

INDIA, THE BHAGAVAD GITA AND THE WORLD

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This essay considers the relationship between the Bhagavad Gita as a transnational text and its changing role in Indian political thought. Indian liberals used it to mark out the boundaries between the public sphere they desired and a reformed Hinduism. Indian intellectuals also used the image of Krishna to construct an all-wise founder figure for the new India. Meanwhile, in the transnational sphere of debate, the Gita came to represent India itself in the works of theosophists, spiritual relativists and a variety of intellectual radicals, who approved of the text's ambivalent view of the relationship between political action and the World Spirit. After the First World War, Indian liberals, notably Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, philosopher and later India's second president, used Krishna's words to urge a new and humane international politics infused with the ideal of "detached action".

In this essay, I take a broad, transnational view of the political and philosophical debate about India, its history and its place in the world during the later nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. It was this debate which gave visibility and range to the Bhagavad Gita as a critical site on which the ethics and politics of Indian society could be discussed and contested. The Gita needed India to make possible its rise to global significance much more than India needed the Gita.¹ For this was the period when the concept of dharma itself was being disseminated across the world by public teachers and cultural apologists such as Keshub Chunder Sen and Swami Vivekananda. My initial intention was to try to understand the reception of the Gita in the West through the works of British officials; theosophists; European supporters of Indian nationalism, such as Annie Besant; and sympathetic oriental scholars, such as Friedrich Max-Müller. But it soon became apparent that this "Western" debate could not be hived off from the internal debate within India itself about the meaning and relevance of the text.

This, indeed, was an example of the outward journey of Indian concepts into the global arena of political and moral thought. What we see is the decomposition of the attempt of earlier European scholars to create a separate

¹ This point, among several others, was sharpened by Arjun Appadurai's commentary during the conference at the New School, New York. I owe him warm thanks.

category of Indian “religion” and to constrain it within an oriental sphere of passive spirituality in contrast to the active spirituality of the Christian and rationalist West. The Gita burst out of its confinement precisely because it spoke to contemporary global concerns on the following issues: violence and non-violence, the individual’s duties to society, the boundary between the spiritual and the social, the significance of individual action as compared with fate, the role of the founders of nations in history. Not only did Indians debating the dialogue between Lord Krishna and Arjuna pay careful attention to the views of Western commentators, but Western scholars and historians also responded, often unconsciously, to the meaning of the text for Hindus, as Christian self-sufficiency began to give way to spiritual relativism after about 1870.

THE CONTEXT IN INDIAN INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY

The essay focuses on the appropriation and use of the Gita in the liberal and communitarian tradition in Indian politics and in transnational humanism.² By contrast, its importance for the Indian insurrectionary, Gandhian and Hindutva tradition is discussed in parallel essays by Shruti Kapila, Faisal Devji and Vinayak Chaturvedi. On the face of it, the Gita had little to offer the liberal tradition stretching from Locke, through Mill, to Rawls, which emphasized freedom of the market, justice and individual liberty. The parallel Indian tradition, stretching from Rammohan through Gokhale, put more emphasis on sharing, sympathy and community, while also critiquing colonial and social despotisms. But the Gita’s relevance to Indian liberal politics is not obvious either.

This text, however, could be made particularly serviceable for Indian liberal reformers and public men attempting to create an ethicized *religion* out of a profusion of “Hindu” ritual and cultic practice during the nineteenth century.

² The literature on the meaning of liberalism is never-ending and descends into semantic niceties. I have tried to define Indian liberalism in several publications. But here I use it as a broadly descriptive term, much along the lines of B. B. Majumdar, *History of Political Thought: From Rammohun to Dayananda (1821–84)*, vol. 1, Bengal (Calcutta, 1934). See, however, E. Paul, F. Miller and J. Paul, *Liberalism Old and New* (Cambridge, 2007); and A. Simhony and D. Weinstein, *The New Liberalism: Reconciling Liberty and Community* (Cambridge, 2001); C. A. Bayly, ‘Empires and Indian Liberals’, in Catherine Hall and Stuart McLelland, eds., *Historians on Race, Nation and Empire 1750 to the Present* (Manchester, forthcoming, 2010), pp. 74–93. A classic statement of Indian liberalism would be Surendranath Banerjea, *A Nation in Making* (Bombay, 1925); or, in a vernacular idiom, Bharatendu Harish Chandra’s speech at Ballia in 1883, when he asked “Bharatvarsh ki unnati kaise ho sakti hai?” (“How can Indian make progress?”), *Bhartendu Grantavali*, 3, (Varanasi, 1956), 262–7, and stressed the importance of community, communication and sympathy.

The Gita could be interpreted as validating social and ritual hierarchy. Indeed, Aishwary Kumar shows that this was precisely why B. R. Ambedkar, spokesman for the “untouchables”, found it so offensive. Yet, at the same time, it could be used to gesture towards the incorporation of popular spirituality into a moderate and rational national religion supporting a liberal public sphere. The antimony in the Gita between this-worldly action and contemplation also helped to demarcate the secular from the religious, another concern of liberal reformers. At the ontological level, the Gita recognized the existence, even the need, for the war and killing, constantly exemplified in colonial India. Yet equally, liberals could use the concept of dispassionate action embedded in the text to urge political caution at the national and international level, just as their insurrectionary opponents could employ it to argue for violence against colonial rule and the Muslim “other”.

Finally, the Gita came to represent a metaphor for liberals in its guise as a meditation on the “personality” of the state.³ In the European context, the issue of the state’s “personality” had arisen as a result of the long conflict between absolutist government and the corporation, creating a tradition of interpretation running from Hobbes, through Gierke, to Maitland and the socialists. David Runciman argues that in this tradition, commonwealths arise out of the capacity of “artificial persons” to represent natural persons.⁴ The key word here is “represent”. The turn away from liberal ideas of contract to the later nineteenth-century concerns with community and personal and group psychology re-empowered this debate.

The Indian case was different, but analogous. From classical times it was taken as axiomatic that society and polity was a “person”, made up of different elements (Brahman, Kshatriya warrior, Sudra toiler, and so on) But how far and to what extent could this “person”, the state, remain a moral being when one element was, for instance, forced to kill its kinsmen in order to preserve the whole? For the radicals discussed in this issue, and even for Gandhi, the colonial state was an evil and illegitimate body, so the question scarcely arose. But for liberals, the colonial state was the true “intimate enemy”, corrupt and despotic, yet capable of acting ethically, if only it could be “injected” with Indian representation and Indian corporate bodies capable of “dispassionate action” in the interest of the people.

