Christian Responses to Five Views of the Bhagavad Gita

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Entry into Dialogue

By

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With grateful thanks to Hindu and Christian colleagues who have helped me think and learn more about how to read the Bhagavad Gita.

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CHAPTER ONE

THEOLOGY AT 120°F

> It wasn't so much the heat, as the constant necessity of pitting all one's strength against a hostile atmosphere, just to remain alive. The sun was no more a life-giver, but a murderer. And as yet there was no hope of rain. … Theology at 120°F in the shade seems, after all, different from theology at 70°F. Theology accompanied by tough chapatis and smoky tea seems different from theology with roast chicken and a glass of good wine. Now, who is really different, theos or the theologian? The theologian at 70°F in a good position presumes God to be happy and contented, well-fed and rested, without needs of any kind. The theologian at 120°F tries to imagine a God who is hungry and thirsty, who suffers and is sad, who sheds perspiration and knows despair. But all this is already too hinduistic.
>
> The theologian at 70°F and with a well-ordered life sees the whole world as a beautiful harmony with a grand purpose, the church as God's kingdom on earth and himself as promoter of the real culture of humanity. The theologian at 120°F sees the cracks in the soil and the world as a desert; he considers whether it wouldn't be wiser to keep the last jug of water till the evening; he wishes the heat was a few degrees less and he has to exert all his Christian faith trying to find a little bit of sense in this life wherein he plays a very insignificant role, because he depends on so many people.
>
> Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban (Klostermaier 1969, 38-41)

This extract from Klaus Klosermaier's reflections on his experiences as a Catholic priest in Vrindaban, a key spiritual site within the worship of Krishna, begins to open up the markedly different Hindu and Christian approaches to what are sometimes termed the "ultimate questions" of faith, the purpose of life, divinity and the nature of humanity. Klostermaier's point is that our context, our culture, even the weather, all make a big difference to how we answer these fundamental questions. His experience suggests that Hindu answers are often quite different from those offered by Western Christians.

While there is a long-standing tradition of engagement between the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Western Christian

engagement with Hinduism is much more limited in scope and scale. I have written this book to help gather my own thoughts in relation to how Christians understand and learn from Hindus. The initial stimulus was a three-year project, focused specifically on Anglican-Vaishnav dialogue, that is, conversations between a particular strand of Christianity and a particular strand of Hinduism. This book has grown out of those discussions, which have often drawn from the Bhagavad Gita, the text which is my primary focus in this book.

An outline of the book

In this chapter I will outline the project as a whole and establish some of the key points of contact and difference between the worldviews being discussed. The second chapter explains why the Bhagavad Gita was selected as a particular text to focus on, as well as introducing its main themes and overarching story. The next five chapters explore different expositions of the text of the Bhagavad Gita, before the final two chapters explore points of contact and difference with Christian Scripture and thought.

My purpose in writing is to clarify and record my current thinking about the connections and differences between my own Christian faith, other Christian understandings and a variety of Hindu understandings. This chapter outlines my understanding of some of the key terms that will be used throughout the rest of the work, namely what I mean by "Christian," "Hindu," "God," and "humanity."

What is a Christian, what is a Hindu?

The name "Christian" was originally coined as an insult; it is a diminutive form of the title "Christ," which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah," the anointed one, the chosen king. The term Christian is only used a few times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16) and is used by some other authors (Lucian, Alex 25, 28 Tactitus, Ann. 15, 44; Suetonius, Nero 16, Pliny the Younger Ep 10,96, 1; 2; 3).

When the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, it was done so in mild mockery, calling them "little Christs" who busied themselves following someone who was obviously a failed messiah. After all, the detractors of Christianity thought, this Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified and was presumably therefore dead, whatever his followers claimed. But over time this insult became a badge of honour; followers of Jesus became proud to

be called Christians. Whether that remains the case today is, of course, a moot point. In some parts of the world, where it is illegal to be a Christian or to become a Christian as an adult, alternative names are used. This is also the case when those seeking to attract others to joining them as followers of Jesus wish to be sensitive to the cultural expectations of the people they are engaging with. Thus, for example, those sharing Jesus with people in South East Asia may talk of *Jeshua Satsangs* as a way of describing gatherings that in another context would be called church services (Duerksen 2015). In a Muslim majority context where conversion is illegal, it would be more common to describe the offer of becoming a follower of *Isa* (Arabic for Jesus) rather than of becoming a Christian. Even in my own context in the UK, the description "Christian" is not necessarily a positive one. The scandals of abuse of children that have engulfed the Catholic and Anglican churches have meant that for many people, "Christian" (or perhaps more particularly "Christian priest") has become synonymous with abuse, cover-up and unashamed self-interest with no regard for victims.

Names come with baggage and presumptions. Many people who want to follow the teaching and example of Jesus Christ are reluctant to call themselves Christians because of concerns about the connotations of that name. Whilst I recognise these difficulties, there is also a need to be practical and produce readable material. For the purpose of this book, I will continue to use the term "Christian" but also refer to "followers of Jesus," both for variety and to make it clear that my intention is to focus on the individual and corporate relationship between Jesus Christ and those who model their lives on his teaching and example.

