

*A Lesson in Allegory:
Theosophical Interpretations of
the Bhagavadgita*

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If we accept the wisdom of recent scholarship on the *Bhagavadgita*, this classic became a popular text for religious self-understanding and scholarly debate and interpretation at about the same time in India as it did in the West. It has been suggested that the *Gita* was not really a popular scripture in India before the nineteenth century, that it was known mainly to the spiritual elite who treated it as another Upanishad. In the West, with the earliest translations appearing near the end of the eighteenth century, the *Gita* came to be known as a poem of beauty and universal wisdom. Surprisingly, however, in the writings of the founders of the Theosophical Society, the *Bhagavadgita* did not appear to draw much attention as a book expounding esoteric teaching or occult wisdom. To be sure, there are isolated references to the *Gita* in Blavatsky's magnum opus, *The Secret Doctrine*, and in her *Collected Writings* and even the promise that *The Theosophist* would begin to expound the meaning of the *Gita*.¹ After 1885, however, much attention and energy was given to interpreting and understanding the *Gita* by writers directly or indirectly associated with the Theosophical Society. It is not surprising this happened given that a concern of the Theosophical Society has always been to recover the esoteric teachings wherever these may be found in the religious history of humankind. Thus as the *Gita* became popular in both East and West, it was bound to receive special attention as a vehicle *par excellence* of occult wisdom or the perennial philosophy.

The concern of this study is to uncover the understanding and the use of the *Gita* in Theosophical writings. It will be my contention

that there is in Theosophical literature a fairly consistent understanding of the *Gita*, brought about by an overarching commitment to Theosophical teachings as found in the writings of H. P. Blavatsky. If outstanding differences do appear, they will usually appear on the level of the use to which the *Gita* is put, but not on the level of understanding or interpretation.

WORKS ON THE GITA

Works on the *Gita* from the perspective of Theosophical teachings are indeed numerous. The beginning of the period of special attention seems to be the 1880's, particularly in the work of Subba Row who, according to Eric Sharpe, functioned for a time as the *Gita* expert for the Society.² There follows a long list of monographs which takes Theosophical interpretations of the *Gita* up to the present day. These monographs are of various kinds—translations, recensions, studies, discourses, essays, notes and indexes.

In addition to monographs one can also point to a plethora of articles appearing for the most part in Theosophical journals. These would probably run into the hundreds and are too numerous for consideration in this paper. There is, of course, some overlap between monographs and journal articles inasmuch as some of the monographs are compilations of series appearing in Theosophical journals. For example, *Essays on the Gītā* by William Q. Judge appeared originally as a series of studies in *The Path* in 1887–88 and 1895–96 under the penname William Brehon.³ *The Yoga of the Bhagavad Gītā* by Sri Krishna Prem originated in a series of articles written for *The Aryan Path* of Bombay.

A number of the monographs are also compilations of lectures delivered at meetings of Theosophical Societies. *The Philosophy of the Bhagavad Gītā* by Subba Row, for example, was delivered in four lectures at the annual convention of the Theosophical Society held in Adyar in 1886. *Thoughts on the Bhagavad Gītā* by A. Brahmin was originally a series of twelve lectures delivered before the Kumbhakonam Branch of the Theosophical Society in 1892. *Hints on the Study of the Bhagavad Gītā* by Annie Besant was a series of four lectures delivered at the thirteenth anniversary meeting of the Theosophical Society at Adyar in 1905. *The Doctrine of the Bhagavad Gītā* by Pandit Bhavani Shankar represents talks given in 1914 and 1925 in Calcutta and Madras respectively. *Discourses on the Bhagavad*

Gītā by C. Jinarajadasa were originally lectures delivered in Bangalore in 1946.

The approach in this study will be to present an overview of a representative sampling of the early monographs from 1885 to 1920. Consideration of the monographs will be divided into two parts, the first dealing with Indian works and the second dealing with Western works.

INDIAN WORKS

The stage for Theosophical interpretations of the *Gita* is set by Subba Row's influential 1888 work, *The Philosophy of the Bhagavad Gītā*. As Eric Sharpe points out, Subba Row had already been active in the pages of *The Theosophist* expounding the true meaning of the *Gita*.⁴ His approach to the *Gita* is that it is essentially practical, designed to give directions to humanity for spiritual guidance in the evolutionary drama in which man realizes more and more his essential immortality.⁵ It teaches nothing more than the premises which have been the basis of every system of philosophy and scientific endeavor.⁶ The *Gita* is proposed as the path to true spirituality over against other Hindu, particularly Sankhyan paths, which have degenerated into superstition and demoralized India by leading people away from practical action. In making this criticism he sounds a note which is a familiar one in the writings of Hindu reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

If you examine these customs by the light of Krishna's teachings, it must appear to you that, instead of having Hinduism we have assimilated a whole collection of superstitions, beliefs and practices which do not by any means promote the welfare of the Hindu nation, but demoralise it and sap its spiritual strength, and have led to the present state of things, which, I believe is not entirely due to political degeneration.⁷

It is interesting to note that Subba Row, in his discussion of the philosophical basis of the *Gita* adopts a fourfold classification of the cosmos and humanity, rather than the traditional sevenfold classification usually found in Theosophical works. The sevenfold classification is seen by him to be misleading, unscientific, and contrary to Hindu works.⁸ This rejection of traditional theosophical numeration and his appeal to quite traditional approaches to the study of the *Gita*, appear to have played a role in his subsequent departure from the Society.