In a similar vein, nineteenth-century liberal intellectuals also continuously pondered the nature of the Indian princely state (which many of them, notably D. Naoroji and R. C. Dutt, served at one time or another). The “personality” of princely India was both a warning from the past and a premonition of a certain type of future. The liberal press was full of stories of conflicts within Indian

³ Cf. David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge, 1997).

⁴ *Ibid.*, esp. 10–11.

states where corrupt rajas killed kinsmen through greed or envy. Would a future Indian state engage in fratricide of this sort? Or would it perhaps be forced to replay Arjuna's story as when, for instance, reason of state demanded in 2009 that the Republic of India effectively sacrifice its Tamil "kinsmen" in Sri Lanka for regional stability?

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Outside India, the wider context for the appropriation (often the distortion) of the Gita was the epistemological retreat of Christianity and the rise of relativism in both social and scientific theory. This is not to say that Christianity declined in power or became less aggressive over this period. Yet its very worldwide expansion and ambivalent complicity with imperialism forced Christians to recognize other spiritualities, and the Gita seemed a readily packaged representation of the "Indian" spirituality which was setting out to capture the world's attention. It was not easy to denounce the Gita for advocating "inhuman slaughter" when Krishna's advice to Arjuna to kill his kinsmen was set against Ecclesiastes 3:1: "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven . . . A time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up". Hidden within the Christian programme there also lurked what might be called the "Las Casas Paradox"⁵: if "the native" could ultimately be converted to Christianity, then her soul had to possess some intuitive understanding of God, however mired it was in error and sin. If so, what was the status of this prior or natural spirituality?

Nineteenth-century evolutionary historicism inevitably relativized Christianity, therefore. Believers could assert that Christianity stood prior to all heathen religions, which had merely assimilated and distorted its texts. Alternatively, they could argue that all other religions were imperfect, but moving inexorably towards Christian perfection. But in either case, these assertions opened themselves to immediate challenge on textual, historical and philosophical grounds. Once comparative criticism became the order of the day, it was easy enough to show that Christianity was truly the "Dharma of distraction".⁶ So what came to be called "Fulfilment Theology" in the later nineteenth century was forced to take note of the Gita and other non-Christian texts.⁷

⁵ Bartolomeo de Las Casas was the sixteenth-century Dominican priest who urged the Spanish church and secular authorities to recognize that the Amerindians also had souls.

⁶ For the background see Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Polemics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Vienna, 1981).

⁷ The best recent discussion of Fulfilment Theology is in Hayden Bellenoit, *Missionary Education and Empire in Late Colonial India 1860–1920* (London, 2007).

Meanwhile, far beyond the boundaries of orthodox Christianity, theologians found the text an ideal exemplar of their romantic spiritual historicism, which represented a kind of fantastical Darwinism, devoid of natural selection. Farther away yet from the centres of Western theistic and rationalist thought, what was interpreted as the Gita's combination of political pragmatism with a sense of mystical spiritual unity appealed to a whole range of insurgent intellectuals: followers of Nietzsche; orientaling gay experimenters and novelists, such as Edward Carpenter, E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood;⁸ mystical aristocratic nationalists, notably W. B. Yeats;⁹ and New Age idealists such as Aldous Huxley. "Further out than Pluto", there was the Austrian intellectual turned house painter, Adolf Hitler.

THE GITA AND THE TENSIONS OF INDIAN MODERNITY

Conventional accounts of the original historical context of the Bhagavad Gita agree that it must have emerged at a period of tension within the various ancient Brahminical traditions.¹⁰ The "traditionalists" who stressed the need to continue to perform Mankind's prescribed rites, duties and sacrifices within family and society were confronted with a movement that lauded the *vairagi* life of wandering and homelessness in the interests of spiritual self-discipline. Should one remain a householder or become a renouncer? This social dilemma was deepened by a philosophical conundrum. To be a sacrificer in this world—as householder Brahmin or warrior—implied personal commitment to a particular end. Yet this in itself guaranteed that one could never escape the cycle of birth and rebirth and its attendant suffering. Only by realizing Brahman in one's own true nature could one achieve permanent liberation and bliss. This was most likely to be achieved by total renunciation. Yet in that case, how could human society, which itself represented part of the workings of Brahman within creation, itself continue to evolve?

At the supposed time of the writing of the Gita, these may have appeared as starkly alternative lifestyles and the purpose of the dialogue was to square the circle by posing the possibility of dispassionate action, but action within this world. The warrior (Arjuna) could act, even to the extent of taking the lives of his

⁸ Antony Copley, *Gay Writers in Search of the Divine: Hinduism and Homosexuality in the Lives and Writings of Edward Carpenter, E. M. Forster and Christopher Isherwood* (Delhi, 2006).

⁹ Michael Collins, "Rabindranath Tagore and the West, 1912–41", unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 2008.

¹⁰ W. J. Johnson, "Introduction", *The Bhagavad Gita* (Oxford World's Classics) (Oxford, 1994, 2004), vii–xx; I am also grateful to Dr Eivind Kahrs for help on this historical issue.

own kinsmen, provided this was done in a spirit of detachment. He had to perceive that all life was one and that Brahman was both endless and unchanging. At later period of Indian history, institutional, as opposed to philosophical, resolutions of this conflict over the inner meaning of karma (action) were apparently developed in the lived sequence of *brahmacharya* (student–renouncer), *grihastha* (householder) and *vairagi*, the older man who finally gives up family attachment.

It is easy to see why, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Bhagavad Gita once again came to be seen as a particularly apposite field for philosophical, social and political debate in India.¹¹ Firstly, in conditions of foreign invasion and massive political, economic and intellectual change or collapse, that classical sequence of lifestyles became difficult to maintain, even though some members of the wealthy classes continue to take to a life of mendicancy after the age of fifty. The Gita’s compromise—action within the social world, but action taken in a spirit of detachment—seemed particularly attractive.

