Caitlin Westerfield

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Final Project

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The Westernized *Bhagavad Gita*

“Meditation,” “yoga,” and “karma” are the three abstract terms that, when filtered through language barriers and across country and continent lines, tend to define the religion that Westerners call “Hinduism.” While these terms in extraction symbolize for many Westerners a connection to something universal or perennial – as something that applies to us all no matter our faith or cultural heritage – in reality these practices are part of a series of religious traditions in India and in those traditions carry a particular weight. This project looks to compare the ways that cultural and religious significance is lost in cross-continental translation by comparing interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* aimed at a variety of audiences. This project compares interpretations written for the Hindu audience for which the *Gita* is canonical with those written for Christian, Western, or an otherwise non-Hindu or Indian audience.

The *Gita* is acknowledged by the interpreters considered in this project to be one of the best known ancient Hindu scriptures to the Western world (White 1). Literally, “Bhagavad Gita” is a phrase meaning “song of the Lord” (White 1). It is a 700 verse subsection of the much larger *Mahabharata* which is usually attributed to the Sage Vyasa. While the actual timeline of creation is unknown, this text is estimated to have originated from somewhere between the fifth to second century B.C.E (Easwaran 14). While the *Mahabharata* parallels the *Iliad* as a religiously focused battle epic, the *Bhagavad Gita* is a particularly well studied section because it takes a break from the depictions of war to show an intimate conversation between the warrior Arjuna and Sri

Krishna, who is believed to be the human incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu. Within this sixth section of the *Mahabharata*, Arjuna asks Sri Krishna about whether he should be fighting a battle against opponents – many of which are his own family members – whom he respects, especially considering the Hindu teachings against violence. This launches Krishna into a question and answer session with Arjuna about duty (or *dharma*), caste, life and death, and the proper way to achieve spiritual enlightenment. “The Gita is thus a detailed lesson in the necessities of right and effective action, delivered in the specific context of the epic battlefield, with Krishna as the divine teacher” (White 2). However, because this epic is written in parables and is a story with characters rather than as a step-by-step guidebook, the text itself is extremely difficult to interpret, leading to conclusions that vary drastically depending on interpreter, era, and audience. These significant interpretative disagreements also lead to further cultural implications.

The first major controversy between interpretations is the importance of caste in determining dharma within the Hindu tradition. Respected Hindu interpreter Śrī Śankarāchārya focuses a lot on the importance of caste within the Hindu traditions. He writes, “it was by preservation of spiritual life that the Vedic Religion could be preserved, since thereon depend all distinctions of caste and religious order” (Śrī Śankarāchārya 3). All castes and religious order can practice using the *Bhagavad Gita*’s teachings, just in different ways and at different levels (Śrī Śankarāchārya 2). However, Western interpreters, rather than portray the Hindu religion as relying on caste for its “preservation,” follow a much more Christianized way of thinking by saying that *all* people are of the lowest caste in the eyes of God. As Mohini Chatterji writes, “Let me work for God like a slave; not that He wants it of me, but because He has blessed me with the wish to serve Him” (Chatterji 14). While Bede Griffiths acknowledges that “Duty is *dharma* and

let us remember that the whole of Hindu society was formed on the basis of *dharma* …, his duty in his caste, in his place in life" (Griffiths 23), he insists that this is more about the goal of getting "rid of all egoism" (Griffiths 31) in order to do "whatever is required of us" (Griffiths 30), rather than attaching oneself to a specific unchanging economic or social status.

This leads us to the second point of contention which is the group for which the *Bhagavad Gita* and its lessons are targeted. According to Śrī Śankarāchārya, there are two groups of people and two different paths for achieving enlightenment within Hinduism. The first is through Vedic rites – as described in the *Gita* – and the other is through knowledge. He writes, "Thus the Vedic rites are intended for him only who has desires and has no knowledge of the Self. … This assigning of the two paths to two distinct classes of people would be unjustifiable if the Lord had intended a simultaneous conjunction of knowledge and Vedic rites" (Śrī Śankarāchārya 19). While someone who arrives at "knowledge of the grand truth" may continue to perform works in order to set an example for the masses, in reality Śrī Śankarāchārya claims that "the conclusion, therefore, of the Bhagavad-gita is that salvation is attained by knowledge alone, not by knowledge conjoined with works" (Śrī Śankarāchārya 22). This therefore creates two statuses of people for whom the *Gita* has different meanings: the ones who do their daily duty because there is no other possible path for them, and the ones who actually have the potential to achieve knowledge and consequently salvation. Thus, the *Gita,* which is first and foremost a discussion of the everyday ways for a human to reach religious enlightenment, is aimed only at the "daily duty" Hindu rather than the ones who actually have potential for salvation. However, the other interpreters studied in this project tend to disagree with Śrī Śankarāchārya's analysis of audience, or at the very least argue that these two methods for enlightenment are equitable. Griffiths agrees that the *Gita* is written for the everyman, writing,

