

Gospel & Gita

Some remarks on the New Testament and the Bhagavad Gita¹ as a key to each other.

Introduction:

There is a popular opinion to consider all religions as equal, not only in their right to be a religion, but also in the contents of their faith. I am not an adherent of that opinion and try to be aware of the disadvantages of parallelomania.² It is too easy to find more or less the same metaphors in the Gita and the bible (e.g. the robe and the body in Gita II, 22 and the tent and the body in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians 5,1.) There are books³ based on similarities like these, but if we analyze the meaning of the metaphors we soon find, that they do not function the same at all.

Let me make some remarks.

1. I prefer reading sacred texts from other religions while talking about it with living people. Papers don't talk to papers and the writers of those papers can never meet again. Only we, the faithful Hindu and Christian readers of the papers, do matter. Considering the Gospel and the Gita as each others key, can give openings towards the faith of the other and strengthen ours as well.
2. Nobody can read any sacred text apart from his own context and history. That context can form steppingstones as well as blockades. I try to examine the Christian side first.
3. While reading foreign sacred texts, Christians in general are suspicious to syncretism, because they fear that admitting truth in other religions could violate the honor of God. But is that critique an act of true faith, a sign of uncertainty or even a feeling of self importance? If we believe that God intends to be all in everyone, it might be possible to maintain the honor of God and seeing traces of truth in the Gita at the same time. Another blockade for Christians, lies in the way Hindus express the nature of God in a variety of statues and metaphors. Mainstream Christians tend to consider that variety as exotic and naive. They on the other hand fall into the trap of simplifying poetic mysteries into the quick reference of one-liners⁴. In a way they do with words exactly the same as they accuse idol worshippers from: to freeze a living faith.
4. Liberal Christians in The Netherlands claim to stand aside from that mainstream, but if they are honest to themselves, they could admit that they are still influenced by at least Christian dogmas and a primacy of the literal

¹ I like to write my papers as clear as possible, for not missing the chance that I can use the same thoughts in the classroom as well. This paper I dedicate to Gita Patandin, one of my students in the secondary school in which I work.

² A word I first found in the preface (by N. van Doorn) of F.E. Peters, *Islam en de joods-christelijke traditie*, Amsterdam 2005, 9.

³ A remarkable book in this field is M. Borg (ed.), *Jesus & Boeddha, de verrassende overeenkomsten in hun uitspraken*, Utrecht 2003.

⁴ I saw the pop singer Lenny Krawitz wearing a t-shirt during a performance with the words 'Jesus died for You!' on it. Other examples can easily be found.

meaning of the text. They come from a past in which Christ has been believed to be the only true incarnation of the One, and the words he spoke were considered to be a source for and confirmation of that faith. Protestant reading developed a further reduction, caused by focusing on personal salvation and the habit of expressing that faith in written and even signed confessions.

5. If we are able to overcome these backgrounds (explained in 3&4) and not read the Bible as a reservoir for our confessional documents, we can be aware that there are steppingstones to other religions given in the polyphonic way in which the New Testament points to treasures of wisdom, mysteries of our nature as wounded and healed people and love as the universal highway for mankind. If Christians see the polyphonic ways within the Gospel, they can open the Gita in a better way as well.
6. Faithful readers of the Gita encounter more or less the same blockades if they reduce the Gita to only a quick reference about samsara or a story about warfare and duty. However, within the immense variety of interpretations of the Gita, they can be aware of three main paths that lead to salvation: the ethical path of karma, the wisdom path of jnama and the devotion path of bhakti. Although all three are worthy in their own right, the Gita can be considered as the search for which of the three is the ultimate. In the course of the poem devotion becomes more and more important, without erasing the others: action is needed, but not for the sake of a reward, but as an act of service and gratitude from and towards God.⁵ It is the spirit in which the work is done, that makes the difference. Jnama disciplines the soul in considering what matters and what is vanity.
7. If we open both the Gospel and the Gita as books containing more than a single monolithic truth, we can see surprising similarities, and yet try to avoid parallelomania.
To mention but one example: in the last chapter of the Gita we hear words that sound familiar to Christians: *On Me fix thy mind, to Me bring thy devotion, to Me offer thy sacrifice...* and: *Abandon all duties and come to Me the only refuge.*⁶ In the same sense Christ speaks to suffering people: *'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'*⁷
8. Gandhi's concern on the dalits and their heavy suffering is part of the same track, but can we also compare his ahimsa and *non-cooperation with evil* to Christ's wisdom of *turning the other cheek*? Both agree on love as the central highway, even to those who do not love us, but on what is the energy of that love aimed?

To come to a conclusion, we can say that reading the Gospel and the Gita as a key to each other, can be fruitful, but further study in the last place and talk to faithful Hindus in the first place, is needed.

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⁵ Close to the thoughts of Martin Luther (1483-1546)

⁶ Gita 18, 65-66, translation Gandhi

⁷ Matthew 11, 28, translation King James.