



**AUC: Asian Journal of Religious Studies**

66/3 May-June 2021, ISSN P-2249-1503 E-2582-791X | 32-36

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo. 5034271

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo. 5034271>

## Between Martha and Mary: Discovering the Impossible in God

**Victor Ferrao**

Dean of Philosophy, Rachol Seminary, Goa

---

**Abstract:** The biblical story of two sisters from Bethany has been interpreted as representing two orientations to discipleship: *ora et labora*, contemplation and action. We need the courage of faith to welcome and say come to the undecidable coming of God who comes like a stranger and say a calm Amen to the unforeseeable that is still to come. Following tradition of Meister Eckhart, John Caputo attempts to take the side of Martha. He gives importance to Martha because she does not simply attend to the spiritual needs of Jesus but she is primarily focused on meeting material human and animal needs in her performance of hospitality.

**Keywords:** Mary and Martha, *Ora et labora*, Contemplation in Action, *Ad Maiorem Dei Glorium*, Hospitality.

The biblical story of two sisters from Bethany has been interpreted as representing two orientations to discipleship: *ora et labora*, contemplation and action. The fact that Jesus seems to prefer the

<p>Cite as: Ferrao, Victor (2021). Between Martha and Mary: Discovering the Impossible in God (Version 1.0). AUC: Asian Journal of Religious Studies, Sept-Oct 2021(66/5), 32–36. <a href="http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo. 5034271">http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo. 5034271</a></p>
---

choice of Mary over the work of Martha has privileged contemplation over action (Luke 10:38–42). There is a possibility of thinking the choices of the two sisters together. St. Ignatius of Loyola seems to have thought them together in his motto: *Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam*. It was left to his companion Jerome Nadal SJ to articulate it as being contemplative in action. To arrive at this middle, it is important to push the pendulum on the other side. We find such a reading in the work of Meister Eckhart. Following this tradition, John Caputo attempts to take the side of Martha. He gives importance to Martha because she does not simply attend to the spiritual needs of Jesus but she is primarily focused on meeting material human and animal needs in her performance of hospitality.

### Being Haunted

This active love haunts the passive apparently escapist choice of Mary. Martha’s hospitality cuts deeply into the fabric of the biblical name of God, where the invisible face of God is inscribed on the face of the stranger as if God was looking for shelter. Therefore, true hospitality is saying come to what we cannot see coming. We say come to the stranger who can be *hostis*/ hostile. It challenges us to welcome the unwelcomed (Kearney, 2012). The come of hospitality and the come of prayer belong together. In both cases, the come is addressed to what we cannot see coming. If we knew what is coming, what is there to pray? It is this uncertainty that is central to prayer that unites with welcoming the stranger.

The praying Mary and hospitable Martha belong together in as much as they do not know what is coming.

This is why the praying Mary and hospitable Martha belong together in as much as they do not know what is coming. It is not about who is coming. They very well knew Jesus. But what will come out of his coming remains in the coming as they chose prayer and work respectively.

Both are haunted by not knowing what is coming. Derrida said, ‘it is not an event. If you already know who is on the other side of the

door, it is not hospitality, or only half. If you can foresee the future, it is already present, only the future present, not the absolute future” (Derrida, 2003). This means Martha and Mary choose without knowing what is coming. They choose to stay in the impossible. To say come to the merely possible is to play with dice loaded in our favour. Things really occur when we reach the condition of impossibility. Real hospitality welcomes the unwelcome and embraces the impossible, the wholly other. The impossible is wholly other. Kierkegaard speaks of the impossible as the challenge to believe the unbelievable (McDonald, 2017). To St. Paul, it means Hope against Hope and to Jesus it means to love the unloveable/enemies.

### **The Impossible and God**

Where there is the impossible, there is God. The two sisters that we are discussing faced the impossible in the visitation of Jesus. This is why they come of prayer and hospitality that they chose respectively as their response opens them to a shattering of the horizon of the familiar. Hence, if we bracket the aesthetic preference of Jesus, we can see that the choices of both the sisters belong together. There is prayer in the hospitality of Martha and there is hospitality in the prayer of Mary in as much as both are welcoming a living out that says, ‘come’ and both do not know what is coming. This is why there is nothing to choose between their choices. They have both chosen to be contemplatives in action in different ways.

The two sisters are saying Amen differently to what is come. There was no standard formula to say Amen. One chose prayer and the other chose hospitality. It is their willingness to say come that is one that unites their Amen. To them come comes first, because come as response comes second to one who knocks at the door. The response is welcome to what comes it manifests openness to the unforeseeable. Hospitality and prayer, therefore, means the hostis/stranger who can be friend/ foe is made feel at home. Prayer/contemplation has another side. The other side is hospitality. This means one is faced with God who cannot be simply captured in our familiar terms. One has to face the undecidable situation. God is undecidable and cannot be predicted by human conceptual estimations. This means we are faced with a condition of perhaps that remains as an un-receding horizon. It can only be closed by God. But that closure also leaves us puzzled as in the case of Jesus' praise of Mary and rebuke of Martha.

We are faced with a condition of perhaps that remains as an un-receding horizon. It can only be closed by God. But that closure also leaves us puzzled as in the case of Jesus' praise of Mary and rebuke of Martha.

### Concluding Remarks

The zone of perhaps/ the un-receding horizon is a condition of impossibility that may send us on our knees or set us moving on to acts of caring love. This is why both Mary and Martha have been great hosts as well as disciples in prayer and contemplation. Mary is not better than Martha in any way. Both are hospitable and chose to say come and Amen to the coming. They together teach us to face the unforeseeable by having the courage to say come while that which is in the coming may put us into the discomforting zone of the impossible where we face divine undecidedness. Staying in the undecided/ the zone of perhaps, we have the challenge to say Amen. Meister Eckhart when faced with the impossible/ the divine

undecidable/ zone of perhaps knelt and prayed saying, “I pray God to rid me of God” (Rohr, 2015). Maybe we can also turn to the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane where He requests that the cup of suffering be taken away from him but comes back to a calm Amen when he opens Himself to the will of His father and accepts His cross (Mt. 26:36-46). We need the courage of faith to welcome and say come to the undecidable coming of God who comes like a stranger and say a calm Amen to the unforeseeable that is still to come.

## References

- Kearney, R. (2012, June 21). *Guest or enemy? Welcoming the stranger*. ABC Religion & Ethics. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/guest-or-enemy-welcoming-the-stranger/10100458>
- McDonald, W. (2017). Søren Kierkegaard. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2017). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/kierkegaard/>
- Pandikattu, Kuruvilla. (2021). *Finding God in Everything: And Everything in God*. New Delhi: ISPCK.
- Rohr, R. (2015, July 16). *Meister Eckhart, Part II*. Center for Action and Contemplation. <https://cac.org/meister-eckhart-part-ii-2015-07-16/>



**Dr Victor Ferrao** is Dean of Philosophy, Patriarchal Seminary of Rachol, Goa. He obtained first PhD from India on science and religion dialogue. Email: [victorferrao@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:victorferrao@yahoo.co.uk). ORCID: 0000-0002-5008-8114

Article received: Feb 23, 2021: Accepted: April 24, 2021. Word count: 1190



© by the authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license. (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)