Secondly, the revival of the tradition of Vedanta, notably through the life and work of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, posed the possibility of a new form of social and political renunciation and so raised again the issue of the extent of one’s duty to society. Thirdly, the assault on Brahminical ritualism, both by Dayananda and the Arya Samaj and, more radically, by Jotirao Phule and the incipient non-Brahmin movement, held out the possibility of a popular spirituality. This had also been raised obliquely in the Gita, where devotion to the supreme deity (Krishna) was enjoined on the whole of Mankind.

At an even more general level, the Gita provided a cosmic resolution, as it were, of the apparent differences between proliferating philosophies and religious traditions. Rather than being an example of moral confusion, textual interpolation or the essential irrationality of the Indian Mind, as several earlier European oriental scholars asserted, the Gita instead represented a series of creative juxtapositions to reveal an underlying unity. As Bimanbehari Majumdar put it, “Indian scholars . . . find no difficulty in reconciling the Transcendence and Immanence of God as preached in the Bhagavad Gita.”¹² Thus “theism sat with pantheism, Samkhya philosophy with Vedanta and Saguna with Nirguna”. In the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries the Gita could equally be enlisted to resolve contradictions between devotion to one’s individual dharma and the life of the nation, or between the Indian national destiny and the destiny of humanity as a whole.¹³

¹¹ I owe this point to Shruti Kapila.

¹² Bimanbehari Majumdar, *Krsna in History and Legend* (Calcutta, 1969), 39.

¹³ See S. Kapila, ‘Self, Spencer and Swaraj: Nationalist Thought and Critiques of Liberalism’, *Modern Intellectual History* 4/1 (2007), 109–27,

The Gita seemed to offer some kind of antidote to the barbarism of modernity. As Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan commented after the trauma of the First World War, Arjuna's distress was a "dramatization of a perpetually recurring predicament".¹⁴ Earlier, Aurobindo Ghose had affirmed that Krishna's teachings would help to resolve the "practical crisis in the application of ethics and spirituality to human life".¹⁵ He observed that throughout history, and never more obviously than in the present age, the appeal to "soul force" ran the danger of "mobilising the aggression of new empires".¹⁶ Christianity, striving against the brutality of Rome, had itself become an aggressive force for empire-building: "the very religions organise themselves into powers of mutual strife and battle together to live, to grow, to possess the world". Only by knowing the god in oneself, as enjoined by the latter chapters of the Gita, could this fate be avoided.

Finally, the underlying scheme of the Gita was very attractive to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century philosophy and science, both in India and abroad. The text taught that that the original Amorphous Unity was transformed through time into a multiplicity of difference, but that the meaning of this Unity could be recaptured through spiritual discipline. Philosophers as varied as Henri Bergson, T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet themselves sought the ideal unity behind the complexities of positivism and they also believed that being and consciousness evolved and changed over time. The Gita could even, with some intellectual effort, be squared with the notion of the evolution towards complexity of the "Unknowable", the let-out clause in the sprawling thought of Herbert Spencer, chief philosopher of the Anglo-Saxon world, who in other respects seemed to be a materialist.

THE GITA AS A TRANSNATIONAL PUBLIC TEXT

From the time of Charles Wilkins's English translation of 1783, the Gita, which already had a much earlier Portuguese translation, became the subject of scholarly curiosity. It was mined by Sanskrit scholars for philological material, praised by freethinkers for its superior morality and denounced by orthodox Christians as an imposture. In the 1830s and 1840s, American "Transcendentalists", notably Emerson, Thoreau and Conway, influenced by German eighteenth-century thought, tried to create a non-doctrinal religion of humanity, forsaking

¹⁴ Majumdar, *Kṛṣṇa*, 38.

¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita (First Series)* (Calcutta, 1949), 15; these essays were originally published in the *Arya*, Aug. 1916–July 1918.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56; see also Andrew Sartori in this issue.

Unitarian Christianity.¹⁷ They turned to the Gita as a text which taught the unity of spirit and matter.

The Transcendentalists, however, were an elite group of artists and intellectuals. It was only after 1870 that the Gita rose to prominence in the transnational public arena to acquire a degree of significance scarcely less than that of the Bible or the Koran. At one level, this can simply be explained by the appearance of F. Lorinser's German edition (Breslau, 1869), with its suggestion that the Gita was a late text of about 300 AD which showed the distinct influence of Christianity.¹⁸ It was said to be a Vaishnavite *bhakti* (devotional) text in which "the writers had transferred to Krishna much of what the Christians wrote and believed of Christ". Inevitably, this provoked widespread polemic. The leading contemporary Indian Sanskrit scholar, R. G. Bhandarkar, responded that the dating was absurd because Krishna had appeared hundreds of years earlier in the *Mahabhasya* of Patanjali. K. T. Telang, nationalist political economist, attacked the Christian interpretation even more vigorously, arguing for a multiple liberal historicism, in which Indian culture and spirituality, like the Indian economy, had developed parallel to the civilizations of the West, rather than in thrall to them.

The growing emphasis on the part of Christian officials and scholars on *bhakti* as the acceptable dimension of Hinduism privileged, as William Pinch has argued, the neo-Christian interpretation of this movement.¹⁹ In different ways, this is common to the work of local magistrate F. W. Growse and language scholar George Grierson, who saw Nestorian Christian influence in the Gita.²⁰ This trend of thought was brought together by the Oxford sanskritist Monier Williams, who, like some of his Hindu contemporaries, saw Vaishnavism as the true national religion of India.

All this, however, only explains the timing of the Gita's outward journey, not the reasons for it. More significant, the 1870s were a turning point in the interpretation of the meaning of religion at a world level. By this date, early nineteenth-century Western attempts to exalt Christianity as the only true religion had failed. The evangelical charge had faltered. Biblical textual criticism had undermined the notion of the infallibility of the Gospels and other aspects of the Christian tradition as surely as it had been used to erode the authority of the Koran and the Hindu epics. The rapid expansion of a "sociological imagination"

¹⁷ See e.g. Charles Capper and Conrad E. Wright, eds., *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Context* (Boston, 1999); John T. Reid, *Indian Influences in American Literature and Thought* (Delhi, 1965), 18–34, on Emerson, Thoreau, et al.

¹⁸ Cf. Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions: Bhartendu Harisichandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras* (Delhi, 1996), 394.

