

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The Bhagavad Gita and the Gospel

VARGHESE MANIMALA

Man always stands in need of the sacred. This is a need which only the Word of God can satisfy. Religion can help man in this. Always man has been in search of the answers for the problems he faces in life. He looks up to various religions for answers. Today as never before man asks these questions: What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of our life? Where lies the path to true happiness? What is the truth about judgment and retribution beyond the grave? What is that ultimate and unutterable misery which engulfs our being, and whence we take our rise and whither our journey leads us?¹ Religions bound up with cultural advancement have struggled to reply to these same questions with more refined concepts and in a more highly developed language. Thus in Hinduism men contemplate the divine mystery and express it through an unspent fruitfulness of myths and through searching philosophical enquiry. They seek release from the anguish of our condition through ascetical practices or deep meditation or a loving trusting flight towards God.² Our aim here is to study the answers given by the Bhagavad Gita to some of these questions and to compare it with the answers given by the Gospel. By the word 'Gospel' we mean the message of salvation rather than any one of the particular Gospels. Taken in the broader sense it would mean the whole New Testament. In our study we shall try to be as objective as possible. After having seen something in general about Gita we shall touch upon the following points: Gita's conception of God and Man, Incarnation, Salvation and Immortality, Heaven and Bliss, and Mysticism. We shall end the study with a few words on 'the presence of Christ in Hinduism'.

The Composition of Gita and its Place in Hindu Scriptures:

The Bhagavad Gita is now considered as an independent book though originally it belonged to the great epic Mahabharata. Many consider it as a later interpolation into the great epic. Those who hold that the Gita is a later insertion into Mahabharata adduce the following proof for their contention. In the original epic Krishna is only one of the human heroes who fight on the side of Pandavas to help them to regain their kingdom; in the Gita he appears as Bhagavan embodying all the attributes of Atman and Brahman.³ But according to Swami Chidbhavananda the internal evidence does

¹ cf. *Nostra Aetate, Declaration on the relationship of the Church to the non-Christian religions*, Vatican II Documents, No. 1.

² *Ibid.*, No. 2.

³ cf. Jesuit Scholars, *Religious Hinduism*, Allahabad, 1964, p. 222.

not bear any testimony to this contention. Both in diction and development there is homogeneity running all through. The philosophy of the Gita explained and expanded becomes Mahabharata. Conversely Mahabharata condensed into philosophy becomes Gita. What the heart is to the human body the Gita is to this epic.⁴ We are not sure who is the author of Gita and when it was composed. Most of the authors hold that it is not of later composition than 2nd century A.D. Some writers hold that the Gita has directly borrowed many of its sentiments from the New Testament. This is an unwarranted assertion and we should not forget that Bible is an oriental book, cast in the oriental mould, and full of oriental ideas and expressions. Hence both Gita and Bible may resemble each other in the mental framework.⁵

Occasion of the Bhagavad Gita and its Interpretation:

The period of exile was over for the Pandavas. They had faithfully fulfilled all the hard terms imposed on them for the sin of gambling. They were to get back the extensive empire belonging to them. But the covetous Kourava cousins bluntly refused to part with even an inch of land. Sri Krishna came to intervene as mediator, but the Kouravas would not budge. Then the preparations for war started. Sri Krishna's whole army was placed on the side of the Kouravas while he himself unarmed was on the side of Pandavas. Krishna acted as the charioteer of Arjuna. Seeing the grandsire Bhima, and Drona the revered preceptor, and other dear relatives were to be killed in war he became perplexed. To fight or to flee was the question which Arjuna could not solve. He found himself unequal to the challenge of the situation. He was, therefore, obliged to seek that enlightenment which would help him to probe into the mystery of life and tide over the difficulty.⁶ Sri Krishna comes to the help of Arjuna. The whole of Gita is placed in this context and the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna is the subject matter of Gita.

