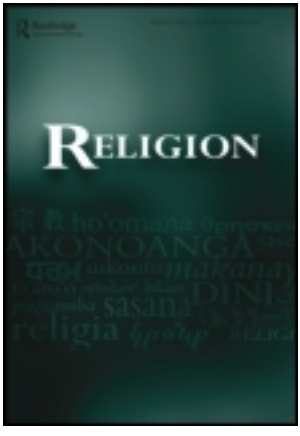

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Who is the ideal karmayogin?

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WHO IS THE IDEAL KARMAYOGIN? The meaning of a Hindu religious symbol

Ursula King

The reformers and writers of modern Hinduism are often dealt with in too great an isolation. Their individual originality tends to be over-emphasized, their uniqueness over-stressed at the expense of disregarding the continuity of themes and motifs present throughout the Hinduism of modern times. The dynamic of transformation at work in the handling of traditional materials and the shaping of contemporary Hindu self-understanding is rarely closely scrutinized. Most studies on Hinduism tend to fall into two categories: either they place an exclusive emphasis on earlier, classical developments with little regard for the modern period, or if they deal with the latter, they frequently include nothing more than a factual-descriptive account of the major figures and movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in most cases only based on secondary sources. There are of course exceptions to this generalization, especially on the development of the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj (1), but they come from the pen of historians rather than from scholars in the study of religions. The historical studies examine mostly social, political, economic or intellectual developments whereas the religious factors at work in the shaping of the modern Indian mind have not received sufficient critical analysis. We shall make little progress in the understanding of modern Hinduism as a contemporary religious force of great vitality until we enquire more closely into the hermeneutical principles which govern the ongoing reinterpretation of the traditional Hindu heritage in a new social and historical context.

The result of this reinterpretation is a Neo-Hinduism

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which defines itself on the one hand as a truly eternal religion *(sanatana dharma)* and on the other as a newly universal religion. The different theoretical approaches, selectively presented themes, and effectively used religious symbols of modern Hinduism are nowhere systematically stated nor are they without inherent contradictions. Old and new elements coexist together and cannot always be harmonized. This becomes apparent when one analyses particular aspects of modern Hinduism. An interesting example is provided by the symbol of the *karmayogin* which is widely used today and is closely connected with the enhanced emphasis given to *karmayoga* in contemporary Hinduism. Fully aware that more research is needed in this area, I would like to draw attention to the use of this symbol and investigate several layers of its complex meaning. I shall first briefly comment on the modern meaning of *karmayoga* (I), then examine the literary usage and iconographic treatment of the *karmayogin* (II) and lastly point to some of the existing contradictions and tensions in the use of this religious symbol (III).

I

In traditional usage *karma* has several levels of meaning. As law of cause and effect *karma* determines all human actions and their results as well as the continuous round of rebirths. It is a universally operative law and the main reason for *samsara*. It seems that the original meaning of *karma* relates mainly to ritual and cultic action rather than to human action in general. Traditionally, *karma* meant first of all the many sacrificial actions prescribed by the Vedas. A *karmayogin* would thus be primarily someone who fulfils these ritual duties in accordance with the scriptures. Generally speaking, the position of the *karmayogin* has always been secondary in relation to that of the *jnanayogin* who attains *moksha* through renunciation leading to the identity-realization of *atman* and *brahman*, at least according to the monistic schools of classical Vedanta. However one might object to the socially and religiously elitist minority position of this teaching in practice, there can be little doubt that it has always held a priority of esteem, at least among the primary bearers of the religious and cultural tradition, the Brahmins. Although recent studies of renunciation have uncovered a great diversity in the traditional theory and practice of *jnana* and *sannyasa* (2), the central need for some form of renunciation cannot be questioned. In order to be freed from the bondage of rebirths and reach *moksha*,

it is essential not to accumulate any further *karma* produced by action. As the attainment of *moksha* remains the ultimate religious goal of the Hindu, the renunciation of all action is in the last analysis more important, necessary, and urgent than any kind of action. This soteriological primacy and necessity of renunciation affects all categories of action and requires in some cases even the abandonment of ritual action (although different teachings exist on this issue in the Indian tradition).

