

The Bhagavad Gita

An Introduction for the Western Reader

by

Rama P. Coomarswamy

Source: *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 10, No. 3. (Summer, 1976). © World Wisdom, Inc.
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“For the battle is the Lord’s”
1 Samuel 17

“Remembering God’s Blessed Son
Who calls us to a Holy War”
Raymond Lull, Blaquerna.

The Bhagavad Gita provides the western reader with an excellent introduction to the scriptures of Hinduism, provided that he is supplied with certain “keys” to its understanding. It is the aim of this introduction to provide some of these keys, to clarify the meaning of certain technical terms without which the text cannot be handled, and as it were to give the reader a guide map of background material.

Now the suitability of the Gita is demonstrated by the fact that it is probably the most well known Indian scriptural text available in the West, available in a variety of translations that range from poor to fair. Margaret Noble says of it that “of all the sacred writings of mankind, there is probably no other which is alone so great, so complete, and so short” (*Web of Indian Life*). It is also—and still is—in India, the most commonly known and *prayed* text. Hindus of all shades of orthodoxy, from all the castes and in all parts of the country revere it and frequently know it entirely by heart. Traditional commentaries by the great Hindu theologians like Shankaracharya and Ramanuja are available in English translation. It is sung or chanted daily by perhaps millions of people, much like the psalms were chanted in the Catholic Church until one or two decades ago.¹

1. Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy opined that the translation by Annie Besant and Bhagavan Das (Theosophical Publishing Society 1905) was one of the best.

In approaching the sacred texts of other traditions than our own, we must divest ourselves of any prejudice of superiority. We must attempt to understand them with the eyes and heart of those who hold them to be sacred. We must accept their traditional interpretation and commentaries as valid. If we find in these texts truths that were once taught in the Christian west, truths that were once the common heritage of all men, we must not be surprised. Rather than concluding that all “primitive” peoples developed similar religious concepts because they were afraid of the forces of nature, of the thunder and the lightning, we should conclude that it is really modern man, with his denial of metaphysics, that has embraced what is in fact a parochial and “sub-human” viewpoint. If we find that other traditions teach and hold truths similar to our own, then we should see good reason for us to cleave to our own truths with greater strength. Thus it was that St. Thomas Aquinas found in the works of pagan philosophers “intrinsic and probable proofs” of the Truths of Christianity. St. Augustine said “all truth, no matter where it is found, has Christ for its origin” and St. Ambrose said “all that is true, by whomsoever it has been said, is from the Holy Ghost.” Let us see that as Krishna—whom for the Hindu is Christ—says in the Gita: “All men, whatever path they follow, come to me.” Let us remember that the pagan is, according to St. Eymard, “one who worships creatures” and not one who worships God in ways that differ from our own. Let us not forget that, as St. Gregory the Great tells us, Job was not of the Jews, but was nevertheless a “man perfect and upright,” thus signifying and indeed holding forth as an example to Israel (the people of God), the spiritual virtues existing outside their own tradition. Christianity, while inclusively true—containing within it all things necessary for salvation—has never denied that truth exists outside its own confines. To deny truths outside our own tradition, or to state that despite the fact that they say things—often in the same words—that our own saints and scriptures have said, but in fact mean something different, is to “sin against the Holy Ghost,” even when done in sincerity. Let us then seek in our reading of Hindu scriptures that “wisdom that surpasseth human understanding,” for as the Gita says, we should hope to become like “the wise who have seen the Truth.”²

In order to place the Gita in a somewhat historical context, the following outline of the sacred books of the Hindu tradition is given. The general division is into two classes, *Sruti* and *Smriti*. *Sruti* is literally “audition,” not of personal authorship, and thus in Christian terms “revealed.” *Smriti*, which can be translated as “recollection” and which is usually ascribed by western scholars to specific authors because of the fact that the names of the ancient

2. One can in no way fault the providential nature of the “exclusive” viewpoint of certain religious writers. Nor can one deny the words of Christ who said “many shall come from the east and the west and enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but verily you shall not enter therein.” Under normal circumstances there is no need for a person within a given tradition to read outside his own “fold.” What is however most objectionable is when a writer misinterprets his own tradition, or presumes to speak of another tradition with authority when in point of fact he has no true knowledge of it.

“collectivities” or sages are attached to them, are roughly parallel to what in the Catholic Church are called “The Traditions.”

