

THE CONCEPT OF AVATĀRA IN ANCIENT AND MODERN  
COMMENTARIES ON THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

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The Bhagavadgītā contains a relatively simple and straightforward teaching on the avatāra, probably the first elaboration on the subject in the Hindu tradition.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as is the case for most of the doctrines in the Gītā, interpretation of this teaching have differed considerably over the centuries. The purpose of this article is to review interpretations of the Gītā's avatāra doctrine by several ancient and modern commentators on the poem in order to discern and discuss major differences and possibly gain insights into modern tendencies.

The commentaries selected are those of Śaṅkara, Rāmānuja, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, M. K. Gandhi and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan. The bhāṣyas of Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja are authoritative, traditional and influential, and provide a basis for comparison with others. The remaining commentaries were chosen from those authors who rose to prominence, popularity and greatness during India's progress to independence. Such men reflected not only the political but also the spiritual yearnings of the Indian people. The three authors selected from among them represent a variety of backgrounds, interests and religious views. Their works on the Gītā were and are generally respected in India, though not necessarily by the

same segments or levels of Indian society. It must be admitted that several other commentaries were felt to be equally worthy (some would no doubt argue "more worthy") of inclusion; but ultimately they were put aside for considerations of time, space and personal interest. Obviously then, no claims as to the relative importance, quality, or validity of the commentaries is being made or implied by this selection.

### The Gītā on Avatāra

Let us begin with a brief summary of the basic Gītā teaching on the avatāra. It is contained almost exclusively in the first ten verses of chapter 4.<sup>2</sup> Here Kṛṣṇa indicates that he first taught the eternal yoga to Vivasvān many generations ago. When Arjuna questions how this is possible, Kṛṣṇa replies that he has passes through many births, remembering them all. Although his self is eternal (avyayātman) and unborn, he repeatedly comes forth in the world of prakṛti, which is his own material nature, by his own power of illusion (māyā) whenever he is needed to restore declining dharma, to protect good and destroy evil people. Kṛṣṇa goes on to say that his divine birth and actions are a key to release (mokṣa), for those who know the nature of these will escape samsāra and attain him (G.4.9). However, he is not easily known. Eksewhere Kṛṣṇa asserts that fools merely see him as human and only the spiritually advanced recognize him in his true nature (e.g., G.9.11 ff.; 7.17 ff.). In other words, Kṛṣṇa's māyā has a creative power in bringing about his advent into

the world and it also has a veiling power in hiding his true identity from most men (e.g., G.7.14, 15 & 25).

Gītā does not say whether the Lord's repeated births are always in the form of Kṛṣṇa or not. Certainly the theophany of chapter eleven leaves open every sort of shape and form for these manifestations. The distinctions drawn between Kṛṣṇa and ordinary mortals in chapter seven would appear to be that: he remembers his previous births while they do not; he controls the circumstances of his birth while they do not.

There is no discussion in the Gītā concerning the degree to which the avatāra is a manifestation of God. The distinctions made in the poem between the higher unmanifest nature and the lower manifestations indicate that the fullness of God is not thought to be reduced by his descent (e.g., G.7.24; 9.11). Tradition holds to this idea and also to the belief that Kṛṣṇa was a complete descent (pūrṇāvatāra) of God, not a partial one (aṁśāvatāra).<sup>3</sup>

Kṛṣṇa does not call himself Viṣṇu in the Gītā; but the traditional view has been that he is Viṣṇu here. The evidence is that Kṛṣṇa speaks of himself as Viṣṇu (of the Ādityas) once (G.10.21); that Arjuna addresses him as Viṣṇu twice (G.11.24, 30); that he is called Hari by Saṁjaya twice (G.11.9; 18.77); that Arjuna twice refers to him as possessing the club (gadā) and disc (cakra) associated with Viṣṇu (G.11.17, 46). The generally accepted opinion now is that Kṛṣṇa is associated with Viṣṇu in the Gītā, but that the doctrine is relatively young.<sup>4</sup>

## Śaṅkara

The subject of Kṛṣṇa as avatāra is dealt with specifically by Śaṅkara in his Introduction to the bhāṣya and at G.4.6-9.<sup>5</sup> With regard to the manner of Kṛṣṇa's birth, the Introduction says that Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa, the original creator, came into manifestation as Kṛṣṇa through a particle (aṁśa) conceived in Devakī by Vasudeva.<sup>6</sup> The root stuff of matter (mūlaprakṛti), is māyā and is controlled by the Lord, and even though he is by nature eternal, pure, intelligent and free, he is perceived by means of his own māyā as if born and embodied.<sup>7</sup>

This doctrine of apparent birth and worldly existence is repeated with some amplification at G.4.6. Śaṅkara explains that Kṛṣṇa is eternal and unborn, and controls his own prakṛti/māyā under the power of which the whole world lies; and he comes into being as if embodied, as if born, by his own māyā and not really and according to the way of men.<sup>8</sup> Śaṅkara adds, on G.4.7, that Kṛṣṇa issues forth by means of māyā and, on G.4.9, asserts that the birth is of the nature of māyā (Ś. GBh., pp. 121-22).