The *Bhagavad-Gita* has much to say about *karmayoga*, the way of action. Like *bhaktiyoga* or the way of loving devotion, *karmayoga* is recommended as a path to *moksha* open to members of all castes, particularly those who traditionally have no access to *jnanayoga*, such as women and *shudras*. Although not part of the orthodox *shruti*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* early gained a special place of recognition as one of the sources of classical Vedanta but this had initially little to do with its teaching on *karmayoga*. However, since the late nineteenth century it is particularly this teaching which has come to mean something much more specific than in the past. The literary history of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, its oral and written transmission, its varied interpretation through the ages, its translation into Indian vernacular and Western languages as well as the history of the diffusion of this work and its ideas in the modern period remains largely uncharted so far. There can be no doubt, however, that the influence of this text in modern Hinduism, with numerous editions and countless commentaries, goes far beyond anything in previous periods on Indian history. The *Bhagavad-Gita* has so displaced the orthodox vedic scriptures, at least in popular thought and practice, that some speak of a new Hindu orthodoxy based on the modern interpretations of what is now considered to be the central message of the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

The literary form of the text has remained the same throughout many centuries but its meaning is understood quite differently today. Although *karma* means more than merely ritual action in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, *karmayoga* as path of human action is still closely confined there by the limits laid down by the traditional *varnashramadharma*-system. Moreover, the *Bhagavad-Gita* does not assign an unambiguously positive value to human action; rather, activity is seen as an unavoidable part of human life, important and necessary for the maintenance of human society. The unavoidability and necessity of action is stressed as a relative value but seen from an ultimate perspective the

ideal of selfless action still remains a preliminary goal; it is the path of those who cannot pursue complete renunciation, that is of course the majority of men. Ultimately, action of any kind can only serve as a stepping-stone towards *jnana* which remains the condition *sine qua non* for attaining *moksha* at the Hindu doctrinal level.

However much the *Bhagavad-Gita* speaks of *karmayoga*, it says little about the *karmayogin*. But the text discusses the idea of *karmayoga* in such different contexts that it is open to a great variety of interpretations. It allows for a multiplicity of meanings and creative adaptations and this extraordinary potential has been recognized by many spokesmen of Neo-Hinduism; it has also been fruitfully explored in modern discussions on Hindu ethics. In a situation of intercultural encounter between India and the West, accompanied by the profound transformation of traditional Indian society, the teaching on *karmayoga* has been reinterpreted in such a way that a very positive value can be assigned to it which far transcends its traditional meaning. *Karma* is now understood to refer to human action in the widest possible sense. Beyond ritual and dharmic action it refers to all aspects of human activity and is applicable in a universal manner. In fact, the idea of *karma* is now sometimes so widened as to lose all specific content as formerly circumscribed and defined by the *shastras*. In a period of social change and renewal the initiative of the individual and action in general are positively valued and legitimized through the new interpretation given to the teaching of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. This has also brought about an evaluation of physical work and an emphasis on social service which are quite new in comparison with most teachings of traditional Hinduism. One can rightly consider the *Bhagavad-Gita* as providing a basis for the development of a religiously motivated 'work-ethic' in the Weberian sense although it seems too one-sided to consider this modern transformation merely in terms of 'a westernized middle class interpretation' (3).

Such a statement overlooks the fact that the reinterpretation of *karmayoga* has found its most powerful expression through personal embodiment by being fused with the figure of the *karmayogin*. During an era which brought about a new social order which also required a new understanding of the religious and cultural heritage of the past, the ideal *karmayogin* has become a religious symbol of great power and attraction. It represents an effective vehicle for expressing a partly new message and provides a focus for the hopes and religious aspirations of a new

historical period. This symbol, as currently used in Neo-Hinduism, is not found in traditional Hinduism. The ideal *karmayogin* is a new symbol which has deep roots in the tradition but expresses in quite a new way the religious meaning of a new kind of life, inseparably linked to the universalized understanding of *karma* and the new positive evaluation given to *karmayoga*.

II

Eric Sharpe considers the figure of the *karmayogin* as primarily a new political ideal set up in the early twentieth century when the *Bhagavad-Gita* was understood as a nationalist manifesto (4). However, a detailed examination of the writings of modern Hinduism shows that this close connection of the *karmayogin* with the sphere of political action is only the logical outcome of earlier developments which imply the religious interpretation of *karmayoga* and the quest for an ideal *karmayogin* whose sphere of activity could later be extended to political activism.

It was Vivekananda who first recognized the religious importance of the *karmayogin* but his interpretation was based on earlier ideas which can be traced to his predecessors. Subsequently, Sri Aurobindo made wide use of this symbol and more recently, the ideal of the *karmayogin* has been closely connected with Gandhi. How did this development occur and what does it imply in terms of the meaning which different representatives of modern Hinduism give to the *karmayogin* and his work?