The description "Hindu" is potentially even more problematic as a descriptor, for at least two reasons. First, because it is a Western imposition, and second, because it can be difficult to define precisely what is meant by the term. As with the epithet "Christian," the first uses of "Hindoo" were primarily pejorative, a catch-all term used by white Western men to belittle the beliefs and practices of the peoples of the Indian subcontinent.

The phrase *sanatana dharma*, the eternal duty, or eternal religion, is the phrase that is more commonly used by Hindus themselves to describe what they believe and practice. The key emphases are on the timeless nature of this belief and its all-encompassing scope. Religious thought and actions are not compartmentalised or privatised, but are public and all-embracing.

The second challenge in using the term "Hindu" is that it can be hard to know precisely what is meant by the term. If *sanatana dharma* refers to the

whole of life, to all actions by a particular people, then is everything they do and think automatically part of Hinduism? What of those who argue their faith is separate, of which the Sikhs are the most obvious example? The Indian constitution describes Sikhi as a sub-set of Hinduism, an assertion Sikhs would deny. What about, as I will discuss in greater detail below, those who do not believe in God? Or those who practice animal sacrifices as part of their Hindu faith, actions that stand in tension with the espoused core belief in *ahimsa*, non-violence, and with teachings about the importance of vegetarian or vegan diets?

The above discussion illustrates the limitations of the term "Hindu." However, no suitable alternative exists within English, so it will be used here, despite these problems.

Do Hindus believe in God?

It is not necessary to believe in God in order to be a Hindu. As Brockington notes,

> it is possible to be a Hindu and an atheist, for belief in the existence of a deity is not an essential component of religion for all Hindus. What is far more difficult is to reject the various practices typifying different Hindu communities and yet to remain accepted as a Hindu (1992, xi).

This focus on action over belief suggests that Hindu identity is derived primarily from orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy, from what people do rather than what they believe. This stands in contrast with a Christian emphasis on belief being equally, if not more, important than action. Of course, there are those who could be described as "Christian atheists," with many of the members of the "Sea of Faith" network being a case-in-point. Whilst this is the case, it is also true that the self-identity "Christian" is primarily an expression of doctrinal belief, whilst self-identification as Hindu is as much to do with culture, practice and ethnicity as it is to do with doctrinal belief.

There are thus some Hindus who describe themselves as atheists, although what they mean by that term may not be what others mean by it. One challenge in engaging with Hindu belief from a Christian perspective is the challenge of language. What I mean by a particular word is not necessarily what someone else means by that same word. The term "god" is very relevant here. As Brockington goes on to explain:

> If we define the deity as the highest or deepest principle of existence, the ultimate reality, then most Hindus are monotheists, since in this sense they believe in only one absolute or one deity. But if we understand the deity as whatever is venerated through invocation, prayer or offering, then the cult of the saints which is general in Roman Catholic and Orthodox communities would make of many Christians as much polytheists as those Hindus who worship the many minor powers (distinguished as *devas* from the one supreme deity as *ishvrara*) that operate at a comparatively mundane level. (Brockington 1992, 1).

Therefore, it is as difficult to be clear about what Hindus mean when they say they believe in one God as it is to understand what Christians believe. Whilst Christian theologians have wrestled for centuries with how to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, many Christians have developed their own theories and understandings, not all of which would be necessarily pass the test of orthodoxy. (As an aside Judaism does not recognise Christianity as monotheistic, because of Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God.) The veneration of saints and of Mary, and indeed some attitudes towards the infallibility of the Bible add greater complexity to the picture.

After all, what do we mean when we say we believe in God? Arvind Sharma quotes Ghandi on his belief in God:

> From the platform of the Jains I prove the non-creative aspect of God, and from that of Ramanuja the creative aspect. As a matter of fact we are all thinking the Unthinkable, describing the Indescribable, seeking to know the Unknown, and that is why our speech falters, is inadequate and even often contradictory. That is why the Vedas describe Brahman as "not this," "not this". But if He or It is not this, He or It is. If we exist, if our parents and their parents have existed, then it is proper to believe in the Parent of the whole creation. If He is not, we are nowhere. And that is why all of us with one voice call one God differently as Paramatma, Ishwara, Shiva, Vishnu, Rama, Allah, Khuda, Dada Hormuzda, Jehova, God, and an infinite variety of names. He is one and yet many; He is smaller than an atom, and bigger than the Himalayas. He is contained even in a drop of the ocean, and yet not even the seven seas can encompass Him (Sharma, 2005, 17).

In Christianity there is also a long tradition of apophatic theology, that is, describing God by what he is not (he is without limits, in-finite, for example). God is understood as being everywhere, and yet outside of time. But there are also distinctive aspects to the Hindu understanding of God. When a Hindu discusses belief in God, an analogy that is often used is that of light refracted in a prism. Just as white light is refracted into a rainbow of colours as it passes through a prism, the explanation goes, so the one God

is refracted through a prism into many forms. It is not so much that there are many gods, as that one God has many forms. But even here, there are differences in belief; some Hindus would describe some of the deities as demi-Gods, or as cosmic organising principles or officials rather than as manifestations of the divine itself. Moreover, different Hindus select a particular appearance of God as the central focus of their worship, depending on which manifestation of God that they feel most drawn to.