The fourfold classification of the principles of the cosmos, according to Subba Row, is as follows. *Parabrahman* is the first cause, omnipresent and eternal, subject to periods of activity and passivity. From it springs a center of energy, the Logos, not different from *Parabrahman* but individualized. Essentially this is the Ego of the cosmos of which every other ego is but a manifestation or reflection. *Mūlaprakṛti* is the veil thrown over *Parabrahman*, the basis of material manifestation in the cosmos. *Daiviprakṛti* is the light emanating from the Logos and acting on *mūlaprakṛti*.⁹ The evolution of the cosmos is described in language reminiscent of *Sankhya*. Everything occurs through the light emanating from Logos and acting on *mūlaprakṛti*.

The human being is also seen as a quaternary; thus there is a correspondence between the individual and the cosmos. According to the Vedantins and Krishna, the individual is physical body (*sthūla śārīra*) corresponding to the manifested solar system, astral body (*sūkṣma śārīra*) corresponding to the light emanating from the Logos, higher individuality (*kāraṇa śārīra*), corresponding to the Logos and *ātma*, corresponding to *Parabrahman*.¹⁰

The individual's goal is to identify more and more through successive incarnations with the Logos through the development of the *kāraṇa śārīra*, the real ego, and its physical frame, to the point where one lives as an immortal being, a manifested *Īśvāra*.¹¹ Subba Row states:

The *Logos* is, as it were, the pattern, and emanating from it is this light of life. It goes forth into the world with this pattern imprinted on it, and, after going through the whole cycle of evolution it tries to return to the *Logos*, whence it had its rise. Evolutionary progress is effected by the continual perfecting of the *upādhi*, or organism, through which this light works. In itself it has no need of improvement. What is perfected is neither the *Logos*, nor the light of the *Logos*, but the *upādhi* or physical frame through which this light is acting.¹²

In the *Gīta* proper, Krishna is seen as representing the Logos. For the benefit of humanity, the Logos descends in rare cases to the human plane to associate itself with a soul, which then *has* the Logos rather than being a mere reflection of it. Indeed, Subba Row suggests that the whole of the *Gīta* could be classified as a book of the philosophy of the Logos, explaining its activity as it incarnates in *yuga* after *yuga* for the sake of humanity.¹³

Arjuna on the other hand is the human monad in the process of evolution. He is a representative human being who has reached the stage in the evolutionary process where he must decide whether to identify with his higher individuality or his lower passions. Essentially, it is a decision to identify with the Logos, the light which enlightens or brings life to all matter. The *jīva*, the real individuality of the human being, is the light of the Logos, which, becoming differentiated, forms the individual ego in combination with *karan-opādhi*.¹⁴ This identification, however, should not be understood as a loss of individuality. Such a culmination is seemingly viewed with horror by Theosophists. According to Subba Row, the doctrine of complete extinction of individuality has spoiled Advaita philosophy, led to the present deplorable condition of Buddhism in Asia, and made immortality into a meaningless term.¹⁵ Rather than become extinct, human individuality becomes the individuality of the Logos; what is extinguished is merely *punarjanmam*.¹⁶

The purpose of *Gita* study is the attainment of immortality in these terms and the use of this knowledge of immortality for the sake of helping one's countrymen.¹⁷ Krishna as Logos becomes the guru who teaches Arjuna, the student, how this immortality is to be acquired. The battle becomes a battle between the higher and lower elements, the human monad versus the lower passions, which go to make up the constitution of the human being. It is this view which comes to dominate in Theosophical interpretations of the *Gita* from Subba Row onward.

Equally as important as Subba Row's work, at least in terms of lasting impressions, is the translation and commentary by Mohini M. Chatterji entitled *The Bhagavad Gītā* or *The Lord's Lay*. There is uncertainty concerning the first edition of this work. Certainly an edition was current by 1888. Chatterji suffered the same fate as Subba Row in his relationship to the Society, in that he fell out of favor after a promising beginning.

Contrary to Eric Sharpe's judgement that Chatterji's work contains little interpretation,¹⁸ the copious notes yield, in fact, much interpretation, some of which runs counter to generally accepted Theosophical teachings on human destiny. In keeping with general Theosophical teachings, however, Chatterji puts the *Gita* in the framework of belief in progress through an evolutionary process in which the ego progresses through a series of kingdoms—vegetable, animal, human, and divine.¹⁹ He also affirms that the *Gita* teaches nothing but those truths which are taught by all scriptures and systems of

thought if one understands them correctly. In this context, the peculiar characteristic of Chatterji's work is the frequent reference to Biblical, particularly New Testament, passages. Thus in speaking of the God of the *Gita*, he proclaims that the same god is proclaimed in all scriptures, and this is followed by references to Job 10.7, Romans 11.33-34, and John 1.1-9.²⁰ John 1 is of course a natural text to cite given its use of the term Logos. If one follows through on Chatterji's suggestions, one reads the Bible in effect alongside the *Gita*.

Since his commentary runs chapter by chapter and, in some cases, verse by verse, Chatterji's interpretation is more specific and more sophisticated than Subba Row's. In general, the allegorical approach is the same: the *Gita* is understood to be speaking about the human being in general and his spiritual travels in the evolutionary development of the cosmos. However, not only is Arjuna made to stand for humanity or a certain type of human being, but so is the opposition. Thus Duryodhana is seen as the incarnation of pride, injustice, and jealousy, and Bhishma comes to stand for success in experience, the mainstay of the existence of evil.²¹

Arjuna, on the other hand is taken to represent one who is thrown into doubt as a result of being assailed by the internal enemies represented by such opponents as Duryodhana and Bhishma. This was to become a frequently stated position in Theosophical interpretations. In commenting on *Gita* 1.30 Chatterji states:

Whenever a man loses faith, these three evils, grief, fears, and weakness, attack him, and he begins to delude himself into the belief that it is fruitless to persevere on the upward path.²²