¹⁹ William R. Pinch, 'Bhakti and the British Empire', *Past and Present* 179 (May 2003), 159–97.

²⁰ Dalmia, *Nationalisation*, p. 399.

in Europe and India had given way to the idea that all Mankind had a basic religious instinct even if it developed at different speeds in different societies. Two broad intellectual developments marked the transition: what I will call romantic counter-Christianity and the emergence of Christian Fulfilment Theology.

Romantic counter-Christianity represented a variable mix of spiritualism, revolutionary anti-clericalism and amoral individualism, all of which flourished in the seas of moral alienation characteristic of the new industrializing European and American cities. Numerous Victorian intellectuals sought to “re-enchant” the world. In the United States the absence of a state church allowed the development of many quasi-Christian sects during the so-called “second great awakening” after 1840.²¹ Spiritualism’s idea of the afterlife of the soul proved hospitable, in turn, to theosophy and then to various Hindu Vedantist “missionaries” who visited the country after 1890.

The intelligentsia of continental Europe had already seen many editions of key Sanskrit texts, notably the Manusmriti and the Gita. Writers as varied as Jules Michelet and Ernst Renan applauded the grandeur of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, in part because they could be used to relativize the Bible and orthodox Christianity, which after the revolutionary surges of 1848 and 1870 were seen by many intellectuals as opponents of human progress. One fascinating maverick on the fringes of this group was the French author Louis Jacolliot, who had visited India and was attracted in equal measure by the eroticism and spiritualism that he claimed to have found there. Jacolliot wrote *Le spiritisme dans le monde* (1880) and *Christna et Christna* (1887), in which he claimed to use the Gita and other texts to show that Christ’s life was based on an *ur*-memory of the previous life of Krishna.²² This trope neatly inverted Lorinser’s position. An intellectual charlatan, or, to be a little kinder, a fantasist reminiscent of the Anglo-German Francis Wilford fifty years earlier, Jacolliot was astonishingly influential. His work was favourably commented upon by Dwarkanath Mitter, a commentator on Manu, who wrote, “Manu inspired Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek and Roman legislation; and his spirit still permeates the economy of European laws.”²³ Friedrich Nietzsche read Jacolliot’s translation and commentaries on the Manusmriti and the somewhat distorted understanding of Hinduism and Buddhism that he adapted from Jacolliot was enlisted in his campaign against the “slave” religion of Christianity.

The new Christian Fulfilment Theology, the second context for the Gita’s outward journey, argued that Christianity was not so much the only true religion,

²¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The History of Spiritualism*, 2 vols. (London and New York, 1926).

²² David Smith, ‘Nietzsche’s Hinduism, Nietzsche’s India: Another look’, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 28 (2004), 37–56.

²³ Cited in *Tribune* (Lahore), 10 Nov. 1883.

but more the end point at which all religions converged. Fulfilment Theology embodied a primitive form of social anthropology, so that its proponents could investigate features common to Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Yet, as suggested above, it also posed a serious threat both to orthodox Christianity and to the assumption of Western cultural supremacy that was still ultimately based on it. If it was true that all mankind nurtured the basic seeds of religious truth, why should we assume that Christianity was the seal of religions? Why not Islam or a revived Vedantism, or as the theosophists argued, a universal religion that was still in embryo and would be propagated by a soon-to-appear Great Teacher? In retrospect, the desire to show the historical priority of Christianity and its precursor, Judaism, was a desperate move to head off the relativism that arose from the corroding effects of biblical textual criticism and the birth of social anthropology. For, as Friedrich Max-Müller wrote of the Christians who attacked his understanding of the origin and growth of religion, how could they “believe that over the centuries and in all the countries of the world, God has left himself without a witness, and has revealed himself to one race only, the most stiff-necked of all the Semitic races, the Jews of Palestine?”²⁴ Of course, this apparent “cosmopolitanism” also leaves a chilling reminder that those left out of its Aryan inclusiveness might one day have their necks broken.

It was, however, the theosophists, the third medium of its outer journey, who played the greatest part in diffusing the Gita throughout India and bringing it to the attention of the wider world. Their engagement with the text is amply discussed in Mishka Sinha’s essay in this issue. But two further points can be made here. First, it was the para-scientific nature of theosophy which appealed to people both inside and outside the subcontinent and, in parallel, it was the “cosmic relativism” of the Gita which made it so hospitable to a global scientific culture, which was turning towards relativity in both the human and the physical sciences.²⁵ Annie Besant, for instance, refuted the orientalist trope that the doctrine of karma encouraged fatalism. The aim of both Hinduism and also “modern science”, Besant claimed, was not to renounce activity, but to find when it is best carried on: “a law of nature is not a command, but a statement of conditions”.²⁶ This, once again, echoed Krishna’s advice. Theosophical liberal humanism, therefore, set itself in the context of the contemporary scientific trend towards relativism, conditionality, uncertainty and a concern with personality.

Second, the Gita could be enlisted in the broadly liberal politics espoused by theosophists. The text could be used to argue for dispassionate and rational

²⁴ Bryan Turner, “The Early Sociology of Religion”, in Bryan S. Turner, ed., *Anthropological Religion*, vol. 3 (London, 1992, repr. London, 1997), vi.

²⁵ See S. Kapila, “The Eventuality of Science in India”, *Isis forum*, May 2009.

²⁶ Annie Besant, *A Study in Karma* (Adyar, 1917), 153.

political action in the context of certain karmic conditions, as opposed to the emphasis on immanent knowledge, blood and culture associated with the neo-Vedantists of the so-called “extremist school”. Politically, theosophy could also employ the Gita to reinstate India at the apex of historical civilizations and to denounce imperialism. Thus Besant stated that the knower of karma must “carefully study the national conditions into which he is born” so that he can help the nation by knowing himself: “The rise and fall of nations is brought about by collective karma.” Thus, for instance, the expulsion of the Moriscos and the slaughter in the New World had visited bad karma on Spain, recently crushed in war by the United States. Besant went on to make a particularly arresting link between religion and eugenics in the case of Britain. The country’s bad karma arose, she argued, from unjust colonial conquest. The souls of “all the dead natives” from all over the world gravitated towards England, “where they take birth in slums, providing a population of congenital criminals and the feeble minded”.²⁷ Spiritualism and the new eugenics were thus happily united.

