



Book Review

Francis Xavier Clooney. *Saint Joseph in South India: Poetry, Mission and Theology in Costanzo Gioseffo Beschi's Tēmpāvāṇi*. Publications of the de Nobili Research Library, volume 39. Wien: Verein 'Sammlung de Nobili, Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Indologie und Religionsforschung', Institut für Südasiens-, Tibet- und Buddhismuskunde der Universität Wien, 2022. ISBN: 978-3-900271-48-0, pp. 194. (Hardcover).

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The title of Francis Xavier Clooney's book, *Saint Joseph in South India: Poetry, Mission and Theology in Costanzo Gioseffo Beschi's Tempavani* tells us all that we need to know about his monograph. In this monograph Clooney, a Jesuit priest, discusses *Tempavani* the epic poem in the Tamil language written by the 18th century Jesuit missionary to the Tamil country, Fr. Costanzo Gioseffo Beschi, an Italian, who worked in the Tamil country from 1710 to his death in 1747. Beschi has gained universal fame for his mastery over the Tamil language, being the author of a number of highly acclaimed Tamil texts, including, the epic poem on Saint Joseph, the work under discussion in Clooney's work. Four thousand verses long, the *Tempavani* describes the birth and life of Jesus prior to his public ministry, told from the perspective of Saint Joseph, Jesus Christ's foster father. Rather than plunge into a detailed translation of this epic, what Clooney does in the fifth chapter (of six) of this book is to rather focus on the three chapters from the 27th to the 29th that recount the ministry of Joseph in Egypt, and, which Clooney argues, manifests Joseph as "the natural and moral teacher par excellence" (p17). After all, Clooney clearly indicates in the monograph introduction that he is not interested in "presenting a full analysis of the Tamil grammatical and poetic styles, nor the still necessary full history of the text, but rather an account of Beschi's great plan to make the Christian story grow fruitfully in the soil of South Indian culture" (p. 14). What this book does do, therefore, is to offer a *theological* appreciation of *Tempavani* with the argument that such an appreciation would allow us to perceive the nuances of Beschi's missionary strategies, namely, about how to present the Gospel in ways that would make sense to an audience rooted in a Tamil context.

In keeping with this project, the earlier chapters of the book provide the contextual nest within which the fifth chapter sits—think of it, if you like, as an intellectual matryoshka doll project. The second chapter titled "Some Groundwork for Our Understanding of Beschi's Literary Project" is dedicated to a discussion of the various works that Beschi engaged with. This chapter begins with an analysis of the three chapters (13th-16th) of the *Vetiyarolukkam (On the Behaviour of Catechists)*, representing the way Clooney believes it allows readers to appreciate "Beschi's overall view of natural virtue and the moral life" (p. 17). In this chapter Clooney also points out that the *Vetiyarolukkam* also references portions of the *Tirukkural* and launches into

an exciting discussion of the classical Tamil text, pointing to how eventually what Beschi did was not so much faithfully *translate* the text as much as *reframe* the *Tirukkural*, to communicate a Christian truth through a reinterpretation of various beliefs and concepts that were dominant in the original text. The third chapter offers an initial introduction to the *Tempavani* offering an outline of the epic, presenting it as a work of a Christian imagination, which introduced Christian theology as a seed into the fertile soil of Tamil literature. What Clooney helpfully points out in this chapter about the *Tempavani*, is that it presents Egypt, the location of the Holy Family's exile, as a stand in for the Tamil country to which Beschi is preaching. The fourth chapter nests the *Tempavani* within a broader context, highlighting some of the works which inspired and influenced the composition. Clooney lists two Tamil epics as a source of this inspiration, namely Kampan's Ramayan from the 13th century, and the Jain epic, Civakachintamani, authored by Tiruttakkatevar, from the 9th century BCE. While the second inspiration is revealed to be the 17th century Spanish mystic María de Ágreda's (1602-1665) *Mystical City of God (Mística Ciudad de Dios)*, the third source of inspiration for Beschi's *Tempavani* was the author's own Ignatian tradition of the *Spiritual Exercises* where the retreatant is encouraged to enter the scene of the Gospels and experience sentiments of joy, fear, remorse, gratitude. It is only after this elaborate contextualising of the epic that Clooney proceeds to analyse the three chapters of the *Tempavani* in the fifth chapter, followed by a brief sixth chapter where Clooney seeks to link Beschi's strategy of accommodation with the more contemporary Catholic project of inculturation.