It has already been noted that the *karmayogin* symbol is linked to a new and more universalized understanding of *karma* which supplies the basis for a strong legitimation of human action. Vivekananda used the symbol of the *karmayogin* very effectively in order to give more substance and appeal to his teaching on practical Vedanta. He and many others frequently refer to the 'ideal *karmayogin*', but who is meant by this? Sometimes, Vivekananda speaks of the *karmayogin* only in general terms, characterizing his work and message but not his personality. At other times, he refers to different religious personalities in connection with the *karmayogin*, for example the Buddha (5). Other descriptions remind one of the *bodhisattva* ideal: 'The Karma-Yogi wants everyone to be saved before himself. His only salvation is to help others to salvation....This true worship leads to intense self-sacrifice' (6). Even Jesus

may be considered as an ideal *karmayogin*. In the words of Swami Abhedananda, a close associate of Vivekananda's, 'Jesus was a great yogi because he realized the transitory and ephemeral nature of the phenomenal world...(he) was a great Karma Yogi, because he never worked for results' (7). But Abhedananda considers Jesus also to be a *bhaktiyogin*, a *rajayogin*, and a *jnanayogin*. In the end, his interpretation of a *karmayogin* becomes so wide as to lose its effectiveness as a religious symbol, for Abhedananda includes not only Jesus and the Buddha but all great spiritual leaders of mankind in his ideal. A true *karmayogin* then simply means anyone who works for humanity through love (8).

The ideal *karmayogin* can thus be linked with a number of concrete figures. Its most convincing expression for the modern Hindu is, however, found in the Krishna figure of the *Bhagavad-Gita* who represents the *karmayogin* par excellence for Vivekananda and Neo-Hinduism in general. This ideal *karmayogin* works without motives for reward for the well-being of all; his message is one of intense and ceaseless activity. Vivekananda's first work, published in London in 1896, bears the significant title *Karma-Yoga or Realization of the Divine through Works performed without Attachment*. Like Tilak after him, Vivekananda seems to have clearly recognized that his interpretation of *karmayoga* put forward here was different from that of traditional Hinduism. His active reinterpretation of the path of *karmayoga* developed during his three years in the West (1893-6) and the book on *Karma-Yoga* represents a collection of lectures first addressed to Western audiences. The text frequently refers to the 'secret of *karmayoga*' and states quite categorically that all work, all action, every human deed, must be understood as *karma*. The ideal *karmayogin* is an ever active worker.

By using the terms 'work' and 'worker' interchangeably with *karma* and *karmayogin*, Vivekananda evades the need for a clearer definition of the meaning and content of work. The fluidity of his concepts makes his statements vague but this also allows for new associations and further interpretations of what he may possibly have meant. Vivekananda describes the teaching of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as 'a science knowing how to work that will bring the greatest results' (9). If people follow Krishna's teaching, they can ceaselessly work in freedom as their work will no longer lead them into bondage. No wonder that Abhedananda equates the path of *karmayoga* simply with a 'philosophy of work' (10). The human goal of perfection is now seen in the path of action, understood as duty but

achieved without bondage to the fruits of action. Such action, performed in the spirit of devotion and sacrifice, is real renunciation. That is the true meaning of the message of the ideal *karmayogin* who is no other than Krishna on the battlefield at Kurukshetra, especially as portrayed in the second and third chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Quite contrary to the accepted view of the past, the traditional path of renunciation is now considered to be inferior to the path of action. The new interpretation of Vedanta as a religion of work and action, a 'practical Vedanta', praised the necessity and spiritual usefulness of work. In this way Vivekananda hoped to mobilize the religious resources of Hinduism for the development of a new spirituality and the progress of Indian society.

If one examines his writings more closely, it is evident, however, that in spite of his praise and recommendation of work in general, the different kinds of human activity are nevertheless strictly ordered in a hierarchy which is by no means so untraditional. Physical work and even concrete help given to one's fellow men still belong to the lowest order; intellectual work ranks more highly, and highest of all stands any work which helps men to find true spirituality. He also voices a traditional view, still characteristic of many Indian attitudes, which believes in the inherent strength of spirituality per se without concrete reference to either matter, work, society, or human relations when saying: 'Spiritually strong and sound men will be strong in every other respect if they wish it, and until there is spiritual strength in mankind even the physical needs cannot be satisfied' (11).

One discovers a distinct difference in tone and orientation in Vivekananda's lectures, depending on whether he was speaking to Indian or Western audiences. Although he developed his reinterpretation of *karmayoga* under Western influence, he preached the religion of work mainly in India where it was most needed for promoting social development. In the West, by contrast, he primarily emphasized *jnanayoga*, the need for religion and spirituality, that is to say, the way of wisdom rather than work. His understanding of *jnanayoga* has exercised a far-reaching influence and requires much further analysis. It represents as much a syncretistic reinterpretation of traditional teaching as does his notion of *karmayoga*. Whilst most of Hindu religiosity finds its practical expression in one of the myriad forms of *bhaktiyoga*, the self-definition of modern Hinduism at the theoretical level hinges on the reinterpretation given to *karmayoga* and *jnanayoga*. Both

have been central to the Hindu religious tradition but they have now been considerably modified in theory and practice. Until one enquires more closely into the creative hermeneutics underlying this new interpretation, one cannot gain a sufficiently differentiated and adequate understanding of the nature of Neo-Hinduism.