The Bhagavad Gita allows itself to be viewed allegorically. Through the drama of human life Sri Krishna demonstrated the divine principles which are irrevocably linked with progress in life. On the battle field of Kurukshetra human endeavours reap their corresponding results. That spot itself is a symbol of the human frame. Body-centred life is itself a kind of warfare. Parallel to the Pandavas and Kouravas are the good and bad tendencies in the human nature. The teeming bad tendencies do very often outnumber the good ones. In short, every man is obliged to wage the Mahabharata war in and through his own life.⁷

⁴ Swami Chidbhavananda, *Introducing the Gita*, Tirupparaithurai, 1965, p. 7.

⁵ Sir Monier Williams, *Indian Wisdom*, London, 1893, p. 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8-11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-14.

Gita's Conception of God and Man:

The Gitakara (the author of the Gita) gives us the Gita conception of God and the doctrine of the God Krishna. Krishna is the human birth of God Himself (Incarnation or Avatara). Krishna's attributes as God are numerous: He is the best in all categories of beings (cf. 10:21-38). He is the origin of all existents and the Lord of all beings; He supports the whole universe. Krishna is the God of gods and the Lord of the whole universe. In the 11th chapter of Gita Krishna reveals himself in his proper and awe-inspiring form—a form with many mouths and eyes, with many divine ornaments, with many uplifted divine weapons, with faces on all sides, with a splendour as if of a thousand suns etc. (cf. 11:10-12). At this vision Arjuna confesses Krishna as God. Gita's conception of divinity is also revealed through countless titles attributed to Krishna. Perhaps Purushottama—the Supreme Person—is the most popular of them all, though the exact meaning of this title is not very clear (cf. 15:16-17). Also Krishna is immanent in them all, all knowing, all powerful and yet he is perfectly transcendent (cf. 10:20; 7:26; 11:43).

Gita's understanding of man is influenced by the various contemporary religious views. Man is considered as a *dehin* in *deha*, an embodied self in a body (cf. 2:18). This self is eternal and cannot be affected by anything. This embodied self is the experiencer of *deha*, the body. This body belongs to the domain of Prakṛti. 'Purusha is seated in Prakṛti, experiences Gunas born of Prakṛti; attachment to the Gunas is the cause of his birth in good and evil wombs' (13:21). The three Gunas, Sattva, Rjas and Tamas bind the embodied self though he is changeless (cf. 14:5). The Guna which predominates at the time of death determines his next birth. Man is in a special way related to the divinity. In his search for God he realizes Krishna as the Lord and creator of all and himself as his creature (cf. 14:3). Man is considered as a sacrificer also. He expresses his dependence by sacrifice. In the early chapters of Gita man is seen as a sacrificer by divine ordination and the value of vedic sacrifices is reasserted. This clearly shows the brahminic background of the Gitakara. In chapter 9 the Gitakara explicitly says that sacrifices are offered to the Supreme and are of great value. But he also stresses the disposition: 'Whoever offers me with devotion, a leaf, a flower, a fruit or water, I accept that, the pious offering of the pure in heart'. And 'Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you gift away, whatever austerity you practise, do it as an offering to me' (9:26-27). Hence as in the Brahmanas the stress is not on the thing offered but the disposition with which you offer and to whom you offer. Thus man is presented as one in search of a personal God in a personal-way.

The biblical and the Christian idea of God and man differs from that of Gita, though in a few aspects they agree. In the Bible, especially in the New Testament, God is presented as a loving Father and man as His adopted son through Jesus Christ. Man is considered as created by God in His own image. As in the Gita, his soul is not eternal, but created by God. It has beginning but after that lives for

eternity. Man has only one birth and death; the Bible does not admit of transmigration. Gita's conception that man has to seek God in a personal way is endorsed by the Bible too.

Some Doctrines Common to Gita and Gospel:

Here we will deal with only a few of the themes which are common to Gita and Gospel, showing the differences wherever they exist. We shall treat the following doctrines: Incarnation, Salvation and Immortality, Heaven and Bliss, and Mysticism.