In spite of his use of aṁśa as noted above, Śaṅkara does not raise the question of how complete was Viṣṇu's descent in Kṛṣṇa. Aṁśa appears in G.15.7 in connection with the relation of the Supreme to human beings.<sup>9</sup> There Śaṅkara provides several synonyms for aṁśa (bhāga, avayava, ekadeśa) and explains that part of Nārāyaṇa is the agent and enjoyer in the individual in samsāra (Ś. GBh., pp. 403-4). He also indicates, by means of analogies of the sun reflecting in

water and the space contained in a jar, that the bodily confinement of the amśa is only apparent and does not affect its source. This passage confirms that Śamkara really does mean to say that the Supreme can only apparently be divided. It also confirms that the Supreme is not diminished by the fact that "parts" of it are present in individuals in samsāra. But it does not shed light upon the question of the completeness of the avatāra.

The major distinctions between the ordinary embodied human and Kṛṣṇa seem to be these. The ordinary mortal is involved involuntarily with the world of māyā/prakṛti, which he cannot control, through ignorance and desire. Kṛṣṇa however, as we have seen, is involved of his own volition, descending into the world by virtue of the fact that he controls its stuff and nature. Furthermore, once descended, Kṛṣṇa appears to be, through the ignorance of the human observer, a samsārin. This is the same process as that in which the ignorant observer mistakenly identifies the Self and his physical body (Ś. GBh., p. 321, re G.13.2).

At this point we come to realize, as K. S. Murty has pointed out, that Kṛṣṇa is, in a sense, a double illusion for Śamkara. The avatāra is a phenomenon in this empirical world. The latter is illusory and therefore its phenomenon, the avatāra is so also. On another level, we have seen above that God does not really become man in Śamkara's doctrine, and so Kṛṣṇa is an illusion in this sense too.<sup>10</sup>

Śaṅkara, then, holds a docetic view of the avatāra in which Kṛṣṇa is not fully man, in which he is "as if" man, but really God. Nevertheless, Śaṅkara does not raise any doubts about the fact that the descent took place or about its effectiveness in the manifest world.

The purpose of the descent is also explained in the Introduction. It was to protect the Brahmin class, which embodies brahman on earth (brāhmanatva, bhaumasya brahmanah) in the face of degeneration of dharma under the onslaught of lust (kāma). This in turn would guard the Vedic dharma and the dependent divisions of classes and stages of life (varnāśrama), and ensure the preservation (sthiti) of the world (S. GBh., pp. 2-3 [p. 2]). The move was made for the welfare of created beings (bhūtānujighrksayā) and without selfish aim (svaprayojanābhāvaḥ) on the Lord's part (S. GBh., p. 4 [p. 2]).

At G.4.7-9, Śaṅkara adds nothing to our understanding, but merely repeats that Kṛṣṇa's object is the stabilization of dharma which involves varnāśrama (S. GBh. pp. 121-22).

In sum, for Śaṅkara, Kṛṣṇa did come down to earth by his own will and power, appearing like men but actually unlike them, for the selfless purpose of preserving the Brahmin class and all that it represents, and of re-establishing the old Vedic varnāśramadharmā.

## Rāmānuja

The manner and purpose of Kṛṣṇa's descent and his nature are discussed chiefly in Rāmānuja's Introduction to his bhāṣya, and in his commentary on G.4.4-11, 7.24-25, 9.11-13.<sup>11</sup>

In the first of these we find that Kṛṣṇa in his own true form is not accessible through religious means to the different classes of beings in the various worlds of creation. However, he is able by his own will to assume their forms (without abandoning his own essential nature, which is described at length at the beginning of the Introduction) (R. GBh., pp. 1-2), and does so repeatedly, entering their worlds to become available as an object of meditation and worship. In the same manner he descends to earth and becomes visible to men.<sup>12</sup> He resorts to mortal form.<sup>13</sup> At G.4.4 ff., Rāmānuja sees Kṛṣṇa answering questions as to the reality and manner of his birth. G.4.5 establishes the reality (satyatvam) of the birth since Kṛṣṇa compares his own and Arjuna's previous births (R. GBh., p. 115). At G.4.6, Rāmānuja understands Kṛṣṇ to say that he retains his own true nature (prakṛtim svām, which Rāmānuja renders as svabhāva) and divine qualities (e.g., of being supreme lord, imperishable, sinless), is born in his own true form (svena eva rūpeṇa) which he makes in accordance with those of gods or men, and of his own free will (ātmanāyayā); nevertheless be it noted that his birth is not like that of other men (itarapurusaśādhāraṇam janma akurvan).<sup>14</sup> Leaving aside G.4.7, 8 for the moment, we find in the commentary on G.4.9 that the divine birth is one that

is not caused by karma and is therefore free of the usual connection with material nature (R. GBh., p. 118). At G.4.11, Rāmānuja stresses the variety of the Lord's manifestations by stating that he does not merely descend in the form of gods, men, or other beings, but shows himself to those who come to him in whatever manner they desire (R. GBh., pp. 119-20).

Commenting on G.7.24-25, Rāmānuja says that certain persons consider Kṛṣṇa's to be an ordinary human body, acquired in the normal way through the karmic process. His true nature, with all its previously mentioned qualities, is hidden from them by yogamāyā (being the conjunction of souls and bodies) and they do not understand that he has assumed a human form so as to be the refuge for all (R. GBh., pp. 216-17).