Sruti

The Vedas: (“knowledge”), four in number, Rig, Yajur, Saman and Atharva. They consist of hymns and liturgies and are difficult to date. The Hindus call them “eternal.” Western scholars ascribe a date of 2000 years B.C.E. to them.

The Brahmanas: (“intimate sessions”) ritual and exegesis and again dated as being produced about 800 years B.C.E.

Aranyakas: the “forest-hermitage” books.

Upanishads: which explain the liturgy and sacrificial rites and are dated about 500 years B.C.E.

Smriti

Vedanga: the “limbs of the Vedas,” treatises on Grammar, Astronomy, and the various arts.

Sutras and Dharma Sutras: the books of laws such as *The Laws of Manu* and including such well known works as the *Kamasutra*.

Itihasa: the great epics, namely, the Ramayana (concerned with the earthly life of Rama), and the Mahabharata (concerned with the earthly life of Krishna) and including, within it, the Bhagavad Gita.

Puranas: mythical and devotional works.

Not every Hindu knows the Vedas by heart, but until relatively recent times, and before the introduction of the cinema and television, almost every Hindu, no matter what his caste, was intimate and familiar with the great epics. Wandering troupes of actors still go from village to village, after the fashion of the mediaeval mystery plays, to perform scenes from the epics. Children spontaneously act [these out] as part of their play, putting on scenes from the epics as once the children of England would enact scenes from the tales of King Arthur and the knights of the round table. The great epics thus provide the average Hindu with the prime source of his religious instruction. He may not know the Laws of Manu; he may not be able, unless he is a practicing Brahmin, to recite the Vedas by heart; but he does know how the heroes of his epics act, he knows their values and draws his inspiration from them. It is not unusual to run into illiterate (so-called “uneducated”) peasants who know the entire epics—running as they do to some sixteen volumes in English translation—by heart. The Bhagavad Gita is a small part of the Mahabharata epic.

The study of the Gita cannot be approached by means of the “critical historical method.” When a western scholar like Garhe says that it is “a Sankhya text-book overwritten by Krishna worshippers and then again by a Vedantist,” or when Edgerton, or Hopkins and Holzman write long treatises showing that it is full of contradictions and interpolations of foreign material into a historical poem, Hindus smile in derision. A Hindu does not believe in “Theological progress.” As Krishna teaches in the fifth chapter of the Gita, the Yoga he imparts is the “same ancient yoga” that was taught at the beginning of time. A Hindu holds with Frithjof Schuon that “either theology is important, and that it doesn’t progress, or theology progresses and therefore it cannot be important.” Let us see what Krishna Prem, a recent author has said: “the Gita is one foot of the triple base on which the Vedanta stands, the other two being the Upanishads and the Brahmasutras.” Notice how he says that the older texts are derived from the younger, thus implying a unity of doctrine and not an historical sequence. Shankaracharya in the first paragraph of his commentary on the Gita says “we begin this important work after an orthodox fashion by initially contemplating God, and then showing that the Puranas, the Itihasas and the Gita teach one and the same doctrine.” He goes on to say a little later that the Gita “is the epitome of the whole Vedic teaching” and adds as if in parenthesis that “it is very difficult to understand.”

The Bhagavad Gita is in every sense a Scripture. The Jewish fathers say that “The Torah is like an anvil, when it is struck with a hammer, a thousand sparks fly.” St. Alphonsus Liguori tells us (in his *Exposition and Defense*) that all scripture is to be interpreted both literally and mystically. He further divides the mystical sense into allegorical—which regards the mysteries of the faith; analogical,³ which has reference to the eternal beatitude which we hope for; and tropological which relates to the moral sphere. Dante in his *Convivio* uses a similar classification and notes that the term “analogical” literally means that which is “above the sense.” Now if we accord this privilege to Christian scriptures, we must do the same for the Gita. Nor must we complain if in places we find its content obscure or difficult, anymore than we would complain of our inability to understand a complex text in higher mathematics.

