

PROTESTANT MISSIONARIES AND THE STUDY
OF THE BHAGAVADGĪTĀ

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By Hindu standards, the Gītā is not of great size, being made up of eighteen fairly short "books" or "readings," and amounting to no more than 700 verses in all. At the opening of the poem, Prince Arjuna, together with his charioteer, Krishna, is preparing for battle. But the battle is between two rival branches of the same family, and Arjuna is oppressed with the thought that although as a warrior it is his duty to fight, it is equally his duty to further the well-being of his family as a whole. Therefore he cannot fulfill his sacred duty (dharma) in one direction without breaking it in another. Indecision paralyzes him, and he asks Krishna's advice. Krishna, who is actually the god Vishnu in human form, responds at length, and it is Krishna's teaching that comprises the message of the Gītā. Krishna, incidentally, is also called Shri Bhagavān (the Adorable Lord), and it is this title that gives the poem its name. His teachings, though they begin as a direct answer to Arjuna's questions, soon leave these far behind, and in the end take the form of a comprehensive statement of Vaishṇava Hindu doctrine as it was understood in post-Buddhist times - and, one may add, as it has been understood ever since. Arjuna is taught the theory of the Sāṃkhya school and the practice of Yoga. He is taught the meaning of Vedānta. But above all his charioteer-guru tells him the meaning of bhakti (loving devotion) as the final key to unlock all the sacred mysteries. By this time Krishna is clearly more than a

mere charioteer, and in response to Arjuna's request he finally reveals his true nature as the creator, sustainer, and destroyer of all things. In the matter of dharma, what Arjuna (and all other devotees) must do is to pursue their duty without thought of personal reward - though in Arjuna's case whether or not he is to place his duty as a warrior over his duty to his family remains something of an open question. This in the briefest possible form is the burden of the Gita's teaching.

But the Gītā is not the only Hindu scripture in which Krishna appears. He is equally the central figure in the vast narratives of the Bhāgavata and Viṣṇu Purāṇas. There, however, he is not the mature warrior-statesman, but the youthful "trickster," the supernaturally born child whose powers are revealed in a succession of startling exploits. And in popular Hindu piety, it is this Krishna who has long occupied the front of the stage, presiding over festivals involving human intimacy and the relaxation of normal social restraints.¹ In comparison with these, the severe and somewhat abstract teachings of the Gītā have little popular appeal, though this is not to say that they do not inspire those for whom reflection has the upper hand of ritual performance.

Turning now to Christian interpretations, before about the turn of the present century, when Protestant Christian missionaries spoke of Krishna it was almost always the Krishna of the Purāṇas they had in mind. They could well have read the Gītā in one or another translation, but there is practically no evidence that most of them did so. Thus when we read in the Church Missionary Intelligencer for 1855 that India's population "is morally unhealthy, nor can we be surprised that they are so when the deteriorating influences to which, under the name of religion, they are subjected, are

brought to remembrance," and that "the corrupt heart of man" has "set up as objects of worship the personifications of its own vices,"² we may surmise that the anonymous writer has been either contemplating a lingam, or reflecting on a Holi festival, or possibly both. The tendency to condemn the Krishna of the Gītā on account of the rituals associated with the Krishna of the Purāṇas was, than as later, far from uncommon. But there were other lines of attack. One was for a progressive age to condemn the message of the Gītā as "quietist."

Robert Caldwell, from 1877 Coadjutor Bishop of Madras with jurisdiction over the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, wrote about the Bhagavad Gītā at various times during the 1870s and 1880s. After his death in 1891 some of this material was printed separately. In the resulting pamphlet,³ as well as stating his opinion that the greater part of the Gītā was "decidedly anti-Christian" and "unsound and incapable of being regarded as inspired by the Moral Governor of the Universe,"⁴ he asked scornfully, "Is it this [the Gita's "quietism"] which is covering the country with a net-work of railways and telegraphs?"⁵ That the Gītā is "quietist" is a judgment slightly difficult to support from a reading of the text, the main point of which is to advocate disinterested action in the pursuance of one's duty; but once made, it proved hard to dislodge, and has reappeared of late in the writings of at least some Indian Marxists. The point seems to be that unless one strives after precisely defined worldly goals, one is an enemy of progress; and this the Gītā certainly does not teach.