The themes of these two verses are repeated by Rāmānuja in his comments on G.9.11-13 (R. GBh., pp. 255-57). He adds here a soteriological theme: those who can see beyond Kṛṣṇa's human form and know his true nature and purpose, become single-minded devotees of his. This latter point has already been raised at G.4.9, 10, where Rāmānuja states that such a devotee attains the Lord (R. GBh., pp. 118-19).

This brings us to what Rāmānuja conceives to be the purpose of the avatāra.

In the Introduction, Kṛṣṇa is said to descend to earth in order to reveal himself as the adorable, compassionate, loving protector and refuge of all men; and above all, to



teach release of the soul to God through bhaktiyoga (R. GBh., pp. 3-4). At G.4.8, the mantle of God's love and protection falls upon loyal Vaiṣṇavas who uphold dharma, rather than on all men. These Vaiṣṇavas might fail to attain release for lack of spiritual support because the Lord is not accessible to them in his supreme form. Therefore God descends in a suitable form from age to age, to rescue them with his refreshing acts and teaching, and with the restoration of Vedic dharma which takes the form of worship of him. He also destroys the wicked (R. GBh., pp. 117-18).

Finally, we may note that there is no specific time when the descents occur. The Lord is ready to help whenever the situation demands it (R. GBh., p. 117, re G.4.7).

To sum up, Rāmānuja's Kṛṣṇāvatāra appears to be an ordinary human being; but he is different in that his birth is not the result of karmic forces, and he is free from the domination of prakṛti. In addition, the Lord preserves his true nature and form and his divine qualities. Kṛṣṇa is like man; but he is really God for those who are qualified to understand his true nature, role and activity. And that understanding is a liberating one. The reality is not questioned as it is in Śaṅkara's view. It is driven home by Rāmānuja in the view of his repeated self-revelation to man as a compassionate, gracious, loving God, the restorer of Vedic dharma and punisher of the wicked, who brings the doctrine of bhakti for the salvation of all.

One may assume from this that Rāmānuja regarded Kṛṣṇa as a pūrṇāvatāra. The situation is not entirely clear because, while Rāmānuja does not, I believe, discuss the subject in the bhāṣya, he does cite Viṣṇu Purāna 5.17.33 in his comment on G.15.18.<sup>15</sup> The Purāna there refers to Kṛṣṇa as an aṁśāvatāra of Viṣṇu; but it has already done so at the beginning of the chapter (5.17.2) and the succeeding verses make it obvious that no distinction in fullness of being is recognized between Viṣṇu and his descended "portion". In addition, in the bhāṣya, Rāmānuja is stressing the supremacy of Puruṣottama; and in this regard the human appearance, not the being, of Kṛṣṇa can be seen as only a part of the whole.

#### Tilak

This commentator deals with the nature and role of Kṛṣṇa as avatāra in his commentary only at G.4.6-10.<sup>16</sup> Since he is concerned with the internal meaning of the poem here, we must turn for the moment to his external examination for Tilak's understanding of the historicity of Kṛṣṇa. In Part IV of his Appendix on the external examination, Tilak refers to the birth and death of Kṛṣṇa, a member of the Yādava community; argues against the hypothesis that several Kṛṣṇas may have contributed to the final person and teaching of Kṛṣṇa, the avatāra; rejects the idea that the Mahābhārata is imaginary or allegorical, in favor of the claim that the epic and its people have a basis in history; and concludes that a single historical individual, Kṛṣṇa, lived at least 1400 years B.C.

and taught the Bhāgavata religion of the Gītā (T. GR., 2: 769-71).

As to the nature of Kṛṣṇa, Tilak brings up the belief that he and Arjuna are incarnations of the ṛṣis Nārāyaṇa and Nara (T. GR., 2: 770). He has pointed out the same thing elsewhere and also that these two are worshipped as the original teachers of the Bhāgavata religion (T. GR., 1: 1-2 fn.). He does not in any way indicate that he thinks along other lines himself; but he does not clarify in what sense he is using the word, ṛṣi (i.e., whether as equivalent to an avatāra, or a being other than man or god, etc.). The matter is puzzling because, while Tilak rejects the idea that Kṛṣṇa was deified a long time after his death, he does speak of Kṛṣṇa "acquiring" his status, or form, twice in the same paragraph in connection with Buddha and Christ; but he varies what he says. In the first instance he sees no reason for long delay in Kṛṣṇa's "acquiring the Parabrahman status, ..." because Buddha and Christ acquired their positions shortly after their death. In the second instance, he sees no difficulty in Kṛṣṇa "...acquiring the form of a god or of the Brahman from the very beginning ..." as did Buddha and Christ.<sup>17</sup>

The question is, then, does Tilak mean the same thing by "shortly after death" and "from the very beginning?" If he does, then he must be saying that Kṛṣṇa was not essentially an avatāra from birth, and perhaps that the status was earned and bestowed upon him from above or ascribed to him by grate-

ful mankind.<sup>18</sup> This alternative seems to make nonsense of the strict meaning of avatāra. The other alternative is that by, "from the very beginning", Tilak really meant that Kṛṣṇa, and Buddha and Christ, really were what they were essentially and from the very beginning of their existence. If that is so, one can only conjecture that his statement about acquiring status shortly after death was in reference to the recognition by men in general of the unusual nature of these individuals.