India, by contrast, had suffered centuries of bad karma because of the oppression of its aboriginal tribes by the ancient Aryans and the everyday curse of untouchability.²⁸ Determined action against this and other evils would lift India again to the highest point of humanity. Besant concluded by quoting the Gita. The cosmic energy had always existed and would always exist, but action still responds to particular conditions. We must know ourselves and change the world by forging together will, thought and action into a potent karmic cause. For, as man transmutes his desires into will, he rules his stars. Besant published this tract as her Home Rule leagues mobilized against the British in 1916.

LORD KRISHNA AS HERO

The saviour–hero was a major theme of theosophy, but it also emerged in a more robust version in the thought of many other Indian and foreign intellectuals. Along with the Bhagavat Purana, the Gita was the key source for various reconstructions of the nature of Krishna that occurred during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, Krishna himself had become a virtual political actor. The Krishna who both travelled to the West and also became the dominant figure in Indian intellectual circles was not the village deity beloved of the *gopis* or female cowherds, but a political and moral leader in the style of Carlyle’s Muhammad.

Ironically, it was the Christian orientalist, notably Lorinser, who stirred up the debate by asserting not only that the Gita was a latter-day creation and

²⁷ Ibid. 174,

²⁸ Ibid.

marred by inconsistencies and interpolations, but that the figure of Krishna was itself a bowdlerized version of Jesus Christ.²⁹ As we have seen, his position was vigorously rejected by scholars such as K. T. Telang. But several rather different representations of Krishna emerged from these Indian debates. There was, for instance, the revamped rustic deity of north India represented above all in the work of Bhartendu Harischandra of Benares. Here Krishna's dallying with the *gopis*, with its eroticism toned down, was reaffirmed as an aspect of the folk culture of *lila* or enjoyment in "Hindustan *profonde*".³⁰ In contrast, there was the petty figure, virtually ignored in the works of Phule, for whom Krishna was merely a Kshatriya king misled by the caste hierarchy imposed on him by the self-seeking Brahmins.³¹

A more favourable picture emerged within the Arya tradition. Dayananda was ambivalent about both the Gita and Krishna, coming in time to believe that the text's apparent endorsement of the caste hierarchy cancelled out its positive features, notably its call to enlightened action.³² By the 1890s, however, a new and dominant version of Krishna had emerged not only from the Arya Samaj, but also in Bengal. This new warrior-philosopher Krishna arose from internal Indian conflicts, especially conflicts over caste hierarchy. But it was also influenced by analogous Western compulsions to seek the historical Jesus who, through the concept of sacrifice, merged imperceptibly with great national heroes, such as Garibaldi, Gordon of Khartoum or Scott of the Antarctic. Lajpat Rai, for instance, entirely rejected the frivolity and sensuality of the *gopi* stories and asserted that "even though Shri Krishna was not an incarnation of God, but only a human being, he was a model human being".³³ He was a rationalist political reformer, one of the 'great men of the world', whose modern representatives included Mazzini and Dayananda himself. This accorded with the stern figure of the historical Krishna represented in works such as the *Krishnacharitra* of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* and various Bengali plays.

In these latter works, as Majumdar noted, Krishna was depicted as a far-sighted statesman who had attempted to unite India by bringing together regional kingdoms, and even, in one interpretation, making an alliance between upper and lower castes. So Krishna's dallying had to become completely innocent play, "like European ballroom dancing". Nevertheless, Bankim's attempt to portray Krishna as a kind of Indian Gladstone ran into some difficulties in light of the extended

²⁹ Majumdar, *Krsna*, p. 41.

³⁰ "Krishna Carita", *Bhartendu Samgraha*, ed. Hemant Sharma, 5th ed. (Varanasi, 2002), 182–8.

³¹ *Selected writings of Jotirao Phule*, ed. G. P. Deshpande (Delhi, 2002), 72.

³² J. T. F. Jordens, *Dayananda Sarasvati; His Life and Ideas* (Delhi, 1978), 273.

³³ *The Collected works of Lala Lajpat Rai*, ed., B. R. Nanda, vol. 1 (Delhi, 2003), p. 434.

list of his wives and also the assertion in the Vishnu Purana that he had fathered 180,000 sons. Bankim showed, with admirable statistical precision, that since Krishna was a historical figure, this was impossible. It would have amounted to 7.5 sons per day of his creative life, leaving little time for nation-building. Bankim's was a rationalistic tale of the emergence of the nation through history, but for him Krishna was more than an Indian King Alfred or even a Gladstone; he was also a great philosopher, an Indian Aristotle, "the wisest and the greatest of the Hindus". Here the Krishna of the Gita merged with the Krishna of the Puranas.

Bipan Chandra Pal took a similar position. Krishna was

the ideal of the Indian type of humanity. In his life and teaching, India has found the master key to her nation building, and a rational synthesis of all the outer differences and conflict of her diverse races and communities and the confusions of her numerous cults, cultures and religions.³⁴

In the prevailing nationalist and historicist mood, it was important for Indians to envision a great originary national hero, common to the whole subcontinent. Evidently, Ashoka, as a Buddhist, and Akbar, as a Muslim, would not really fit the bill. The liberal nationalists, notably Surendranath Bannerjea, had fixed on Mazzini, prophet of Italian unification, as both a philosopher of immanent religion and a nationalist warrior.³⁵ In 1870 Banerjea had lauded Mazzini's example of nation-building to India in almost exactly the same terms that Bipan Chandra employed of Krishna. So Krishna became a kind of indigenized Mazzini, while the Gita became a divine Indian avatar of *The Duties of Man*.

Yet the great statesman could never quite displace the religious teacher. By the close of the First World War, the theosophist and psychologist Bhagawan Das had gone back to Lorinser's question of the relationship between Jesus and Krishna. It was true, he argued, that Jesus had urged the wronged man to turn the other cheek, while Krishna had urged Arjuna to kill the foe. But these teachings were perfectly in accord with each other. A violent response was only bad if the wrong had simply been done to oneself. But it was fine to kill "when the wrong is done to another who depends on you".³⁶ Jesus would have approved of Krishna, Bhagawan Das believed.

Krishna's reign as the austere hero of India and the world or as muscular Jesus was never unchallenged, of course. Scarcely had the Christian orientalist's

³⁴ Bipan Chandra Pal, *Sri-Krsna* (Calcutta, 1909), 7–8.

