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The „Song of God“ as a Journey of Discipleship: A Reflection on the Bhagavad-gītā and Christian Perspectives

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This essay offers a brief exploration, in the spirit of interreligious dialogue, of how Hindu thought may be brought into meaningful conversation with Christian thought. Although an unbridgeable gap is often imagined to exist between these two traditions, particularly with respect to cosmic and historical worldviews, here is suggested that this gap may be productively overcome by focusing on representations of discipleship in the Gospels and the Bhagavad-gītā, such that each tradition has something to learn from the other.

Keywords: Hindu-Christian dialogue, Bhagavad-gītā, cross-cultural studies, Marcus Borg, ancient education, Biblical hermeneutics, historical versus cyclical time, scriptural narratives.

Ever since the Bhagavad-gītā – a small portion of the much more vast Sanskrit epic Mahābhārata – was translated into English by Charles Wilkins in 1785, this dialogical discourse on ultimate values and self-cultivation has enjoyed considerable popular and scholarly attention in the West. Responding to this attention has been a relatively steady flow of translations, especially in English, but also, in recent decades especially, in numerous other languages. Western reception of the Gītā (as it is called for short) is thus a long and rather complex topic about which others have written. One significant aspect of this reception history is the attention it has had from Christian readers who have considered the work significant for its strongly theistic (and arguably “monotheistic”) orientation, and for its espousal of avatāra-vada – the doctrine of divine descent that seems to resonate with Christian incarnational theology.

One Christian theologian who engaged deeply with Hindu traditions (in which the Bhagavad-gītā holds major, arguably “canonical” importance) was Bede Griffiths (1906-1993), the Benedictine monk native to Great Britain who spent more than three decades in India developing Christian “ashrams” (Hindu monastic retreat centers). In the course of his study of Hindu sacred texts, he naturally also studied the Bhagavad-gītā, and also gave lectures on the Gītā that were recorded and compiled into a book, *River of Compassion*. In this short essay, I wish to take up some aspects of Griffiths’ treatment of the Gītā as the starting point for a broader consideration of this text as a “counterpoint” to Christian notions of self-cultivation, especially as articulated by the American writer Marcus Borg.

By placing both traditions in juxtaposition it may be possible to gain a fresh and enriched perspective of both.

While reflecting on some of Bede Griffiths'observations about the Bhagavad-gītā in his Christian commentary *River of Compassion* I was somewhat dissatisfied with his perhaps too simple contrast of the Gītā with the Judeo-Christian perspective in regard to time and historicity. As he writes, whereas cosmic religion (i.e. Indian religion) is cyclic in its view of time, "the religion of Israel concerns God's revelation not in the cosmos but in history, and this is constantly emphasized in contemporary Biblical studies" (Griffiths 1995: 68). With ideas culled from Marcus Borg's book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* I wish to explore a possible softening of this distinction, especially in light of what Borg calls "macro-stories" of the Bible, in the interest of bringing the two traditions closer together for mutual benefit.[1]

In the context of current discussion on narrative theology, Borg identifies three basic narratives which define the Judeo-Christian faith experience -- the Exodus Story, the Story of Exile and Return, and the Priestly Story. In summarizing each of these, he is prompted by an observation of William James in the last chapter of his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that all religious traditions make essentially two claims about the human condition. The first claim involves a description of the human predicament, a recognition that "something is wrong with our lives" (Borg 1994: 122). The second claim is to offer a solution to the problem.

Borg sees the Exodus, Exile, and Priestly stories (stories of bondage-to-liberation, exile-return, and sin-guilt-forgiveness respectively) as "constituting a pastoral 'tool kit,' each addressing a different dimension of the human condition" (Borg 1994: 122). Thus I would suggest that if (using the language of "cosmic religion" versus "historical religion") we find it valuable to acknowledge a "cosmic" (i.e. non-linear or "holistic") dimension to human existence,[2] additional stories out of such cosmic religion could be added to this "pastoral tool kit," from outside the Biblical tradition, not least of which would be the narrative of the Bhagavad-gītā. As narrative, both the Mahābhārata (in which, as already noted, the Bhagavad-gītā is located) and the Gītā within it have their beginning, middle, and end -- their own linearity, or direction -- and therefore "history" -- which, persisting in human culture as profound literature, comprehend in linear (story) fashion significant features of the human drama.