"the householder, living an ordinary life but having *bhakti*, devotion to God, could reach this state of supreme union, not only as well as, but even more easily than the *sannyasi*, [the monk]. For the *Bhagavad Gita*, *sannyasa* is a difficult path for the few; *bhakti* is the normal path for the many" (Griffiths 5). Thus, likening the text to the New Testament (Griffiths 5) – high praise from a Christian scholar – Griffiths argues that the *Gita* is a handbook for how to live the "ordinary life" yet simultaneously using devotion to the personal God of Krishna to attain final liberation (Griffiths 5). God is found by looking at the "suffering fellow countrymen" or by "serving God in humanity" (Griffiths 5), and "attainment of perfection" can be done in the "midst of his everyday activities" (White 32). Unlike Śrī Śankarāchārya, the everyday man is on a parallel path to the knowledgeable scholars on his (or her) journey to liberation. When considering this difference within the context of caste, it is clear that interpreters for the West try to remove Indian cultural concepts of spiritual "levels" which may be incoherent to Western readers who are used to the oppressed as, in theory, the most beloved in the eyes of God. But this also leaves out a hugely impactful aspect of the Hindu religion that to this day still has repercussions echoing through economic and political inequality in India.

Another example of the removal of puzzling or possibly disturbing ideas from the *Bhagavad Gita* in interpretations for the West centers around the use of a battlefield as the setting for the lesson. While Indian interpreters use the discussion of whether Arjuna should go to war as a direct textual mandate to follow one's duty no matter the effect on life, Western interpreters take the call to violence as a metaphor for a bigger lesson that is "appealing to quite a low level of morality" (Griffiths 23). Specifically, as Griffiths writes, the concept of fighting wars "belongs to an older tradition" (Griffiths 24), which as an interpretive strategy seems to lean towards a living *Gita* rather than a textual one. White agrees with Griffiths when he writes,

"we should remember two things: warfare in ancient India was not the wholesale slaughter of both combatants and civilians that it has become in more recent times; and throughout the Gita the true yogi is characterized as completely nonviolent" (White 27). In fact, White discards the "duty to perform" and "dire worldly consequences of [Arjuna's] refusal to fight" argument entirely by saying that "the Gita soon abandons this superficial argument and turns to much more serious matters" (White 31). According to White and Griffiths, the metaphorical significance of the wartime backdrop is that "the war is the battle of life and the conflict is with the powers of evil" (Griffiths 24). As Eknath Easwaran writes in the introduction to his translation written specifically for attendees of The Blue Mountain Center of Meditation, "The battlefield is a perfect backdrop, but the Gita's subject is the war within, the struggle for self-mastery that every human being must wage if he or she is to emerge from life victorious" (Easwaran 15). Griffiths similarly argues that what Krishna is really telling Arjuna to do is "fight in the cause of right" (Griffiths 11), and that, just like Arjuna, "Many people feel that society as a whole is corrupt.… Arjuna would rather become a beggar and drop out of the society than conquer in the battle and be involved in all the sins of that society" (Griffiths 12). Easwaran pleas for the reader to make their own interpretations, saying, "just base your life on the Gita sincerely and systematically and see if you find killing or even hurting others compatible with its teachings. … The very heart of the Gita's message is to see the Lord in every creature and act accordingly" (Easwaran 20). To Easwaran, violence is always a "violation of dharma" (Easwaran 32).

While these are interpretations to consider when studying the *Gita*, these Western interpreters vary drastically in their analysis from more traditionalist interpreters for Hindus like Śrī Śankarāchārya and Mehta. Śrī Śankarāchārya writes, "For, our Lord says that, since fighting which is the profession of the warrior caste is the proper duty (of the caste), it is not sinful

though it involves cruelty to elders, brothers, sons and the like and is therefore very horrible" (Śrī Śankarāchārya 17). He compares this to the important task of using animal sacrifice as part of traditional Hindu rituals in certain sects of Hinduism. He writes, "those rites which are enjoined as life-long duties by the Vedas are sinless though they involve cruelty to animals" (Śrī Śankarāchārya 17). Since Arjuna tried to do the duty of a different caste, he has "resort[ed] to those [duties] which are prohibited" (Śrī Śankarāchārya 16). Unlike Easwaran who claims violence of any sort is a violation of dharma, Śrī Śankarāchārya argues the exact opposite. Mehta also gives a justification for violence. He asserts that the human cannot possibly understand the unalterable fact of death and thus "man is forever afraid of death so long as he functions within the confines of the mind" (Mehta 14). However, "very few of us can see [death] as an unalterable fact. He who can see thus is truly wise for he grieves not for death" (Mehta 17). Violence is thus justified if it is the individual's dharma since just because a man will never understand why God wants violence committed does not mean that violence is wrong. Instead, the person must follow his or her dharma under the assumption that their entrapment in the mind is preventing them from seeing the meaning of the practice and the death. This debate around the use of violence within the *Bhagavad Gita* is thus an important interpretative distinction that illuminates the ways that Hindu interpreters tend to take the *Gita* more literally whereas instead the Western interpreters employ allegorical interpretive techniques.