Incarnation:

To believe in the incarnation is to believe not merely that God became man, but that God became man at a certain time and in a certain place. It is to believe that the divine has entered human history and given it a new meaning and a new direction.⁸ The Gita and the Gospel speak about the activities of incarnate persons. In Gita it is Krishna who is identified with Vishnu and is held to be an incarnation of Supreme Being Himself, having taken human form as the son of Devaki and Vasudeva who was the brother of Kunti, wife of Pandu.⁹ Krishna is the avatara of God Himself. He takes birth whenever dharma is on the decline. The Blessed Lord says in the Gita: 'Whenever there is decay of dharma and rise of adharma, then I embody myself' (4:7). Also the purpose of incarnation or avatara is explained: 'For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked and for establishment of dharma I am born age after age' (4:8). Sri Ramakrishna comments and says: 'A viceroy is deputed by the monarch to quell lawlessness and disorder in a distant dominion. Similarly incarnation is a man of authority sent by Iswara into society. He comes to put in order all lapses and deviations in the practices of dharma'. Krishna himself explains how he comes into being: 'Though I am unborn, imperishable and the Lord of beings, yet subjugating my Prakṛti, I come into being by my own maya' (4:6). Thus Prakṛti or Maya-sakti has a great role to play both with the Jivatman and with the Incarnation of Iswara, but her function with these entities is on two diametrically opposite bases. She enslaves the former but is enslaved by the latter. It is by manipulating his Maya-sakti that the unborn Lord puts on the appearance of being born and growing.¹⁰ The Gita teaches that there is not only one avatara of Iswara but many. As quoted above, when dharma is on the decline Iswara assumes bodily form. 'The Blessed Lord said: "Many are the births taken by Me and you, O Arjuna, I know them all while you know not".' Men migrate from body to body and Iswara takes on bodily form at different times. The difference is that the Lord knows them all. Sri Ramakrishna commenting on this passage says: 'Incarnations are all the personifications of Iswara.

⁸ Bede Griffiths, *Christian Ashram*, London, 1966, p. 69.

⁹ Sir Monier Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

¹⁰ Swami Chidbhavananda, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Tirupparathurai, 1965, p. 275.

In the ocean of Sat-cit-ananda a wave rises up in one place at one time and it is called Krishna. Another wave rises at another place some time later and it is called Christ'.

Thus for Ramakrishna Christ is also an incarnation of God. He is not considered as the last incarnation or fulfilment of the yearning of all religions but one among many incarnations. No Hindu will raise any objection to this idea. But the Gospel and Christian theology teach us that Christ is the only incarnation of God. Except for the incarnation of Jesus there would not have been such a religion as Christianity. In Christ God communicates Himself to man and in Him the self-communicating love of God is made clear. The Gospel and Christianity teach that Christ became man to save mankind. It is the light of the history of salvation which shows that the absolute, infinite and holy God wills in the freedom of His love, to communicate Himself by grace *ad extra* to what is not divine. Thus it is a free self-communication of God. The whole New Testament teaches us that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and he came to save mankind. Jn. 1:14 clearly tries to prove that Jesus is the Son of God and the incarnation of the Word makes God personally and visibly present to mankind. Christian theology holds that incarnation is a mystery because the possibility of God's self-communication to the finite is a mystery. It is also a mystery that the possibility of such self-communication can find its culmination in the incarnation. Finally, the irreducible contingent fact of the incarnation having occurred precisely in Jesus of Nazareth is an aspect of this mystery in concrete.¹¹

Both Gita and Gospel deal with the incarnation of God in history, yet both differ in some aspects. Krishna is only one of the incarnations, while Christ is the only incarnation. Also the Lord Krishna is not explicitly mentioned as the Saviour. It is said He generates Himself as the protector of the good and destroyer of evildoers and to keep up the Sanadhana Dharma (eternal dharma) (cf. 4:8). This may be considered as salvation. We see that rejection of God in human form is affirmed by Gita. 'Fools disregard me as one clad in human form not knowing my higher nature as the Great Lord of being' (9:11; cf. Jn. 5:39). Jesus too was rejected since he was in human form, an ordinary man. Thus Gita is in a way pointing to Christ.