The latter alternative is given credence by Tilak's attitude towards Kṛṣṇa, "the Blessed Lord," elsewhere in the Gītā-Rahasya,<sup>19</sup> and throughout the verse commentary, more specifically at G.4.6 ff. Here Tilak affirms that the imperceptible Parameśvara controls the prakṛti out of which the world evolves, and renders himself perceptible as Kṛṣṇa in the world by the same power through which he creates all perceptibles out of his imperceptible form, namely, the power of māyā.<sup>20</sup> Tilak does not here qualify Kṛṣṇa's birth in any way as Śaṅkara did, but he often makes it clear elsewhere in his work that the power of māyā is the power of illusion, that the perceptible world is illusion (māyā), and that the perceptible form of the Supreme, i.e., Kṛṣṇa, is illusory.<sup>21</sup> And he also claims to agree with Śaṅkara that the perceptible world is illusory or unreal in the sense of being impermanent and perishable (T. GR., 1: 305). Kṛṣṇa, like all other created beings, is perishable. It goes without saying, according to this concept of manifestation, that Tilak holds the Supreme to be unaffected and undiminished by this descent.

Finally, we may note that at G.4.8, Tilak says that Kṛṣṇa "...becomes incarnated in the shape of a brilliant and powerful human being,..." (T. GR., 2: 944).

With respect to the purpose of Kṛṣṇa's descent, it is to restore order to his creation, to re-establish the dharma, which is identified by Tilak as "...the duties of the four castes, justice, morality, and other similar things," rather than Vedic religion which is concerned with the other world (T. GR., 2: 944). This restoration is known as working for universal welfare (lokasaṃgraha), according to Tilak, and is of the same nature as the work that realized individuals on earth must do insofar as they are capable. But Kṛṣṇa's descent and activity have a secondary function. They serve as a guide for men's understanding which, if followed, opens the mysteries of Spiritual Knowledge and Karma-Yoga to them. Having understood these, one attains union with the Lord (T. GR., 2: 945, re G.4.9).

We may sum up Tilak's position by saying that, in spite of some confusion as to when Kṛṣṇa became, or was recognized as an avatāra, Tilak holds somewhat the same views as Śaṅkara, though with differences in emphasis. Kṛṣṇa was the Divine, actually descended to earth in a prākṛta form. Although this form is māyā and therefore perishable, one receives an impression of more emphasis upon the humanity of Kṛṣṇa in Tilak than in Śaṅkara. Tilak says nothing about the descent being an act of the Divine's will, in contrast to both Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja; but we may assume from his appre-

ciation of the Supreme that he could never conceive the latter to have been constrained to manifest itself. Finally, while Tilak and Saṁkara both seem generally to agree that the object of the descent is the restoration of dharmā including at least, varnadharma, Tilak emphasizes an element that Saṁkara, in view of his emphasis on samnyāsa, does not, namely, that the avatāra provides an example in his actions for realized men to follow. For Saṁkara, the Lord performs actions only to avert the destruction of the universe and its creatures.<sup>22</sup>

### Gandhi

This commentator also deals with the question of avatāra in his Introduction and at G.4.8.<sup>23</sup> His view is such that our previous practice of dealing with the commentators' thought on the manner and purpose of Kṛṣṇa's descent is not adequate. In the first place, Gandhi holds that "Strictly speaking there can be no birth for God." (Ga. G., p. 196, re G.4.8). Who or what, then, is an avatāra generally, and Kṛṣṇa specifically?

At that same verse Gandhi identifies avatāra (rendered "incarnation") as "Inscrutable Providence--the unique power of the Lord--..." which is constantly at work to uphold Right (dharmā) and Truth. In his Introduction, however, he asserts that all embodied beings are "an incarnation of God" in that they contain a spark of the Divine (Ga. G., p. 128). He also holds that the term "incarnation" is usually used

only of those who have served mankind in some extraordinary way,<sup>24</sup> of those in whom the divine spark has glowed most strongly. If we try to reconcile Gandhi's views at this point, it would appear that the divine spark and Inscrutable Providence--the unique power of the Lord--are one and the same; and that an avatāra is he in whom the divine spark is strongly present, through successful subordination of the self,<sup>25</sup> working to uphold Right and Truth. An avatāra, then, is not a particular creation (either real or unreal) of God's will; but is the result of man's efforts to realize himself, to become "like unto God," an ambition that is the only one worth having, according to Gandhi (Ga. G., p. 129).

With respect to Kṛṣṇa, we should note that being "like unto God" does not necessarily mean becoming or being God.<sup>26</sup> Indeed the perfection of self-abandonment spoken of above is not possible in the world. It is an ideal, set up for man to strive towards and the only one who can be totally without self and desirelessly motivated is God (Ga. G., pp. 368-69, re G.18.17). There would appear to be no possibility of a pūrṇāvatāra in Gandhi's view.

Kṛṣṇa, then, is not God. He may have lived and he appears in the Gītā as the personification of "perfection and right knowledge." But these latter are imagined qualities attributed to him afterwards.<sup>27</sup>

In sum, Gandhi's doctrine of the avatāra is in line with his attempts to demythologize the Gītā. It is based on man's achievement and not upon God's intervention. Man, indwelt

by God, is God's instrument in the world and he does not descend completely himself to intervene in world affairs. Avatāras, individuals who attain a high level of religious achievement, do so from their positions in this world. Their manner of birth is that of any being of their species and their role or object is the re-establishment of dharma, the service of mankind.