We have said above that the Hindu holds Krishna in the same reverence that the Christian does, or should hold Christ. He considers Krishna to be an *avatar*, literally a “descent,” God born of woman and having simultaneously both a human and divine nature. He holds that there have been nine *avatars* in the present *Kalpa* or age. The Hindu sees Christ as an *Avatar*, though not one given to his own tradition. And why so many *Avatars*? The answer is to be found in the Gita

3. Editor’s note: It has been brought to our attention that there is a error that should be corrected here. The term “analogical” that appears here and in the following sentence should, with little doubt, have been “anagogical.” This becomes quite evident given the sense of the first sentence in which “analogical” appears. The case for an error or misprint becomes conclusive in the second sentence. This is because Dante explicitly employed the term “anagogical” in his *Convivio*, following the practice of many theologians of his time, and the definition of “above the sense” correctly refers to the term “anagogical.”

where Krishna says: “whenever there is decay in religion, O Bharata, and an ascendancy of irreligion, then I manifest myself.” If such a concept sounds strange to our ears, let me quote St. Clement: “He alone has it (the Spirit of Christ) who has changed his forms and his names from the beginning of the world and so reappeared again and again in the world” (*Homilies*, III. 20).⁴ The tenth and final *Avatar* for our age, the *Kalki Avatara* will come riding on a white horse and wielding a double-edged sword (much as described in the Apocalypse) at the end of time.

Returning then to the Gita itself, let me draw for you the setting. The text opens on a battlefield, called the field of Dharma. Arjuna is a warrior and he asks Krishna, his charioteer to drive his chariot between the two opposing armies where they start their discussion. Arjuna gives many arguments against fighting, and incidentally couches them in religious phrases, and ends by throwing down his bow and arrows, and in tears leaves the field of endeavor.

Now none of this is as it were, accidental. Let us examine in turn each part of this scene.

First of all, the battlefield, called *Dharma*. What is *Dharma*? *Dharma* has been variously translated as duty or “right-action” or justice. Plato defines justice as “for every man to do what is his to do in accordance with his own nature.” The Greek and Platonic word for Justice is *diskaisosune* and appears frequently in the Bible translated by the word righteousness. We can assume that the Apostles used it in its platonic sense. “Blessed are they that seek after righteousness.” The battlefield of life is precisely this field of righteousness which is why St. Thomas Aquinas says that “a workman (we are all workmen) is inclined by justice to do his work faithfully” (*Summa*, I-II, 67). Thus we see that *Dharma* is allied to the concept of vocation—to that calling by which we can perfect our souls. (To imagine that we can perfect

4. This is not to imply that Jesus reappeared many times as the man-God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, but as Saint Cyril says: “prophets too were spiritually anointed with the Holy Ghost, so as thence to be named Christs...” (Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only-Begotten). To quote an eminent Muslim theologian, each prophet of the Old Testament, “by his ‘active’ identification with the Divine Wisdom, each prophet is an immediate determination of the Eternal Word” (Introduction to *Fusus al-Hikam*). Thus it is that Saint Augustine says “from the beginning of the human race, whoever believed in Him and in anyway knew Him, and led a pious and just life according to His commandments, was undoubtedly saved by Him.... We are not under necessity to suppose different things and different kinds of salvation to be signified, when the self-same thing is by different sacred arts and sacraments assumed in one case as fulfilled, in the other as to come. As to the manner and time, however, in which anything that pertains to the one salvation common to all believers and pious persons is brought to pass, let us ascribe wisdom to God, and for our part submit to His will. Wherefore the true religion, although formerly set forth and practiced under other names and with other rites than it now has, and formerly more obscurely revealed and known to few persons, but now more clearly and to many, is one and the same in both periods.... Thus the salvation provided by this religion, by which alone, as alone true, true salvation is truly promised, was never wanting to anyone who was worthy of it” (Epistolae, 611, 12, and 15—cited by Eric Przywara, S. J. in *An Augustine Synthesis*, N.Y., 1945, pp. 220-221.)

others, or the world around us, before we perfect ourselves is one of the absurdities of the modern age. A surgeon could hardly practice on others what he has not first learnt himself). Now a vocation is in one sense on two levels, the first being the work we are called to do, as for example being a priest or surgeon (the Hindu sees this in fulfilling the duty of his caste—and remember that the priestly caste among the Jews was an inherited one); the second being to fulfill our obligations to God, or what might be called, to enter the path of self-perfection. Actually, the two are intimately related and can only be artificially separated. For example, in the case of a priest, only by being a good priest can one become a saint, but only by trying to be a saint can one become a good priest. In a society where every *métier* is a *sacradotium* (c.f. Hocart, *Les Castes*), where the words of Christ “as the Lord has called everyone, so let him walk” are taken seriously, this is especially true. Krishna in the Gita in unequivocal words defends the Caste system and says “it is better to do your own work without merit than to do another’s, no matter how well.” So it is appropriate that we start our quest on the field of *dharma*, fulfilling that vocation which we are called to in a just manner, for to talk of perfection outside our calling is a foolish endeavor.