Salvation and Immortality:

The Gita and the Gospel alike teach that man is saved by God and that there is a future life. Both affirm that life does not end with this world. The Gita deals with three modes of attaining salvation—Karma Marga, Jnana Marga, and Bhakti Marga. In the Upanishads the way to union with God has been conceived as the way of knowledge; to know Brahman was to become one with Brahman or rather it was to recognize the identity of the Atman with the Brahman which always exists. The result would be that union with God was held to belong only to those who could attain to this higher wisdom,

¹¹ *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. II, pp. 110-111.

which in practice meant the yogis and ascetics who could undertake the discipline of mind and body which was necessary for this. But the message of Gita is that union with God is open also to the householder living in the world. Action which was done not for personal gain but in a spirit of detachment, seeking not the fruit of action but offering it as a sacrifice to God, was to be a way of union no less valid than the way of knowledge.¹² The Gita teaches that man by his very nature has to work, 'Engage yourself in obligatory work, for action is superior to in-action, and if in-active even the mere maintenance of your body would not be possible' (3:8). In the contemporary religious trends there had been conflicting views about action and renunciation. The Gitakara with a keen insight into man's nature and with a consummate intelligence proposes practically a new way of action and renunciation. The Gitakara accepts various works as a must. 'Acts of Yajna (sacrifice), gift and austerity should not be given up, but should be performed; Yajna, gift and austerity are purifying to the wise' (18:5). Thus he is trying to steer a middle course. He is strongly attached to his Brahmanic background. Hence he exhorts the four various varnas to be faithful to their own varna duties because Varna and hierarchical systems are of divine origin (cf. 4:13). So the advice is that one's own dharma, though imperfect, is better than the dharma of another well discharged. 'Better death in one's own dharma; the dharma of another is full of fear' (3:35). What the Karma-margi has to do is only, as said before, to avoid seeking the fruit of his action.

Jnana Marga is also one of the means to reach God. It is not 'the' means as the Upanishads stressed. It is the way of knowledge and wisdom. The Gitakara extols knowledge in these terms: 'Knowledge-sacrifice is superior to wealth-sacrifice. All Karma in its entirety culminates in knowledge' (4:33). This marga requires yogic practices. They are elaborately described in chapters 5, 6 and 8 of Gita. The Yogi who attains wisdom in his search for the divine knows Brahman (cf. 5:16; 5:20). Here the Gitakara shows that attaining wisdom and attaining Brahman are equivalent. But he does not stop here; he goes further and says that Brahman is attained by Bhakti Marga.

Bhakti Marga is the third and most perfect way proposed by Gita to attain God. It is the total surrender of man to God in love. The Bhakti is directed to none other than Krishna himself. It leads the Yogin to union with Krishna in Parabhakti, supreme love of the participation of the personal God. This Bhakti is both love of man for God as well as love of God for man (cf. 4:11). This is well expressed in the following verse: 'He who sees Me everywhere and sees all in Me, he never becomes lost to Me, nor do I become lost to him' (6:30, 31). Bhakti is openly stated to be superior to everything else. 'The yogi is deemed superior to ascetics, superior to men of knowledge even; he is also superior to ritualists' (6:46). The sole object of Bhakti is Krishna. The whole of chapter 12 deals with Bhakti yoga.

¹² Bede Griffiths, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

These are the three ways proposed by the Gita to attain God. The central point in all these yogic margs is the Lord Krishna himself. Thus Gita puts forth different ways for reaching God according to the capacity of the individual.

The Bhagavad Gita deals at length with the immortality of the soul in chapter two. The soul is considered as eternal and it exists in one body for some time and passes on to another body until it reaches God through selfless action or wisdom or bhakti. The Atman is part of Brahman. The Gita enumerates the characteristics of Atman: 'The Atman is neither born nor does it die, coming into being and ceasing to be do not take place in it. Unborn, constant and ancient, it is not killed when the body is slain' (2:20). To be born, to exist, to grow, to change, to decay, to perish are the six modifications undergone by the body constituted of elements. But the Atman remains unaffected by these changes.