In Gandhi's interpretation the word avatāra appears to lose its etymological meaning, for these beings do not descend but are born in the normal course of events. And it is difficult to see how Gandhi can justify his interpretation against special intervention by God, in view of G.4.4-9. The strength in his view is that it does not permit men faced with an evil situation to lie back in the expectation of divine help, but calls upon them to make their own corrective efforts for one another thus bringing the Divine to greater realization on earth.

### Radhakrishnan

The subject of Kṛṣṇa and the avatāra occupies several pages in Radhakrishnan's Introduction;<sup>28</sup> and he also discusses it in the early verses of the fourth chapter, with some additional references in the first, second, and ninth chapters (e.g., re G.1.15; 1, colophon; 2.7; 2.10; 9.8).

In Radhakrishnan's view of the process at work in the world, divine ideas or potentialities are manifest as human souls and are evolving in samsāra to full realization or



perfection.<sup>29</sup> Radhakrishnan finds that the concept of the avatāra illustrates this divine manifestation in two ways.

In the first place, like Gandhi, Radhakrishnan emphasizes the fact that all beings are indwelt by the Divine. This has two consequences in his thought. On the one hand, Kṛṣṇa is the indwelling spirit continuously available to all men at all times (Rd. G., p. 31). In this sense he is the real self of man, the charioteer in the "psychophysical chariot" which is the body; he is the Logos, Arjuna's deepest self, revealing Arjuna's true path for the development of his own personal Divine destiny (Rd. G., p. 85, re G.1.14 and p. 37; p. 96, re G.1, colophon; see also p. 101, re G.2.7). The relationship of Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna becomes the archetype for the existential condition of all men. All men in samsāra are Arjunas who, when confounded by their world situation, may turn to their indwelling charioteer, Kṛṣṇa, for guidance. It is as a result of this view that Radhakrishnan can maintain that it does not matter whether Kṛṣṇa was an historical figure or not (Rd. G., p. 37), that what is important is the portrayal of the constant entrance and presence of the Divine into the world (Rd. G., p. 28).

On the other hand, Radhakrishnan concedes that there is evidence for the historicity of Kṛṣṇa, and is therefore obliged to deal with him as an individual. Here we find that Kṛṣṇa is among the many forms in which the Divine manifests itself in the universe. He is however, unusual (but not unique), Radhakrishnan holds, in that he demon-

strated great spiritual development and initiated significant "spiritual and social upheaval." These are the individuals of whom we say "...God is born for the protection of the good, the destruction of the evil and the establishment of the kingdom of righteousness." (Rd. G., p. 32). This, in fact, is what Kṛṣṇa claims in part for himself at G.4.8; but for Radhakrishnan "The divinity claimed by Kṛṣṇa is the common reward of all earnest seekers," (Rd. G., p. 31). The avatāra, then, is the individual who is highly evolved spiritually, who has exalted "...human nature to the level of Godhead by its union with the Divine." (Rd. G., p. 32). The direction is not of God descending into man, but of man evolving up to God.

There are obvious problems for this doctrine of "descent" which emphasizes God's continuing immanence and the rise of spiritual giants in the world, particularly in relation to the early verses of Gītā chapter four which speak unequivocally of occasional and special interventions of God in the world.

This brings us to the second way in which Radhakrishnan understands the concept of avatāra to illustrate divine manifestation. In his introduction and his commentary on the fourth chapter, he presents the theistic view of avatāra, one more in keeping with traditional views. Specifically, the Divine descends to earth assuming complete human nature, but not becoming any less, even though mediated through this limited form (Rd. G., pp. 32-33; p. 154, re G.4.7). There

is no difficulty or novelty for Radhakrishnan in God's manner of doing this since he had done it in all ordinary beings (Rd. G., p. 33). The difference between the divine embodiment and human birth is that God, who controls nature, is born of his own free will and by his own power (ātmanāyā); ordinary beings do not control prakṛti, and are born involuntarily as a result of ignorance (Rd. G., pp. 153-54, re G.4.6; p. 241, re G.9.8). Finally, the descent is real, an "actual becoming" and not appearance.<sup>30</sup> The direction of the avatāra is reversed from that of the previous way of viewing the subject. "An avatāra is a descent of God into man and not an ascent of man into God, which is the case with the liberated soul." (Rd. G., p. 34).

It is worth noting that, having presented these two aspects of the avatāra in his Introduction, Radhakrishnan declares they are not to be regarded as incompatible, but as reflecting the "...transcendent and immanent aspects of the Divine..." (Rd. G., p. 35). He then returns, however, to the amplification of the first aspect, namely that of the avatāra as the Divine in each individual, in a discussion of the process whereby the individual consciousness is illumined by and raised up to the eternal Divine. We find once again that: "The incarnation of Kṛṣṇa is not so much the conversion of Godhead into flesh as the taking up of manhood into God." (Rd. G., p. 36). The section ends with a restatement of the view that what the idea of avatāra teaches us is more important than the latter's historicity (Rd. G., p. 37).

