

# HOLY WAR

## *Violence and the Bhagavad Gita*



### INTRODUCTION

"My dear Krishna, as I look at family and friends, arrayed for battle,  
My limbs feel weak and my mouth is dry.  
My body trembles and my hair stands on end.  
My skin burns and my faithful bow slips from my hands.  
My mind causes me incredible grief.  
O Krishna, as I look around me  
I see only omens of evil."

—Arjuna, the *Bhagavad Gītā*

The events of September 11, 2001 are indelibly etched on the world's collective heart. For many, as the twin towers came crashing down, so did Western innocence, the illusion that the world is a safe place and that America is as loved by people of other lands as it is within our own borders. Inescapably, "violence and religion" are the new twin towers, replacing the old because the perpetrators claim that their crime was not only sanctioned by God but commanded by Him.

What is the relationship between violence and religion? This work seeks to answer this question, or at least explore it, but particularly in relation to the *Bhagavad Gītā*, one of the world's oldest and most enduring religious classics. The *Gītā*, as it is called, is significant in this regard, because it takes place on a battlefield, and because the traditions associated with it have considered the question of violence and religion for millennia.

The papers in this volume thus focus on the *Gītā* and the war alluded to in its pages. This introduction, as I see it, will serve to briefly introduce our readers to this most sacred of texts—its basic content and its long history of commentaries—and to the authors who contribute their meaningful words on these most consequential subjects.

To begin, *Gītā* means "song," and *Bhagavad* refers to "God, the possessor (*vat*) of all opulence (*bhaga*)." *Bhagavad Gītā*, therefore, is "The Song of the All-Opulent One." The text centers on the teachings of Lord Krishna, be-

lieved to be God incarnate—the source of all other Divine manifestations.

The work comes to us in the form of a dialogue between Krishna and the princely warrior Arjuna, just before the onset of the devastating Mahābhārata war. Arjuna, putting aside his duty as a *kshatriya* (administrator/politician), decides not to fight. This decision is motivated by personal reasons: his kinsmen and teachers are in the opposing army.

Krishna, who has agreed to become the driver of Arjuna's chariot, sees His friend and devotee in illusion, paralyzed by the fear that he must kill his relatives and friends. Feeling compassion, Krishna eloquently reminds Arjuna of his immediate social duty (*varṇa-dharma*) as a warrior upon whom people are depending, and more importantly, of his religious duty (*sanātana-dharma*) as an eternal spiritual entity in relationship to God. The relevance and universality of Krishna's teachings transcend the immediate historical setting of Arjuna's battlefield dilemma.

The dialogue moves through a series of questions and answers that elucidate metaphysical concepts, such as the distinction between body and soul (matter and spirit), the principle of action without attachment, the virtues of discipline (*yoga*) and meditation, the role of knowledge (*jñāna*) and devotion (*bhakti*). Krishna teaches that true spiritual perfection does not lie in renunciation of the world, but in disciplined action (*karma-yoga*) that is to be performed without attachment to results (*karma-phala-saṅga*).

In the pages of the *Gītā*, Krishna shows Arjuna His mystical Universal form, which includes "everything in existence." When this is too much for Arjuna to bear, He shows him His more common four-armed Vishnu form and, finally, His original two-armed form. He explains His many manifestations, such as His all-pervading impersonal feature, His pantheistic Paramātmā aspect, and Bhagavān, His Supreme Personality, revealing that, ultimately, His personal feature supercedes all the rest. Krishna explains the three modes of material nature—goodness, passion, and ignorance—showing how an understanding of these three qualities, along with knowledge of divine and demoniac natures, can lead to enlightenment. He tells Arjuna of the different kinds of liberation and the ultimacy of surrendering to Him with a heart of devotion.

Most of all, He describes *dharma*, a word usually translated as "duty" or "religiosity," but one that is in fact difficult to translate. Etymologically, it derives from the verbal root *dhri*, which means "to hold," and more specifically, "that which holds everything together." Things are held together by their essential qualities. *Dharma* is consequently seen as "the essence of a

given thing," or "a thing's inherent nature." The *dharma* of water is wetness. The *dharma* of honey is sweetness. And, according to Vaishnavism, or the theistic tradition that centers around the worship of Krishna, the *dharma* of the soul is service to God in love and devotion.

Although widely published and read as a separate text, the *Bhagavad Gītā* originally appears as a short episode in the Sixth Book of the *Mahābhārata* (*Bhishma-parvan*, chapters 23-40), which is one of India's great epics and, according to some, the longest poem ever written. The *Gītā* itself consists of 700 verses in eighteen chapters and is often referred to as "Gitopanishad," in that it follows the style and philosophical conclusions of the ancient Upanishads.

The *Gītā*'s depth of wisdom has inspired numerous commentaries. In fact, the *Gītā* is said to be the most commented upon book in the religious history of man. In India, practically every major teacher, dating back to antiquity, has contributed a commentary on the *Gītā*. Interestingly, even the *Mahābhārata* itself has its own built-in explanation of the *Gītā*, since Book Fourteen (the *Anugita*) is basically a summarization of the *Gītā*'s contents.

