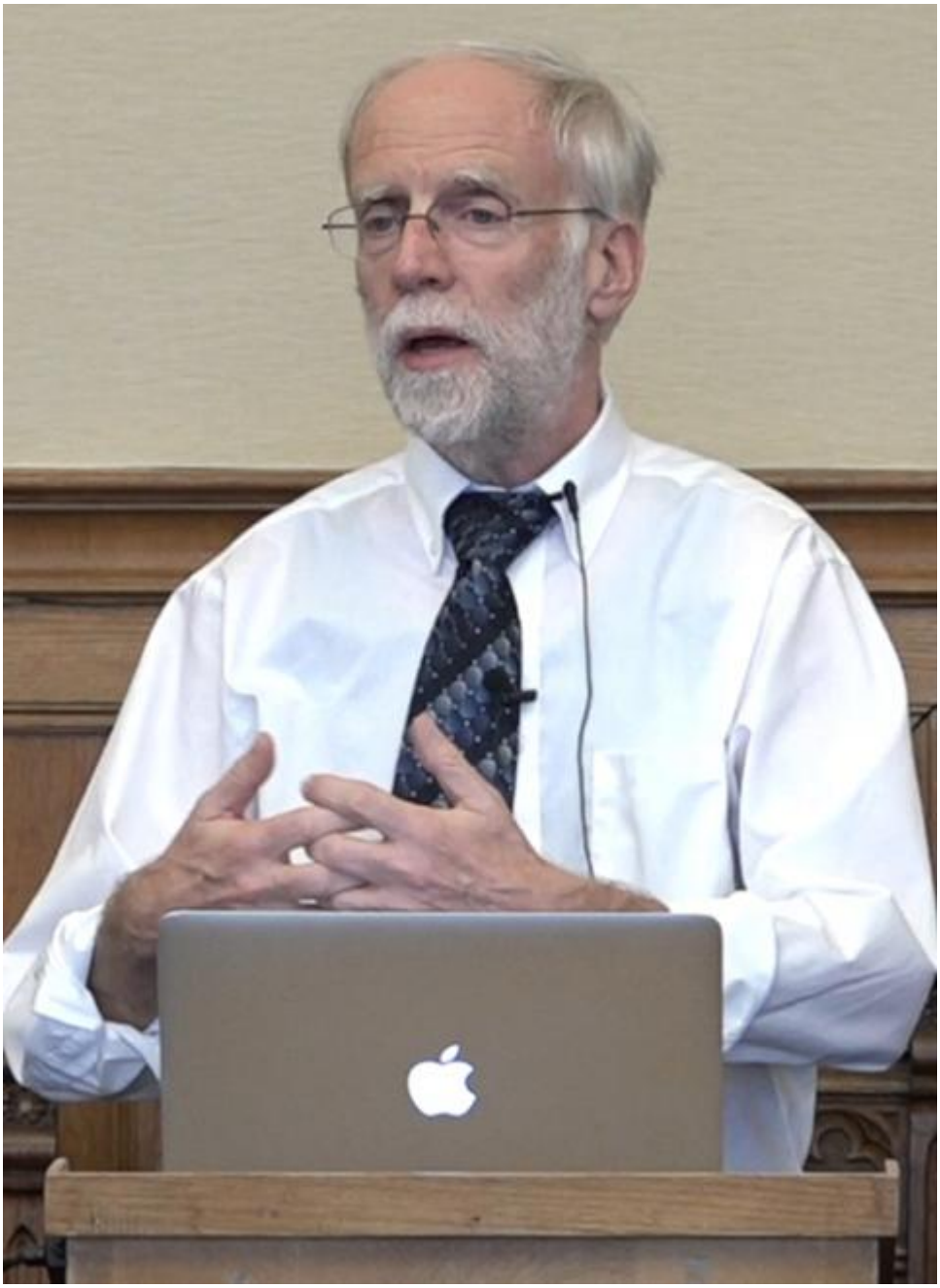
At age 15, Clooney experienced a clear calling. "My life was now in the hands of the God who had touched me, and that I could from now on be only for-God," he writes. There is a lot of criticism today, and rightly so, of the mid-20th century practice of shepherding teenagers into religious life directly after high school graduation. But there are some for whom it worked beautifully, and Clooney — whose faith is a steady thread throughout this book — is clearly one.



Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar: A Love Story
Francis X. Clooney
208 pages; Bloomsbury
$24.95

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But this is a scholarly autobiography in addition to a spiritual one. Like many Jesuits, Clooney taught high school as part of his formation. Unlike most Jesuits, however, he taught in Nepal. There, he guided his students in contemplating Hindu and Buddhist texts in an Ignatian style, and requested permission to put an image of Sarasvati, the Hindu goddess of wisdom, next to the classroom crucifix. (He also taught the boys how to speak English correctly — that is, like a New Yorker.)



Jesuit Fr. Francis X. Clooney of Harvard Divinity School speaks at the University of Edinburgh's School of Divinity in 2016 (Wikimedia Commons/Caorongjin, CC BY-SA 4.0)

This experience fundamentally shaped the rest of his career. He delved into various Hindu texts, including ones less studied by Westerners, and learned from highly regarded Hindu theologians. Hindu theology is discussed extensively in this book, which for some might feel overwhelming even while interesting and generally accessible.

Hindu and Catholic is aptly named, for all of this is wrapped around his discussion of his life as a Jesuit and what it has been like to live out his vocation over decades. Clooney is known for pioneering the field of comparative theology. Not comparative religion as a social science discipline, but theology as approached from a place of genuine belief. While he emphasizes the importance of texts, he also cares deeply about the actual practice of religion.

One interesting part of the book is near the end, as his frustration with Harvard Divinity School, where he has served as faculty since 2005, is evident. A professor who wants to teach about Hinduism was perhaps not the best suited for the theology department at Boston College, where he previously taught. But a professor who firmly believes in God is perhaps not the best suited for Harvard Divinity School, yet there he is.

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I had the opportunity to hear Clooney speak at Harvard Divinity School this past spring, right after there had been numerous federal cuts to research funding, resulting in many people losing their jobs. He spoke about how he felt terrible that other people's worlds were being upended while his life was fine. He also talked about his guilt about his primary activity being translating medieval Tamil poetry instead of something more useful. In the book, he recalls the shame he felt over escaping the windowless office he shared with other faculty, who, unlike him, were not tenure-track. As many of us are wrestling with our privilege in real time, it is refreshing to read a priest writing honestly about his struggle with his own.

Hindu and Catholic, Priest and Scholar is a worthwhile read; certainly for anyone interested in the academic study of religion or theology, but also for anyone interested in how to navigate a deep commitment to one's own faith while also respecting and learning from others' traditions.

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