Jesus, too, taught the way of salvation. In the Gospel salvation is often expressed by the image of the kingdom of God. This is characterised by the fact that God's will is done (Mt. 6:10). The essential thing for salvation is to have faith in Jesus. It is this faith that cures many. When God is Lord the dominion of Satan is at an end. This is indicated by the driving out of demons by Jesus (Lk. 11:20). Salvation is also manifested by Jesus' turning to sinners, the poor and the sick (Mk. 2:1-2; Lk. 7:36-50); all who have strayed are received back (Lk. 15). Because the content of Jesus' message is salvation of men the Gospel is called 'the message of salvation' (Acts 13:26), the way of salvation (Acts 16:17), the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). Salvation is caused by Jesus' redemptive death. The future of salvation is deliverance on the day of the Lord from his wrath etc.¹³ We must do penance to achieve salvation (Lk. 13: 3-5) and must continue on this path till the end (Mt. 23:13). The demand for detachment is so great that the disciples ask among themselves: 'Who, then, can he saved?'. The salvation which Jesus offers is presented under a paradox: he who wishes to save himself will lose himself; whoever accepts the loss of himself will save himself for life eternal (Mt. 10:39; Lk. 9:24; Jn. 12:25). Jesus himself submits to this law.¹⁴

The immortality of the soul is very much connected with the idea of resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is considered to be a proof for the immortality of the soul. Christ is the first fruits of them that sleep. The primary purpose of Jesus' resurrection is not to prove the immortality of the soul but his messiahship and divinity.¹⁵ Christ explicitly teaches the immortality of the soul when he speaks about heaven, hell etc. He speaks of the patriarchs as living and speaks about the angels living and serving in the presence of God. All these go to prove the immortality of the soul. There is a difference in the teaching of the Gita and the Gospel. Souls are not part of Brahman; also there is no transmigration from one body to another,

¹³ *Sacramentum Mundi*, Vol. V, p. 410.

¹⁴ Leon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, London, 1970, p. 459.

¹⁵ A. J. Appasamy, *The Gospel and India's heritage*, London, 1942, p. 159.

and the soul is indeed affected by the body because the soul is not living in the body as a man in a room but expresses itself through the body. They are intimately connected. Man is a 'bodified spirit'.

Heaven and Bliss:

Connected with salvation and immortality is the idea of heaven and bliss. The synonymous word in the Gita and later Hindu writings is Nirvana. Nirvana means to be 'blown out', to be extinguished like a lamp or fire. As a fire is quenched for want of fuel so the flames of desire are blown out and peace is attained. In the Bhagavad Gita Nirvana is found in union with God. 'Keeping himself ever steadfast in this manner the yogi's subdued mind attains peace abiding in me and culminating in Nirvana' (6:15). Fixed in the divine state at the hour of death one becomes Brahman or enters into Brahma-Nirvana (cf. 2:72). This could mean simply entering into an eternal mode of being, and this is the trend of the early chapters of the Gita, but in the later chapters Krishna is recognised as the 'Supreme Brahman and the Supreme Abode'¹⁶: 'For I am the abode of Brahman, the immortal and the Immutable, the Eternal Dharma and Absolute Bliss' (14:27; cf. also 5:24). Thus in the later chapters the goal becomes more personalised. In his manifestation to Arjuna in infinite forms, Krishna is revealed as greater than Brahman, being and non-being, what is beyond that. The frightened Arjuna seeks for grace and is comforted by the exalted one. In the final chapters of the Gita the yogi has become one with Brahman through the grace of the Lord, and through devotion to him. It shows that the ultimate aim of existence according to the Gita, is not becoming Brahman but union with the Lord, the beatific vision.¹⁷