Inseparably linked to the new presentation of *karmayoga* and *jnanayoga* is Vivekananda's extraordinary claim, now central to the Hindu message proclaimed by Indian and Western gurus alike, that the specific *karma* of India, her foremost duty, consists in preaching spirituality to the rest of the world. This affirmation reflects a considerable isolationism, if not to say ignorance, in relation to the existence and claim of religious traditions outside Hinduism. In spite of Vivekananda's vigorous attempt to break out of the boundaries of an ethnically-confined Hinduism by universalizing certain aspects of its teaching, he was not entirely successful in developing a truly universal vision where there is room for the perspective of others. Instead of overcoming differences through integration, he remained wedded to thinking in oppositional terms, particularly with regard to the over-accentuated contrast between Indian spirituality and Western materialism (12).

The symbol of the ideal *karmayogin* devoted to selfless action is also connected with the idea that service to one's fellow men is identical with worship of God. Social work and service to all living beings *(jiva seva)* as true worship have become institutionalized in the Ramakrishna Order. But it is wrong to assert, as is often done, that this synthesis represents a completely new religious path. Under the influence of Christian missionaries the idea that *karma = seva* (understood as social duty and service to others) was articulated earlier in the nineteenth century. Keshub Chunder Sen was probably the first who, long before Vivekananda but similarly to him, envisaged a collective *sadhana* combining the four traditional paths of *yoga, bhakti, jnana,*and *karma* (interpreted as communion, love, wisdom, and social service). These ideals were incorporated as motto into the flag of the 'New Dispensation', promoted in 1880 (13). Vivekananda himself, although not all his later followers, rightly recognized that the step to consider social work as an integral part of *karmayoga* had first been undertaken by the Brahmo Samaj.

Karmayoga as social ethics can either be grounded in Vedanta monism (14), as is the case with Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Order, or in the belief in a personal God,

as found in Keshub Chunder Sen and the Brahmo Samaj. Keshub's image of God, initially influenced by unitarian and rationalist ideas, remained too unspecific and vague, however, to provide a powerful focus of attraction for religious fervour. An orator of much skill and fervent appeal, Keshub tirelessly preached both the fatherhood *and* motherhood of God. But at some stage he must have realized that the idea of God needs a more concrete form and embodiment to attract human devotion. Perhaps this is the reason why late in his life he turned to Bengal Vaishnavism and *bhakti* practices when founding the 'New Dispensation'. The living God can be encountered in the figure of Krishna, particularly the classical Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, free from the excesses of later puranic mythology. Another Bengali, the nationalist writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, was the first to praise this Krishna-figure, purified from popular accretions, as the most perfect embodiment of the idea of the divine, transcending all other religious figures through its very comprehensiveness in providing an ideal for human action (15). Bankim also produced the first modern *Bhagavad-Gita* commentary and thereby initiated what has become a new tradition, for to comment on this scripture is now almost de rigeur for Hindu writers and gurus. Whilst there exist different views as to the central message of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, there can be little doubt that, contrary to the past, the majority of commentaries emphasize the active, world-affirming teaching of the ideal *karmayogin*, symbolized by Krishna teaching at Kurukshetra. This extraordinary emphasis given to the Krishna-figure and his partly new, actively understood message of *karmayoga*, blended with the age-old *bhakti* tradition of the Indian masses, has become the mainspring of an activist and theistic Neo-Hinduism of the present.

In the modern period, the symbol of the *karmayogin* also appears as a relatively new iconographic motif in the religious image world of India. One searches almost in vain if one looks in classical Indian art for a representation of Krishna at Kurukshetra. So far, I have not come across a representation of the charioteer Krishna teaching Arjuna on the battlefield at Kurukshetra before the late eighteenth century. Within a different context, aspects of this scene may have been depicted before but their meaning was unconnected with the symbol of the ideal *karmayogin*. For example, in the realm of sculpture there exists a small detail on a frieze in the South Indian temple at Halebid (late twelfth century), showing scenes from the Mahabharata war in low relief. One of them depicts a small group which in Stella Kramrisch's opinion (16) represents the charioteer Krishna

leading Arjuna, equipped with bow and arrows, on his chariot into battle which, however, is not shown. In the background one can observe two human figures, standing upright, with their hands folded in an attitude of adoration. This may be interpreted as evidence of Krishna *bhakti*. The countless representations of Krishna in Indian art usually relate to puranic sources and motifs, particularly those drawn from the *Bhagavata-Purana*, rather than to the world of the epic and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. By the nineteenth century, however, one can find many modern miniatures and examples from popular Indian bazaar and calendar pictures depicting Krishna at Kurukshetra, understood as the ideal *karmayogin*, surrounded by armies arrayed for battle. Today it is not infrequent to see this picture on the cover of *Bhagavad-Gita* editions.