I would characterize the Gītā, as a narrative, as a story of "confusion-to-clear-resolve" which, by its dialogical structure, urges its readers to focus on *discipleship* as its forward moving principle. Looking at how Arjuna comprehends discipleship in the Gītā in turn suggests that we consider the narrative(s) of Jesus in the context of discipleship. As much as these two pictures of discipleship contrast with each other, perhaps they also complement each other in some way for one's personal understanding and practice of discipleship. In this context, by viewing these narratives in proximity to each other, the different dimensions of the human condition might take on greater depth, allowing one to more deeply appreciate the ways that divine grace have been conceived, as ways divinity reveals itself in a variety of responses to humanity's predicaments.

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1 I should acknowledge that a fair amount of comparative work has already been done on the Gītā and Christian theology, including attempts to integrate the two, both by persons with Christian backgrounds and persons with Hindu backgrounds, with varying conclusions. Here I offer but a few observations from a position which might be said to be culturally somewhere between the two traditions.

2 I don't know to what extent this is possible for a Christian, but I would think at least certain wisdom literature within the Bible could accommodate it; especially I am thinking of passages in Ecclesiastes.

Whereas the human problem is expressed in Biblical narrative as bondage, exile, and sin/guilt, Bhagavad-gītā opens with the problem of confusion. Arjuna, suffering what today we might call a nervous breakdown, has enough presence of mind to seek understanding and clarification from his charioteer and guide, Krishna about his proper duty as a warrior and human being. Faced with the prospect of killing his relatives on the battlefield, Arjuna is emotionally distraught, but he is not bereft of reasoning power; thus it is clear to him that nothing short of a spiritual transformation will resolve his dilemma. His sensitivity to moral issues and preparedness for such a transformation become his qualifications for discipleship to Krishna.

To instill transcendent understanding upon his disciple, Krishna sustains a didactic time-out before the ensuing great battle of the Kurukṣetra war. In the course of instruction readers or hearers are urged to take up the weapons of transcendent knowledge in the great battles against illusion. Thus Krishna shows the way for one to become, as R.C. Zaehner writes, an "athlete of the spirit" (Zaehner 1969: 25) as one practices the disciplines of *karma-yoga*, *jñāna-yoga,* and *dhyāna-yoga* with increasing *bhakti*, or devotion, gaining reinstatement in one's positions of eternal discipleship or servitorship to the Lord in full submission to his will.

Looking at Jesus as teacher, Borg stresses his challenging spirit -- challenging with alternative wisdom the conventional wisdom of his countrymen, his disciples, and later followers as that which prevents one from attaining life's ultimate aim. Conventional wisdom is the wisdom of maintaining the status quo in family, wealth, honor, purity and religiosity (Borg 1994: 81). As Jesus sometimes urged rejection of family in favor of recognizing one's true Father, so Krishna calls on Arjuna to fight his family members in battle, trusting that their "deaths" will be but changes of the "clothing" of their bodies. Arjuna's conventional morality privileges family maintenance by domestic religiosity, or artificial renunciation of duties in the face of moral dilemma. As a well educated warrior and as a pious leader of his people, Arjuna's concern to act correctly is paramount. Krishna undermines his notions of right and wrong as he induces Arjuna to acknowledge a higher, more complete conception of morality which comprehends the purposes of God, which include a transformation of the self. Arjuna's predicament, if considered a moral one, could be seen as his attempt to find moral integrity beyond the first of three dimensions of morality as outlined by C.S. Lewis in his lectures *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 1984: 57). Arjuna's failure to find harmony between individuals (the first dimension, according to Lewis), prompts him to seek morality in the second, that of "harmonizing the things in each individual." But the seriousness of his inquiry allows him to learn of the third dimension of morality, that of the "general purpose of human life as a whole." Krishna, as the supreme *guru*, subverts Arjuna's superficial morality with a deeper morality which comprehends the "general purpose of human life as a whole", namely surrender to and devotion for the Lord, who is the higher Self of every individual self.

