

# *Some Reflections on the Bhagavadgita*

WALTER W. SIKES

IN THE collection of ancient Hindu fables known as the Panchatantra, there is a story of some Brahmins who were boasting of the powers they possessed because of magical formulae which they knew.

As they were passing through a jungle, they saw the body of a dead lion. Each of them thereupon told how his secret knowledge would enable him to restore the lion to life. One said that he could assemble the skeleton, another claimed that he could restore its skin, flesh and blood again, and the third boasted that he could then bring back the breath of life to the body. The fourth Brahmin decided that if they could indeed make good on their claims, it would be safer for him to climb a tree, and he proceeded to do so. Whereupon the other three restored the lion to life, and it promptly attacked and killed them.

The author of this fable then says,  
Scholarship is less than sense;  
Therefore seek intelligence.  
Senseless scholars in their pride  
Made a lion; then they died.

It is easy to apply this fable to the world of the atom and the hydrogen bomb. Is it not also applicable, one may ask, to the world of religion? Scholarship has opened up the treasures of the great scriptures of mankind, and gives us knowledge which is of immense value in understanding the spiritual heritage of the human race. But intelligence is the key which must be used when we compare, evaluate and interpret the truth which each has to contribute to the common store.

THE LATE WALTER W. SIKES wrote this article just prior to his final illness. After his retirement from The University of Denver as Professor of Sociology, he retained his active program of study and continued to participate as a valued friend in the community life of The Iliff School of Theology.

Among the various Scriptures of the great religions, the Bhavagadgita (or "The Lord's Song") has long been acknowledged to be one of the greatest. Ever since it was first translated into English by Sir Charles Wilkins in 1785, it has been increasingly studied and appreciated in the western world. Many subsequent translations have followed the first one, and it is easily secured, at a very low price, by anyone who wishes to have it. One of the best translations, which also has an exposition and a commentary is by an English scholar, W. Douglas P. Hill.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of his exposition, he has said that the Gita (as it is commonly called) is essentially a book for the ordinary man. If this is correct, then its influence is certain to be even more widespread in the years ahead. Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakishnan, President of India, has also stated that the message of this book is for the whole world. Consequently we may find that it will take its place as a world scripture, with the Bible of the Christian, the Koran of the Moslem and the Dhammapada of the Buddhist.

In India the Gita is so highly treasured that, especially since independence, it has been the inspiration of a great revival in Hinduism. It is often taken as the basis for a commentary by the learned or the devout, and it is constantly read and recited by faithful Hindus. Perhaps we can appreciate something of their attitude if in this country the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the President of Harvard, or Dr. Oppenheimer, were to consider it a religious duty to write a commentary on their favorite religious classic!

As we might expect, men find in it whatever meets their own interests or

<sup>1</sup> W. Douglas P. Hill, *The Bhagavadgita*, 1st edition, Oxford, 1928.

needs. It is of such scope and inclusiveness that Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the fiery nationalist, could use it in a militant call to defend Hinduism and drive out the hated foreigner. But Mahatma Gandhi, on the other hand, deplored violence, and so he considered it an allegory of the warfare between good and evil in the soul. It was Gandhi who said of the Gita

I find a solace in the Bhagavadgita, and the Upanisads, which I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount. When disappointment stares me in the face, and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavadgita. I find a verse here and a verse there, and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming tragedies—and if they have left no visible, no indelible scars upon me, I owe it all to the teachings of the Bhagavadgita.

It is not my desire or intention in this brief paper, to enter into a general discussion of the teachings of the Gita. I wish only to point to two reflections which have come to mind after thinking about this Scripture and our modern world.

First, one of the fundamental ideas in the Gita is the conviction that life is tragic. It is tragic because we are constantly faced with choices which, whatever the alternative taken, lead only to disaster. When Arpin sees his friends and relatives lined up to fight against him and his brothers and allies, he refuses to accept the choice which would lead to so great a sin as opposing and perhaps killing them. And yet he has to fight to uphold his own cause because he must defend the right. The author of the Gita presents this dilemma to us, and we ask for the solution where either choice must be a tragic one. When our choice is between good and evil, there is no problem. But when both alternatives are evil, and a choice must be made between them, the element of tragedy is inescapable.

The answer which Krishna gives to this dilemma is based upon the ethics of the caste system. Arpin is a Kshat-

riya and the highest deity of a member of that caste is to fight in defense of the right. But (and this is the contribution which is unique in the Gita) if Arpin fights with no hatred toward his enemies, or attachment to the result of his actions, he commits no sin! It is not renunciation of action, it is renunciation in action which frees us from the tragic consequences of our choice. It is not what human nature desires, it is what our duty requires, which must be the key to our action. As Krishna says "Better a man's own duty, though ill done, than another's duty well performed." This is the answer of the Gita to the problem of choice. It is not one which will commend itself to those who are not bound by the requirements of caste.