This simplification serves the purpose of trying to wash away any potentially controversial elements of the *Gita* in order to insist that the work is pluralist and thus has universal implications. While both for-western and for-Hindu interpreters agree that this text can be applied to people on all walks of life, the way that this work is applied takes on particularly secularized aspects when interpreted for the Western reader. Specifically, Chatterji and Griffiths

aim to make the *Gita* comprehensible to a Christian audience, and they do this by claiming that the God present in the *Gita* is "the God whom the Scriptures of all nations proclaim, – the God who is the true and only Self in all creatures" (Chatterji 6). Easwaran likens the book to a perennial work since it contains within it ideas that "appear in every age and civilization" related to the concepts of an "infinite, changeless reality" (Easwaran 17). But he also strips away the *Gita*'s potential for being considered logical but arguing that "the Gita does not present a system of philosophy" (Easwaran 48). White insists as well that philosophical debate cannot be found within Hindu, or even any Asian works, and says, "there are no words in any Asian language that can be translated literally as 'philosophy' or 'religion' in the sense of current Western usage, since for the Asian thinker, both philosophy and religion are inseparable elements of the total culture and cannot, therefore, be hypostasized as separate entities" (White 4). Thus rather than seen forming a logical philosophical argument, the *Gita* is merely a spiritual work stemming from culture. This process of pluralizing the Hindu tradition can also be seen in historical analysis. In his book *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, Leigh Eric Schmidt writes that many people during the early twentieth century began practicing watered down versions of Hindu religions. These people "did not care what such practices were called – a form of 'meditation, realization, treatment, or whatever term' – as long as they helped prompt people in the here and now to seek the kingdom of heaven within and beyond themselves" (Schmidt 156). Since meditation was reimagined as a "cosmopolitan, inclusive practice," it could be used to find "universal knowledge" and served "the rhetorical purposes of a universalized religious liberalism and its cosmopolitan dreams" (Schmidt 172).

However, by exploding the *Gita* to universal proportions, many of the particular and not easily cosmopolitan aspects are lost in the debris. Universalism leads to questions of ownership

of the text, since to imply that a text can be made to fit anyone or can be used to improve life of people even of a different religion inherently means that this text is being utilized outside of its cultural context. As Griffiths writes, “The *Bhagavad Gita* or *Song of God* is a spiritual classic, which, though it comes from the Hindu tradition, belongs not only to Hindus, but to all the world. It is part of the spiritual inheritance of mankind” (Griffiths 1). This rhetoric also brings to the forefront the question of “synthesis of doctrine,” since Griffiths argues that “if one knows the *Gita*, one knows the essence of Hindu spirituality” (Griffiths 2). However, as was acknowledged before, according to Śrī Śankarāchārya the *Gita* only supplies one path to enlightenment and thus to abandon all other Vedic works is to abandon hugely important other doctrine of the Hindu religions. White in particular acknowledges in his introduction that he does not prioritize the depiction of culture in his translation of the *Gita* because it is “too difficult” (White 2). He writes, “It is therefore to the discovery of whatever universally comprehensible and possibly useful insights the *Bhagavad Gita* may hold for us that this translation is primarily directed” (White 3). But by dropping all attempts to understand the specific cultural elements within the *Gita*, such as caste or dharma, the version of the *Gita* that is shown to the West is one that “erases the cultural context and institutional setting of such practices” (Carrette 117). As Jeremy Carrette and Richard King write in their book *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Hindu practice “becomes *recoded* in the terms of modern psychological discourse and in the individualist values of the western society, … [losing] much of what is genuinely counter-cultural, transformative and challenging to western cultural norms. It becomes secularized” (Carrette 117). The idea that “Western philosophers have reasoned their way” to philosophical discovery as “an intellectual exercise” but “for these ancient sages … these were not logical conclusions but personal discoveries” (Easwaran 26), profoundly influences the ways that

Westerners perceive Asian traditions in general "as 'mystical,' [and] experiential … in nature" (Carrette 116). Thus through Western use of allegorical interpretive strategies, rather than Hindu textual or even historical strategies, the text ends up being depoliticized and stripped of many of the cultural attributes that make it valuable to those for whom it is canonical. While "the ancient Indian thinker's understanding of our common human problems may enable us to consider our own formulations of the questions from new points of view" (White 8), these very real philosophical arguments are not presented in their true form to the Western thinker and therefore cannot be universally applied unless their cultural context is also being studied and incorporated.

This project looked at six different interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* including one historically significant Hindu interpretation by Śrī Śankarāchārya, one contemporary for-Hindu interpretation by Rohit Mehta, two turn of the twentieth century interpretations aimed at Christians by Bede Griffiths and Mohini Chatterji, and two contemporary for-Western interpretations by Eknath Easwaran and David White. Strategies for analysis were clearly split between the textualist for-Hindu interpreters and the allegorical for-Western interpreters. Just like with the Constitution or the Bible interpretation leads to a wide variety of conclusions, but in the case of the *Gita* these different conclusions range from vaguely colonialist to grossly appropriative. These Western interpretations discard the people for whom this text is canonical in order to satisfy their own objectives and, in turn, do all Western readers a disservice in falsely portraying the fundamental ideas of Hinduism as demonstrated in the *Gita*. Thus the *Gita*'s varying interpretive strategies not only have varying conclusions but also varying levels of reliability.

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