But, from the Christian missionary point of view, the trouble continued for many years to be the problem of the moral attributes of the youthful

Krishna. On this point, Protestant missionary opinion was practically unanimous. It was assumed that the name "Krishna" referred to one diety (or hero), and it was held that the stories told about him in the Purāṇas were such as to disqualify him from serving as a reliable guide for a people whose main need in life was moral purpose. Protestant missionaries between the 1880s and 1930s maintained a consistent line. At the London missionary conference of 1888 an American Presbyterian, F.F. Ellinwood, having characterized Krishna as "a good-natured, rollicking Bacchus, romping with the shepherdesses [the Gopis were not sheperdesses, but an American could scarcely have said "cowgirls"] around their camping fires, and setting at defiance all laws of decency and morality,"went on to assert that in answering human-kind's need for a mediator in this way, "the father of lies has given a stone for bread, and a serpent for fish."⁶ In 1908, when Sydney Cave came to India, he found that a prescribed Christian textbook in the Tamil language contained the following: "You say that Krishna gave lofty teaching to Arjuna, but who was the Krishna? - a murderer, an adulterer, a thief."⁷ In 1912 we find C.F. Andrews, who could hardly be accused of lack of sympathy for India and things Indian, writing that "there has been no more potent cause of degradation in the whole of Hindu religious history than the vile legends concerning Krishna in the Purāṇas. They have corrupted the imagination of millions of the human race, and their evil influence is still potent in India at the present time."⁸ In 1933, Edgar W. Thompson was still writing in almost identical terms: "The Krishna stories belong to what is least admirable and moral in Indian religious literature. They are not merely unethical and offensive to the conscience: they appear silly and tedious to the reason and taste of the modern man."⁹

And in 1938, the year of Tambaram, a Basel missionary, G. Staehlin, described the Krishna of the Purāṇas as "a mighty hero who performs a number of astounding heroic deeds, surrounded by a halo of grotesque miracles" and as "more an emancipation from all moral laws than an ideal pattern."¹⁰ And as a final example, we may refer again to Sydney Cave, a British Congregationalist, who spoke in his Haskell Lectures of 1939 of "the lewd Krishna of the later Purāṇas."¹¹

We have no need to elaborate this point further, except to say that whatever missionaries before World War II might have thought or said about the Krishna of the Gītā, always at the back of their minds was what they took to be the sexually hyperactive Krishna of the Purāṇas, and this image tended to stand in the way of a full expression of sympathy for the teachings of Krishna as found in the Gītā. It was not without reason that as far back as 1902, Krishnalal M. Jhaveri had recorded that "The Christian missionary or the College-educated Hindu see in him [Krishna] the very incarnation of an oriental sensualist."¹²

It tends to be supposed that, the position of the Gītā being what it is in Hindu piety, it has always been so: that the Gītā has always occupied a focal point as the scriptural standard by which all else Hindu is to be judged. But before about the 1880s this was hardly the case. In 1912 C.F. Andrews wrote that within living memory, the Gītā, "which a century ago was scarcely known outside the learned circle of the pandits...has been elevated from a position of comparative obscurity to that of a common and wellread scripture for the whole of educated India."¹³ That the Gītā did not always occupy such a position in Hindu India is still capable of being received with some incredulity both inside and outside India. The point

is not whether before the 1880s the Gītā was known and revered, but whether it was widely available and widely read (and by whom). It appears in fact that beginning in the 1880s there took place, at first in Bengal but subsequently all over India, a "Krishna renaissance," in which the dissemination of the Gītā in popular editions played a very considerable part.¹⁴

I do not propose on this occasion to enter into a discussion of the conditions affecting this development, but some of its features may be noted.¹⁵ First, it was at this time that the Gītā became genuinely a popular Scripture. It was of a convenient size, and therefore could be marketed cheaply and sold widely to the newly literate classes, who were already being bombarded with Christian missionary literature, and from the Hindu point of view needed an antidote. Second, at this time the "mature" Krishna of the Gītā became a model to be emulated in situations of conflict involving dharma, and an avatāra (incarnation) identified especially with the national movement. Third, the Gītā contained doctrines that could be interpreted as having political overtones. Arguably the central teaching of the Gītā was and is the doctrine of nishkāma karma, or selfless endeavour. This was in the political climate of the period the ideal complement to personal devotion to Krishna - a total selfless commitment to the restoration of Hindu dharma, that cause with which Krishna was himself identified as an avatāra of the Supreme.

