

Francis X. Clooney, S. J., *Saint Joseph in South India: Poetry, Mission and Theology in Costanzo Gioseffo Beschi's Tēmpāvāṇi*. Vienna: Publications of the de Nobili Research Library, 2022, 194 pp.

Francis Clooney is proud to walk in the footsteps of pioneering Jesuit inculturators of the Christian faith in Asia, such as Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), João Rodrigues Tçuzu (1561/2-1533/4), Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656), and Ippolito Desideri (1684-1733), as he reaches out to Hindu religious practice as well as studying textual sources in a comparatist perspective. The title of the present work is slightly misleading, as it might suggest some special Indian cult of St Joseph comparable to the flamboyant syncretistic cult of St Anthony of Padua described by P. J. Johnston (see *JMJ* Spring 2018). The book presents a Tamil poem—the *Tēmpāvāṇi* (Unfading Garland)—composed by Costanzo Beschi (1680-1747), also known as Viramamunivar, ‘the most brilliant Tamil scholar and imaginative missionary among the Jesuits in South India in the period between Francis Xavier’s arrival in 1542 and the Order’s expulsion from India in the 1760s’ (12). Another work of Beschi’s, *On the Behavior of Catechists*, gives the key to the poem’s missionary purpose: “Enter with those who have lost their way, then bring them out with yourself”—entering by their door, out by ours’ (20).

Large extracts from the poem are translated throughout and these are given in the original in an appendix (151-87). I am not sure if the book is suitable for purposes of language learning, given the difficulty of the poem, of which Protestant missionary James Hough said in 1824: ‘the metaphysical style and the classical language, in which the Author has clothed his Lessons, have rendered them quite unintelligible to any but the most Learned Hindoos’ (142).

‘Beschi goes beyond de Nobili’s vision of an apologetic core to a more risky, complex and potentially fruitful “incarnation” in the culture and thus too amid the literature of South India’ (133). In line with the Jesuit missionaries’ esteem for the role of natural virtue and wisdom as a pre-given *praeparatio evangelii*, the poem portrays St Joseph ‘precisely as the “natural man” who is also “the man open to grace” and who is able to bring conversion and salvation to pagans. ‘This is all Beschi’s enactment of his theology: the natural prepares for the supernatural. Christ is present before Christ is known’ (133). But since Joseph carries Christ in his arms it seems difficult to define him as ‘natural man’ using only natural means. ‘The ideal natural life of virtue that, as truly natural, is open to grace’ (137) is an account of Joseph that is tailored to the portrayal of the ‘good pagan,’ making a place for Tamils and their ancestors within the biblical map of salvation. They might be touched by Christ before the arrival of missionaries: ‘a prior hidden wisdom, revelation before revelation, akin to the “Seeds of the Word” of Patristic and later Catholic theology’ (134). Christian Tamils today have greatly changed: ‘For some, the doctrinal core of Christianity remains central, for others it is no longer the rule in a world where revelation is differentiated into many revelations, all of

which may, by the judgment of some, be simply expressions of human creativity and aspiration' (136). What situation lies behind that troubling remark is unclear. But it remains that Beschi continues to nourish 'a Catholic way of acting in the world, and artfully speaking a beautiful truth in service of a mission of repentance and conversion' (136).

In another work Beschi argues against the Danish Lutheran Mission on the need for selective translation and sensitive interpretation of the Bible, adjusting it to people's needs and setting it within a virtuous communal lifestyle: 'the written word (*varivētam*) needs to be read in the context of the natural word (*italvētam*) and the word of grace (*arulvētam*)' (141). Protestant critique of Beschi's free inventions that threatened to obscure the biblical narratives continued throughout the nineteenth century. Clooney champions this 'revelation spoken again in a new language' (145), but it would not be approved in the western church since the days of the apocryphal gospels. Even literary augmentation of biblical tales, such as Milton's epics or Thomas Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*, has to tread carefully. A century before Beschi, Thomas Stephens wrote an epic of Christ in Marathi, which is 'a harmonized Gospel story' (38). Beschi gives his imagination free rein especially in describing St Joseph's activities in Egypt, with recalls of the patriarch Joseph and of Moses.

The lesson of the *Bhagavad-gītā* on karma yoga underlies the advice an old man gives to Joseph: 'If you look at the two *dharma*-s separately,/ Then the *dharma* of renunciation you've mentioned is the best./ But if you hold them together within yourself as a single undivided *dharma*,/ That *dharma* ranks still higher in strength and in fruit,' though 'detached action in the world' is also a core Jesuit principle (45). The poem evokes the joys of parenthood and of humble shared domestic tasks, laced with adoration of the precious Child. The loss of the boy Jesus in Jerusalem figures a dark night of the soul for Joseph 'As if everything he saw was melting and weeping along with him.' This draws on the style and setting of Indian 'poems of love, separation, desperation on the way to reunion' (55). Beschi had immersed himself in particular in the Tamil *Rāmāyaṇa* and the Jain epic *Cīvakacintāmaṇi* (59-66). The fusion of eastern and western inspiration—including Ignatius, Jesuit drama, and María of Ágreda (1602-1665)—makes the poem a rich cultural artefact even apart from the theological significance of its use of de Nobili's definition of 'God,' now presented in a sensitive pastoral style, taking account of 'the persons receiving the argument, mindful of their ambivalence, how they are torn by what they hear' (95).

Francis Clooney has excavated a rich and stimulating chapter in the history of mission and inculturation, and his book will leave its readers with the keen wish to know Beschi's work in Tamil. At a time when negative aspects of church history are so often emphasized, it is refreshing and edifying to learn of such joyful interchange at the deepest level of culture.

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