Clooney's monograph is a delight to read because it is a true, and masterly, example of interdisciplinary scholarship. The author is both a social scientist as well as a theologian, and the combination of these skills allows us a unique appreciation of the text. At the same time, his treatment of the text also offers us an exciting perspective of what qualitative interdisciplinary work between theology and the social sciences might look like. This would be especially useful for students of Catholicism, whether in the Tamil country, in South Asia, or in the context of global Catholicism, as too often social science engagements are not supported by an adequate, robust, understanding of theology. The most exciting part of this book, however, is Clooney's suggestion that what Beschi was attempting was to present his readers with a book that schooled the native catechists in virtues necessary for Catholic life by building precisely on the virtues already extolled within local society. This makes sense; how else was a Catholic missionary to propagate Catholicism in the absence of a Christian prince who upheld, and physically manifested, a Christian political order? Clooney draws our attention, however, to the fact that Beschi's reference to the *Tirukkural*, focused on just two of the three types of virtues contained within it, notably ignoring to translate the portion on *kamam* or desire. This seems to be clear evidence for how Beschi sought to enter through the Tamilian door, but exit, along with the converted, through the door of European Catholic sensibility. Also interesting is the distinction Clooney draws between Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), and Beschi. While de Nobili is often hailed as the founder of *accommodation*, which is presented as the largely Italian missionaries' strategy to acculturate Catholicism in local forms, Clooney points out that while de Nobili was accommodationist to his Roman, Goan and Jesuit audiences, he was, in fact, contrarily, sharply argumentative with his Tamil audience. Beschi's difference,

Clooney argues, was to stress on an 'affective' method, one which stressed kindness and compassion toward the unconverted native.

Despite its great promise as an interdisciplinary work, and the extremely interesting insights it provides about missionary work and Catholicism in the Tamil country, the book is not without flaws. To begin with, nothing that Clooney himself discusses in the book suggests that either de Nobili or Beschi were anything other than men committed to eventually bringing the people they converted into a clearly Western European form of Catholicism. If Clooney eventually ignores his own data, it is perhaps precisely because of his own location in contemporary theological debates. Clooney appears to want to link early modern accommodation with inculturation, the latter tied to contemporary attempts at fitting Catholicism within the racialised perspective of the nationalist postcolonial order. This theological positioning is not unlinked to an ideological positioning within the social sciences, which is marked by definite methodological nationalism. This kowtowing to methodological nationalism is especially evident in the way in which the region in which, and the people among whom, Beschi worked are framed. Clooney alternatively frames the territory as India—a territory born only in the 19th century via British efforts—South India, or the more acceptable Tamil country. Similarly references to the people have them recognised as Hindus, Indians, rather than simply denizens of the Tamil country who may not even have recognised themselves as Hindu, leave alone Indian. But Clooney also seems committed to reading Hinduism into early modern Tamil country, for example when he writes, “detached action in the world is a core element of Jesuit spirituality, as it would also be a familiar virtue for any Hindu knowing the *Bhagavadgita* and its teaching of karma yoga” (p. 45). Why assume that there was a standard Hinduism, or even Hindus, in a time when equality within native polities was a distant dream? Or when he references “a trope familiar in Hindu religious poetry, even the heaven-dwellers look with envy on their modest home here on earth” (p. 50): what he means is Puranic literature, not Hindu poetry. There are also certain silences in the work. For instance, it is unclear why Clooney assumes Beschi to be the sole author of the Tempavani? Why is Clooney silent about blood sacrifice, that are so much a part of early modern Tamil culture. For example, I thought the book could have spent more time in elaborating this possibility when discussing “This sacrifice comparable to Issac’s” (p. 53). Beschi may also have been reaching out to the local Tamil polities, since the notion of blood sacrifice is deeply prevalent in the Tamil worldview. And finally, there is not a whisper of Muslims in the book, and we already know that Muslims were a critical component of early modern, and subsequent, Tamil life—literary and otherwise.

Finally, despite these words of caution, it must be said that Clooney’s work, precisely because of its focus on virtues as the route through which we can initiate conversation with those who are culturally different, has a broader significance. Clooney’s scholarship draws our attention to the foundations on which we can resume conversations in a time when fundamental universal values seem to be under threat. To put it in Clooney’s own words, we would learn; “how to act virtuously in the cultures of today. Beschi’s achievement is...a Catholic way of acting in the world, and artfully speaking a beautiful truth in service of a mission of repentance and conversion” (p.136).