It is thus evident that Radhakrishnan wishes to stress the last mentioned theory of the avatāra. In discussing the role of the avatāra on earth, he tends to interpret along the same lines of internal evolution. True, God descends to protect the good and restore righteousness (Rd. G., pp. 154-55, re G.4.7 and 8 respectively); but the avatāras, by their teaching and the examples of their lives, also show man how to achieve his innate divine potential and rise to a perfect spiritual nature. They set an example by suffering through this life and overcoming their trials, teach the way to die to self, and offer themselves as channels of grace for man.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of the avatāra includes the raising of man to Godhead (Rd. G., pp. 157-58, re G.4.10). And finally, the historical avatāra in the above role illustrates a process that is continually going on internally in man (Rd. G., pp. 156-57, re G.4.9).

In sum, by stressing the idea of the internal avatāra and his guiding developmental role in the spiritual evolution of man, Radhakrishnan is presenting an aspect of the avatāra somewhat similar to Gandhi's. Like Gandhi's, Radhakrishnan's overall view tends to diminish the importance of the traditional view of God's descent to and intervention on earth, even though he acknowledges this traditional view in the Gītā. In playing down the importance of the historicity of the avatāra and emphasizing the development of men to great spiritual heights, Radhakrishnan also moves beyond the claims of those traditions that base their doctrine in historic fact.

He is both demythologizing the Gītā and universalizing it.

### Conclusions

We have seen that the ancient commentators accept without question Kṛṣṇa's descent as a given fact, He came of his own will and by means of his control of the constituents of nature. Both commentators insist that the Supreme is essentially unchanged by this descent. This doctrine lends a docetic quality to their Kṛṣṇa, whose nature is not like that of other men (which is not to say that the two agree on this nature, since they have different conceptions of the reality of the manifest world). For Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, the purpose of the avatāra was to restore dharma, punish evil doers and teach the release of the soul. Śaṅkara holds that the latter is taught in the Gītā through jñāna and karmasamnyāsa, while Rāmānuja claims it is through the bhakti revealed by the loving and compassionate Lord.

The three modern commentators all raise the question of the historicity of Kṛṣṇa. More will be said about this fact below. Of the three, Tilak conforms most closely to the views of the ancient commentators. He affirms Kṛṣṇa's individual, historic existence, and holds that the Supreme, while remaining undiminished, assumed perishable human form as Kṛṣṇa through his control over matter, in order to restore varnadharma, justice and morality. He specifies, however, in a way that Śaṅkara would not (because it emphasizes the importance of karma and denigrates other-worldly Vedic

religion), the exemplary nature of Kṛṣṇa's life for mankind's ongoing activity in this world.

A certain ambiguity noted in Tilak's statements raised questions as to when Kṛṣṇa became, or was recognized as, an avatāra. It was concluded that Tilak had held that Kṛṣṇa was divine and an avatāra from birth, and did not achieve that status through his mortal efforts, or have it attributed to him by humankind (although human realization of the status may have come late). Gandhi and Radhakrishnan, both of whom read Tilak (Ga. G., p. 126; Rd. G., p. 20, 384), lean to the idea of attribution--avatāras are made not born.

Gandhi holds that God is not really born on earth; and he comes to a quite different estimate of Kṛṣṇa. All human beings contain the divine spark, and are potentially Godlike, according to Gandhi, and Kṛṣṇa (he may have been a historic person, but that is not of vital importance to Gandhi) is one who has best realized that potential. The perfections and attributes of avatāra were bestowed upon him afterwards by mankind as a result of his achievements. In such a concept, the word avatāra is used more as a term of great respect than to denote the descent of deity, and the idea of God's loving and compassionate intervention in the world is denied, G.4.6-8 notwithstanding.

Radhakrishnan manages to combine something of both the divine descent and human achievement views, with emphasis on the latter. In that view, which is somewhat like Gandhi's, he sees all men as indwelt by the Divine. This "inhabitant"

is none other than Kṛṣṇa, the guiding principle or Logos, steering each man up to his destiny. In a related view, Kṛṣṇa is also a historical individual, one of many unusual, divine manifestations who show great spiritual achievement and are therefore called avatāras; but the divine state to which they rise is attainable by any earnest seeker. These are exemplars for mankind. But in Radhakrishnan we also find an exposition of the more traditional view: the Divine descending by his own will and power to assume (complete, not apparent) human nature, while remaining undiminished. His role here is the conquest of evil and restoration of dharma to new levels.

Thus Radhakrishnan gives a broader meaning to avatāra than does Gandhi. He does not deny the traditional and theistic understanding of the descent of the avatāra, but adds a reinterpretation to the effect that the avatāra is a raising of man to God. Aware of the contradiction in terms, he says that the two views reflect the transcendence and immanence of the divine. The latter is the more important aspect for Radhakrishnan, and in stressing it he diminishes the significance and importance of the Gītā's avatāra, who intervenes in justice and mercy. So also, by reducing the importance of the traditional and historical avatāra in favour of a doctrine of human spiritual evolution and ascendance, Radhakrishnan is, in part, demythologizing the poem. He is also universalizing it, for the truths he sees expressed in it transcend the historic expression and

manifestations so important to other traditions.