The subsequent injunction to fight in chapter 2 of the *Gita* is to be understood as "a statement of Arjuna's mental state, which has been temporarily clouded by doubts."²³ The concern of the *Gita* then, in the injunction to fight, is not to propose a specific course of action, but rather to highlight the internal enemies which one must overcome in order to achieve the extinction of conditioned existence.²⁴

In two important respects Chatterji's interpretation departs from the generally expressed views in Theosophical literature. In his views on action and non-dualism he follows Shankara rather than Theosophical thought. First with respect to non-dualism, Chatterji agrees with the Theosophists that in reality the human monad is divine or at least a manifestation of the divine. However, this manifestation

is one of appearance only and not of reality. In commenting on chapter 2 of the *Gita* he states:

In this chapter as well as in those succeeding, it is taught that the only reality is Consciousness, or the Supreme Spirit, which, being absolute, has no relation to any object or action. But there is a mysterious power, which though really non-existent, except in identity with the Supreme Spirit, yet appears as if possessed of a co-ordinate being. . . . The one pole is the personal God . . . the other, man.²⁵

The whole universe is to be understood as illusions which "simulate the One Reality."²⁶ The human goal then becomes not simply the overcoming of conditioned existence but the elimination of any individuality whatsoever. In general, Theosophists would insist on the reality of the universe and the evolutionary process, and on movement to higher and higher states of individuality.

In his view of action Chatterji takes the same view expressed by Shankara, that the path of action is a necessary antecedent to the path of knowledge. In his comment on *Gita* 2.39 he states

. . . although the knowledge of the philosophy of action does not by itself remove "bondage of action," yet it renders man pure enough to receive the knowledge of the Spirit which does cut asunder the knot of action.²⁸

Work and forms, although necessary for the human being at one stage in his life at some point become unnecessary. According to Krishna therefore, action is inferior to knowledge.²⁹ The injunctions for right action are meant only for those who are still bound by egoism.³⁰ This position would appear to be quite different from that taken by Theosophists in general, who assert that there is a real involution of the absolute, a real evolutionary process in which action is essential and not a matter of choice, and that knowledge of the true nature of reality dawns in ongoing activity rather than apart from activity, as one aligns oneself with the evolutionary process. Activity is simply not seen by Theosophists to be either antecedent to or inferior to knowledge, nor is the loss of individuality seen to be a desirable goal.

An obscure treatment of the *Gita* is found in *Thoughts on the Bhagavad Gītā*, a series of twelve lectures delivered to the Kumbhakonam Branch of the Theosophical Society by an author known simply as A. Brahmin, F.T.S. in 1893. It has received little or no

mention in Theosophical writings, possibly because it is so badly written and has relatively little to do with the *Gita*, notwithstanding the title. The book includes more reference to Puranic teaching and to *The Secret Doctrine* than it does to the *Gita*.

The author purports to give a non-sectarian treatment of the *Gita* along Puranic lines rather than the usual one-sided treatments given by Europeans, karma-yogins, Advaitins, and Vishishadvaitins. The *Puranas* are put forward as containing almost everything occult. The difficulty is that they are written in symbology which can be understood in broad outlines only through the work of Blavatsky.³² Consequently there is more emphasis on teaching basic Theosophical ideas than on teaching about the *Gita*.

There are, nevertheless, some interesting developments in this treatment. Perhaps the most outstanding is the attention given to historical issues such as the time and place of the war and the appearance of Krishna within human history, something which is barely mentioned in previous works. The war is alleged to have taken place about 5,000 years ago at the beginning of the present Kali Yuga as a karmic punishment for the selfish spirit which had developed in the previous cycle. The situation demanded the appearance of a great soul, a *jagat-guru*, to adjust things.³³

Following this, however, there is a resort to the standard allegorical treatment of the *Gita*. Although the war is real and actually took place, it is to be understood as a war which went on in human hearts and minds. The war symbolizes what takes place at an important juncture in human evolution, a battle between the divine and gross elements or the higher and lower selves in human beings.³⁴ The injunction to fight in the cause of justice and to do so in a spirit of renunciation, without grief or doubt, is an injunction given for the student of *Brahma-vidya* rather than an injunction literally to kill people.³⁵

Krishna is to be understood on various levels. On the one hand, he is the "ray of dark glory that dwells in the lotus of the human heart."³⁶ As the unmanifested Logos, he is "the spirit of all consciousness in the entire universe," the individualized ray in the *Jivatma*.³⁷ On the other hand, Krishna as *avatāra* is simply "one of those divine beings who, living in the noumenal planes of nature, watch over and protect the field of human evolution."³⁸

Arjuna is simply a human monad who has reached a certain stage in the evolutionary process requiring that he bid good-bye to a previous stage of life and all of its affectations in order to enter into

a higher, less personal stage in the evolutionary process. Arjuna's doubt and anguish is caused by his lack of knowledge of the course of the evolutionary process and not literally by the prospect of doing away with his own kinsmen. His conflict must be understood symbolically. Rather than recognize that both *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are two aspects of the ongoing evolutionary process, Arjuna shrank in ignorance from the task at hand of growth in consciousness and threatened to lead an ascetic life.³⁹

The central message of Krishna to Arjuna is that he must act according to the laws of cosmic development and perform those duties required at this stage of development in human life. Such activity, furthermore, is to be done as *yajñā*, that is in a spirit of service to all, recognizing that all have their place in the great unfolding of the evolutionary process towards universal oneness.

. . . The fundamental keynote of true theosophic teaching is the key-note of the *Gītā* and that is act, act, act. Act how? To render service to cosmic *yajñā*, mentally indifferent to the blissful fruit of it.⁴⁰

This emphasis on sacrificial action leads to some interesting conclusions. It means to take seriously the plight of the famine-stricken whether in India or elsewhere,⁴¹ to love others, to work for others to alleviate the cruel blows of nature,⁴² and to do so within one's own tradition, not to denounce such traditions or seek to convert people from one tradition to another; all traditions, practices, and nationalities have their own peculiar functions to perform. This is what is meant by being true to one's own *dharma* or caste.