Similarly, as part of the "priestly story", but also as a subversion of that story, Jesus repeatedly challenges conventional wisdom and morality to point to ultimate purpose, instatement in the kingdom of God. As Borg points out, in the course of his ministry Jesus challenges the Jewish conception of holiness and purity with his own message of compassion. "It is in the conflict between these two *imitatio deis* -- between holiness and compassion as qualities of God to be embodied in community -- that we see the central conflict [that which makes the "plot" of the story move forward] in the ministry of Jesus: between two different social visions. The dominant social vision was centered in holiness; the alternative social vision of Jesus was centered in compassion" (Borg 1994: 49). Jesus' alternative did not, of course, entail a rejection of holiness, but rather the revelation of a higher conception of holiness. Similarly *dharma* – the principle of cosmic order that includes moral order and

adherence to prescribed duties -- is not rejected by Krishna; rather he reveals its essence to Arjuna by elaborating the process of gaining divine intuition or communion with God, which is the essential element of holiness.

To move from confusion and ignorance to knowledge and determination, Arjuna must undergo schooling. Unlike Jesus, who calls his disciples to him to take up his mission, Krishna is requested by Arjuna to accept him as Krishna's disciple.[3] Initially Krishna mildly reproves Arjuna for speaking "wisdom-words" while ignoring the spiritual constitution of the soul, the most elementary spiritual lesson. But Arjuna is an attentive student, asking intelligent questions and readily revealing his doubts. As a well-trained warrior, he is accustomed to discipline and able to absorb his teacher's precepts. He is pious, "not born of the demonic nature," and from the beginning he is bound in friendship to Krishna. When overwhelmed by the vision of Krishna's universal form (in the eleventh chapter), Arjuna is appropriately humbled, begging Krishna to resume his four- and then two-armed form, a request Krishna immediately obliges. The bonds of reciprocation between guru and disciple are strong, such that Krishna can confidently unfold the force of his argument: One should mold his or her life in such a way as to be fully attentive to the will of God. "Bear me in mind, love me and worship me, sacrifice, prostrate yourself to me: so will you come to me, I promise you truly, for you are dear to me" (Bhagavad-Gītā 18.65, Zaehner 2003: 400).

The contrasts between Krishna's relationship with Arjuna to Jesus' relationship with his original twelve disciples is striking. Jesus' disciples are, from a mundane perspective, uncultured or even socially outcaste persons. They do not always comprehend Jesus' teachings[4] and sometimes they neglect his instructions. One of the disciples even betrays Jesus to his executioners; and after he has risen from the dead, when the disciples worship him they are, in some sense, doubtful.[5] And yet, Jesus accepts them as his disciples despite all their faults, and even commissions them as his apostles. For Jesus, compassion is the power that overrides all error and all shortcomings: our very existence is one of shortcoming, which only becomes complete, redeemed, by acceptance of discipleship to him as he who is sent by God.

Does this third "meta-story" of the Bible -- sin-guilt-redemption -- have any place in the Gītā narrative? Bede Griffiths seems to see this as the central culminating story of the Bible, noting the increasing historicity of the Biblical story, leading from early times shrouded in myth and legend to the descent of Jesus, which marks a finality, pointing to the end times to come.

I am suggesting that this might be an artificial distinction borne from the predominant Christian notion of the centrality of the "priestly story." Marcus Borg, perhaps in contrast to Griffiths, notes several problems with placing this "priestly story" in a favored position over the two previously mentioned stories (Borg 1994: 130-131),[6] the last one being simply that

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[3] An 18th century Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava commentator to the Gītā, Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura, inserts additional lines to the dialogue, such that Krishna is portrayed as initially refusing the position of guru. Paraphrasing, he says "Arjuna, you don't need a guru; you just need to fight!" To which Arjuna replies with text 8 of Ch. 2: "Even were I to win sovereignty over the gods themselves, my grief would not be dispelled" (Swami 2003: 21-22).

[4] All these shortcomings of the disciples are especially emphasized in the Gospel of Mark, as pointed out by John H. Hayes in his book *Introduction to the Bible* (Hayes 1971: 339).

[5] The conventional translation "and *some* doubted" has been challenged convincingly by Keith H. Reeves in his paper *They Worshipped Him, And They Doubted: Matthew 28:17*, delivered at the Society of Biblical Literature Regional Meeting, Graduate Theological Union, March 24, 1997. Whether the disciples were doubtful of Jesus' divinity, or whether they were actually seeing him, or of their own qualifications as his disciples, we are not told by the author of Matthew.