This motif also decorates the title page of Aurobindo's weekly review *Karmayogin*, published at the height of his political activity in Calcutta between 1909-10 and continued for some time, after his imprisonment, by Sister Nivedita. As the title explicitly states, the *Karmayogin* was 'A WEEKLY REVIEW OF National Religion, Literature, Science, Philosophy, etc...'. Above the title is the picture of Krishna and Arjuna in a chariot, surrounded by warring armies. Although the paper was published in English, the margin of the picture is surrounded by Sanskrit quotations from the *Bhagavad-Gita* referring, for example, to verses II,50 ('Yoga is wisdom in work') and III,30 ('Offer to me all thy works and rest thy mind on the Supreme') (17). Religious and political nationalism are closely intertwined in this review which preaches a new *karmayoga* through the very effective vehicle of the ideal *karmayogin* symbol. In 1918, selected articles from the paper were reprinted in book form under the title *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*, which by 1937 had reached its fourth edition.

Before arriving at his later systems of integral yoga, Aurobindo interpreted the meaning of *karmayoga* similarly to Vivekananda's practical Vedanta, a dependence rarely recognized by Aurobindo's disciples. He went beyond Vivekananda in that he drew further, political consequences from the path of *karmayoga*. The work of the *karmayogin* is closely linked up with the building of the nation. This is not only a political goal requiring a change of government but implies a far more comprehensive moral and spiritual task. India's national religion or *dharma* is important for social and political life but also for theology, philosophy, literature, science, in short, it affects all aspects of individual and society (18).

For Aurobindo, the great yogis of the past comprise Buddha, Christ, Mohammed, Chaitanya, and then of course Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. But for him too the ideal *karmayogin* is best expressed by the Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. He embodies the unity of outer and inner life and teaches a yoga which, far from being quietistic and metaphysical, gives practical guidelines for human action. This yoga truly links man with God and includes knowledge, love, and work.

During the politically active period of his life, Aurobindo understood the message of the *Bhagavad-Gita* in an entirely activist way which left no room for compromise. He then repeatedly stressed that spirituality is not divorced from life, and the heights of religion are not above the struggles of this world:

> The recurrent cry of Sri Krishna to Arjuna insists on the struggle: 'Fight and overthrow thy opponents!', 'Remember me and fight!'....The charioteer of Kurukshetra driving the car of Arjuna over that field of ruin is the image and description of Karmayoga; for the body is the chariot and the senses are the horses of the driving and it is through bloodshed and mire-sunk ways of the world that Sri Krishna pilots the soul of man to *vaikuntha* (19).

The overthrow of the opponents was still understood quite literally here, in spite of the symbolic turn at the end. In his later essays, written between 1916 and 1920, he continued to refer to the *Bhagavad-Gita* as 'a gospel of work' but the major emphasis was now placed elsewhere. More than anything else Krishna's preaching was now about 'works which culminate in knowledge, that is, in spiritual realization and quietude...and not at all in action dictated by egoistic and altruistic, by personal, social, humanitarian motives' (20).

Like Bankim before him, Aurobindo considered Krishna to be an historical human figure as well as the ideal divine teacher. However, he no longer preaches the necessity and value of human work but his teaching is primarily concerned with divine action. Earlier, the message of the *karmayogin* was understood as an appeal 'to do India's work, the world's work, God's work' (21); now it is no longer social duties which are important but the selfless realization of the divine will. Once retreated from the arena of political action into his ashram in Pondicherry, Aurobindo concluded that 'the Gita is not a book of practical ethics, but of spiritual life' in a

traditional Indian sense. To understand this scripture as teaching the disinterested performance of social duties and the ideal of social service is a 'modern misreading' brought about by 'the present-day European or Europeanised intellect' (22). Although one may argue that it is a further extension of its meaning rather than a misreading, there can be little doubt that the activist interpretation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, focusing on the ideal *karmayogin*, is a modern one, closely related to the interaction between India and Europe.