The Gospels do not give us a detailed description of life hereafter. Jesus said very little about it, though he uses the word manytimes, apart from affirming faith in the resurrection; 'God is not God of the dead but of the living'. It is a reality that never exists itself independently of God. Jesus speaks of the kingdom of heaven, one's own reward stored in heaven (Mt. 5:12), of one's treasure laid up in heaven (Mt. 6:20; 19:21). This usage always stems from Jesus' thought of the Father in heaven (Mt. 5:16, 45; 6:19), who knows, who 'is there in the secret place to see'. Thus heaven is the invisible yet attentive paternal presence that surrounds the world with inexhaustible bounty (Mt. 7:11) even for the birds of the air (Mt. 6:26), both for the just and unjust (Mt. 5:45). When he speaks about heaven he does not speak of a distant reality but of a world that is his own, a reality as deep and serious to him as our world is to us.¹⁸ Occasionally Jesus used common metaphors about heaven in the sense of a future abode, but without giving particulars. He spoke of poor Lazarus being carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom while the rich man was tormented in the flames of Hades. The symbol of the

¹⁶ G. Parrinder, *Upanisads, the Gita and the Bible*, London, 1962., pp. 74-75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 76.

¹⁸ Leon-Dufour, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

banquet is used in the Gospels for heaven to which many will come from the east and west and sit down with the patriarchs while the sons of the kingdom are cast into darkness (Mt. 8:11). But this is a messianic feast, and it may be on this earth in the millennium rather than being a description of eternal life in heaven. Jesus also once used the term 'paradise', to the dying thief. This may be a place of cleansing and preparation for heaven as the Jews held.¹⁹ Christ teaches the unconditioned nature of future life: 'They neither marry nor are given in marriage, neither can they die any more, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God' (Lk. 20:36). Eternal life is the goal of the righteous, and in the parable of the judgment eternal punishment is said to be the lot of the wicked. The essence of this parable is the separation of the harsh and uncharitable from the merciful and kind. The New Testament does not answer the questions we like to ask about such matters as the nature of punishment after death, eternal retribution and so on.²⁰

The most profound teaching about eternal life is found in the Fourth Gospel. Christ came that whosoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life. This is not just a future state, but can be a present condition, for 'he that believes in the Son has eternal life' now (cf Jn. 3:16). Similarly judgment is not a future event but a present reality. 'Whoever listens to my words and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life; without being brought to judgment he has passed from death to life' (Jn. 5:24). Both faith and knowledge are involved in the apprehension of eternal life. It is defined thus: 'And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (Jn. 17:3). To know is to perceive the truth, but those who reject revealed truth are self-condemned and love darkness rather than light. But more than faith and knowledge is needed. The 1st epistle of St. John stressed the necessity of love for others: 'We have passed out of death into life, and of this we can be sure because we love our brothers' (1 Jn 3:14).

Eternal life, in biblical teaching, is not the flight of the alone to the Alone, but life in the redeemed community. The Bible knows nothing about the identity of man with God. Union is expressed but not identity. The Christian goal is eternal life which can begin now and transcend death. It is in communion with God and its condition is love of both God and man.²¹

Mysticism:

Mysticism is a word which can lead to misunderstanding. Hence an explanation of our position is needed. The Oxford Dictionary defines a mystic thus: one who is 'concerned with direct communion of soul with God; seeking absorption into God or the infinite'. It gives still another definition: one 'who believes in the spiritual apprehension of truths intellectually incomprehensible'. The

¹⁹ Parrinder, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

first one is more to the point. Here we arrive at religious mysticism. Sometimes Christianity is accused of not being mystical enough while Hinduism and other eastern religions are said to be deeply mystical. This is not fully true as we shall see presently.

In the Bhagavad Gita the 'classical devotional mysticism' arises from the faith in a personal God, who shows his grace to his devoted follower. The latter is particularly important. Gita at first followed the common teaching of the need for liberation, and recommended yoga as a means of obtaining it. By his own efforts, it seemed, the yogi could gain liberation and the condition of Brahman (cf. 9:28; 18:54). But after being liberated and becoming Brahman, what then? Is that all? No. It is a decisive step, the turning to God. 'Having become liberated thou wilt draw nigh unto me.' And again 'having become Brahman... he receives the supreme devotion to me'. So for Gita the realization of the immortality of the soul is only the preliminary to communion with God. This is in opposition to the Semitic religions, which put relationship to God first and immortality as the result of it.²²