For both Christians and Hindus, God has appeared in physical form. The Sanskrit term used to describe the appearance of the divine in physical form is an *avatar*, from the term *tri*, to cross over, attain, save, with prefix *ava,* down, so *ava-tri,* a down coming, descend to, an incarnation. Although the Christian term Incarnation can be used in reference to Hindu understanding of *avatar*, the term does not refer to the Christian understanding of Jesus becoming incarnate as a human being in a once-for-all salvific event. Thus, Vishnu has ten *avatars*, of which his appearance as Rama and Krishna are arguably the most important. Vishnu's ten *avatars* are: as a fish; a tortoise; a boar; a man-lion; a dwarf; Rama with his axe (*Parasurama*); Rama with his bow (*Ramacandra*); Krishna; Buddha; and Kalki. This final *avatar* is predicted for the end times and the destruction of the world. He will be born a Brahmin and glorify Vishnu. Destroying all things, he will bring in a new age. As king of kings, he will exterminate foreigners, restoring order and peace in the world.

This is different from a Christian understanding of "theophanies" or "Christophanies," appearances of God in the Hebrew scriptures. There are differences of opinion between Christians as to exactly what these accounts of God engaging with people signify, but many would argue that God is somehow physically present when, for example, Abraham receives visitors (Genesis 18), or Jacob wrestles with God (Genesis 32:22-32) or Moses asks to see God's face but is only allowed to see God's back (Exodus 33:12-34:7). It would be too much of a digression to discuss different Christian and Jewish understandings of what these accounts signify. Suffice to say that for some Christians, these, and other similar accounts of the physical presence of God meeting with his people, are "Christophanies," that is physical appearances of Christ before his Incarnation. Many other Christians, and all Jews, would reject this idea, believing rather than it is either God in physical form, or the appearance of the angel of the Lord who represents the physical presence of God.

Parrinder suggests that a Christian notion of "inhistorisation" be utilised to make the understanding of Incarnation distinct. By this he means an

Incarnation of a fully historic individual. That is to say, it matters more for Christianity whether Jesus was really a human being than it does whether Krishna really did dance with cowgirls (1970, 119). Parrinder goes on to outline twelve characteristics of *avatar* doctrines (1970, 120-26). These are:

1. In Hindu belief, the *avatar* is real. It is "a visible and fleshly descent of the divine to the animal or human plane."
2. The human *avatars* take worldly birth, in various ways, but through human parents.
3. The lives of *avatars* mingle divine and human. In the example of Krishna, his youthful loves, manly exploits, marriage and reign show his humanity but also some power of divinity.
4. The *avatars* finally die. Krishna is fatally wounded in the foot by a hunter's arrow before ascending to heaven. Death came when the *avatar's* purpose in coming had been accomplished.
5. There may be historicity in some *avatars*. The animal *avatars* are mythical, though visible, and are important for cosmology. But Indian thought does not give the same prominence to history that Jews or Greeks did.
6. *Avatars* are repeated. The divine descent comes more than once. This can give the whole thing a mythical air. But there is a rhythm; they come when there is a decline in righteousness.
7. The example and character of the *avatar* is important. For Krishna, focus on his character in the Bhagavad Gita, where he is noble, moral, active and compassionate.
8. The *avatar* comes with work to do; it is not mere play. The great purpose is to establish *dharma*, to restore right and put down wrong. This may include slaying men and demons, delivering the earth, showing the divine nature and love.
9. *Avatars* show some reality in the world, because they become human people in the material world, they live and suffer in it. They teach *dharma* for this life, the importance of action over inaction.
10. The *avatar* is a guarantee of divine revelation. *Avatars* are special revelations of God, building on the general knowledge that is already there.
11. *Avatars* reveal a personal God, who responds to human persons. The personal revelation of God brings divine speech to people, in commands and promises.
12. *Avatars* reveal a God of grace; entry into a relationship of love.

What about Krishna?

This book is focused specifically on the Bhagavad Gita, and as such the *avatar* Krishna is of particular relevance. Barnes notes that Krishna is "the most popular manifestation or *avatar* of God in the Hindu pantheon. He is the mischievous child who delights parents, the dependable hero who strengthens warriors and above all the ideal lover who seduces the soul with his passion and beauty" (2012, 225-26).

Discussing Krishna, Parrinder comments

> In the popular Krishna legends there is a constant mingling of human and divine. When the baby Krishna was laid to sleep he cried and kicked his feet, but these tiny feet, soft like sprouts, capsized a cart and broke its shafts. One day when his mother placed the baby on the ground a huge demon carried him away in a whirlwind, but the child caught the monster by the neck and throttled it. When Krishna's companions said that he had been eating mud, he denied it and told his mother to look into his mouth; there she saw the universe, earth and air and sky, moving and unmoving. Then Krishna stole the butter, and in guilt his eyes seemed to tremble in fear so that his mother tried to bind him with a rope "like an ordinary person," but the rope was always too short till the god in pity for her allowed himself to be bound, and then he pulled down two trees to free himself.
>
> These legends cannot be history, yet they are treasured by millions of believers, who dwell with love on every detail and consider them to have happened "historically." Apocrypha may be history in the eyes of faith, and comparable stories that are told about the Buddha and Muhammad demonstrate the importance of story to religion, which is not satisfied with abstract principles (1970, 237).