It is well known that Gandhi, unlike Aurobindo, always maintained the view of *karmayoga* being the central message of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Gandhi read the scripture for the first time in England in 1888-9 but his own commentary on it, entitled *Anasaktiyoga* (23), was only written forty years later. The ideal *karmayogin* is for Gandhi the person who chooses the way of selfless action and sacrifice as path to God. The central importance of this message for Gandhi and the way it presupposes a substantial reinterpretation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* has been commented upon in detail by Agehananda Bharati (24) and will not be further discussed here. It may be mentioned, however, that a further development has taken place in that today Gandhi himself is often seen as the ideal *karmayogin*. The newly understood *karmayoga* taught by the Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita* has found concrete and permanent historical expression in the person and work of Gandhi. Hindu religious teaching today makes use of the ideal *karmayogin* symbol by applying it both to the classical Krishna and the contemporary Gandhi. Not only Hindus but others, too, refer to Gandhi as *karmayogin*; for example, in a recent study of mysticism and contemporary spirituality, a western author describes Gandhi as a 'true mystic of action, a true karmayogin' (25). This shows the wide diffusion of the *karmayogin* ideal and implies an even further transformation of its meaning. One may also note that no other representative of modern Hinduism illustrates the originality as well as the dilemma of the *karmayogin* symbol more strikingly than Gandhi does.

III

These examples must suffice to show that the symbol of the *karmayogin* and the new understanding of *karmayoga* are of central importance in Neo-Hinduism. The changed emphasis on *karmayoga* as an ideal path of action for individual and society has come about through the socio-cultural

transformations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is given religious legitimation through certain passages of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The adaptation of traditional teachings to modern needs allows for the development of a dynamic spirituality, at least partly new, which preaches the ethic of work and service as a form of worship leading to liberation.

The symbol of the *karmayogin* brings together and fuses into one the classical Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita* with the puranic Krishna of myths and legends as well as with exemplary religious figures of the present. It can also draw on the rich emotional responses of a long and varied *bhakti* heritage, deeply rooted in the Indian religious tradition. The intimate blend of all these elements endows the *karmayogin* symbol with a powerful appeal for the religious imagination and provides a particularly effective call to action. Integrating traditional and modern meanings, it represents a radiant centre for theistic and actively oriented religious aspirations. It would seem that in any discussion on modern Hindu ethics this symbol deserves an important place and calls for further attention.

However, in spite of the wide use of this symbol today, both in Hindu apologetic writings as well as in the images of devotional literature and art, it must be pointed out that the current portrayal of the *karmayogin* is not without its contradictions. Important tensions continue to exist in the way modern life is given religious meanings from a Hindu point of view. The choice of Krishna himself implies an inherent contradiction for a closer examination shows that the Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita* does not get involved in action. On the contrary, he fulfils the traditional role of an Indian teacher who engages in philosophical dialogue with Arjuna instead of acting himself. As far as his dialogue deals with action at all, it is concerned with fighting in battle, with the *dharma* of the *kshatrya* rather than with human action at a general level.

In several passages of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as well as in some modern commentaries on this text, the path of knowledge and renunciation, of *jnanayoga*, remains ultimately higher and nobler than the path of *karmayoga*. This is sometimes explained as being due to the fact that neither Arjuna nor the present age in its decadence *(kaliyuga)* are able to cope with more than the simple path of *karmayoga*. Vivekananda, for example, eloquently underlined the importance of *karmayoga* for the present moment of history and thereby gave historical consciousness a place in Hindu thought it

had never before held (26), but as a monk of the Ramakrishna Order he could not but see all work and action as finally overcome and annihilated in the realization of the oneness of *brahman*. In the last analysis then Vivekananda does not arrive at a truly positive evaluation of work. All work means pain, disappointment, and suffering for him; it is part of man's duty and a path of self-sacrifice which must finally be left behind. From this perspective, work can never be freely chosen, positively valued and loved for it is never considered as a challenging task leading to human fulfilment and the joy of creation.

Other contradictions may be briefly mentioned. The tension between the different religious ideals of the householder in the world and the ascetic, between an active and a contemplative life runs through much of traditional Indian religious thought and is already embodied in the different worldviews of the Upanishads and the epics (27). This tension has never been resolved and in the modern period it has become even more acute. But so far, it has not found a satisfactory resolution in Neo-Hinduism either. Only the future will tell whether a mysticism of action can be combined with a mysticism of contemplation or whether these two paths of experience and realization are alternatives exclusive of each other.

Another unresolved tension exists in contemporary Indian society between the theoretical understanding on one hand and the practical attitude on the other towards labour and physical work for which dignity is more easily demanded than awarded. If *karmayoga* means essentially only an abstract, idealized notion of religious work, then all other aspects of modern working life are still not valued in themselves, for what they really are. This problem remains hidden under the symbol of the ideal *karmayogin* for the Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita* did not encounter the complexities of modern life with its concomitant multiplicity of ethical choices regarding action.