³⁵ Banerjea, *A Nation in Making*, 33, 40, 130, 192; Eugenio Biagini and C. A. Bayly, eds., *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalisation of Democratic Nationalism* (Oxford, 2008).

³⁶ Bhagawan Das, "Krishna: A Study in the Theory of Avatars" no. 2, *Hindustan Review* 41–2 (1920), 15.

attempts to downgrade him by revealing the prior influence of Christ ceased, than secular Western historians of classical India began to chip away at his pedestal with ethnographic tools.³⁷ They argued that Krishna, “the Dark One”, had, in fact, been a minor aboriginal tribal deity, who only rose to prominence late in the day. The focus again switched from the Gita back to the Puranas and the parts of the Mahabharata which Bankim and Lajpat Rai had wished to ignore. The attempt by Westerners and then by Indian historians to annex the god to the state-making process in India continued to stir anger and controversy in India right up to the time when Majumdar published his *Krsna in History and Legend*. This remained a contentious, transnational debate.

THE GITA AND THE NEW INDIA

After 1905, the Gita was drawn into a new set of debates, of somewhat greater moment than the question of psychic relocation to the great cave under Central Asia which had concerned the theosophists and their opponents. In the first place, the text became a field of battle between colonial officials and missionaries and Indian political radicals who used Krishna’s advice to Arjuna to legitimize the use of violence in the freedom struggle. As Farquhar put it, “Even the Gita was used to teach murder. Lies, deceit, murder, everything it was argued may be rightly used” in the political struggle.³⁸ Bipan Chandra Pal and Aurobindo Ghose both appeared to support this radical interpretation in their statements on the Gita and the nature of Krishna. But political notoriety of this sort was only one aspect of the text’s continuing visibility.

It is worth considering again why the Gita and the Vedanta more generally continued to make their “outward journey” in the period after the First World War. Theosophy had lost some of its momentum, though it continued to attract new audiences, particularly in the New World and Australasia. The liberal humanism which had appropriated and used the Gita both in India and outside was scarified and weakened by warfare and the popular upsurge. The events of the war, however, sharpened the conflict between idealism and materialism. Equally, the slaughter of the war damaged the notion of a benign personal God and the idea of grace. But it also gave rise to a return to the idea of immanent spirit at the same time as it gave an impetus to the idea of class conflict. In Western universities and scholarly circles, rationalist scepticism, embodied in figures such as Bertrand Russell or C. E. M. Joad, contended with late idealism represented particularly by William James. There were, in addition, some crossover figures, such as Joseph Needham—biochemist, historian of science, idealist, Anglican

³⁷ Majumdar, *Krsna*, 53.

³⁸ J. N. Farquhar, *Gita and Gospel* (Madras, 1907), 364.

Christian and communist. For Needham, history saw the common evolution of both spirit and matter, but cataclysms such as revolutionary rupture and war had to be built into this progression. Violent change acted to “burn off” redundant material, just as layers of dead cells were stripped away as a living organism or group of cells emerged.

It is not surprising that Indian philosophy continued to have an appeal in this ideological climate. Purporting to bring together spirit and matter, action in this world and the world of withdrawal and meditation, the Gita continued to attract interest and veneration. It was not surprising that contemporary India’s greatest interpreter of the Gita, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, was brought from Mysore to Calcutta as professor and then to the Spalding Chair of Philosophy at Oxford in 1932. Radhakrishnan argued that the Gita was superior even to Kant. The latter had argued that man was free only in the noumenal realm, but not in the phenomenal realm. The Gita allowed man “freedom even in the phenomenal realm with a choice to resist impulses, check passions and lead a life regulated by reason”.³⁹

The question of violence and political action also continued to draw attention to the text of a whole range of politicians from Gandhi and Tilak and members of the revolutionary Anusilan Samiti (as discussed by other essays in this issue).⁴⁰ Orthodox admirers of Gandhi such as Madame Sophia Wadia purported to see in the Mahatma the embodiment of Krishna’s advice to Arjuna, and the true inheritor of the Indian renaissance that had begun with Rammohan.⁴¹ Man could become god, and this would be the end point of human evolution. But this could only occur if the search for spiritual salvation was brought together with the service of society. She advocated what she called Buddhi Yoga, spiritual discipline combined with social action, a force that would bring together rich and poor, as the Gita was held to raise both Chandala (untouchable) and Brahmin.

Two significant, but starkly different, commentaries indicate the continuing journey of the Gita both “outward” to the wider world and “inward” within the subcontinent. The first was D. G. Mukerji’s translation, *The Song of God*, published in 1929. The book was dedicated to Jawaharlal Nehru of Prayaga (the Hindu name for the city of Allahabad). This text became implicated with the international propaganda offensive associated with Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience movement. Its purpose was to convey “to the American reader the poetic and spiritual significance” of the Gita, “the key to the Hindu character”. Gandhi,

³⁹ Sarvepalli Gopal, *Radhakrishnan: A Biography* (Oxford, 1992), 25.

⁴⁰ Earl of Ronaldshay, *The Heart of Aryavarta: A Study of the Psychology of Indian Unrest* (London, 1925), 125.

⁴¹ Sophia Wadia, “The Place of the Gita in the India of Today,” *Hindustan Review* 67 (1935), 166–70.

“the most conspicuous Indian of our time”, it proclaimed, had affirmed that the text dictated the major decisions of his life. But the introduction to Mukerji’s translation also transposed the debate between contemplation and action to the India of the Great Depression.

Along with its eulogy to Gandhi’s spiritualism it contained a justification of “the age of industrialism in which the philosophy of action is appropriate to so large a part of the human race”. Indeed,

Another reason for presenting [the Gita] to the American mind lies in its philosophy of action, the most eloquent and subtle ever written. Since nearly all Americans lead active lives, this book holds truth for them, to which many, beginning with Emerson, have paid homage.⁴²

Its motto, “it is better to do than not to do”, was the motto of the American people. In effect, the Gita was here being used to accomplish yet another intellectual and spiritual reconciliation, this time between Gandhian “neighbourliness” and Nehru’s panacea of individual action, science and industrialization.