The Brahmin, however, does take pains to reject what are seen as false notions of oneness. On the one hand modern advaitins come under attack as nihilists who do not discriminate properly between *ātma* and non-*ātma* or world evolution.⁴³ To suggest that there is such a thing as eternal rest and that all manifestation is falsehood is to reject puranic lore.⁴⁴ On the other hand, neither is the divine to be personalized, a tendency which has led in India to enormous waste of energy and money on temples and adornments and the growth of evils or *rakṣasas* like religious hatred and bitter disputes while millions suffer from poverty and ignorance.⁴⁵

An influential series of studies of the *Gīta* by The Dreamer, a pseudonym for Rajendra Lal Mukerjī, was published in 1902–1904.⁴⁶ The purpose of the *Gīta* is seen as teaching Sankhya Yoga, which, incidentally, is standard theosophical teaching concerning the origin

and destiny of man. A great deal of time is spent setting "the record straight" in order that we might understand the *Gita* properly. Consequently there appears to be more reference to the writings of Blavatsky than to the *Gita* itself.

The interest is in the timeless meaning of the *Gita* as a guide book for the student on the path of non-attachment (*nivṛtti*), service, love and sacrifice.⁴⁷ The message has meaning only for the crucial point in human evolution, for "the great battle where the human soul has to conquer the *human* in it and cross over to the other side of immortality and service."⁴⁸ Considerable attention is therefore given to Arjuna's despondency and the problems symbolically presented in chapter one. It depicts the critical stage of the life of an aspirant when he or she is struggling to forge links with and move on to a higher level of life. It is a struggle between a well-developed personal self, which was fit for the current stage in the evolutionary process, and the higher life or self to which one is to move.

Arjuna, though a highly evolved being who has purified his life to the extent that his personal self no longer has a voice in the regulation of his conduct, is still bothered by spiritual powers and virtues which he has evolved but must now give up. The lower self, once evolved, is bent on securing a separate existence for itself, and will not easily give way to the evolution of higher forms of life.⁴⁹ Thus, The Dreamer says, the virtues of *rāga*, attachment to formal life, *yoga*, desire of possession, and *kṣema*, extreme compassion for forms of life which were once

. . . the very *sine quā non* of evolution and growth, are now used as dead weights to stop his further progress. His intellect becomes confused; he cannot distinguish between the form and the life. He loses sight of the great fact, that every Ego has to give up all likes and dislikes, *all love for life in form* as well as *all attraction for formless* life; that the Ego's progress henceforth lies in recognizing itself as merely an aspect and a mode of the Diving energy instead of being a separate centre by itself.⁵⁰

The lengthy allegorical treatment of Arjuna's problem sets the stage for similar treatment of other aspects of the *Gita*. Such is the case, for example, in the treatment of Arjuna's basic argument against fighting—caste confusion. This receives special treatment because of the efforts of Hindus towards spiritual regeneration and freedom from caste restrictions.⁵¹ Caste has its proper role to play in the

economy of cosmic evolution to allow for infinite variety and specialization, and to indicate the most efficient lines for individual development.⁵² The ego must evolve slowly in vehicles appropriate to its stage of development. Otherwise the result will be discord (caste-confusion) and pollution (the vitiation of women). In an obvious warning against attempts to reform the caste system too quickly the Dreamer states:

When, however, the body follows a different line of evolution—when there are built into it materials incongruous to the stage of evolution of the Ego—when the body goes one way with its lines of heredity and the Ego the other way, there is war and discord. There is then what the Gītā calls “Caste Confusion”—when the vehicles of man, instead of being instruments to express the inner Life in a way most suited for growth (which is called duty), are vitiated by the effects of actions incongruous to the needs of the inner Man—when by such actions forms of matter of different planes hostile to the life of the Ego are drawn and built into the bodies, then these vehicles become polluted, or, as the Gītā puts it, “the women become vitiated,” there is what is called confusion of caste.⁵³

Thus he allegorized caste confusion, pollution of women, and *dharma*. Outward forms, particularly *dharma*, have efficacy. Their primary role is to allow for the unfolding or manifestation of the potentialities of Life or the Deity within the individual, the gradual realization of the true nature of the “individualized Self” within.⁵⁴

The idea of the *avatāra*, too, is rendered in terms of the conflict between stages in the evolutionary process. The *avatāra* appears when the law of growth changes from one that emphasizes separation, concentration, and self-centeredness to one that emphasizes expansion and surrender to the larger life of which we are all a part.⁵⁵ Such a change however, means conflict that at times threatens to overwhelm the forces for evolutionary progress or good. In such a situation the *avatāras*, as manifestations of the One Life, appear to restore a proper equilibrium. The forces for good (expansion and surrender to larger life), the Devas, combine to beat back or subdue the forces of self-assertion or resistance, the Asuras.⁵⁶ The vehicle whereby such a manifestation is made possible is the Yogi, the purified and perfected individual who, having unified his life with the “Supreme Life,” becomes a vehicle for a special manifestation or descent of the Unmanifest.⁵⁷

A more recent Indian interpretation of the *Gita* is that done by Pandit Bhavani Shankar, published in 1966. The volume is actually based on lectures given in 1914 and 1925. These lectures were not an attempt to deal with the whole of the *Gita*, but only with chapters 4, 13, and 15, which are regarded as key chapters.