[6] He lists six "distortions" in the understanding of Christian life: 1) The priestly story leads to a static understanding of the Christian life, "making it into a repeated cycle of sin, guilt, and forgiveness;" 2) it "creates a quite passive understanding of the Christian life," stressing the idea that "God has already done what needs to be done,"

"some people do not feel much guilt . . . Guilt is not the central issue in their lives. Yet they may have strong feelings of bondage, or strong feelings of alienation and estrangement. For these people, the priestly story has nothing to say" (Borg 1994: 131).

Arjuna, who is addressed by Krishna as "sinless one" or "blameless one", *anagha* (Bhagavad Gītā 3.3, Flood et al. 2012: 26), might be counted amongst those who do not feel guilt, yet have strong feelings -- in this case feelings of confusion and doubt about the best and proper course of action. In the Gītā, our original problem is identified as lust, which is described as a covering over or obscuration of the true knowledge of the self (Bhagavad Gītā 3.37-39, Flood et al. 2012: 32). From this perspective, sin *results* from lust, which enshrouds the self in ignorance.[7] Ignorance is the tendency to *ignore* the divine council which is the "alternative wisdom" constantly afforded the enlightened self by the Lord's presence in the heart, but also available to the sincere person willing to accept such council through discipleship. Thus in the Gītā redemption becomes reinstatement in a condition of responsibility (response-*ability*) -- the ability to act decisively and respond appropriately to God's actions in harmony with his will. At the conclusion of the Gītā, Arjuna says, "Destroyed is the confusion; and through your grace I have regained a proper way of thinking: with doubts dispelled I stand ready to do your bidding" (Bhagavad-Gītā 18.73, Zaehner 1969: 402).

What, then, can be said of compassion in the Gītā? Indeed, in the Gītā, compassion is compared to a shining lamp -- a lamp which has a "destructive" function: "To show them special mercy, I, dwelling in their hearts, destroy with the shining lamp of knowledge the darkness born of ignorance" (Bhagavad-gītā 10.11, Bhaktivedanta 1996: 521);[8] thus by means of spiritual knowledge the Lord calls human beings to become mature "athletes of the spirit," to follow Arjuna's example of discipleship to act firmly and decisively out of selfless devotion to God. As an athlete practices to become qualified in physical feats, so one may become qualified in submission to God, a condition free from doubt and confusion.

Marcus Borg notes that four common elements in the three macro-stories of the Bible emerge when seen as equally important. The last of these is that they are all describing journeys. Even the priestly story, seen as a journey, "means that God accepts us just as we are, wherever we are on our journey" (Borg 1994: 133). Or, looked at in another way, Borg suggests, Jesus' offering his life is the once-for-all sacrifice which subverts the priestly story and affirms the journey stories. "In addition," he writes, "the New Testament has a journey story of its own -- the story of discipleship." This he describes as a "journeying with Jesus" which means "listening to his teaching -- sometimes understanding it, sometimes not quite getting it. It can involve denying him, even betraying him" (Borg 1994: 135). Borg offers us the image of Jesus feeding the five thousand in the wilderness: "If we think of the Eucharist as like those meals in the wilderness, it becomes a powerful symbol of journeying with Jesus and being fed by him on that journey. 'Take, eat, lest the journey be too great for you'" (Borg 1994: 135-136).

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as well as a passivity toward culture, as a "politically domesticating story. The stories of bondage in Egypt and exile in Babylon are culturally subversive stories;" 3) it makes Christianity primarily a religion of the afterlife; 4) it "images God primarily as lawgiver and judge. God's requirements must be met, and because we cannot meet them, God graciously provides the sacrifice that meets those requirements. Yet the sacrifice generates a new requirement: God will forgive those who believe that Jesus was the sacrifice, and will not forgive those who do not believe... The priestly story most often turns the subversive wisdom of Jesus into Christian conventional wisdom;" 5) the story is hard to believe. "The notion that God's only son came to this planet to offer his life as a sacrifice . . . is simply incredible. Taken metaphorically, this story can be very powerful, but taken literally, it is a profound obstacle to accepting the Christian message..." His sixth point I explain above.

7 The late Ninian Smart, professor of Religious Studies at U.C. Santa Barbara, was fond of referring to this as the "doctrine of original ignorance."