We have seen above that for the modern understanding of the avatāra, the question of the historical existence of Kṛṣṇa is a matter for discussion (whether or not that existence is regarded as significant, or even accepted at all) whereas the ancient commentators accept his life and actions as given. This difference in attitude towards the avatāra points toward one of the most basic differences in the approaches of ancient and modern commentators to the text.

These approaches have been classified by J.A.B. van Buitenen as: "traditional Indian" and "modern scholarship."<sup>32</sup> He holds that the former is based on the assumption of the eternal authority and truth of a text in relation to all ages and to the whole body of other sacred texts: "...for the Indian commentator all texts are the one expression of the everlasting present truth..."<sup>33</sup> The question, then, of the historicity of Kṛṣṇa does not arise in this approach.

In contrast, the approach of modern scholarship is to see the texts historically, according to "...their place in history, their date, their relations to other texts of the same age, their connections with older and younger texts..."<sup>34</sup> The result is a balanced interpretation of each text as an historically unique entity, rather than as conforming basically to similar texts of whatever age. Obviously the historicity of Kṛṣṇa is a matter of significance for, and must be considered in this approach.



Van Buitenen recognizes the value of the traditional approach. By not locating the texts in history it has kept them alive and ever open to new interpretations according to the insights of succeeding generations. By regarding them as revelations of eternal truth it has preserved them as a "living force" for the inspiration of Indian thinkers. By seeing all the texts as containing the same fundamental truth, it has given them a group solidarity, as it were, that makes each text consistent with all the others and therefore more than itself. Nevertheless, although such an approach deals with the spirit and intent of the text, van Buitenen finds its principles are incompatible with that of modern scholarship and he opts for the latter.<sup>35</sup>

In Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja, as we have seen, the presentation of Kṛṣṇa is accepted as given in the Gītā and in what moderns might call the theological or mythological history of the sacred texts. There is no sense of historical criticism brought to Kṛṣṇāvatāra. Theirs is the traditional approach.

On the other hand, we have noted that the modern commentators have raised the question of the historical Kṛṣṇa. Tilak has assigned him a date and a doctrine. Gandhi concludes that the Mahābhārata is not an historical work, that it is an allegory, that "Kṛṣṇa of the Gītā is perfection and right knowledge personified; but the picture is imaginary." Yet he does not rule out the possibility of an historical Kṛṣṇa (Ga. G., pp. 127-28). Radharkrishnan speaks

of Kṛṣṇa both in symbolical terms and as an historical individual and seeks to justify the birth of the divine in the latter (Rd. G., pp. 30 ff.).

We can by no means conclude from this evidence that the approaches of these three commentators fall into the category of modern scholarship. Each of them has obviously been touched to a greater or lesser extent by the historical consciousness that is integral to the modern scholarly approach. Yet for each of them the Gītā is a spiritual work, of great religious significance. Their interpretations of it are designed primarily to clarify its spiritual meaning for the guidance and welfare of others (e.g., T. GR., 1: 9-11; Ga. G., pp. 126-27; Rd. G., pp. 4, 12).

Our analysis of Gītā avatāra doctrines has pointed to what could be demonstrated for the Gītā in general, namely, that there is a third category of commentators who are responding to the poem in terms of both the traditional Indian and the modern scholarship approaches, and who do not, therefore, properly belong to either.

## NOTES

1. The word avatāra does not occur in the Gītā itself although it does occur elsewhere in the Mahābhārata.
2. Except where they concern a specific commentator or where they are otherwise attributed, general references to the Gītā text and translation are according to "Part I: Text and Translation" in volume 38 of Franklin Edgerton, The Bhagavad Gītā, Translated and Interpreted. Harvard Oriental Series. Vols. 38, 39. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952). References to the Gītā are hereafter presented within parentheses in the text as G followed by chapter and verse number.
3. Although Krishna Datta Bharadwaj points out that, for Bengali Vaiṣṇavas, Kṛṣṇa is the source of all avatāras. The Philosophy of Rāmānuja (New Delhi: Sir Shankar Lal Charitable Trust Society, 1958), pp. 156-57.
4. The subject has been discussed for decades. One of the more recent summaries of the arguments may be found in Geoffrey Parrinder, Avatar and Incarnation (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 32-34.
5. Śaṅkara's Gītābhāṣya is hereafter abbreviated to Ś. GBh. Since there are many editions of the Sanskrit text, only reference to Gītā chapter and verse is normally provided here. Where it is necessary to quote the text, use has been made of D. V. Gokhale, The Bhagavad-gītā with the Commentary of Śrī Sankarācārya, 2nd rev. ed. (Poona: Oriental Book Agency, 1950). In such cases