The symbolism of the battlefield goes much farther. Despite the prevalent carping on love and peace (that ignores the very things that make for love and peace), we must remember that there is such a thing as a just war, indeed a just and holy war. There is such a thing as evil in the world and it is to be opposed. (Let us remember that Krishna calls Arjuna’s enemies “evil-minded” and “felons” and that he calls the war “lawful”). I am not suggesting that modern wars, based as they are on our “lusts and greeds” (St. Paul), based on economic imperatives, are just or holy. However, the Old Testament is full of examples of just and holy wars, and David is an exemplar of the hero that should be in all of us. Now if we are to have just wars, then we must have just and holy soldiers, and they in turn must not only fight, but fight well. Arjuna, the hero of the Gita, is a warrior—but he is more than a warrior—he is everyone of us. Not only is there a little bit of the warrior in each of us, but even more, the words addressed by Krishna to Arjuna are addressed to each and every one of us as we stand dejected and of “confused-mind” on the field of battle.

It is said that the Prophet Mohammad, on returning from battle said to his followers: “You have successfully fought the little *Jihad* (holy-war); now you must fight the greater *Jihad* within you.” The symbolism of war, whether it be a fight between two opposing armies, or between two giants, has always been a symbol of this real inner battle, the battle between David and Goliath, between St. George and the dragon. We are all meant to be knights of the round table and are all called to set out in search of the Holy Grail. Is not the Old Testament full of wars and battles, and are we to assume that all these fights have only a pseudo-historical significance, or are we to see in them also aspects of the inner battles as the Church fathers did? Let us remember that as Saint Gregory said: “it is in the field of battle that we stand every day” (*Comm. on Job*). Let us gird our loins, “put on the amour of Christ” and take “faith as our buckler.” Let us as the Gita says, echoing the words of St. Paul, “play the man” so that the Word of God, likened by Christ to a

“two-edged sword” may sunder our lower soul from our Spirit. Let us as St. Benedict says, “gather under the banner of God so that we can go forth to battle.” Let us join Father Scapoli and St. Catherine of Siena in what they call “spiritual warfare,” ever remembering that as St. Theresa of Liseaux says, “sanctity is to be won at the point of a sword.”

We, like Arjuna, are full of excuses. And how we like to cover our excuses, as he does, with a false religiosity. Thus finally we are led to throw down our arms and to desert the field. Now St. Catherine of Siena says that “it is the Devil’s delight and whole aim to get the soldier of Christ to lay down his arms” (her *Life* by the Blessed Raymond of Capua). And what are these arms? Let me paraphrase a quotation from another Hindu Scripture, the *Mundaka Upanishad* (II, 3. 4).

Having taken as a bow that great weapon, the instructions of one’s spiritual
director (*guru*),
One should fix in it the arrow sharpened by constant meditation. Drawing it with
a mind filled with God,
Penetrate, O man, the imperishable (God) which is the bull’s eye. The Divine
Breath is the bow, the arrow is the Self,
God is the mark.
With concentration it is to be penetrated,
One should become one with God as the arrow with the mark.

Lastly, to understand the scene we must discuss the chariot, which is a symbolism common not only to the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, but is also to be found in Philo (*Laws* 898 D) and Plato (*Phaedrus* 247 C). The chariot is the psycho-physical vehicle as which or in which—according to our knowledge of “who we are”—we live and move. The horses are the senses, the reins their controls. If the horses are allowed to run away with the mind, the vehicle will go astray. If however the horses are curbed and guided by the mind in accordance with its knowledge of the Self, the *Atman*, and in our story it is by Krishna, then and only then can it travel along its proper course. As Saint Patrick of Ireland says in his famous poem: “Christ in the chariot seat.”

In the *Canticle of Habacuc* the following words are to be found:

That you (O God) drive the steeds of your victorious chariot. Bared and ready is
your bow, filled with arrows is your quiver.

Cornelius Lapidé in his commentary on this passage quotes St. Ambrose who says:

The chariot is the soul (*anima*). It has good horses and bad ones. The good horses are the virtues of the soul. The bad ones are the passions of the soul. A good ruler restrains the bad horses and recalls them as it were out of exile thus a good ruler is

he who knows how to govern his horses...and thus they become the horses of Christ.