8 Zaehner translates "destroy" as "dispel" (Zaehner 1969: 294).

Arjuna's discipleship can also be seen as a journey. *Mām evaiṣyasi satyaṁ*: "you will surely go to me" (Bhagavad Gītā 18.65, Flood et al. 2012: 146). Krishna promises Arjuna that he will *go* to him; several references to being on or keeping on the path are there, and the devotee is repeatedly urged to gain spiritual vision, by which one can see one's way forward. There is a sense of progression, advancement in devotion -- a forward motion which definitely suggests a journey, in which Krishna's instructions are like guideposts on the way. Arjuna was guided to make a momentous decision, namely to go ahead and perform his duty as a warrior and fight in the battle of Kurukṣetra, but in transformed consciousness of purpose. Jesus similarly calls his disciples to follow him and bear witness to the redemption of the world. Thus followers of Jesus may find insight in the Bhagavad-gītā, in the example of Arjuna, how to become and remain determined as Jesus' disciples, and the followers of Krishna may learn from Jesus' example that, recognizing one's own shortcomings, one can be assured of the Lord's compassionate protection in one's journey toward becoming a fully dedicated servant of the servants of the Lord. "Cosmic religion" and "historical religion" may not be so far apart if we look at them both in terms of their respective stories of discipleship.

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SUMMARY

Taking as the point of departure the oft-made distinction between Indic "cosmic religion" and Abrahamic "historical religion" as a presumed unbridgeable gap between Hindu and Christian worldviews, this essay first draws from contemporary Christian theologian Marcus Borg's identification of three essential Christian narratives to then consider the Bhagavad-gītā as a narrative. On this basis, both the Gospels and the Gītā may be read as stories of discipleship, with varying sorts of interactions between teacher and student – Jesus with his several disciples, and Krishna with his one disciple, Arjuna. In both cases the teachers challenge conventional morality to awaken their students to deeper morality, the essence of holiness, and in so doing bring them along spiritual "journeys" to beatitude or liberation. Some contrasts are noted in the teacher-student dynamics of Jesus and his disciples with Krishna and Arjuna, for example their different social classes and their readiness to comprehend and accept the teachings. However, by appreciating the unconditional acceptance of Jesus for his sometimes weak disciples, and Arjuna's unconditional surrender to Krishna and determination to follow the yogic path of spiritual progress, it becomes possible to envision a locus of common understanding between these two traditions of religious thought and practice.

SAŽETAK

„Božja pjesma" kao put učeništva: refleksije o Bhagavad-gīti i kršćanskim gledištima

Uzevši kao početnu točku često navođenu razliku između indijske „kozmičke religije" i abrahamske „povijesne religije" kao pretpostavljani nepremostivi jaz između hinduskog i kršćanskog svjetonazora, ovaj esej kreće od suvremenog kršćanskog teologa Marcusa Borga i njegove identifikacije tri ključna kršćanska narativa, a zatim razmatra narativ Bhagavad-gite. Na toj osnovi, i evanđelja i Gita mogu se čitati kao priče o učenicima, s raznim vrstama interakcije između učenika i učitelja – Isusa s njegovim učenicima, i Krišne s njegovim učenikom Arjunom. U oba slučaja, učitelji izazivaju konvencionalni moral kako bi probudili dublji moral u svojim učenicima, esenciju svetosti, i na taj način poveli ih na duhovna „putovanja" prema beatifikaciji ili oslobođenju. Neki kontrasti istaknuti su u dinamici učitelj-učenik između Isusa i njegovih učenika, i Krišne i Arjune, primjerice njihova pripadnost različitih društvenim klasama i spremnost da razumiju i prihvate učenja. Međutim, ako uzmemo u obzir bezuvjetno prihvaćanje Isusa prema njegovim ponekad slabim učenicima, i Arjuninu bezuvjetnu predaju Krišni i odluku da slijedi jogi-put duhovnog napretka, moguće je zamisliti lokus zajedničkog razumijevanja između ovih tradicija religijske misli i prakse.

Ključne riječi: hinduističko-kršćanski dijalog, Bhagavad-gītā, međukulturalne studije, Marcus Borg, drevno obrazovanje, biblijska hermeneutika, historijsko naspram cikličkog vremena, skripturalni narativi