



Harvard Divinity School 45 FRANCIS AVENUE, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS 02138

March 17, 2018

I received my PhD in 1984 from the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago, on the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini in relation to the earliest strata of commentary on the Sūtras attributed to him. Through the decades I have done further study of the Mīmāṃsā tradition, and of the related Vedānta (or Uttara Mīmāṃsā) traditions, most particularly of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja. In addition, since I began my study of Tamil as a student in SALC, I have also studied texts of the Tamil tradition, particularly the songs of the ālvārs, and their reception in the Sanskrit, Tamil, and maṇipravāḷa writings of the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition. I am generally thought of as a comparative theologian, and thus have engaged too in studies in the history of Hindu-Christian encounters in India, and in comparative studies that create a dialogical and dialectical conversation between Hindu and Christian sources. After teaching at Boston College for 21 years, in 2005 I became the Parkman Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School. Between 2002 and 2004 I was also the Academic Director at the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies.

Given my expertise and interests, I am happy to write this endorsement in support of the South Asia Research and Information Institute (SARII), which was founded in 2006. SARII has hosted, in collaboration with the Asian Studies Program at Southern Methodist University, a series of most interesting day-long conferences since 2006, on a range of topics that explore both the historical and textual sources on the cultural and religious history of South Asia, while at the same time addressing issues of contemporary importance, ranging from the intersection of education and political issues, the state of religious pluralism in South India, and the role that institutions play in the cultures and religions of India today, both colleges and universities, and temples. I myself was honored to participate in the 2013 seminar, "Conversion, Caste, and Coexistence: Christianity in South India."

SARII has also conducted scholarly research resulting in landmark findings regarding the socio-cultural history of India and shared the results in forums in India and North America. These findings potentially alter conventional views held for more than a millennium. Notably too, SARII's work inspired the establishment of a new organization, Critical Social Studies Research and Publications Institute (CSSRPI) in Chennai in 2013. SARII has plans to support the training of Indian and US researchers in the rigorous inter-disciplinary research approach that SARII employed in studying issues of South Asian socio-cultural-religious history.

SARII is an important institution both for South Asia, particularly India (and indeed South India) and the West, because it offers integral programming that holds together the values of tradition and the most urgent contemporary issues, and highlights the connections between matters of religion and religious identity and the larger concerns of complex pluralistic societies. While its status as an institute that is not a university center as such requires of its supporters more work to insure its stability, quality, and long-term well-being, it also has the freedom and agility of a smaller body that can use all its resources only for the most high-quality and timely projects. That SARII has had, during its years of existence, a healthy working relationship with SMU is a welcome sign that its independence has not isolated it, and that its focus is still welcomed and that its programs can be hosted in an excellent academic institution.

SARII is also admirable in that while most of its programming has occurred in the United States, it is by no means a merely westernized institution keeping its distance from South Asia. Rather, from the start, its leaders and the participants in seminars have come from both South Asian and Western institutions. Issues discussed in the United States are generated in large part by close attention to what is happening in South Asia today, while the results of programming in the United States can valuably make a difference in the cultural and academic worlds of contemporary South Asia. It is therefore also a model for the peer collaboration that will be all the more urgent in the decades to come.

Crucial then is to insure that SARII will have the financial resources not only for long-term existence, but also to grow, in a prudent and manageable way, so as to be able to share its seminars with still wider audiences in a more popular fashion and, crucially, to better support the training of younger scholars in the humanities, study of religions, and social sciences as these are related to South Asia, in an era when, even at universities, the resources to support such

work are shrinking. I fully support SARII's efforts to raise funds for a permanent endowment to pursue its goals.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "FX Clooney". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Francis X. Clooney, S.J.  
Parkman Professor of Divinity  
Professor of Comparative Theology  
Harvard Divinity School  
Cambridge, MA 02138