Is it any wonder then that St. Bridgit of Sweden asked Christ to assist her in “bridling” her will and that St. Alphonsus Liguori speaks of “reining the horses” of his passions?

The stage is now set, and we find ourselves at the end of the first of eighteen chapters in the Gita. The other seventeen are explanations and expositions—in dialogue form—of doctrine and of the spiritual life to be led. They are entitled, in greater part, “Yogas.” Yoga is literally and etymologically “yoking” as of horses, and different yogas are no more mutually opposed than are, say, the spiritual ways of the Franciscans and the Jesuits. The modern reader, be he Eastern or Western, must beware of the tendency to see violent contradictions in what are really differing points of views, or interpretations on different levels of reality. One can speak of a yoga of knowledge (*Jnana-yoga*), a yoga of love (*Bhakti-yoga*), or a yoga of works (*Karma-yoga*), but one must remember that, as a Christian theologian would put it, one cannot love without knowledge any more than one can really know without loving. Thus in the second chapter of the Gita we have what is called the “*Sankhya Yoga*.” No attempt will be made to give an exposition of the Sankhya *darshana* (point of view), for that has been adequately done elsewhere. However, it is important to introduce the reader to the concept of the *Atman* or Inner Self which is discussed in this chapter.

Krishna says to Arjuna that it is not the mere living and dying of the individual that is important, for there is in each individual an inner core, the *Atman* (literally “breath” or “spirit”) which is to be “known.” We must remember that, as St. John of the Cross says, “God sustains every soul and dwells in it substantially, even though it may be that of the greatest sinner in the world. This union between God and creatures always exists. By it He conserves their being so that if the union should end they would immediately be annihilated and cease to exist.” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*). This is the Self that every tradition admonishes us to know. This is the “Spirit,” as opposed to the “soul” that must be hated. Thus St. Thomas Aquinas says, “*duo sunt in homine, scilicet natura spiritualis et natura corporalis—there are two in man, that is to say, his spiritual nature and his corporal nature*” (*Summa* II-II. 26.4). This is a confusing concept to put across to one not familiar with metaphysical thought. The confusion is compounded in that we use the word “soul” in a wide variety of senses. Thus Philo speaks of the “Soul of the soul,” and Plato of the “Man in the man.” William of Thierry (a contemporary of St. Bernard and his spiritual son) speaks of the difference between *anima* and *animus* (both translated loosely as soul) and refers to the *animus vel spiritus* which is the *imago Dei* in us. St. Paul talks of the Word of God which “extends to the sundering of the soul from Spirit” (Hebrews 4:12), and tells us that it is God “who only has immortality” (I Timothy 6:16) and also speaks of “the Spirit of God that dwelleth in you (I Cor.3:16). St. Paul is expressly, as the Hindu would say, denying himself—his lower soul—when he says “I live, yet not I, but Christ in me.” This distinguishing

between the two selves, the Inner Self (also called by various authors our “Common man,” “true Reason” Inwyt, Conscience, Syneidesis, Synteresis, “uncreated intellect” and the “Daimon” of Socrates), and the outer contingent self is reflected in our linguistic heritage. We speak of people being “self-controlled,” and admonish one another to “be yourself.” We speak of saints as being, not “at war with themselves” but rather as “being at peace with themselves.” At the same time we recognize with St. Paul that there are those who are “lovers of their own selves” (II Timothy 3:2), which is exemplified in the common term “selfishness.” The lower self, the “I” of the egotist, is a contingent entity, always changing and having no substantial reality. As Krishna tells us, “these two selves are at war with one another.” St. Paul says “I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of God, and captivating me in the law of sin, that is in my members” (Romans 7:22, 23).