The Gita is slowly and finally orientated to God and devotion to him. The great theophany of chapter 11 opens the way. Having heard the divine truths declared by Krishna, Arjuna goes further and asks to see the divine form. Krishna gives him the supernatural eye and reveals himself (cf. 11:9). The Gita challenges those who dislike the worship of personal God or the concept of an avatar by saying, 'The deluded despise me clad in human body, not knowing my higher nature as great Lord of all beings'. In fact, it says, all people worship God, whether as devout bowing down with devotion or as learned. There are differing ways of worship according to the individual; 'the faith of every man is according to his nature'.²³

The Grace of God to men which appears a little in the Upanishads, comes to clearer light in the Gita. And it now develops beyond condescension into pity and love. Arjuna having seen the fearful manifestations of God requests: 'Therefore, bowing down, prostrating my body, I implore thee, adorable Lord to forgive me. Bear with me, O Lord, as a father with a son, as friend with a friend, as a lover with his beloved' (11:44). Arjuna seeks the graceful form of the Lord and Krishna comforts him.²⁴ It might have been hard for the Gitakara to introduce the idea of a compassionate God into the Hindu conception of Brahman, for the latter is unaffected by any creature and could not be subject to feelings of any kind. Earlier in the Gita itself God is said to be 'alike' and 'indifferent' to all beings. But Gita slowly modifies this view and says that God has compassion on those who love him, and while remaining impassive in his eternal nature he yet delivers souls from darkness (cf. 10:11; 12:7). The

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 98-99.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

²⁴ Compare this vision with the vision of Paul of Christ on his way to Damascus, or Israel in the presence of the Lord of glory, or the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, here it is not fear but joy.

devotee (bhakta) is dear to God, 'exceedingly dear to me'. This is a further step and the Gita closes with the plea 'you are beloved of me and steadfast of heart. . .' (cf. 12:14ff; 18:64). Krishna has already said that Arjuna is beloved by him and now he presses further and says that he is well-beloved or 'positively desired by him'.²⁵

Union with God had been the aim of all upanishadic teaching. The Gita had early considered this and taught that beyond liberation, beyond becoming Brahman and entering the Nirvana of Brahman, there is a loving relationship with God. Thus the mysticism of Gita goes beyond the mysticism of identity to mysticism of union, in which nevertheless there is a loving relationship between man and God.²⁶ Christian mysticism differs from some kinds of Hindu mysticisms, while it is akin to other kinds. The only mysticism which can claim any basis in the Bible is that of a theistic type. This is the mystic who seeks the I-Thou relationship with God.

Christianity teaches that it is through Christ that man has to attain union with God. The New Testament teaching of the Incarnation shows God present with man: 'God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself' (2 Cor. 5:9). The purpose of the incarnation was to dissolve all barriers of ignorance and sin and draw man into union with God. St John in his prologuespeaks at length about incarnation and its purpose (cf. Jn. 1:10, 18). The Son is the revelation of the Father. This revelation has the aim of unity with God, 'I in them and you in me' (Jn. 17:23). Here the New Testament is closely akin to the devotional mysticism of Hinduism. It has rightly been said that the whole mass of Johannine and Pauline teaching is mystical to the core.²⁷

This teaching begins in the Synoptic Gospels, with 'come unto me, all you who labour and are overburdened', with 'the kingdom of God is among (within) you' and with the promises, 'I am with you always', and 'where two or three meet in my name, I shall be with them'. In Matthew the relationship of Jesus to the Father is paralleled by that of the disciples to himself and this is taken up and extended in the Johannine writings. The mystical union of man to God is one of love and intimate union, 'Abide in me and I in you . . . Abide in my love'. In the high-priestly prayer eternal life is said to be knowledge of God and Christ, but union with God is more than mere knowledge; 'Father, may they be one in us, as you are in me and I am in you . . . and that I have loved them as much as you loved me' (Jn. 17: 21-25). St Paul too speaks at length about the mystical union with Christ and through Christ to God (cf. Ep. 3:17).