Long-established Indic texts, such as the *Varāha Purāna* and the *Padma Purāna*, include many Gitamahatmyas (verses glorifying the *Gītā*). In the 7th and 8th century C.E., teachers of the impersonalistic school, such as Bhaskara and Shankara, wrote what are now considered classic *Gītā* commentaries.

Important for Vaishnavas are the highly theistic commentaries of Yāmuna-āchārya, Rāmānujāchārya, Madhvāchārya (he actually wrote two: *Gītā-bhashya* and *Gītā-lāṭṭhāya-nirmaya*), Keshava Bhatta of the Nimbarka school, Vallabhāchārya, Jayatirtha, Vishvanāth Chakravartin, Baladeva Vidyābhūshana, Bhaktivinode Thākura, and A. C. Bhaktivedānta Swami Prabhupāda.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak wrote a highly political commentary, as did Mahatma Gandhi, who also translated the *Gītā* into Gujarati. Sri Aurobindo also wrote an insightful, highly politicized commentary, and we will consider these two latter commentators in this book.

After the *Gītā* was translated into English for the first time (by Charles Wilkins in 1785), its popularity began to soar. Intellectuals among the Germans (Schlegel, Deussen, and Schopenhauer), Americans (Emerson and Thoreau), Englishmen (Max Mueller, who was English by adoption, and Aldous Huxley), Frenchmen (Romain Rolland), and Russians (Tolstoy) were greatly intrigued by the *Gītā*'s teaching, a teaching that continues to be expounded upon even today.

The subject of violence and religion in relation to the *Gītā*, though central to its underlying message, has not been the focus of any sustained study. The most considered analysis of this subject is the essay that appears at the conclusion of the translation by Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood, entitled, "The Gita and War." Though extremely valuable as far as it goes, this essay does not thoroughly analyze the ramifications and dimensions of the subject in depth. Our purpose here is to fill that lacuna by looking at the *Gītā* not only in terms of violence and religion but to contemporize the issue by exploring pertinent recent events and religious wars, in particular, hopefully elucidating why people who claim to find peace in worshipping God would perpetrate violence on others who do not share their faith.

When one contemplates the Crusades, the Inquisition, or, in a more contemporary setting, Waco, Bosnia, Heaven's Gate, the Catholics and the Protestants in northern Ireland, the Om Shinrikyo attacks in Japan, the bombing of American embassies in Africa, the constant battling between Hindus and Muslims—it makes one think twice about "believers" and their chosen path. How is it that the world's religious traditions, which are supposed to represent spiritual ideals such as love, peace, and mutual understanding, often seem to be instigators of hate and strife? The question is nicely phrased—and, to a degree, answered—by psychotherapist Russell Shorto in his book, *Saints and Madmen: Psychiatry Opens its Doors to Religion*:

Is it possible that religious feeling—the feeling of oneness with others, of being swept up in the current of cosmic love and eternal goodness—has an element of violence in it? Of course it does. It is an avenue of human expression, and so will carry whatever baggage people choose to take with them as they travel down it. In the end, the "religion leads to violence" argument falters; you might just as easily say that education leads to violence since there is so much violence in schools. One might counter the argument by borrowing a slogan from the National Rifle Association: Religion doesn't kill, people do. (p. 42)

While I do not necessarily endorse this view when applied to the National Rifle Association, Shorto's point is well taken. Essential religious truths do not promote violence. Rather, people already predisposed to violence interpret these truths in their own distinct way.

Accordingly, a brief look at religious history reveals both martial and peaceloving angles on religion. There are Zionists who are willing to fight

for the state of Israel, and there are those like Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, who took nonviolence to the point of vegetarianism. The same Islamic tradition that promotes *Jihad*, or holy war, also gave rise to Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a renowned pacifist. The very existence of someone like Oliver Cromwell, who through military means labored to make England a Christian nation, would lead one to believe that Christianity is a religion that favors violence; but peace advocate George Fox, founder of the Quakers in England and North America, would lead one to believe otherwise. Religion has brought forth the Prince of Peace, Jesus, and personalities such as Gandhi and Mother Teresa. It is also true that most "religious" wars have been fought as much for political and economic reasons as for spiritual ones. Therefore, it seems reasonable to evaluate a given religion on its own spiritual merits, not on the basis of those who have used it to endorse war or violence.

To me, just as man is made of an inner soul (the real Self) and an outer covering (the body), religion seems to have both internal and external dimensions. The internal aspect to religion is the esoterica, the mystical traditions associated with every major religion. This is the heart of religious practice, and it runs counter to superficiality—the kind of superficiality that leads to an "us and them" mentality, the kind of mentality that leads to war. One rarely sees religious wars being fought by Christian mystics, Kabbalists, Sufis, Vaishnavas, and so on—though, I am sure, there are exceptions. More commonly, however, wars are fought by those who embrace external interpretations of religion, or those who come to identify religion only in terms of its outer shell. Such adherents may even be well-meaning, sincere, devout—but if they do not dig deep, if they do not absorb the mystical core of their tradition, they will likely perceive its surface teaching only, which necessarily discounts the value of other faiths.