The Gita’s continuing “inward” journey during the interwar period can be illustrated by a strikingly different publication, the introduction to *Shri Bhagavad Gita* by R. J. K. Shastri of Kathiawar. This work attests, first, to a series of anomalous internal battles among India’s intellectuals. The editor referred to a number of recent authors who had allegedly denied the reality of Arjuna’s distress on the battlefield. This, he proclaimed, was evidence of the decline of Indian emotion due to the inroads of the materialistic civilisation of the west.⁴³ The issue of literalism also arose. B. G. Tilak had doubted whether all the stanzas could have been imparted by Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield because it would have taken too long as the restive armies strained at the leash. Tilak was here employing a version of the positivistic textual criticism that had become common since the days of Lorinser. But this, said Shastri, denied the depths of Arjuna’s distraction and the greatness of Krishna’s teaching. Besides, the dialogue would only have taken an hour at the most, leaving plenty of time for the battle.⁴⁴

Second, however, R. J. Shastri’s introduction glided into the esoteric. It referred to the reverend Guru Achutya Swami, who had lived in Girnor twenty-six years earlier.⁴⁵ The Swami had been an expert in yoga, tantra and various other sciences.

⁴² Dhan Gopal Mukerji, *The Song of God: Translation of the Bhagavad-Gita* (London, 1929), xlv.

⁴³ *Shri Bhagavad Gita, Revised and Edited by and with Its Gloss Siddhi Datri* by R. J. K Shastri (Gandal, Kathiawar, India, 1937).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

He knew the past, present and future. He possessed tantric perfection and supernatural powers, such as the ability to move invisibly through the sky. Most tellingly, when he was aged 125, he still looked like a youth of twenty-five years of age. The key to his powers was the fact that he continuously recited the version of the Gita that Shastri was putting before his Kathiawar readership. Works with introductions such as this—and there were many in indigenous languages—are a salutary reminder that interpreting the Gita was far from being the sole preserve of transnational intellectuals such as Radhakrishnan, or even Gandhi. It was also a text deeply implicated in the world of popular religious beliefs and empowerments. Even in the modern period, the Gita, like the Bible and the Koran, was simultaneously being abstracted into the world of high political theory and being appropriated by the world of charms, magic and the supernatural.

RADHAKRISHNAN: THE ENDS OF INDIAN LIBERALISM

It was Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who brought the debate on the Gita between Indian philosophers and its western interpreters within a single frame. But after 1940, philosophy gave way to public action and the Gita itself took on a new, more active role again. As an ambassador of the new India to various international bodies and the Soviet Union, he transformed the morality of dispassionate action into a doctrine for international diplomacy.

On the one hand, Radhakrishnan used the tools of Western philosophical analysis to confer what he saw as scholarly rigour on the Indian classics. His commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita (1948), the Upanishads and Brahma Sutra are said to be the most exact. On the other hand, he sought equivalence between the Western and the Indian tradition by insisting that Western philosophy and political theory itself, despite its claims to objectivity, was essentially a product of the Christian and Jewish theological traditions. This was obviously true in the case of the Western philosophers who most influenced him in the Oxford idealist tradition, such as T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, and more distantly Hegel. Yet Radhakrishnan would also have extended the analysis even to apparently agnostic or anti-religious philosophers and sociologists such as Kant, Marx, Nietzsche or Durkheim. Later, in the 1950s and 1960s, the Oxford analytical tradition, represented by R. M. Hare and J. Hart (aside from Elizabeth Anscombe, with her Roman Catholic sensibility), had no doubt come to emphasize rationality and the meaning of language as the foundation of Western philosophy. Yet many analysts would now agree with Radhakrishnan about the importance of implicit ideologies of salvation even in the Marxist, Nietzschean and Durkheimian traditions. Alongside his philosophical universalism, Radhakrishnan insisted on the importance of instinctive thinking as opposed to the purely rational, a concept which was perfectly compatible with the idea of devotion to the Lord in the Gita.

Radhakrishnan conceived himself as a warrior for immanent religion in a world degraded by materialism and human arrogance. This was the theme of works of his such as *The Religion We Need* (1928) and his Hibbert lectures of 1932, published as *The Idealist View of Life* (1932).⁴⁶ But perhaps the most striking (if philosophically less rigorous) of his works arguing this case was his Kamala lectures in Calcutta University of 1942, published as *Religion and Society* (1947). The lectures were originally given against the background of the Japanese invasion of South East Asia and India and the build-up to Gandhi's Quit India movement. They were published, however, as the war ended, the United Nations was founded and Radhakrishnan became India's representative to UNESCO.

The world needed religion. The context was its "perilous condition", "the disaster of our [Indian] race", "economic misery" and the unprecedented pace of revolutionary change.⁴⁷ There was a "lag between social institutions and the world purpose" for even nationalism was not a "natural instinct". Radhakrishnan's religion was not a soteriological form of devotion to a loving external Creator. It was instead in the Vedantist tradition, the "god in man" which had to be released from the arrogance of the "herd animal", which he had become.⁴⁸ He quoted the Gita: "when men deem themselves to be gods on earth . . . when they are thus deluded by ignorance, they develop a satanic perversity that proclaims itself absolute both in knowledge and power".⁴⁹

Freedom evolves, to apply Daniel Dennett's phrase to Radhakrishnan. Yet this is not the freedom of the dialectical materialist tradition. Material conditions do not create ideas. On the contrary, as Hegel asserted, "the ideal is the creator of the real".⁵⁰ Intelligence and instinctive reason, indeed the "sacred flame of spirit", must be brought back into the frame of philosophical analysis, for individuals in groups or classes do not act simply on the basis of material interests. As he told his Calcutta audience, "Those Indians who are attracted by the Marxist social programme must reconcile it with the fundamental motives of Indian life."⁵¹

At the same time as rejecting materialism, Radhakrishnan was making a case for the new world institutions within a Vedantic-cum-Hegelian tradition. The World Spirit, he argued, needed to evolve rapidly in order to accommodate

⁴⁶ See also his own translation and commentary on the Gita: S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavadgita with an Introductory Essay, Sanskrit Text, English Translation and Notes* (London, 1948). This was dedicated to the "late Mahatma Gandhi" and pointed to the text's importance during the wartime and postwar period.