- page references to that text are also provided, in brackets. Normal page numbers accompanying references, e.g., Ś. GBh., p. 50, refer to A. Mahādeva Śāstri, The Bhagavad-gītā with the Commentary of Śrī Śankarāchārya, translated from Sanskrit into English, 5th ed. (Madras: V. Ramaswamy Sastrulu & Sons, 1961).
6. Ś. GBh., p. 3: ...saḥ ādikartā nārāyaṇākhyo viṣṇuḥ ... devakyām vasudevāt amṣena kṛṣṇaḥ kila sambabhūva [p. 2].
  7. Ibid., sa ca bhagavān ... nityaśuddhabuddhamuktasvabhāvo 'pi san svamāyayā dehavāniva jāta iva ca ... lakṣyate.
  8. Ibid., p. 121: ...sambhavāmi dehavāniva bhavāmi jāta ivā'tmamāyayā'tmano māyayā, na paramārthato lokavat [p. 65].
  9. The word also appears in G.10.41, 42; but Ś.' treatment of it there does not contribute to our understanding of Kṛṣṇa's descent.
  10. K. S. Murty, Revelation and Reason in Advaita Vedānta (Waltair: Andhra University, 1959), p. 279.
  11. Rāmānuja's commentary is hereafter abbreviated to R. GBh. Regular page references refer to M. R. Sampatkumaran, The Gitabhashya of Ramanuja (Madras: Prof. M. Rangacharya Memorial Trust, 1969). Page numbers in brackets are for quotations from the Sanskrit text and refer to Śrīharikṛṣṇadāsa Goyandakā, anuvādaka, Śrīmadbhagavadgītā [Śrīrāmānujabhāṣya hindī anuvādasahita] (Gorakhpur: Gītā Press, n.d.).

12. R. GBh., p. 3: ...avatīryorvyām sakalamānujanayanaviṣaya-  
tam gataḥ [p. 11].
13. Ibid., p. 4: ...martya āśrita ... [p. 12].
14. Ibid., pp. 115-16 [pp. 139-40]. R. renders ātmanāyayā  
as "my māyā" and māyā, on the basis of textual authority,  
as "knowledge." With further use of textual authority  
"knoweldge" becomes "free will" and so ātmanāyayā  
becomes ātma-, or svasamkalpena.
15. Ibid., p. 434.
16. Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Śrīmad Bhagavadgītā Rahasya, or  
Karma-Yoga-Śāstra, trans. B. S. Sukthankar, 2 vols.  
(Poona: Tilak Bors., 1935); hereafter abbreviated to  
T. GR. Volume 1 deals with the various subjects and  
doctrines of the Gītā and differing opinions on them,  
including T.'s own view of the meaning of the poem.  
His verse by verse translation and commentary form a  
part of Volume 2 and most references in this article  
are to that commentary. Volume 2 also contains an  
Appendix dealing with matters external (in T.'s opinion)  
to the Gītā's meaning, e.g., its historicity.
17. T. GR., 2: 772. Emphasis mine in the second quotation.
18. The possibility that "avatārhood" is bestowed post-  
humously by men is a theory that Gandhi puts forward,  
as we shall see.
19. E.g., "...the Blessed Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who was a living  
incarnation of the Parameśvara, ..." T. GR., 1: 278.

20. "This unimaginable power of the Parameśvara to create the entire cosmos from His Imperceptible form is called 'Māyā' in the Gītā; ..." Ibid., 2: 943, re G.4.6.
21. E.g., Ibid., 1: 279, 288; 2: 1115, re G.13.12-17.
22. Ś. GBh., p. 107, re G.3.24. Wise men like Janaka may perform actions as an example to prevent the masses from straying. Ibid., p. 106, re G.3.20.
23. Gandhi's interpretation of the Gītā, Anasaktiyoga, appears in Mahadev Desai, The Gospel of Selfless Action, or the Gita according to Gandhi (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1946); hereafter abbreviated to Ga. G. The first part of the work is Desai's introductory "submission". This is followed by Gandhi's introduction, translated by him from Gujarati into English, and his verse by verse commentary translated by Desai and approved by Gandhi.
24. This would accord with Monier-Williams' description: "...any distinguished person in the language of respect is called an Avatāra or incarnation of a deity ..." Sir Monier Monier-Williams, A Sanskrit-English Dictionary, new ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), s.v. avatāra.
25. Ga. quite often makes the point that the self should be surrendered to allow God to work through us. E.g., Ga. G., pp. 203, 238, 254, 323-24, re G.4.21; 6.31; 8.4; 13.23, respectively.
26. Ga. does not qualify or comment on G.14.26 "sa ... brahmabhūyāya kalpate"; but tends to speak himself in

- terms of merging and union which do not necessarily imply identity. E.g., Ga. C., p. 325, re G.13.28.
27. Ibid., p. 128. In general Ga. holds that to describe someone as an avatāra is an act of homage by later generations.
  28. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, The Bhagavadgītā (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1948); hereafter abbreviated to Rd. G.
  29. This statement summarizes elements of Rd.'s thought taken from many places in his commentary. Rd. G., pp. 364-65, re G.18.41, for example, supports the summary.
  30. Ibid., p. 154, re G.4.6. In keeping with his position that the world of māyā is delusive but not illusion, Ed. here specifically attacks Ś.'s interpretation of apparent birth.
  31. Rd. G., p. 156, re G.4.9. Rd. comes close to Christian language at times here and indeed at the next verse claims the avatāra "...generally declares that He is the truth, the way and the life." Ibid., p. 158. In discussing the descent of God, he is quite aware of the history of Christian doctrine on the subject. See pp. 32, 35, 36, 37, especially footnotes.
  32. J.A.B. van Buitenen, Rāmānuja on the Bhagavadgītā, 2nd ed. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), pp. 29 ff.
  33. Ibid., p. 29.
  34. Ibid.
  35. Ibid., pp. 38-39.