With frequent reference to the *Voice of Silence* and the *Light on the Path*, Shankar described chapter 4 as having to do with the successive initiations of the *jīvātma* on its way to *jñāna* once it enters the human realm. Arjuna's dilemma is described as follows:

He has not yet killed what in "The Voice of Silence" is called the Raja of the senses, the "slayer of the real," and despondency possesses his mind when at last he has to pass through the experience. He is now called upon not only to kill the 11 Akshauhinis of Kinsmen formed of his five senses and six passions (Kama, Krodha, etc.) but to slay even the Dharmacharyas to whom he was looking up hitherto for guidance.⁵⁸

The successive initiations through which Arjuna and all human monads are to travel are the realization that the physical ego or center is an expression of divine life, the realization that the astral body is a reflection of the one life, the realization that the spiritual ego or causal body is a mere reflection of divine light, not limited by any form, and finally the realization of transcendence over the neutral point of isolation from all matter or the death of the individual and birth of a regenerate human being not limited by the bonds of matter. It is this last initiation which is said to be the real *kuruksetra* battlefield of the *jīvātma* which does not end in the loss of individuality and passivity but leads on to yet further progress. This, however, is thought to be difficult indeed as indicated by the verses which suggest that the real *mahātman*, the true *jñānin*, is indeed hard to find.⁵⁹ Here again one comes across the criticism of advaitins that says that they are wrong because they reject individuality while Krishna teaches the perfection of individuality.⁶⁰

An interesting twist is given to the concept of *avatāra*. The seeker after *jñāna* becomes a participator in the incarnation of the Divine in that the incarnation is a response from *Īśvara* to some individual's developing the virtues entitling him to union with *Īśvara*.⁶¹ The *Gita* should therefore be seen as a treatise dealing with the high doctrines of the origin, trials, and destiny of humanity and should not be used to feed the questionable neo-theosophical preoccupation with past

lives of the Mahatmas and sensational stories of personal loves and hates of previous incarnations of particular monads.⁶²

WESTERN INTERPRETERS

An early and influential treatment of the *Bhagavadgita* on the American scene is that written by William Q. Judge. He offered both a recension and a series of essays dealing with the first seven chapters and intended as a non-academic exposition. His work influenced some later treatments in the West coming out of the Theosophical movement.

He spends a great deal of time discussing the proper approach to take to the *Gita* to avoid inappropriate interpretations. As might be expected, he places the *Gita* in the optimistic evolutionary framework so typical of much Theosophical literature. The *Gita* is to be understood as an account of the evolutionary development of humanity. Therefore, like the Indian interpreters, he takes an allegorical approach. While admitting that there may be interesting historical material in the *Gita*, Judge suggests that to dwell on this, as do many European scholars, is to overlook the Hindu psychological system underlying the work.⁶³ To find the inner sense he argues, we need to move beyond the disclosed word or the historical facts and read between the lines. This is possible, he maintains, even if we don't know the language, because we have a faculty which should allow us to do this.⁶⁴ At any rate, brahmins, Orientalists, and Western Sanskritists are all at fault for fixing our minds on the lowest or literal meanings of key words and references.⁶⁵

Reading between the lines for the higher, more psychological meaning leads to some interesting but not unexpected interpretations of specific characters and terms. Dhrtarashtra, for example, is taken to represent the material side of existence, the human body, or senseless matter acquired by the immortal monad for its evolutionary journey. His blindness represents the fact that the material body has no inherent power of sight or feeling; rather, it is the Self which is the final support of every phase of consciousness and form.⁶⁶ In general, the Kurus are seen as representing the material side of life while the Pandus represent the spiritual side.⁶⁷ Accordingly, the battle is to be understood as a battle between the material and spiritual forces residing in every individual. Indeed, the battle is necessary to the course of evolutionary progress in order to prepare the spiritual for taking over from the material the rule of life.

The hostile armies, then, who meet on the plain of the Kurus are these two collections of the human faculties and powers, those on the one side tending to drag us down, those on the other aspiring towards spiritual illumination. The battle refers not only to the great warfare that mankind as a whole carries on, but also to the struggle which is inevitable as soon as any one unit in the family resolves to allow his higher nature to govern him in his life.⁶⁸

As might be expected, Arjuna represents the human being standing at the threshold of the development of higher powers. But further development comes at a price: the lower faculties, old tendencies and habits must be left behind to make way for the new. This is the real meaning of the enumeration of all the generals and commanders—they are really “a catalogue of all the lower and higher faculties in man,” the powers of our being.⁶⁹ We are all Arjuna, and the battle we fight is the battle with ourselves, or more specifically, with our lower nature. Kurukshetra, then, is not India, or a certain spot in India, it is the sacred plain of the human body, Indian, Hindu, American, Christian, or otherwise wherever it is found, and the words of Krishna are the universal message given to help us conquer our lower selves.

Krishna’s concern—the concern of the higher self—is to reveal oneness, and in the light of that oneness, to teach a correct view of selflessness and action. Thus Judge says of the purpose of the *Gita*:

The Bhagavad-Gītā tends to impress upon the individual two things: first selflessness, and second, action; the studying of and living by it will arouse the belief that there is but one Spirit and not several, that we cannot live for ourselves alone, but must come to realize that there is no such thing as separateness, and no possibility of escaping from the collective karma of the race to which one belongs, and then, that we must think and act in accordance with such belief.⁷⁰