The Gītā, therefore, became in the years around the turn of the century a nationalist manifesto, as well as a focus of personal piety and philosophical reflection. In some cases it even became something of a manual of revolutionary warfare. This did not escape the attention of the British authorities, who came in the revolutionary years (ca. 1900-1910) to regard anyone possessing more than one copy as in all probability bent on overthrowing the government by

force. It should perhaps be added that the Hindu nationalists were at this time very substantially aided and abetted by the passionately pro-Hindu and antimissionary leaders of the Theosophical Society, notably Annie Besant.

In this situation of crisis, how did Christian missionaries react to this "new" use of the Gītā? Some, it must be admitted, reacted hardly at all. Those whose work was done in the villages continued, when they thought of Krishna, to think of Krishna of the Purāṇas, and on that question their minds were made up. But those who were more involved with the educated classes from whence the nationalists were recruited were differently placed. By now (pre-1910), most had begun to take Hinduism seriously as a living faith, and had come to look upon the Christian gospel as the "fulfillment" of all that was ethically respectable in Hinduism.¹⁶ At the same time most were sincerely desirous of affirming their respect for the Indian cultural heritage, and of finding in it "points of contact" with the Christian message. This being so, the figure of Krishna confronted them with a serious problem.

To the Hindu, it was axiomatic that the Krishna of the Purāṇas and the Krishna of the Gītā were one. But if this were indeed so, the missionaries (and some Hindus) asked, how the mischievous and fun-loving Krishna of the Purāṇas could possibly have developed into the philosopher-statesman praised by the Hindu nationalists and the Theosophists. Concerning the earlier, youthful Krishan there was, as we have seen, a complete consensus of missionary opinion: he was an immoral rogue, "a compound of Iothario and Jack the giant-killer."¹⁷ But the Krishna of the Gītā could not be dismissed so easily. After all, it might be argued, no one had ever suggested that the Sermon on the Mount ought to be dismissed on account of the contents of the Apocryphal Gospels. Why then treat the figure of Krishna in a similar way?

Beginning at about the turn of the century, a number of missionaries attempted to come to grips with the Gītā, both as holy Scripture and as a symbol of the Hindu renaissance. But few did it at all well. Perhaps the most respectable standard was reached by J.N. Farquhar, in his slim volume Gita and Gospel (1903). In it Farquhar professed (entirely seriously and sincerely, in my opinion) much admiration for the Gītā as a literary creation. But he was not for all that able to accept the historical credentials of the figure of Krishna. He most emphatically did not try to win a cheap victory by pouring conventional scorn and derision on the Krishna of the Purāṇas, whom he clearly regarded as totally separate from the charioteer-god of the Gita. Again and again he acknowledged the literary and esthetic qualities of the Gītā: its author he praised for his "marvellous insight," his genius, and his catholicity. But the esthetic question was not, for Farquhar, the religious question. In the last resort, the religious question was a matter of ethics, on the one hand, and history versus poetry, on the other. The ethics of the Gītā were in his view questionable, while on the historical question, "On the one hand...we have the imaginative portrait of Krishna, surrounded by millions of adoring worshippers... On the other, stands the historical Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁸

Behind this particular attitude - that true religion derives only from true and accurately recorded history - lay hidden so many and so diverse intellectual assumptions that even a brief examination would lead far beyond the bounds of this essay. But let us at least note that although a few Hindus rose to the bait and attempted to argue for the strict historicity of Krishna, the more authentic Hindu position was, and is, that metaphysical truth in no way depends on the changes of history. Farquhar's argument therefore made very little impression.