Let us illustrate this teaching from a story which comes from the time of our Civil War. It is entitled "A horseman in the Sky" and the author was Ambrose Bierce. The situation is somewhat similar to that in the Gita. A father and son find themselves on opposite sides in the conflict. The son is with a small party of Union soldiers deep in Confederate territory. While he is on guard one day, he sees a horseman approaching, and it appears that he will certainly discover the Union soldiers. When he comes close enough, the son recognizes him as his father, and the choice is inevitable; **either** allow the father to escape at the price of his comrades and himself or shoot the horseman before he can escape and bring disaster to the Union troops. Ambrose Bierce can do no better than to tell us the choice which the son made. If he had read the Gita he would have been able to introduce the renunciation in action which cleansed the son from all blame. The philosophic rationalization of the Hindu author softens the tragedy, though it cannot avoid it.

A second characteristic of the Gita is that it refuses to reflect one or more opposing points of view. It insists on reconciling and incorporating them by

taking the position that we must accept "both-and" and not "either-or."

If Heinrich Zinner is correct in the statement that the haughty Brahmins were compelled to accept and adapt the views of those who were in India before the Aryans came, we can see that in doing so they took the road which has made Hinduism so incurably syncretistic. The Gita incorporates this syncretism, as a western religious genius might do if he could combine the Summa of St. Thomas with the Institutes of John Calvin! There were some in India who emphasized the way of Works, others favored Knowledge and still others Devotion as the road which led to man's salvation. There was a rival system of Goga and one of Sankhya. Instead of rejecting one or all, the Gita accepts and incorporates them. "However men approach me, in that same way do I show them favor; my path men follow in all ways." (4)

This spirit is perfectly exemplified in the attitude and conduct of Mahatma Gandhi. In his prayer meetings a favorite Christian hymn "Lead, kindly Light," would be sung and perhaps a reading from the Sermon on the Mount. Then there would be a selection from the Koran, and then a reading from the Gita or other Hindu Scriptures. Reading 2:54-72 was one of his favorite selections. Why confine the truth to one religion? There are many paths, but they all end in the same goal. There are many colors in the spectrum which is white before they are revealed! So Buddha was a great heretic in the eyes of the orthodox, until they discovered that he was an incarnation of Vishnu. The solution was found not by opposing or rejecting the great heresy, but by incorporating it as a part of Hinduism itself.

Let us conclude then by considering an example of the problem posed by the Gita, and this time from our modern world. It comes from the great institution which in so many ways resembles the spirit and the genius of

Hinduism, especially in the second characteristic I have mentioned. I refer to the Roman Catholic Church and the dilemma it found itself in during the Nazi era in Europe. A play produced in Germany, entitled "Der Stellvertreter" or "The Representative" has provoked riots and violent discussion wherever it has been performed.

The play presents the problem which confronted Pius XII as "The Representative" of Christ, when Hitler and his henchmen were murdering millions of Jews and other people in their barbarous program. Why did not the Pope speak out against such a plain denial of the Christian faith? Why did not the Vicar of Christ and the Head of His Church denounce these works of the Devil? Surely there was no possible doubt that all Hitler represented was a challenge to what the Pope stood for in the eyes of the Christian and non-Christian world alike. But the dilemma in which he found himself was so acute that only Silence came from the Throne of St. Peter. On the one hand, if the Pope denounced the Nazi terror, the Church and its members would certainly have to pay a heavy price. It might be imprisonment in concentration camps. It would surely be the confiscation of property and the treasures which the Church had accumulated through the centuries. But on the other hand, if he did not speak out, he would be accused of following St. Peter in denying his Lord, and in betraying the Gospel of Brotherhood and Love toward all men. It was indeed a tragic choice which confronted the Pope, and the Gita has no message to help him. He could have found it, however, in the words of Jesus, "He that doth not take his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me." It has been pointed out that the Pope did aid many victims, but it was done in such a way as not to compromise the Church. For the condition of these victims might have been much worse if decisive action had been taken on their behalf. This was

no time for "both-and" but for "either-or," and there was only silence. In the play itself, it is the humble priest who identifies himself with the Jews, and who dies with them in the concentration camp. He made the choice which many another humble and unknown person chose to make, but not "The Representative" who saved his life and that of the Church, and thereby lost both. The Gita is right when it looks to the motive for our actions. It is wrong when it seeks to divorce all attachment to the result from that motive, for thereby it cuts the root of all moral value in that action. The Gita is right

when it tries to save all that is good and true, whatever the source from which it comes. It is wrong when it takes its stand on "both-and," and insists on compromise with that which "either-or" would find inconsistent and intolerable.

Perhaps the two examples I have given will show both the strength and the weakness of the Lord's Song. Under the assumptions of Hinduism it is indeed a spiritual treasure. But in the evaluation and interpretation which the deeper insight of Christian understanding gives, it is only part of that greater Truth which the mind and spirit of man find in the Gospel.

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