Our situations and bodies are to be understood as the product of nature’s law, which is also our law; in evolutionary terms this means that we have those bodies and tendencies, and are born into those situations necessary to give us the experiences we need for further growth. This is what is to be understood by the fact that Arjuna is a warrior.⁷¹ It is also to be expected that in this upward path we will sometimes despair and feel despondency, as Arjuna did since any action bent on further progress will naturally arouse tendencies

antipathetic to further development from previous evolutionary stages.⁷²

Particularly in the Western world today, there are blocks to further progress just as there were in the *Gita's* time. These range from hedonistic concerns like the pursuit of money and external enjoyment,⁷³ engaging in actions to bring the favor of the Mahatmas or which will result in good karma,⁷⁴ to false doctrines such as the Christian notion of securing happiness and prosperity on earth and bliss in heaven.⁷⁵ Particularly pernicious is the worship of the spirit of individualism, which flies in the face of the *Gita's* message of sacrificial action. Judge states:

With the culmination of the dark age it was, however, natural that the last vestiges of sacrifice should disappear. On the ruins of the alter has arisen the temple of the lower self, the shrine of the personal idea. In Europe individualism is somewhat tempered by various monarchical forms of government which do not by any means cure the evil; and in America, being totally unrestrained and forming in fact the basis of independence here, it has culminated. Its bad effects—vaguely as yet shadowing the horizon—might have been avoided if the doctrines of the wisdom-religion had been also believed in by the founders of the republic.⁷⁵

There is, however, a note of hope and optimism injected by Judge. According to natural law, evil can only grow to the point where there is demanded its opposite by way of reaction—the personification of good to oppose rampant evil. This is how the notion of Krishna as *avatāra* is to be understood.⁷⁷

Annie Besant's work on the *Gita* is difficult to place. While she was a Westerner, she identified thoroughly with India and Indian causes. Her interpretation of the *Gita* is equally as influential at Adyar as Judge's has been in North America. I include her here because of her Western origins. Her influential work published as *Hints on the Study of the Bhagavad Gītā* is based on four lectures delivered at the thirtieth anniversary meeting of the Theosophical Society at Adyar in 1905. She also contributed two translations, one together with Bhagavan Das.

For Besant, the *Gita* is not a Hindu text, nor even an Indian text. Rather it is a universal text acclaimed by all nations⁷⁸ and a mirror of the complex history of the world.⁷⁹ Moreover, the *Gita* is not simply a text to be read, but one to be lived as well, for it is by living it that it comes finally to be understood.⁸⁰

Given her view of the *Gita*, it is expected that she will seek out the allegorical meaning in the text. Besant, however, makes a distinction between two related meanings: the historical which has reference to "the working out of the plan of the Logos" or "the evolution of a World-Logos," and the allegorical, which has reference to a smaller history, the history of some individual who exemplifies the larger picture.⁸¹ It is this double meaning that one should look for in the *Gita*.

The larger historical view sees Krishna as the *jagat-guru*, the *avatāra* or Logos of the world system who appears in physical form at a critical point in the evolution of the world system.⁸² However, this Logos is not something separate from the individual but a part of the human spirit.

He comes as the *Logos* of the system, veiling himself in human form, so that He may, as man, outwardly shape the course of history with mighty power, as no lesser force might avail to shape it. But the *Avatāra* is also the *Ishvara* of the human Spirit.⁸³

Besant at this point becomes somewhat prophetic. Krishna's role has practical implications for our understanding of human history and India's place in it. India was destined to serve as world model and savior. But this could only come about through suffering and humiliation, in other words, through a crisis which necessitated the leadership of an *avatāra*. Ironically, his work destroyed the *kṣatriyas* and opened India up to a series of invasions, that nation's "passion" and "crucifixion," which nonetheless fertilized India and resulted in a life-giving stream of wisdom flowing to other lands. Thus, Besant concludes, the *avatāra* is a loving guide bringing unceasing good.⁸⁴

Arjuna's dilemma is that he doesn't understand the larger sweep of history. He stands for the preservation of an old order, unable to accept what is about to happen because he sees only ruin, not the rise of a new and mightier India. Nor does he understand his own role as a bridge from old to new forms until the cosmic plan is revealed to him. What is the larger lesson in all this? Besant says

And so in all history, if only we can see aright in the history around us, in the history of Arjuna on Kurukshetra; if only we can learn the spirit of the great unveiling, the meaning of life behind the veil and of the little lives on this side, their cooperation, their relations one to the other, then in every struggle we can throw ourselves on the right side, and fight

without doubt, without illusion, without fear, for the Warrior who really fights is doing all, and we are but the cells of His body with our wills harmonised into unity with His.⁸⁵

It is not just a call to activity, but activity in world affairs, and a call to optimism in this activity.

The allegorical meaning mirrors the larger historical one. On the allegorical level, the conflict is between *manas*, or the "unfolding mind" and *kāma*, the passions symbolized by the relatives and their ties to the past. Early in his evolution Arjuna experiences no struggle but follows naturally his own appetites and the teaching of the elders. This, however, gives way to a time of struggle and confusion, when *kāma* becomes unsatisfying. But this struggle results in the triumph of *manas*, "illuminated, with the light of the Self, clear, radiant, decided; the delusion destroyed."⁸⁶ In either case, the historical or the allegorical, the lesson is the same struggle to move on to higher levels of development, historical or individual.

Given this emphasis on struggle, Besant sees action as the central teaching of the *Gita*—its nature, its binding force. Thus it is also a book about yoga, for yoga is mastered on the field of activity, a lesson she feels, on the basis of her experience, modern India still needs to learn. Krishna's teaching of skill in action rather than seclusion is a lesson which has been largely forgotten and this has led to the decadence of India.⁸⁷

Since the name of the game is action, one does what needs to be done at the moment, whether it is fighting, or discarding the body, so that something new and better can arise out of the old.⁸⁸ Certainly this is a call to radical change, if not revolution. Whatever action is called for however, must be done, as the *Gita* commands (4.15; 18.23), without attachment, as a sacrifice.⁸⁹ This is, however, not possible unless one is able to see the union of the many in the One, as chapter 11, the heart of the *Gita* teaches.⁹⁰ This teaching of the unity of the many in the One is given an interesting ethical twist in that it applies to evil as well as good. Indeed, Besant argues, in the nature of things there is no good or evil. We create these categories through our own ignorance, folly and passion.⁹¹ Thus, conventional views and practices of good and evil must be transcended by realizing unity and living within it, whatever one's walk of life may be.