Other missionary literature on the Gita from this period is often shallow and disappointing. For instance, also in 1903 there appeared J.P. Jones's book India's Problem: Krishna or Christ, originally a course of lectures delivered in 1902 at Andover Theological Seminary. Oddly enough, Krishna and the Gītā are scarcely mentioned in the book. The Gītā, Jones characterizes as "simply a dialogue whose gist is the argument of Krishna - 'the Supreme God' - to urge the tender-hearted and the conscience-smitten Arjuna to slay his relatives in war."¹⁹ While concerning the Gītā's argument that the soul is beyond the reach of good and evil, Jones states bluntly that "This is an argument which is subversive of morality and of social order."²⁰ Three years later, in 1906, the principal of Serampore College, George Howells, wrote in the Baptist Missionary Herald a series of short essays on "The Bhagavad Gita and the Christian Gospel," which is respectful, but in the end lukewarm about the Gītā: "The Gītā contains much that is true and beautiful and good, but in comparison with the New Testament, it is, and I say it with deliberate conviction, but as a candle in the presence of the sun."²¹ Other, similar examples might be quoted of the tendency to allow that the Gītā contains some truth, while being far removed from all the truth.

The Gītā was little mentioned at the Edinburgh Conference of 1910, but one comment made by Brother (later Bishop) F.J. Western in discussion is worth quoting. Speaking of the beginnings of a reformed Hinduism, he drew attention to "the widespread use of the Bhagavad-Gita as a book of theology and devotion. The book has been, one might almost say, re-discovered by English educated Hindus, and many are learning from it not only quietism, but to borrow words of Professor [A.G.] Hogg, quoted in the Report - the strenuous mood, and the consecration of life to service."²² This was an important observation.

Even though many missionaries might still believe the Gītā's message to be "quietist," the revolutionary years before 1910 had seen an important alliance between the national movement and certain other aspects of its teaching, and the use of the Gītā to legitimate the cause of India's independence. Might this use of the Gītā then not be a positive sign of the turning of the mind of young India in the direction of an ideal man - a quest that missionaries for their part had no doubt would find its fulfillment in Christ?

But "strenuous" is despite everything not the equivalent of "ethical," and karma yoga in missionary eyes was not necessarily a pathway to the kingdom of God. Even those missionaries who were prepared to go a long way in recording their appreciation of the message of the Gītā were always brought up short against the ethical imperative. For instance, Nicol Macnicol wrote in his book Indian Theism (1915) of the many merits of the Gītā, and admitted that it appeals "at once to the heart and to the reason of India."²³ In the end, however, Macnicol was forced to state that "The most crucial test of any religion is concerned with its ethical character," and to ask, "Is it, or is it not, an instrument for producing righteousness?"²⁴ Macnicol's conclusion was that without a much more consistent link between God and ethical conduct, "a serious Theism" could not emerge in India.²⁵ Precisely the same point was made by Farquhar in 1920, when he wrote that "The theology of the poem is a most imperfect theism."²⁶ And by Edgar W. Thompson in 1933: "...one of the chief defects of Hinduism is that it has so uncertain a hold on morality."²⁷

By this time the center of the Hindu stage had come to be occupied by a man whose devotion to the Gītā could not be questioned, and yet who had left its revolutionary message far behind, insisting that at its heart was

an uncompromising nonviolence. Mahatma Gandhi's interpretation of the Gītā was in terms of ethics and allegory. Writing in November 1925 in Young India, Gandhi had explained, in terms somewhat reminiscent of the Theosophists:

"I regard Duryodhana and his party as the baser impulses in man, and Arjuna and his party as the higher impulses. The field of battle is our own body. An eternal battle is going on between the two camps and the poet seer has vividly described it. Krishna is the Dweller within, ever whispering in a pure heart."²⁸ He had also stressed, as against the revolutionaries of twenty years earlier, that the Gītā "teaches the secret of Non-violence."²⁹