Nonsectarianism, which is the hallmark quality of every major religion's mystical tradition, allows for peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding. It asks for pluralism and inclusivism—ideas that stem from the realization that we are all God's children, even if we choose to worship in ways that are alien to our neighbors. It is only such a broad and far-reaching vision that will put an end to the kind of religious violence seen on September 11.

I do not mean to be simplistic. I fully accept that there are complex reasons why a religionist may opt for violence, and that he or she may have legitimate reasons for doing so. My own essay in this volume shows that I am not an extremist when it comes to pacifism, though, I will admit, I com-

promise that principle only in the most extreme circumstances. The battle depicted in the *Mahābhārata* is one such circumstance—I do believe that the Pāṇḍavas, the heroes of the war in question, had legitimate reasons to fight the Kauravas, the “bad guys” in the story. To my understanding, the battle was fought not to establish “my religion” as opposed to “your religion,” but, rather, for larger issues involving protection of the innocent and the abolition of a tyrannical regime.

In regard to recent events, America’s foreign policy may be as much to blame as is a radical reading of the Islamic faith. Some social commentators say that Muslims in the Middle East are more hateful of “Western Imperialists” than are Muslims in other parts of the world. They thus try to reduce the issue to class distinctions. Some opt for the well-worn arguments of anti-colonialism and anti-capitalism, indicating that there are, no doubt, many sociological and political issues at play. But if we consider the horror of the World Trade Towers and the earlier, if overshadowed, destruction of the two Buddhist monuments in the Afghan desert—also perpetrated by bin Laden’s Taliban—we see not the work of errant religionists but simply of evil men.

The destruction of the two Buddhas is particularly telling: Buddhism is not a symbol of Western Imperialism—it is not Western at all. Buddhism does not cause sociological disturbance for Islam, or poverty for its practitioners. Neither is it a symbol of colonialism. Rather, the destruction of these monuments lays bare the Taliban’s intolerance for other religions in general and their envy for the achievements of great civilizations. Thus, bin Laden’s brand of Islam is politely called “fundamentalist” or “radical” but, in truth, it is not Islam at all.

The word “Islam” is related to *salam*, which is the Arabic word for “peace.” Muslims are duty-bound to embrace peaceful relations and are called upon to fight only when they are threatened, in self-defense, and then only under the most extreme conditions. But this is all discussed in the pages that follow. The *Gītā* will be illuminated not only in relation to its own tradition but, in several of the papers presented here, to Islam and the events of September 11.

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The volume begins with my own paper, which is based on a literalistic reading of the *Gītā*. I argue that the Pāṇḍavas had legitimate political and socio-

logical reasons to engage in war and, although the *Gītā*’s basic message is one of peace, its overriding teaching is that one should do whatever is required in the service of the Lord, even if it means battling to the death with those who are unrighteous. This, of course, leads to thorny theological questions: Does one ever have a right to kill, and would God ever sanction such behavior? Isn’t it easy to misinterpret or abuse the idea of killing on God’s behalf, engaging instead in bloodthirsty battle for selfish and nonreligious reasons? Have not bin Laden and others throughout history claimed that they were fighting on the Lord’s behalf? Such questions are briefly explored in my paper and more thoroughly throughout this work.

My literalist reading of the *Gītā* is supported by **Arvind Sharma** (Birks Professor of Comparative Religion at McGill University, Canada), one of the world’s leading *Bhagavad Gītā* scholars, who looks at Kurukshetra, the land area where the *Gītā*’s battle took place, and discusses it in terms of how it was understood in classical literature—that is to say, as a specific geographical location. He further discusses Kurukshetra from the viewpoint of later commentators such as Sri Aurobindo and Mahatma Gandhi. This, of course, will prepare the reader for the next three papers, one by **Michel Danino** (a prominent scholarly follower of Aurobindo), which focuses on a militaristic if also spiritual reading of the text, and two by well-known Gandhi scholars, **Bradley Clough** (Bard College, New York), who offers in his essay historical background on Gandhi’s nonviolent interpretation of the *Gītā*, and **Nicholas Sutton** (University of Birmingham, UK.), whose more conceptual article fleshes out Gandhi’s doctrine of *ahimsā* as a necessary component of the *Gītā*’s teaching.

After this, **Patrick Olivelle** (University of Texas) looks at India’s social system by referring to Kathā and Dharma literature, exploring the reasons why one might commit violence in the name of religion, particularly an administrative officer in ancient India, like Arjuna. Olivelle shows the significance of caste distinctions in relation to warriors and brahmins, and how such distinctions might impact on the question of violence and the *Gītā*. **Ramesh Rao** (Truman State University, Missouri) then brings the study up to date by looking at how writers of the modern era still use the *Gītā* to support both war and peace. This is followed by the work of **Hector Avalos** (Iowa State University), who takes a deep look at the violence found in the pages of the Bible, showing how it correlates—and sometimes differs—with that of the *Gītā*.

Going back to original sources, **Chris Chapple** (Loyola Marymount Uni-