The call to skill in action—action done in complete dispassion—is for the ascending path of the evolutionary cycle, the *nivṛtti mārga*. This is different from the *pravṛtti mārga*, not because activity mo-

tivated by man's various temperaments ceases, but because the goal of activity changes. Thus one's desire is directed to Self rather than *kāma*, one's activity is directed to sacrifice rather than objects, one's knowledge is directed to the One rather than separate outer objects. In each case there is desire, a necessary force for the realization of the evolutionary process, but the direction and goal of desire shifts from acquisition of things and knowledge to desire and activity for, and knowledge of the One. This Besant sees as the gist of 13.24.⁹² The outcome of the reorientation of desire is the realization of unity, and this leads to yet more activity rather than cessation of activity:

We shall then see that out of one universe rises, in this Body of Light, the Lord of another universe, and we, parts of His Body, shall work with Him in that new universe more perfectly than we have worked here. Thus on from age to age, from universe to universe, and where, I say again, where is grief, where delusion, when thus we have seen the Oneness?⁹³

A somewhat different look at the *Gita* or at least a different emphasis is found in Charles Johnston's translation and commentary of 1908. It is different in that more attention is given to the Indian background to the development of the text. However, Johnston remains true to what Theosophical writers perceive as the universalist message or import of the *Gita*. Thus Arjuna's despondency and doubt, the resolution of these doubts, and Krishna's majesty are universal in their import. Similarly, the *Gita's* insight into human hearts, the concentration on the conflict of natures, the fetters of selfishness, and the subtle evasions to which humanity is given, also have a universal application.⁹⁴ In spite of its Indian background, the *Gita* is to be understood as a symbolic scripture with many levels of meaning and truth.

The attention to the Indian background reflects an acknowledgement of the various strands or systems of Indian thought that the *Gita* tries to reconcile, all of which address the issue of the soul and immortality. These strands or systems are identified as the work of the four castes or races—the rajput or red, the brahmin or white, the vaishya or yellow, the shudra or black.⁹⁵ From each of these the *Gita* inherits something important. From the rajput it inherits the key message of the *Upanishads*, that the human being is an immortal being subject to rebirth and capable of liberation. From the brahmin it inherits the genius of abstract reasoning. From the vaishya, it may

have inherited the way of works, of fulfilling every duty as a ritual. And from the shudra, it may have inherited the devotional path, the path of emotion or exaltation of the heart.⁹⁶ The comments of the *Gita* on *dharma* or caste mixture, Johnston argues, have to do with the rights and duties of each race. These are emphasized because children from parents of different castes fail to inherit the better qualities of either parent.⁹⁷

Johnston also acknowledges that the *Gita* has the flavor of a local martial epic or a bardic cycle derived from a war, a flavor which is apparent in spite of the universal message interpolated into the basic bardic structure. It is these martial aspects which supposedly belong to the earliest parts of the *Gita*.⁹⁸ The movement from local epic to universal message is seen as early as chapter one when Krishna's epithets take on an increasingly universal tone.⁹⁹ The universal message has, of course, to do with the evolution of the human monad. This is how Arjuna's references to fratricide, destruction of families, destruction of women, and mixing of castes are to be understood. He is standing at the threshold of further spiritual development, a breakthrough that inevitably involves the same kind of conflict to which Jesus alluded when he stated that he had not come to bring peace.

There is a spiritual significance to all this, and the situation of Arjuna is well chosen to bring out great spiritual truths. He stands for the personal self, beginning to grow conscious of the Higher Self; touched and enkindled with the spiritual light of that Higher Self, yet full of dismay and terror from the realization of what obedience to the Higher Self must mean Against the still, small voice of the Soul are arrayed the strong forces of the material nature, the passions, the mind. These are the opposing brothers on the field of Law.¹⁰⁰

Like the Bible, Krishna teaches the necessity for losing or sacrificing life in order to live, for giving up structures which have carried us thus far in order to allow for higher, more spiritual structures, for, in effect, a new heaven and earth.¹⁰¹ The path to this transformation is the path of disinterested work, the undoing of bondage to works through work itself. By this means we gradually transcend the plane of selfishness and desire and begin to hear the voice of immortality within. In effect we are "born again from above," to live under the "commands of infinite love."¹⁰²

This conflict between self-seeking and sacrifice, or the personal self and Higher Self is the key to understanding the juxtaposition of fire and smoke, light and night, the moonlit and moonless nights in *Gita* 8.24–26. The first side represents the positive pole of a series of ascending planes, while the second represents the negative pole. The self-seekers, or those living by Vedic or ritual religion, are drawn to the negative pole and are destined to be reborn in this world, while those who have given up self-seeking, who live by the mystery teaching are drawn to the positive pole and thus ascend to eternal worlds from which they do not return.¹⁰³

This conflict also provides the key for understanding the dramatic situation in chapter eleven of the *Gita* that parallels the book of Revelation.