Curiously, Gandhi had been introduced to the Gītā through the translation of Sir Edwin Arnold, The Song Celestial (1875). Although one might have imagined that the Gita's new role, not as a revolutionary manifesto but as a document of nonviolence and personal devotion, would have inspired floods of missionary comment, this hardly happened. The reasons for this are a trifle obscure, but seem to have been due to two factors: first, the overwhelming impression of Gandhi's personality on his contemporaries, which led to a more personalized analysis of "things Indian," and second, the fact of the allegorical interpretation itself. Faced with a clearly ethical personality such as Gandhi's, one could scarcely argue that the sources of his inspiration were unethical. And faced with a text interpreted allegorically, there is little one can do to contest the allegory on which it is based, save to produce a counter-allegory. Christians whose chief categories were still historical found themselves beating the air when they attempted to argue for the historicity of Jesus Christ as against the unhistoric-city of Krishna, since Gandhi freely allowed that history as such meant nothing to him. And that in the midst of the Gandhian period Rudolf Otto could

attempt, in The Original Gita (1933; English translation, 1939), to apply the more extreme methods of biblical criticism to the Gītā was in Indian Hindu terms both offensive and supremely irrelevant. More and more missionaries were understandably concerned, rather, to try to read the Gītā through Hindu eyes (which meant drawing a veil over the critical questions that had exercised the minds of the Western scholars of the nineteenth century) than to repeat the criticisms that had been so common in the years before 1914. If Gandhi claimed, on ethical grounds, to find total compatibility between the Gītā and the Sermon on the Mount, and if in him "the strenuous mood" was personified to perfection, then was it not more important to try to penetrate to the spiritual sources of his inspiration than to make harsh and impertinent criticisms of the scriptural sources from which that inspiration was drawn?

During the 1930s Protestant missionary opinion in India became somewhat polarized, between an increasing number of "liberals," who were concerned, rather, with the practicalities of social action than with theological reflection, and "conservative" groups (by now reinforced by the impact of Karl Barth and "dialectical theology"), who continued to subject Hindu belief and practice to severe criticism. Between the two extremes, missionary study of the Gītā and other Hindu Scriptures came to a virtual standstill. Most liberals were too busy for painstaking study; the Barthians and Neo-Orthodox were convinced for their part that only the categories of the Protestant Reformation would meet the case. G. Staehlin of the Basel Mission put it in a nutshell when he wrote in 1938: "What do the promises of that Krishna (who is neither real God nor real man nor any reality whatever), that he would shorten the migration of his devotees, mean? What can Krishna do over against the reality of sin?"³⁰ And his colleague Friso Melzer summed up that, in his view, Christians can

proclaim the biblical message only "in full contrast to the Bhagavadgita."³¹ Even an "old liberal," A.G. Hogg, was forced in the end to conclude that when Krishna and Jesus Christ are placed side by side, there is "no real parallel" between the avatāra and the Incarnation.³²

Since the Gandhian period, it would seem that Protestant missionary study of the Gītā has been carried on in a superficial and halfhearted way, or not at all - and this despite its continued centrality in Hindu devotion. Nor should the role of the Gītā in the Hindu-based "guru movements" in the West be overlooked, bearing in mind the lectures and commentaries of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Swami Prabhupada, Sri Chinmoy, and others. But it seems that in our day, Protestant anti-intellectualism is passing beyond the point where it is felt to be worthwhile to spend time and energy on the careful study of the Gītā's text and hermeneutical tradition. Among Roman Catholics since Vatican II there would certainly be more to report, though one cannot altogether avoid the impression that a laudable desire for dialogue in depth has in many cases made it seem (wrongly, in my opinion) that since the asking of critical questions is bound to be offensive to Hindus, these must as far as possible be avoided. To be sure, the place of the Gītā in Hindu and quasi-Hindu spirituality is an important question; but it is not the only question that the Christian is allowed to ask. After all, it has a content, a background, a purpose, and - not least important - a long hermeneutical tradition of its own. It is high time to reopen some of these areas of inquiry.

