
This book is the first volume of a new series called ‘Christian Commentaries on Non-Christian Sacred Texts’. It consists of a collection of ten articles about the Bhagavad Gita, edited by Catherine Cornille of Boston College, who is also the general editor of the series.

It was a good decision to start the series with a volume focused on the Bhagavad Gita. It might be argued that the Vedas and not the Bhagavad Gita form the most sacred texts of Hinduism. However, the Gita is certainly the book that has the greatest influence upon spiritual life and religious discourse of the Hindus. Since Hinduism has historically nothing in common with the Christian tradition, the choice for this holy book provides also a good test case for the whole project of the series. Is it possible to comment from a Christian point of view on the sacred texts of such a completely different religion?

Not all authors of this book have the same approach to commenting, comparing, and dialogue. Some contributors have chosen a central theme of the Bhagavad Gita as the starting point for a comparison of Hindu and Christian values. Thus, Gavin Flood discusses the concept of detachment which is so important in the religious ethics of the Gita. He compares this attitude, in particular, with the ascetic monasticism in the Eastern Orthodox churches. Likewise, Joseph O’Leary focuses on desireless action and mystics, with special attention for the context of the Gita, being a part of the great epic of India, the Mahabharata. Bart Bruehler also deals with the moral teaching of the Gita, culminating in selfless action. However, his method consists of reading one chapter of the Gita together with a part of the New Testament, viz. Ephesians 4-6.

In three articles, a comparison is made between the Bhagavad Gita and Christian spiritual classics. Maria Clara Bingemer discusses the spiritual philosophy of Simone Weil, who had read the Gita with much appreciation. But it is also possible to compare the message of the Gita with the work of an author who was definitely not influenced by Hindu thinking. Michael Barnes and Jacques Scheuer, both Jesuit fathers, compare the spirituality of the Gita with the ‘Spiritual Exercises’ of the founder of their order, Ignatius of Loyola.

In the eyes of Rachel Fell McDermott, the Bhagavad Gita represents a via media that is quite in line with her own Anglican tradition. She treats the themes of surrender to duty, equanimity, and the accessibility of God.

Finally, three authors deliver an exegetical analysis of texts in the Bhagavad Gita, which serves as a point of departure for a comparison with Christian theology. Steven Tsoukalas discusses the important Hindu concept of avatara and the Christian notion of incarnation on the basis of a text about Krishna’s assuming a human form (Gita 9: 11). Reid Locklin focuses on an interesting mythological image, the cosmic tree as described in Gita 15: 1-6. Finally, Francis Clooney gives an exposition of the famous text in which Krishna invites his disciple to come to him for refuge, after giving up all modes of righteousness (Gita 18: 66). Especially this last contribution is a beautiful example of a careful and inspiring Christian commentary on a Hindu text.

Not all contributions to this volume, however, are equally valuable. Some authors are experts in Hinduism but others do not seem to have a profound knowledge of the Bhagavad

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Gita. Moreover, the choice of the subjects of the various articles cannot be characterized as well-balanced. Comparison with Christian spiritual classics is useful, but why two articles about the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and not a single reference to e.g. Augustine, or Thomas a Kempis? With regard to the Gita, it is remarkable that almost all authors focus on the ethical teaching of the book: action and detachment. The central Chapter 11 with Krishna’s transfiguration receives hardly any attention. While reading the holy book of another religion, however, one should also be guided by what is considered by the believers to be the climax of the book.

All authors agree that it makes sense for Christians to take knowledge of the Bhagavad Gita. But they have very different views as to what this Hindu lore can contribute to Christian theology. Some tend to present sheer similarities between Gita and Gospels. But can Jesus really be regarded as an example of the passionless sage as McDermott tries to make us believe? Others emphasize that the study of the Gita makes us aware of the differences between Hinduism and Christian belief. That might be partly true, but Bingemer ends her article certainly in a too radical way with the conclusion: ‘Comparison with the Gita enables Christians to recognize the distinctiveness of their own religion’.

It would have been useful if the editor of this volume had not only written an introduction but also a concluding chapter. We would like to see some structure in the ‘wide variety of possible perspectives and distinctive approaches’, which she promises in the introduction. Nevertheless, this volume provides the reader with some interesting and stimulating commentaries on the central sacred book of modern Hinduism. And every reader will be convinced that it is important to explore this religious tradition and to look for elements that can be a source of inspiration for Christians. — Jan Peter Schouten, Bloemendaal, The Netherlands.