Mircea Eliade and others have stressed multivalence as an essential characteristic of religious symbolism and see its most important function in the ability to express paradoxical situations and polarities. Viewed from this perspective, it is perhaps because of the inherent tensions of the *karmayogin* and the ambivalence of its signification that this symbol possesses such appeal and potential for further development. When analysing the literary and iconographic usage of a symbol, one may first of all ask what it means within a certain religion and culture but

beyond that one may also enquire whether it possesses significance in a more universal context. An important aspect of the Krishna symbol, hardly mentioned here, concerns the image of God found in modern Hinduism which, through the stimulating contact with Christianity, has become further sharpened and focused. The God of whom the *Bhagavad-Gita* speaks discloses a vision of universal convergence culminating in him and a message of grace. Thus, the symbol of the *karmayogin* has a human and a divine face; it must not only be seen in the context of work but also in that of theism and its meaning in modern Hinduism. Furthermore, the *karmayogin* does not only symbolize a new *karma* but also stands for the universalization of *dharma*, referring now to a universal religion as well as universal duty (28).

These reinterpretations would not have come about without the new position and meaning assigned to the *Bhagavad-Gita* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Had it not been for the intensive contact between India and the West, this scripture would not enjoy the importance given it today, not even in India (29). Thus, the new meaning associated with the *karmayogin* symbol was originally born from an intercultural situation, and is closely dependent on a specific cultural hermeneutics of India and the West.

In a wider sense, the *karmayogin* symbol also relates to many efforts elsewhere to provide a suitable theological foundation for the development of a more actively engaged spirituality, so urgently required for the profoundly changed world of today. Evidence of these efforts can be witnessed in many religious movements of the present and far transcends the confines of Hinduism. In the *karmayogin* modern Hinduism possesses an active and activating symbol which is used over and over again in contemporary apologetic and devotional literature and in the world of religious images. Its continued usage and widespread presence are a sign of the creativity of Hinduism and of its religious activity, sensitive to the needs of modern men.

NOTES

1 See the excellent studies by D. Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Princeton 1979, and K. W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab*, Berkeley 1976.
2 See especially the critical analysis of sources

undertaken by J. F. Sprockhoff, *Samnyasa. Quellenstudien zur Askese im Hinduismus,* Wiesbaden 1976.

3 This interpretation was put forward in a paper given by V. Subramaniam, 'Karmayoga (work-ethic) as a Westernized Middle Class Interpretation of the Bhagavadgita' at the 9th World Congress of Sociology, Uppsala (14-19 August 1978). Subramaniam also points out that among the traditional commentaries on the *Bhagavad-Gita* only one includes a partly activist interpretation of *karma* in the sense of social duties, and that is the *Jnaneshvari* (XIIIth century) from Maharashtra. This text deserves much closer examination; see H.M. Lambert (ed.), *Jnaneshvari,* 2 vols., London 1967.

4 See E. J. Sharpe, 'Indian Nationalism and Hindu Universalism', *Temenos* 12 (1976), pp. 37-49.

5 *The Complete Works of Vivekananda* (hereafter abbreviated CW), 8 vols., Mayavati Memorial Edition, Calcutta 1955-62; see CW, I, p. 116.

6 CW, VIII, p. 25.

7 Swami Abhedananda, *Complete Works* (CW), 10 vols., Calcutta 1967; see CW, III, p. 76f.

8 Abhedananda, CW, III, p. 44; the whole of Volume III is entitled *How to be a Yogi*.

9 See *Addresses on the Vedanta Philosophy* by the Hindu Yogi Swami Vivekananda, 3 vols., London 1896. The first volume is entitled *Karma Yoga* and the quotation is found on p. 8. This early work was later incorporated into CW, I but not without considerable changes in the text. The second volume of the 1896 edition was entitled *Bhakti Yoga or Realization of the Divine through Love* (now in CW, IV). The third volume was *The Ideal of a Universal Religion* and includes several, but not all lectures reprinted under this title in CW, II.

10 Abhedananda, CW, I, p. 219.

11 Vivekananda, *Karmayoga,* p. 41. Whilst Western influences shaped Vivekananda's new understanding of *karma*, it must also be mentioned that the Theosophical Society made extensive use of an activist reinterpretation of *karma,* both in India and the West. Annie Besant maintains that the idea of *karma* first became known in the West through theosophical writings; see her works *A Study in Karma*, Madras 1917 (2nd edition), and *Karma Once More,* Madras 1930. This claim to the historical priority in the diffusion of the *karma* concept is supported by the analysis of linguistic usage found in G. Subha Rao, *Indian Words in English,* Oxford 1969, p. 25.