Some stories of Krishna portray him as a trickster; one famous one has him stealing the *gopis'* (cowgirls) clothes as they are bathing. They are all in love with him, and although he becomes lover to all of them, he develops a particular relationship with Radha, sometimes regarded as an avatar of Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort. She leaves her husband for Krishna, and is his first ardent love. Parrinder comments, "This romantic but adulterous love was spontaneous, more exciting than the formality of battles and righteous reigns. In it the emotions of passion, jealousy, reconciliation and consummation are all illustrated" (1970, 78). The relationship is highly symbolic: Krishna is God and Radha is the soul; sexual passion is symbolic of the intensity of desire for God.

But by the time he is portrayed in the Gita, Krishna has become a more mature, authoritative leader. He is a seasoned advisor, a dispenser of wisdom, a guide to enlightenment. Worship of Krishna is *bhakti*, which "has connotations of loyalty and sharing and participation. It refers to a self-surrender to the love of God that is all-enveloping" (Barnes 2012, 226). A further term is *prapatti*, which has implications of searching and seeking out the protection of a teacher. To practise *prapatti* is to give oneself completely, without reserve, having lost all inhibitions and forsaken all self-centred calculation.

The precise status of Krishna within Hinduism varies, depending upon whom you ask. For devotees of the Hare Krishna movement, he is the supreme *avatar*, the *avatari*, that is the one from whom all the other *avatars* came. They argue that Krishna is first, and Vishnu is an *avatar* of Krishna, whilst other Hindus see the reverse as being true: Vishnu is supreme, and Krishna comes from him. As will be seen in this book, others regard Krishna as one deity amongst many, or as a subordinate figure; Hass for example focuses his worship on Krishna's consort Shri Radha.

Christian belief about God

Arguably the most significant distinctive aspect of Christian belief about God is the doctrine of the Trinity. Limitations of space prevent a detailed discussion; I will limit myself to three points. First, the doctrine of the trinity is the basis for the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*; second, it makes the relationship between Creator and created clear and third it is possible only because of the self-revelation of God.

All cultures have creation myths of some description, but as Barth (1975, 51) has pointed out, it is erroneous to categorise the Christian doctrine of creation as an alternative creation myth. The reason for this is that creation myths consider a world which already exists. So, for example *Enuma Elish*, the Babylonian creation myth, considers the battle and victory of order over chaos. Hinduism is not teleological in the way Christianity is, and so has less interested in beginnings. In contrast, the Christian understanding is that God created the universe out of nothing.

This is linked in with the understanding that God is Trinity, and thus is in an eternal relationship of mutual self-giving. For God there was no necessity to create, but rather a free choice to create. This understanding is clarified once the relationships within the Trinity are considered further: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, but is not created by the Father, because

creation implies temporal limitation, which the Son is not subject to. However, the eternal distinction between Father and Son forms a paradigm from which we can understand the distinction between Creator and created. Just as there is distinction within the Godhead, with the Father, Son and Spirit being both distinguished and unified in their relationship, so also, we can see a distinction, but also a connection between Creator and created. If we follow Augustine in seeing the Spirit as the bond of love between Father and Son, there may also be a paradigm for seeing the Spirit as the bond connecting Creator and created.

What does the Triune nature of the Creator tell us about the relationship with the creation? My understanding is that the Triune Creator is distinct from, but involved in, the creation. This idea is set out by Iraenaeus' doctrine of the Son and the Spirit as the two hands of the Father. It should be noted that hands must be attached to the body, and thus this is not a way of preserving distance between the Father and creation, but rather of explaining how the involvement takes place. The New Testament asserts that creation took place through and for the Son (see for example John 1:1-14; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 11:3). It also stresses the importance of the role of the Spirit, especially in bringing creation to its intended goal. Romans 8 is a key text here, in which Paul argues that the creation is currently subject to futility but that it will be redeemed through the work of the Spirit. Thus, the Spirit is what Basil of Caesarea has termed the "perfecting cause" of the creation.

Here we can see the impact of the Trinity on the doctrine of creation. Rather than resort to deism, or a purposeless view of creation, as implied by proponents of modern Neo-Darwinism, the creation is good, having a purpose and a goal. Creation must be distinct from the Creator, because were it otherwise that would imply some form of deficiency or incompleteness in the Godhead. As Gunton has demonstrated (1997, 2004), God did not *need* to create but *freely chose* to create.

By preserving a distinction between Creator and created, the creation is recognised as good and freed to become what it was intended to be. The Incarnation of Jesus Christ sheds light on this. The fact that God took human form in Jesus Christ demonstrates that in the Christian view created matter must be regarded as good, and furthermore that human beings must be regarded as the sum of their spiritual, emotional and physical constitution. The Resurrection of Jesus points towards the consummation of creation, and indicates the purpose the Trinity has for it.

The role of the Trinity within the Incarnation of Jesus is also important for understanding the creation. According to Luke it is the Spirit who forms Jesus in his mother's womb, and it is by the Spirit that the Father raises Jesus from the dead (Luke 1:35; Acts 2:24, 35; 3:15, 26). Here we can see spelt out how the different persons of the Trinity are involved in the creation. Calvin's summary of the role of the Trinity in creation is helpful here. He states that the Father is the beginning of the action, the fountain and source of all things. The Son is the wisdom, counsel and arrangement in the action and the Spirit is the energy and efficacy of that action of creation.