Biblical and Christian mysticism sees beyond communion to union with God. But this is not identity or becoming God or being dissolved into him. Like Ramanuja the Christian sees loving relationships with God persisting eternally. The goal of Christian mysticism is not nothingness of absorption, but union with God and the beatific vision.

²⁵ Parrinder, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

Christ in Hinduism:

From the foregoing it appears that Gita has much in common with the Gospel. We have just explained a few points. As Indian Christians we have to be mindful of our Indian heritage and we must help our neighbours, the Hindus, to discover Christ. It is our bounden duty to teach them that Christ is hidden in Hinduism or, in the words of Raymond Panikkar, is the 'Unknown Christ of Hinduism'. As Indian Christians we have to make this 'unknown' Christ the 'known' Christ. For that the study of Hindu scriptures is essential, especially those scriptures which help the common man in his pursuit of God.

Today a new school is being born, which may be called the 'school of Christ's hidden presence'. Raymond Panikkar is one of its main proponents, with his book bearing the significant title, 'The Unknown Christ of Hinduism'. The basic tenet of the school is that Hinduism is more than a human quest for Christ; in Hinduism Christ is present even though hiddenly and imperfectly. It must be clear that Christianity does not relate to Hinduism as the divine response to a quest which in itself would be purely human; rather it consists in the full disclosure of the mystery of Christ already hiddenly present.²⁸

Not everything in Hinduism is a presentiment of Christ; not everything is true and good. Yet Hinduism does have something to offer which can help the sincere Christian to discover new facets in the mystery of Christ. A Christian is fundamentally open to religious dialogue. He knows that truth is not a thing that he possesses but a person by whom he is possessed. He knows that others are also possessed by the same Truth. With them he can share; from them he can learn. However paradoxical it may appear, it is theologically sound to say that non-Christians can teach us something of the mystery of Christ. There is then a sense in which Hinduism and Christianity can be said to converge. Not that the two religions are equal or interchangeable; for Christianity belongs to a different level of sacramental realism than Hinduism. However, Hinduism too mediates divine grace, though not in the same manner; in it also Christ is present. Hinduism and Christianity represent various levels in the order of mediation of the mystery of Christ.²⁹

We have to think of a meeting place for Christianity and Hinduism. Hinduism will very well consider Christianity as a sister religion. Its position is that all religions lead to God. Or also it would be willing to meet Christianity by sacrificing individual ways of both in the mysterious, divine, basis of our Origin and End. Since Christ is already in Hinduism, though in a hidden way, it is Christ who is the meeting place for both religions. The encounter being historical can take place only in Christ already present in the heart of two bonafide partners.³⁰ The study of Gita may help in this endeavour.

²⁸ J. Dupuis, 'The Presence of Christ in Hinduism', *Clergy Monthly*, Vol. 34, (1970), p. 144.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

³⁰ Raymond Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*, London, 1964, 1st chapter.

Conclusion:

Today it is held that salvation outside the Church is possible. For the non-Christians their religions are means of their salvation. Yet the Church has a mission to the non-Christian world. It is not the mission of conquest but to embrace the idea of humble offering of the fulness of God's saving truth and love to free human beings. Christ present in his Church as the fundamental sacrament of God's love pours out that love into the whole world for its consecration; this is the mission. The Church exists to serve, not conquer the world religions; it has to think, speak and act in solidarity with them; it shares a common responsibility not in passive co-existence but in active pro-existence. The Christian attitude is not one of judgment or condemnation; it is an attitude of witnessing, and prayer for and with the world.⁵¹ In working at developing an Indian theology we must take into account the scriptures of the Hindu religion. In guiding the Hindu the Gita holds a unique position and it is a book which has attracted thousands of foreigners. The great message of the Gita is that God can be found not only by the way of the ascetic in silence and solitude, but also by the householder in his daily duties, if he makes an offering of everything he does to the Lord. This idea is akin to the contemplative and active life mentioned in Christian spirituality. The Gita is an important source for a Hindu to discover himself and to find God. It represents an unquenchable quest for God.

⁵¹ J. Neuner (ed.), *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, London, 1967 pp. 22-2+.