Thus we see that the *Atman*—the breath or Ghost (Spirit) that we give up when we die—is a concept (despite the confusion that orientalist and missionaries have imparted to it) of universal acceptance. Thus the Hindu position can be stated in the words that Christ spoke to St. Catherine of Siena: “Do you know daughter who you are, and who I am? If you know these two things, you will be blessed. You are she who is not whereas I am He who is. Have this knowledge in your soul and the Enemy will never deceive you and you will escape all his wiles”... (her *Life* by Blessed Raymond of Capua). The Christian position could well be stated in the words of the Aitareya Aranmaka “this self lends itself to that Self, and that Self to this self; they coalesce.” This is why the Bal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hassidic movement in Judaism, said “there is no room for God in him who is full of himself”; this is why Plato says that “the cause of all sins lies in the person’s excessive love of self”; this is why St. Theresa of Liseaux says that “only Jesus is, everything else *is not*” and that “our mission is to *forget* ourselves, to annihilate ourselves” (*italics hers*); this is why St. Catherine of Siena says that “self love is the principle and foundation of every evil.” Finally, this is why St. Euvard says that the spiritual life “requires that we declare war against the human ego, against love of oneself.” It is in the light of these words that Krishna’s words about the person “whose mind is deluded by egoism” have meaning. Again, Krishna says “Let a man raise himself by himself, let him not lower himself; for he alone is the friend of himself, he alone is the enemy of himself,” or again, “I am the Self, O Gudakesa, seated in the heart of all beings.” The Hindu sees in Egoity, in attachment to his lesser self, in the refusing of the lower self to submit to the higher Self, the same cardinal sin that the Christian sees in pride. Pride and Egoity are but two aspects of the devil’s statement “I will not serve.” It is hoped that by now it is Self-evident (*sic*) to the reader that the Truth is one, though its expressions many. *Una veritas in variis signis varie resplendet*—one truth in various ways shines forth” (St. Nicholas of Cusa).

It is then in this conceptualizing of the Truth that the remainder of the Gita teaches us how to know who we are. It would be impossible to cover all aspects of this teaching, but it is of importance to briefly discuss the Hindu teaching on *Karma yoga*, the “way of works.” Now the “way of works,” or the spiritual life as appropriate to those engaged in what the Christian calls

“the active life,” is stressed in the Gita, and rightly so. We have mentioned earlier on that the Gita is a sacred text used by Hindus in all walks of life. Arjuna is not a monk in solitude, he is a fighter on the battlefield of *Dharma*. Thus while various aspects of the spiritual life are discussed, those most appropriate to him—and to us—are stressed. However, in the realm of Karma Yoga there is room for confusion, for the two traditions seemingly part in their manner of expression, though not in their principles.

Throughout the Gita great stress is laid on the concept of performing one’s duties without attachment to the fruits of one’s actions. In Christian terms this would be called “Holy Abandonment” and “Holy indifference.” The Hindu with his belief in the caste system, in his *dharma*, is instructed by Krishna to “constantly perform the action which should be done, without attachment; thus man reaches the Supreme.” Abbe Lehodey tells us “all perfection, all sanctity consist in faithfully accomplishing that which God requires of us,” and St. Gertrude says “we should imitate the holy religious by applying ourselves with humility and fervor to that which God requires of us according to our vocation, nor must we dream of discovering another and better way to perfection than that marked out... and in truth, since it is God Himself Who has chosen for us our state of life, and the means of our sanctification, nothing else clearly, can be better for us, nothing else can be even good, outside our state and means.” But how is our action to be performed? According to Lehodey, “with Holy Indifference,” not indifference to God, but to the fruits of our labors. As Krishna instructs Arjuna: “Renouncing all actions in Me, with thy thought resting on the Self, being free from hope, free from selfishness, devoid of fever, do thou fight,...take refuge in devotion (love) to Him (God) and abandon the fruits of all actions—be self controlled.” St. Francis de Sales tells us “to abandon one’s soul and to forsake oneself signifies nothing more or less than to deprive oneself of one’s own will in order to give it up to God.” St. Alphonsus Liguori tells us that “he that remains united to the will of God lives and saves his soul; he that prefers to follow his own will die and is lost.” The Hindu position is further clarified in the *Narada Bhakti Sutras*: “The essential characteristic of *Bhakti* (love of God) is the consecration of all activities, by complete self-surrender to Him and extreme anguish if He were to be forgotten.” With the difference in emphasis that superficially appears one can only be impressed in the similarity of instruction in how this spiritual state is to be achieved. Let me juxtapose statements from the two traditions to demonstrate this:

St. John of the Cross: “The appetites are wearisome and tiring to a man because they agitate and disturb him, just as the wind does with water.”

Gita: “For the mind which yields to the roving senses carries away his knowledge as the wind carries away a ship on the water.”