But how do we know of this Trinitarian involvement in creation? Barth argues that it is entirely due to the self-revelation of God through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ (1949, 52). It is impossible for us to separate our knowledge of God as creator from his dealings with people through his Son. The grace God has shown to humanity in his Son helps us understand that creation itself is grace. Barth argues that God does not grudge the existence of a reality distinct from himself, and that this manifestation of grace comes from the triune nature of God.

In a Christian understanding, it is because God is Trinity that he chose and was able to create the universe which currently exists. Without a Trinitarian understanding of God, it is not really possible to formulate a truly Christian doctrine of creation. The Trinity was in eternal, sufficient relationship and so did not need to, but chose to create reality distinct from itself. The fact that the Creator is triune allows the creation to be distinct from the Creator, whilst at the same time allowing the Creator to be intimately involved in his work. And we would know none of this if the Creator had not chosen to reveal himself through his Son, Jesus Christ. Doubtless much more could be said about the Christian understanding of the divine. Suffice to say, Christianity is both monotheistic and trinitarian; the reconciliation of these two understandings is a distinctive feature of Christian thought, and as such is worthy of further exploration in Christian-Hindu dialogue.

What do Hindus believe about humanity?

For Hindus, time is understood as cyclical; belief in reincarnation means that once we die, we are born again in a different form. Hindus understand a human being to consist of that which is perishable and that which is eternal. As Ramesh Menon puts it,

> In the body, we shed worn clothes. So, too, the soul that dwells in the body sheds worn bodies. And as the body puts on new clothes the soul puts on new bodies, as if they were the soul's clothes. But the atman isn't touched by fire or weapons, by wind or water. Inmost, subtlest element, always the being of beings, it is permanent, forever changeless (2006, 14-15).

Menon is not as precise in his language as he might be. The Sanskrit term *atman* is not quite the same as the soul. The *atman* is "that ultimate ground of the individual that is devoid of any of the accidents of ego or the personality" (Brockington, 1992, 145). The *atman* moves from body to body, and so the ultimate goal, for a Hindu, is for the *atman* to attain release from time, to attain *moksha*, or liberation. By contrast a Christian understanding of the soul is that it is linked to one physical existence (albeit one that is potentially renewed at the general resurrection).

The body which one is born in (be it human, animal or plant) is determined by one's *karma*. As Sharma explains,

> The doctrine of karma holds that we undergo the consequences of our own actions, even if they are thoroughly predetermined. So even when we are thoroughly in the grip of predestination, it is our own actions in the past that are responsible, and not any agency other than us such as the Fates or even gods (2005, 81).

How I act now, in this life, thus impacts not just my current life, but also my future lives as well. Ideally, life follows a four-fold pattern: celibate student (*brahmacharya*); householder (*grihastha*); hermit (*vanaprastha*); and the renunciate (*sannyasa*). A related point is that of the *varna* (literally "colour"), or caste system. There are four main castes, and the orderly nature of society depends on every individual remaining in the caste into which they have been born. Lipner explains the four main groups as follows. First are the *brahmins*. They had the most exalted status, fulfilling a priestly function at the top of society. Second are the *ksatriya*, from whom the kings and rulers of society were drawn, as well as those who physically protect the community. Third come the *vaishya*, who engage in trade and commerce, building a flourishing community so that *dharma* can be established on a sound economic basis. Finally, the *shudra* are the lowest, the peasants, the workers (1994, 89-91).

Life, in the Hindu perspective, is shaped by *dharma*, the inherent nature of things. The *dharma* of water is to be cold, of fire to be hot, of people to live in accordance to their *varna*, their status and function in life. The challenge is to determine the *dharma* of any particular context. The sources of *dharma*

are *sruti* (revelation); *smrti* (tradition); *acara* (exemplary conduct); and *atmatusti* (conscience). The Bhagavad Gita is one of many Hindu texts which tackle this central question of what the *dharma* of a particular context is.

The challenge that the four-fold pattern and the caste system pose are as to how one both renounces worldly duties but at the same time fulfils them. This is the central question that the Gita debates; as Arjuna questions Krishna about how he can fulfil his duty when faced with a call to fight against his own relatives.

Christian views of Humanity

According to Genesis 1, humanity is made in the image of God, but if God is Triune, what impact will that have on our understanding of the image? I will discuss this question below. Having made a few introductory remarks on what we can know of the Trinity, I will examine two false uses of Trinitarian theology is discussion of personal identity, namely the equation of personhood and the Trinity, and the insistence of gender within the Trinity, before examining the contributions of the concept of God as "being in communion" and the different roles ascribed to members of the Trinity will have on an understanding of personal identity.

So first, what can we know of the Trinity? Only what we can know with certainty will have any contribution to make to an understanding of personal identity. We can only know what God chooses to reveal of himself, and so even for understanding the Trinity recourse must be made first and foremost to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ through the Scriptures. Pannenberg makes a valid point that we can only have direct knowledge of the economic Trinity; from it we can infer information regarding the immanent Trinity, but can never directly know of it (1991, 30). Thus Blocher's statement is helpful: "God *incomprehensible*, yet God *intelligible* by means of his revelation: both are vital" (1997, 107).