⁴⁷ S. Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society* (London, 1947), 10; originally given as lectures in the University of Calcutta and Benares Hindu University in 1942.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

and direct the massive changes which were afflicting the world. These were atomic warfare (inserted when the 1942 lectures were later published), extreme nationalism, Marxism and Western secularism. The combination of these threats seemed on the point of bringing all peoples to a common crisis. As in the Gita, Mankind must step back, contemplate and act with dispassion to bring about a new world order. We should

withdraw from the world's concerns to find the real, and return to the world of history with renewed energy, which is at once spiritual and social [and] which is likely to be the religion of the new world, which will draw men to a common centre even across the national frontiers.⁵²

Implicitly, then, the League of Nations had failed because its key actors such as Britain, Japan and the European powers had not acted with dispassion. They had sought to create a council of humanity but had clung greedily to their colonial conquests and local rivalries. The Atlantic Charter, a noble document, was sullied by Churchill's insistence on the inferiority of Asians and Africans, a British version of Hitler's race theory.⁵³

Any supporters of the Forward Bloc or communists not yet in gaol in mid-1942 who heard Radhakrishnan's Kamala lectures might well have felt that they were being engulfed by a tidal wave of equivocation. Yet Radhakrishnan was attempting to create the kind of reconciliation between apparently opposing philosophical views that animated the Gita itself. Wilhelm Halbfass later accused Radhakrishnan of distorting classical doctrines: "traditional Hinduism was not used to making explicit adjustments to 'current historical situations' or current knowledge".⁵⁴ But who can tell? Certainly, Halbfass himself seems to underplay the inherent and intentional flexibility of Indian philosophical concepts when he posits a model of fixed "traditional Hinduism" being impacted upon by a dynamic Western and Christian tradition during colonial rule.

Radhakrishnan's project was designed to create a humane hermeneutic, encompassing all the great philosophical traditions. Its flexibility was its great strength. It attempted to avoid the demonic enthusiasms and moral aggression common to politicized forms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (and eventually, it should be added, politicized Hinduism). It also avoided the pathetic obsession with power and the state that has transfixed the Western traditions of civic republicanism, German idealism and Marxism. Ultimately, a series of political theories read out of the Bhagavad Gita and its associated texts seemed rather appropriate for a massive, diverse and religiously plural polity about to embark

⁵² Radhakrishnan, *Religion and Society*, 49.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵⁴ Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York, 1988), 253.

on a precarious journey into a world where transnational ties were still in their infancy. It also provided intellectual solace for many thinking people, both Indian humanists and outward-looking foreigners, who prized certitude, but were suspicious of certainty. For “he who knows Brahman *is* Brahman”.

Yet by the 1950s the Gita’s own life as a major text in political thought was almost over. Indian political thought as a whole had begun to retreat to the newspaper, the television screen, the lecture room and, more recently, the blog.⁵⁵ The Gita resumed its more limited life as an object of religious meditation and a classical icon. In its public role it was now overshadowed by the Artha Shastra and, even more so, by the Ramayana, which became a reference point for Hindutva, politicized Hinduism. The reasons for the Gita’s eclipse were complex. The status of the Brahman and the Kshatriya, the main audience for the Gita, dwindled in Independent India, particularly when they, and the text itself, were assailed by an insurgent low-caste movement of which Ambedkar was the main representative.⁵⁶ The Gita seemed less relevant to the Vaishyas (merchant castes) who inherited the world in the 1960s. It could not really speak to the shopping malls, outsourced call centres and fast-food outlets that burgeoned towards the end of the twentieth century. For India, now a rising world economic and political power, no longer needed the Gita as it had done in the Victorian and interwar eras. In the wider world, meanwhile, communitarian liberals, insurgent radicals and New Age popular philosophers found different master-texts and less demanding Indian gurus than the Gita’s Lord Krishna as the age of W. B. Yeats and Aldous Huxley gave way to the age of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the Beatles and Bob Dylan.

AFTERWORD

Shruti Kapila set me the task of thinking about the outward journey of the Bhagavad Gita into the wider world as a transnational text of political, as much as religious, significance. This has proved fruitful in so far as it has balanced my recent concern with Indian liberal political economy and “benign sociology”. Figures such as R. C. Dutt and K. T. Telang were central to the controversy about the special needs of the Indian economy under colonialism, yet they also entered the debate about the spiritual and civilizational priority of the Gita. The spheres of religion and political economy were conceptually and historically linked for them, as for other contemporary intellectuals. The Gita, like most religious texts, was open to an enormously wide range of interpretations. It was amenable to a reading that stressed compromise, between the spiritual and practical modes of

⁵⁵ An argument advanced by Pratap Bhanu Mehta and Yogendra Yadav, conference for Centre of Policy Studies, New Delhi, Kesaroli, Jan. 2009.

⁵⁶ See Aishwary Kumar in this issue.

life, between contemplation and action, which could be bridged by “detachment”. The idea of the movement of Spirit through history also inspired both Indian and Western liberal commentators, who were bound together by a profound progressive historicism. The issue of killing and rupture in the text could be downplayed safely in their interpretation and left to insurrectionists, zealots and policemen, as have been equivalent passages in the Bible and Koran.

Nevertheless, I end with a sense of unease. The account I have given might seem broadly to be a nice and humane story. But, in common with Richard Dawkins, I am frightened by organized text-based religions, particularly when they become politically normative. The Gita, of course, is not the Ramayana, which, as noted above, has proved a much more potent and dangerous enemy of Indian secular liberalism, and of Muslims in particular, in the hands of the proponents of Hindutva. Yet even the Gita could be put to more sinister uses. The saintly Radhakrishnan once praised the insurrectionist, anti-Muslim RSS for its discipline and “detachment”, to the ire of Jawaharlal Nehru. Again, a collection of the speeches of the Hindutva ideologue V. D. Savarkar was lauded as the “Geeta of Hindu *sanghatan* [unity]”.⁵⁷ Works that claim unique insight into man’s condition—and all foundational religious texts do this—exude a dangerous certainty, a tendency to moral exclusionism and the possibility of political manipulation for murderous ends. Not one of them is anything more than a man-made narrative of power, whatever balm religious leaders try to bathe us in.

⁵⁷ *Hindu Rashtra Darshan (A Collection of Presidential Speeches from the Mahasabha Platform)* (Bombay, 1949), Introduction, ii.