12 For a detailed discussion of this dichotomy and its meaning see U. King, 'Indian Spirituality, Western

Materialism: An Image and its Function in the Reinterpretation of Modern Hinduism', *Social Action*, 28 (1978), pp. 62-85.

13 The considerable religious reinterpretation expressed by this motto is unfortunately not discussed in D. Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*. Kopf's study is more concerned with wider historical issues than with specifically religious factors. Against most other interpreters he rightly recognizes, however, that 'In the ceremonies of the New Dispensation, Keshub was hardly aiming to domesticate Christianity or to Christianize Hinduism. Rather, he was searching for a new synthesis' (ibid., p. 273). Kopf also considers some of Keshub's experience as 'far more ambitious than similar undertakings by Ramakrishna' (ibid., p. 271).

14 The reinterpretation of ethics on the basis of Vedanta monism is discussed in great detail by P. Hacker, 'Schopenhauer und die Ethik des Hinduismus', *Saeculum*, 12 (1961), pp. 366-99. For two different approaches to this subject from an Indian point of view see S. Radhakrishnan, 'The Ethics of Vedanta', *International Journal of Ethics*, 24 (1913-14), pp. 168-83, and P. T. Raju, 'The Inward Absolute and the Activism of the Finite Self', in S. Radhakrishnan and J. H. Muirhead (eds), *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, London 1952.

15 Bankim's concept of God and his understanding of Krishna are dealt with in more detail in U. King, 'True and Perfect Religion: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Reinterpretation of Hinduism', *Religion*, 7 (1977), pp. 268-72.

16 See S. Kramrisch, *Indian Sculpture*, London 1933, p. 197 and plate XLVII. The figure of Krishna is of great iconographic importance in the *avatar* series but no major reference work on Indian art seems to include a representation of Krishna as a teacher or as charioteer at Kurukshetra, based on the text of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. See H. Zimmer, *The Art of Indian Asia*, New York 1955; T. A. Gopinath Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 2 vols., New Delhi 1971 (new edition); G. Liebert, *Iconographic Dictionary of the Indian Religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism*, Leiden 1976.

17 See *Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library* (hereafter CL), 30 vols., Pondicherry 1972. Extracts from the *Karmayogin* are found in CL, II and III, pp. 343-409. A facsimile of the title page of the review is found at the beginning of Vol. II (no page number).

18 See 'The Ideal of the Karmayogin', CL, II, p. 16f.

19 CL, III, p. 346; see the whole essay on 'Karmayoga', CL, III, p. 343f.

20 CL, XIII, p. 28. CL, XIII contains Aurobindo's 'Essays on the Gita'.
21 CL, II, p. 20.
22 CL, II, p. 28.
23 See *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. XLI (1929), Ahmedabad 1970; also the essay 'The Message of the Gita' in M. K. Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*, Ahmedabad 1958.
24 See A. Bharati, 'Gandhi's Interpretation of the Gita - An Anthropological Analysis', in S. Ray (ed.), *Gandhi, India and the World*, Philadelphia 1970; and A. Bharati, 'Hinduism and Modernization', in R. F. Spencer (ed.), *Religion and Change in Contemporary Asia*, Minnesota 1971.
25 W. Johnston, *The Inner Eye of Love - Mysticism and Religion*, London 1978, p. 26.
26 A detailed examination of Vivekananda's understanding of history is found in G. Stephenson, 'Ansätze zum geschichtlichen Denken im Reformwerk Swami Vivekanandas (1863-1902)', *Saeculum*, 23 (1972), pp. 90-108.
27 This tension is well brought out in T. W. Organ, *The Hindu Quest for the Perfection of Man*, Ohio 1970, especially in ch. VIII, 'Karma as Marga'.
28 See P. Hacker, 'Der Dharma-Begriff des Neuhinduismus', *Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft*, 42 (1958), pp. 1-15. J. D. M Derrett, *Religion, Law and the State in India*, London 1968, discusses the tension which exists between the traditional understanding of *dharma* and the modern concept of law and its application to contemporary society. Many aspects of the understanding of *dharma* are examined in the symposium edited by W. D. O'Flaherty and J. D. M. Derrett, *The Concept of Duty in South Asia*, Delhi 1978. For other aspects which have influenced the reinterpretation of Hinduism see E. J. Sharpe, 'Avatara and Sakti: Traditional Symbols in the Hindu Renaissance', in H. Bizais (ed.), *New Religions*, Stockholm 1975, pp. 55-69.
29 The cross-cultural influences which have shaped the modern interpretation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* are examined in detail in the stimulating article by G. J. Larson, 'The Bhagavad-Gita as Cross-Cultural Process: Toward an Analysis of the Social Locations of a Religious Text', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, XLIII (1975), pp. 651-69.

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