The truth would seem to be that, at a certain point in spiritual life, the ardent disciple, who has sought in all things to bring his soul into unison with the great soul, who has striven to bring his will to likeness with the Divine Will, passes through a marked spiritual experience, in which the great soul draws him upward, the Divine Will raises his consciousness to oneness with the Divine Consciousness; for a time he perceives and feels, no longer as the person but as the Oversoul, gaining a profound vision of the divine ways of life, and feeling with the infinite Power, which works through life and death alike, through sorrow and joy, through union and separation, through creation, destruction and recreation.¹⁰⁴

Again we are back at what is considered the essential message of the *Gita*—selflessness or self-forgetfulness, a “ridding oneself of the heresy of separateness, self-centred vanity and egotism.”¹⁰⁵

CONCLUSION

This survey of theosophical treatments of the *Gita* points to remarkable continuity in the understanding of what are to be considered the essential teachings of the *Gita*. There is perhaps something here akin to a controlling orthodoxy—notwithstanding the early claims of the society that crucial for membership in the society is not what one believes but simply a commitment to the search for truth. The issue here is not creedal commitment but the overriding influence of particular ideas owing much to the writings of Blavatsky, and in the view of the society to the instruction of the Mahatmas. This is

supported by the many references to the writings and ideas of H.P. Blavatsky and to the use of terminology found in Blavatsky's writings.

The commitment to particular ideas through which one is to read the *Gita* is also found in the basic view of Theosophical interpreters that the *Gita* teaches the ancient esoteric knowledge that is the fountain for all major scriptures and systems of thought. This ancient esoteric knowledge is, of course, to be found in the writings of Blavatsky which in turn are said to be based on the findings of the ancient Greeks, Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Eastern traditions. For some interpreters, the *Gita* becomes in effect a jumping off point for the explanation or expounding of Theosophical teaching, moreso than one would normally expect for scriptural interpretation or commentary. The outcome is similar to that of Shankara's *bhasya* of the *Gita*—that is, one has the feeling that a system is primary and that the *Gita* is simply being filtered through the system. The single exception to this is Chatterji's interpretation, which is viewed favorably by Theosophists even though some of its ideas run counter to what one might expect in Theosophical literature.

Aside from commitment to particular ideas, or a system of thought through which one reads the text, there is also consistency in the approach to understanding the *Gita*, that is, the allegorical approach, which remains dominant throughout. Given this, the changes one will perceive as one moves chronologically through the interpretations will not be found so much in the basic teachings which are seen in the *Gita*, as in the level of sophistication or detail in the use of the allegorical method. Thus one will move from very general lessons concerning the state and travels of the individual monad represented by Arjuna to a much more detailed use of allegory in which significance comes to be attached to the various characters on both sides, to the epithets used, and even to the weapons used.

Given the predominance of the allegorical approach, it is the esoteric or philosophical import of the *Gita* and not the historical concerns that receives the emphasis. While the historical material is sometimes acknowledged, for the most part it is passed over for the sake of getting to the real essence of the text. Thus Subba Row in his early interpretation points out that Vyasa, the author, "looked upon Arjuna as a man, or rather the real monad in man; and upon Krishna as the Logos, or the spirit that comes to save man."¹⁰⁶ The real import of the *Gita* faithfully repeated by Theosophical interpreters from 1881 on is that we are all Arjuna called upon to do battle with our lower selves. To quote Subba Row:

We are each of us called upon to kill out all our passions and desires, not that they are all necessarily evil in themselves, but that their influence must be annihilated before we can establish ourselves on the higher planes. The position of Arjuna is intended to typify that of a chela, who is called upon to face the Dweller on the Threshold. As the guru prepares his chela for the trials of initiation by philosophical teaching, so at the critical point Krishna proceeds to instruct Arjuna.¹⁰⁷

It is this lesson which is developed in greater and greater degrees of detail and sophistication by Theosophical interpreters. We come back again to the basic Theosophical position concerning life and the human being. Life is an evolutionary process in which individuals evolve from lower to higher, from grosser more physical forms of being to more spiritual forms of being. It is a process which involves constant conflict between those powers and forces which have developed and those which are developing to fit us for a higher plane of life. This evolutionary framework informs the various interpretations of the *Gita*.

Any substantial distinction between the various interpretations would lie in the area of their practical use and social and ethical implications. Here, I believe, we find two broad categories of interpretation. First, all interpretations see the value of the *Gita* in more general terms as reminding individuals that they must join in the struggle to further the process of evolution in order to overcome the forces of ego, desire, and selfishness and to further the development of a human brotherhood characterized by love and selflessness. Second, there are those, particularly Row, Besant, The Dreamer and The Brahmin, who would put the *Gita* to more particular use—that is, as a support for reform efforts and nationalistic aspirations in an India seen as a light that will lead the world to true insight and thus to liberation. This category of interpretations has as part of its agenda the reform and liberation of India. Above all, this liberation of India requires the elimination of slavery to pernicious religious and social customs and religious systems that have caused her to lose sight of the true esoteric teachings of her scriptures. This would characterize the approach of Indian interpreters as well as a few Western interpreters like Besant. The result is a definition or redefinition of Hinduism in terms of Theosophical or primieval teachings that takes issue with a variety of Hindu traditions that are seen to have led India into decadence. Western interpreters, on the other

hand, are not so intent to define true Hinduism as they are to spread the gospel of the universal religion, which just happens to be Theosophy. If there is a more specific agenda it is Western in orientation—that is, the value of the teachings of the *Gita* is seen in its potential to rid Western society of the excesses of individualism and of false interpretations of its own religious traditions, particularly Christianity. This would seem to echo a concern that surfaces frequently in Blavatsky's writings.

Whether Indian or Western then, the interpretations tend to proceed on two levels. There is first the general level having to do with the education and evolutionary development of the human monad, a level which transcends any local, national, geographic or particular religious concerns. There is secondly, the more specific level in which the message of the *Gita* is applied to more particular concerns, national, religious, etc. On this level at least the interpreters could be said to be influenced by the particular worlds or societies in which they are raised or have chosen to move. Beyond the more general message, the *Gita* is made to speak to the concerns, the changes, and the ethos of these societies.