St. John of the Cross: “The ignorance of some is extremely lamentable; they burden themselves with extraordinary penances and many other exercises, thinking these are sufficient for the attainment of union with the divine wisdom. But these practices are insufficient if a person does not diligently strive to deny his appetites.”

Gita: “Not by abstaining from action does a man win actionlessness. Not by mere renunciation does he attain perfection. He who restraining the organs of action, sits thinking in his mind of the objects of the senses, self deluded he is said to be, of false conduct.”

St. John of the Cross: “a man with appetites; he is always dissatisfied and bitter, like someone who is hungry.”

Gita: “The constant enemy of the wise, is a form of desire which is greedy and insatiable.”

St. Paul: “Those who have wives should act as if they had none and those who weep for the things of this world as though they were not weeping, and those who rejoice as if they were not rejoicing, and the buyers as though they did not possess, the users of the world should behave as if they made no use of it.”

Gita: “Therefore without attachment, constantly perform the actions which should be done, for performing action without attachment, man reaches the Supreme.”

Meister Eckhart has said that the highest of virtues is detachment (from all that is not pure Reality) and that this complete detachment implies and includes in it all the other virtues. St. John of the Cross in discussing poverty describes its essence as “the denudation of the soul’s appetites and gratifications” (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*). Now whether we speak of detachment, or poverty, or action without attachment, we are fundamentally speaking of the extinguishing of the ego (self), and this is the highest virtue precisely because it implies the most perfect conformity with the Divine Will. The soul which is annihilated can desire nothing other than the will of God. As Jacob Boehm said “all scripture cries out for freedom from self.”

Within the space of an introduction it is not possible to cover in detail every part of the Gita. One hopes, however, that enough keys have been given to the reader to allow him to penetrate beneath the surface of the text. If a multiplicity of Christian parallels have been used, this is because the Western reader cannot hope to find in the majority of cases, a means to understanding the sacred other than by delving into his own cultural roots. It is also hoped that the reader will see that religion is not just a matter of doing and feeling, that it is not simply a compendium of ethics and sentimentality. It is primarily a matter of being. If modern man is vacuous and isolated, it is precisely because he “believes in himself.” If he does not wish to believe in what is above himself, that is his free choice. Like Arjuna, he may find excuses for his attitudes; he may mask his pride in high-sounding phrases such as “intellectual honesty” or “thinking for himself.” If, however, he wishes to understand the scriptures, he must as Krishna says “live with faith and without caviling.” He must believe, as Krishna says, that “the scriptures are his authority in deciding what ought to be done and what ought not to be done.” He must remember that, in the words of Plato, “unbelief is for the mob,” and that skepticism is very easy. The fight however is not an easy one. The warrior’s life requires training and the soldier must learn to handle his weapons as well as how to guide his horses. We have however become a

“soft” society. We do not like hard work. We have forgotten how to walk in the ways of our fathers and have built for ourselves a series of golden idols such as “progress,” “the perfection of society” (without God), success and economic prosperity. We have confused love with lust, for we see our self-satisfaction in the satiety of our desires and call this happiness. Those who would hear a description of modern man should read the sixteenth discourse of the Gita. We have forgotten that “man does not live by bread alone” and have turned our faces away from the Word of God. We no longer search the scriptures, for we have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear. We no longer seek and complain bitterly that we no longer find. Because we do not ask, we cannot hope to receive.

More than keys are required to understand the scriptures. Like St. Augustine, we must believe that we may understand, and we must understand that we might believe. Let us conclude with Krishna’s final words in the Gita:

And he who hears, full of faith and free from malice (ill-will), even he, liberated, shall obtain to the happy worlds of the righteous. Let us hopefully answer as Arjuna does: “Destroyed is delusion and I have gained awareness through Thy Grace, O God. I am firm (confirmed), with doubts gone. I WILL DO THY WORD.

For those who wish to read further on the subject, the writings of the following authors are recommended: Ananda Coomaraswamy, René Guénon, Frithjof Schuon. In particular the following are suggested:

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., *Selected Writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, 2 Volumes, Princeton University Press, 1977.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K., *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Philosophical Library N.Y.C., 1942.

Schuon, Frithjof, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Harper and Row, 1975.

Schuon, Frithjof, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts: A New Translation with Selected Letters*, World Wisdom, 2007.

Guénon, René, *The Crisis of the Modern World*, Sophia Perennis, 2004. *East and West*, Sophia Perennis, 2004. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, Sophia Perennis, 2002.