This brings us to the first misuse of Trinitarian theology in understanding personal identity, namely confusing the image of God with identity with God. That is to say, to state that humanity is made in the image of God does not mean humans are divine. There are some aspects of Trinitarian life that cannot be part of personal human identity. God is transcendent and distinct from all creation, including the human creation. This is borne out for example in some of the Old Testament names for God such as *el shadai* (God Almighty) and *el elyon* (God Most High). This otherness of God is

grounded in the Trinitarian being of God. As Blocher notes, for God to be self-sufficient, self-contained and in a non-correlative relation with the creation, God must be Triune. God is thus complete in Triune relationship and has no need of the creation, while human beings are not complete in and of themselves (1997, 119-20). The observation that "no man is an island" may be a truism but it marks an important distinction between the Trinity and an individual human being. However, the Trinity also forms the grounds for God's immanence, God distinct from and yet involved in creation. Since God is Three, plurality is not foreign to him, and this is one parallel between God and humanity as a species. Furthermore, the distinction between God and creation is very loosely paralleled by the distinction between humanity and the rest of creation: this could be understood as one aspect of creation in the image of God.

The second misuse of the Trinity as the image of God is a false back projection from humanity to God, for example with the attribution of gender to God. Since one obvious difference between human beings is that of gender, and there are distinctions within the Godhead, it is argued by some that God should therefore have gender. Furthermore, a feminist critique of the patriarchalism associated with God as Father and God as Son has led to the proposal that God the Holy Spirit must be female. But God is beyond gender. The Bible uses both male and female metaphors to describe God, but there are no more to be taken literally that the idea that the Father literally has a physical right hand at which the Son sits. The Father and Son can be understood as male without male sexuality dominating. Irenaeus' doctrine of recapitulation is a case in point of how the physically male Son actually represents all humanity, male and female. Thus, Trinitarian theology affirms the distinction inherent to gender as part of human identity but also helps us see how human identity can transcend that difference.

But what positive contributions does Trinitarian theology have to make to our understanding of personal identity? Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of recent years is Zizioulis' idea of God as "being in communion." Zizioulis states, "The being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God" (1985, 17). If this is true of God, and human beings are made in the image of God, then it is doubtless equally true for humanity. Human beings are therefore to be thought of as primarily relational beings. The image of God is not seen exclusively in individual human beings, but in humans as they relate to and with each other. Such an understanding of human identity stands in direct contradiction to Cartesian dualism, which sees human beings as mind in loose association with a body. If the Triune

God is primarily a relational being, and God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, then not only are human beings relational beings but their physicality is affirmed along with their mental and spiritual attributes.

But how many people are necessary for such relationships to be formed? Gunton (1997, 90) argues that more than two people are necessary since it is only upon the entry of a third party into the relationship that it moves beyond focus on the self. He quotes Richard of St Victor: "Shared love is properly said to exist when a third person is loved by two persons harmoniously and in community." This is a key contribution of Trinitarian theology suggesting that human identity is truly achieved when an individual is in multiple relationships.

But why is this the case? My second main point considering the contribution of the roles of different members of the Trinity will help clarify the situation, since it is only by assuming more than one role that true personal identity can be achieved. Speaking in very broad generalities we can state that within the Trinity the Father's role is that of creation and lordship, the Son's of revelation and obedience and the Spirit's of self-effacing service and empowerment. It is the Father who directs and rules over creation, and he is the source and originator of all things (including the Son and the Spirit, although their origin is eternal, not temporal). It is the Son who reveals the Triune God to humanity, and who submits his will in obedience to his Father in order to win salvation and a relationship with the Triune God for humanity. The Spirit does not emphasise himself but rather works to bring human beings into relationship with the Father through the Son. Furthermore, the Spirit equips and empowers the Son for his earthly mission and now equips and empowers the Church to witness Christ in the world, as well as sustaining the creation itself.

For true personal identity to be achieved, an individual must be involved in all three aspects: leadership, obedience and self-effacing service. This is a hierarchy, and thus necessarily involves functional subordination, but does not have to lead to relational subordinationism. Speaking entirely in human terms both the giver and receiver of orders are equally human, and neither has more intrinsic value than the other. All three persons of the Trinity are working for a common purpose, and although their roles are different, there is not inherent inequality in this. This is equally true for human beings. All human beings need to be involved in all three aspects: leadership, obedience and self-effacing service. They cannot do this as isolated individuals, but only as members of a community. A Christian understanding of humanity is thus very relationally orientated.

Beginning the exploration

This chapter has set out some initial areas for discussion, specifically Hindu and Christian understandings of God and of humanity. It is not written to be the last word on the topic, but rather to be opening words, enough to begin exploration. By comparing and contrasting the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita with those in the Christian scriptures that exploration can become much deeper. The next stage is to explain in more detail what the Bhagavad Gita is. This is the task of chapter two.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY READ THE BHAGAVAD GITA?