The Gītā, in short, may be studied both in the light of its unquestioned role as a source of inspiration to the Hindu, and from the point of view of the non-Hindu reader - pilgrim, scholar, or critic - bearing in mind its

impact on the recent intellectual and spiritual life of the West.³³ In this essay I have done no more than draw attention to a few fairly representative missionary responses to the Gītā and the reasons that lay behind them. Admittedly it is only one case among many; but it is an important case, since missionary reactions to the Gītā provide a valuable insight into developing Christian attitudes to Hindu religion and culture as a whole.

Notes

1. See Milton Singer, ed., Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes (Honolulu: East-West Center, 1966; and Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1969).
2. An anonymous writer in Church Missionary Intelligencer VI (1855): 76.
3. Robert Caldwell, Bishop Caldwell on Krishna and the Bhagavad Gita (Madras: Christian Literature Society, India, 1894). The contents of this pamphlet appear to have been drawn from earlier works published in the 1870s and 1880s.
4. *Ibid.*, p.21.
5. *Ibid.*, p.27.
6. James Johnston, ed., Report of the Centenary Conference on the Protestant Missions of the World...London, 1888, vol.1 (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1889), p.54.
7. Sydney Cave, Hinduism or Christianity? (New York: Harper, 1939).
8. Charles F. Andrews, The Renaissance in India, Its Missionary Aspect (London: United Council for Missionary Education, 1912), pp.81ff.
9. Edgar W. Thompson, The Word of the Cross to Hindus (London: The Epworth Press, 1933), p.147.
10. Georg Staehlin, "Avatar and Incarnation," in The Way of Christ 1, no.1 (January 1938): 15f.
11. Thompson, Word of the Cross, p.22.
12. Krishnalal Mohan Jhaveri, "Krishna: the Hindu Ideal," in East and West 1, no.6 (April 1902): 657.

13. Andrews, Renaissance in India, p.146.
14. Cf. Eric J. Sharpe, Not to Destroy but to Fulfil: The Contribution of J.N. Farquhar to Protestant Missionary Thought in India before 1914 (Lund, Sweden: Gleerup, 1965), pp.194ff.
15. I have discussed the question in more detail in my article "Avatāra and Sakti: Traditional Symbols in the Hindu Renaissance," in Haralds Biezeis, ed., New Religions (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1975), pp.55-69.
16. Cf. Sharpe, Not to Destroy but to Fulfil, passim.
17. Grierson, "Hinduism and Early Christianity," in The East and the West (a different periodical from that mentioned in note 12, above) (April 1906), p.150.
18. John N. Farquhar [under pseudonym: Neil Alexander], Gita and Gospel (Calcutta: Thacker, 1903), p.59. The book was subsequently published under Farquhar's name (London: Christian Literature Society, 1906).
19. John P. Jones, India's Problem: Krishna or Christ (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1903), p.104.
20. Ibid.
21. Howells, in Missionary Herald (1906), p.182.
22. World Missionary Conference, 1910, Edinburgh Report, vol.4 (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), pp.313f.
23. Nicol Macnicol, Indian Theism from the Vedic to the Muhammadan Period (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1915), p.81.
24. Ibid., p.248.
25. Ibid., p.244.
26. J.N. Farquhar, An Outline of the Religious Literature of India (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1920), p.89.
27. Thompson, Word of the Cross, p.148.
28. Mohandas K. Gandhi, Young India, 1924-1926 (New York: Viking Press, 1927), p.939.
29. Ibid., pp.938f., cf. p.907.
30. Georg Staehlin, "Avatar and Incarnation II", in The Way of Christ 1, no.2 (April 1938): 22.

31. Friso Melzer, "Immortality and the Life Everlasting," in The Way of Christ 1, no.3 (July 1938): 41.
32. Alfred G. Hogg, The Christian Message to the Hindu (London: S.C.M. Press, 1947), pp.34ff.
33. In 1985 there will be an opportunity to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the first published version of the Bhagavad Gita in English, the translation of Charles Wilkins (1785). It is my hope to mark the anniversary by publishing a survey of Western interpretations of the Gita during that period. This essay may be regarded as a preliminary (and much compressed) version of some of the material to be dealt with in the central section of that forthcoming study.