In this short chapter, I will explain why I have selected the Bhagavad Gita as a key text to engage with in beginning to understand a Hindu worldview. Chapter one outlined the complexity of some core Hindu beliefs. Reading the Bhagavad Gita is one way in to understanding them in more detail. The focus of this chapter is on the historical and sociological reasons why the Bhagavad Gita became such a prominent text, first in India and second the form in which it became most noticeable in the West. Third, I will explain the nature of my engagement with the text.

Eric Sharpe explains that in the modern world, sacred scriptures, whatever their origin, have at least one thing in common. Once they have been printed in large numbers, no one can prevent them from being read by those for whom they were initially not intended. Translate them into other languages and their potential range is extended even further. Any scripture may fall into anyone's hands and be read not in the light of its original religious, liturgical, philosophical or social setting but against the background of entirely different sets of presuppositions. He notes that there has been a tendency amongst Westerners reading the Gita to approach it either as "a piece of archaic literature" or as "an exotic insight into the mystery of the universe." Yet neither approach takes the context within Hinduism seriously, and this short study will attempt to outline how Hindus might approach the text as well as highlighting some questions Christians may ask as they read the text together with their Hindu friends (1985, xiii).

By Hindu standards, the Gita is not long, only seven hundred verses, divided into eighteen "books" or "readings." It is a dialogue between the prince, Arjuna, and his charioteer, Krishna, who is actually an *avatar* of the god Vishnu. It is an episode within a vast epic, the Mahabharata. The Gita begins with a discussion of Arjuna's indecision over fighting in the battle of Kurukshetra. The two armies are feuding brothers, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, gearing up for a fight. The Pandavas' chief warrior, Arjuna, is overcome with depression at the thought of slaughtering his own kith and kin in order to win back from his evil half-brothers the lands that rightfully

belong to the Pandavas. Thus, the key question the Gita asks is how can he fulfil his *dharma*, his duty, when those he will fight include his family? Frost comments, "In this battle between good and evil, the good doesn't seem worth the bloodshed. So Arjuna lays down his arms and refuses to fight. Krishna, Arjuna's charioteer and mentor urges him to do his caste-duty and sets out to dispel what he sees as the ignorance of his grief-struck pupil as to the nature of life and death, body and soul" (2017, 23). Krishna begins by urging him to fight, but the discussion soon moves on from the practicalities of Arjuna's particular dilemma, and "launches out into the vast area of the nature of reality on the one hand, and human duty on the other." Arjuna comes to realise he must engage in *karma yoga*, the discipline of works, doing his duty for its own sake (Sharpe 1985, xi-xv). Barnes concurs that the theme that holds the Gita together is that of *dharma*, as the Gita wrestles with the intractable problem of how God can be both immanent and transcendent, synthesising "monistic, quasi-pantheistic and theistic ideas that are weaved together into a text of sometimes confusing complexity" (2012, 229).

The Gita in India

Sharpe discusses the two-hundred-year period after the first Western translation of the Bhagavad Gita in 1785. He suggests that in the first hundred years, 1785-1885, "those Christian missionaries who spent time in India were forced to judge Hinduism, not by the contents of its scriptures, but by its popular practices" (1985, 33). Their conclusions were often both ill-informed and derogatory. If Christians are to avoid repeating this mistake today, then they must study and read the sacred texts as well, and the Gita provides an excellent place to start.

Sharpe goes on to explain that

> At first slowly, and after 1900 with the force of an avalanche, the Gita came to occupy a position (which in the popular mind it has since that day never lost) as the undisputed statement of all that is most central and most important in the Hindu world of ideas (1985, 69).

Sharpe suggests that "one important reason for this was simply that the Gita was of a convenient size and could therefore be marketed cheaply and sold widely to a new reading class, that of students and ex-students." There were two reasons for giving the Gita to the new group of those who could read: to counteract the widespread influence of Christian missionary literature directed at the same class; and to provide an intellectual justification for

political action. The emotional justification, of a form of *bhakti* (selfless service / worship) directed towards the cause of the motherland, was also crucial. Moreover, in the Gita, Krishna is a mature leader, not a trickster, and so appeals to those who saw themselves as mature (potential political) leaders. Finally, the content of the Gita was also key, especially the central strand of teaching of *nishmaka karma*, selfless endeavour (1985, 76).

By the first decade of the twentieth century, the Gita was acknowledged in India, especially in Bengal, as *the* scripture par excellence, as a concentrated summary of everything that was central to Hindu doctrine and experience (Sharpe 1985, 83). But at the same time, it was becoming part of a political manifesto. Four interlocking attitudes were involved. First, Hindu *dharma* is threatened by *mleccha* (foreign) *dharma*, and the Gita is a treatise about the restoration of the Hindu cause. In the Gita, Arjuna is told in the end to fight in the name and for the sake of Krishna. So too should all those who hold their motherland dear. Second, the implicit teaching of the Gita is that if violence is involved, so be it. Third, according to Krishna in the Gita, one cannot harm the eternal *atman* of the enemy by killing him; only his body. The warrior has no cause to grieve over being part of the natural process. Fourth, actions carried out without desire for personal reward are never registered negatively in the bank of *karma* (Sharpe 1984, 83-84). The Gita thus provided a powerful ideological underpinning for the emerging Hindu nationalism and possible violent struggle for political emancipation.

Having established itself as a, perhaps *the,* key text for Hindus to read, it also became a source of spiritual solace and comfort. As Gandhi put it, talking with Christian missionaries in 1925,

> When doubt haunts me, when disappointments stare me in the face, and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita, and find a verse to comfort me; and I immediately begin to smile in the midst of overwhelming sorrow. My life has been full of external tragedies. And if they have not left any visible and indelible effects on me, I owe it to the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita (Sharpe, 1985, 114).

In conclusion, we must recognise that the Bhagavad Gita is by no means the only Hindu sacred text; indeed, it is most accurately described as a section of one particular text. But it is the most popular, and is therefore often read as a stand-alone spiritual guide. Hindus may turn to the Gita for comfort and guidance when they are troubled, seeking out individual verses to strengthen and encourage their faith. It is with this reality of lived piety in mind that I have selected the Gita as the appropriate text to examine as a means of

increasing my understanding of Hinduism and engaging with Hinduism from a consciously Christian perspective.

The Gita in the West

Although a translation of the Gita has been available in English for over two hundred years, it is only in the last fifty or so that there has been any serious engagement with it. Talking about the new wave of enthusiasm for the Gita in the 1970s and onwards, Sharpe notes

> Human nature being what it is, most gurus clearly enjoyed their success, and modesty was a rare attribute. Their role was to instruct the faithful from a position of authority, and this at least was done in traditional style. The contents of Gita commentaries and lectures produced for the new readership were similar and in many cases virtually identical in import. The Gita is proclaimed as transcendental truth, to be absorbed unquestioningly as a condition of discipleship. Each commentary is assumed to be revealing the Gita's full meaning for the first time (Sharpe, 1985, 138).

The Gita was read as a source of esoteric wisdom, a way of being spiritual. Interest and enthusiasm for this text grew, and the most widely available version of the Gita is that of Swami A. C. Bhaktivendanta Prabhupada, founder of ISKCON, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, or Hare Krishna movement. As Sharpe explains ISKCON are uncompromising in how they spread the message within the Gita.

> Unlike other jet-age gurus, Bhaktivendanta made no conscious concessions to the West, other than the use of English. He admitted no compromises where scriptures were concerned (nor in respect of dress, food or life-style). As a swami he talked down to his followers, he did not discuss with them. His position was simple. Krishna is God. The Purana is about Krishna, but the Gita is the Word of Krishna, and is therefore infallible. What emerged was therefore a species of Hindu fundamentalism, which some Western observers found almost as distasteful as its Evangelical Christian variant – though the conventions of the "age of dialogue" made it harder to say so (Sharpe, 1985, 142).

If you read the Gita today, it may well be because a member of ISKCON has given it to you. Of course, there are many Hindus who are not part of ISKCON who nevertheless hold the Gita in high regard. The Chinmaya mission are another Hindu group who teach the Gita in detail, and there are plenty of others who see it is a key text, if not *the* key text, from which they develop their faith. In summary, this text is short, accessible, and central to

the spirituality of many Hindus. It is thus the ideal place to begin an encounter with a Hindu conception of the world.

Why I am reading the Bhagavad Gita

In this third section I will, for the sake of clarity, explain my personal engagement with the Bhagavad Gita. I have been active in dialogue with Hindus since 2015; because of my personal background as an evangelical Christian, I have found scriptural discussion to be a natural and easy part of this conversation. My learning has taken at least four distinct forms. First, attending lectures organised by the Leicester Friends of the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies (OCHS). These monthly lectures do not always feature the text of the Bhagavad Gita, but they regularly do.

Second, Oxford-based dialogue with staff from OCHS. This was specifically between Gaudiya Vaishnav Hindus and Anglican Christians. We met three or four times a year, for a period of about three years, discussing both philosophical concepts and specific texts. Topics discussed included responses to Klaus Klostermeir's *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban*; the nature of God and of humanity, as well as dialogue around specific texts.

Third, a process I call Texts Together, which is modelled on Scriptural Reasoning as developed by the Cambridge Inter Faith Programme. Texts Together does not rely on original languages; this is primarily pragmatic, as there are few people who can confidently read Koine Greek and Sanskrit. Texts are short, chosen either around a theme, such as the environment, or a theological premise, such as divine descent. A Hindu and a Christian introduce each text in turn, discuss them between themselves and then open up the discussion to other participants. This model has proved most effective because it is rare for those participating to have knowledge of both texts, and so a structured way into the dialogue is necessary for it to be focused and productive.

The fourth way I have discussed the Bhagavad Gita has been through my work as Director of the St Philip's Centre, either through one-to-one conversations with Hindu friends and colleagues, or else as part of an interfaith engagement session that I have been facilitating. This might be a dialogue between Christians and Hindus, it might be training for Christian ministers or it might be an introduction to Hindu thought and belief for students or adults taking part in a training course.

I have also read the Bhagavad Gita a number of times, using different translations. I have found it an intriguing and engaging text. I do not always understand the argument that is being developed; but rather than put me off, this has strengthened my resolve to learn more. This book is a further part of that learning process. I am grateful to my Hindu and Christian friends for their help in developing my knowledge of the Bhagavad Gita.