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Introduction to World Religions

Response Paper on *Bhagavad-Gita*

The Bhagavad-Gita, or “The Song of God” is a one of the holiest books in the Hindu doctrine; as with any traditional Western holy book, I assumed that the Bhagavad-Gita would be a rigid set of rules dictated by a menacing god. However, after reading carefully and patiently, I realized that this book seeks, not to impose stern rules, but instead to provide the reader with some instruction in living a more spiritually fulfilling life. The book presents itself as a play in which one of the characters, Arjuna, seems -- in my opinion -- to portray the “spiritually confused” human being, in search of answers to his or her worldly dilemmas.

It is my interpretation that Arjuna is the “model” Hindu, feeling some type of sorrow as he embarks life (described in the Bhagavad-Gita as *the battle*) and regrets having to “kill his brothers” (comply with his duties in life), therefore feeling confused on what to do. Sanjaya appears to the reader as a narrator, letting the reader know what Arjuna is feeling at the moment, and who he plans to talk to in order to resolve his doubts about “the war”. Sri Krishna, perceived as a personification of Ishwara, which at the same time could be thought of as a facet of Brahman, is Arjuna’s divine advisor who will lead him through a passage of wisdom; after setting the “stage” for this celestial dialogue, Sri Krishna begins to explain Arjuna (and the reader as well) the basic elements of which Hinduism is made of - caste, duty, action (karma), Brahman, Atman, and the 3 gunas - the ideas, energy and inertia that constitute Brahman.

Sri Krishna describes worldly life as a “dream world”, spiritually obscure in comparison to Reality - or union of Atman and Brahman. He wants Arjuna to learn that the only way to “wake up”, grasp Reality and be one with Brahman is to fight this battle he is so dubious about. Should he not fight, Arjuna would become an “untouchable”, because he would be refusing to pay his spiritual debts - therefore putting himself in

grave spiritual danger.

As the Bhagavad-Gita progresses, Sri Krishna continues to illustrate the nature of a person who is Illumined or Awakened - aware of Reality, focusing on the idea that peace is equal to happiness, knowledge, and ultimately, Illumination. An Illumined can perceive the “dream world” from Reality, he sees the two are completely different - when humans see daylight in their world, it is truly darkness in Reality.

Moreover, Arjuna inquires about the origin of actions and work; Krishna responds by mentioning the 3 gunas - Sattwa (ideas), Rajas (energy) and Tamas (inertia) - that come from Brahman. They - the gunas - are the ones responsible of acting *through* man. When a man recognizes this affirmation, his senses cease to be attached to his actions, and his way to becoming enlightened is clear. As Arjuna attempts to gather knowledge, Sri Krishna points out that rajas is a two-faced guna - it is rage and lust, passionate and energetic, which may incite men to do evil.

Arjuna persists on his journey of discovery and knowledge, and while on this path, he comes across some understanding of the creative power of Brahman - Prakriti or Maya- which is the matter that makes up the phenomenal universe. He also discovers that his negative Karma (or actions) can be “turned to ashes” through knowledge and spiritual work such as meditation. Sri Krishna teaches Arjuna about meditation, mysticism, devotion, making one’s body obey one’s mind. He gives Arjuna several examples of how the gunas impact on a person’s life, talks about the divine and the demonic (a spiritually enriching life symbolizes the divine, while a life led away from Brahman symbolizes the demonic) and finally depicts renunciation of the material world as the final step before fusion with Brahman.

At the end of the Bhagavad-Gita, and an excursion of wisdom, Arjuna communicates his understanding of everything Krishna has taught him, also expressing the dispersion of his “delusions” - He accepts his fate and his duties, and is ready to lead

a divine life that will ultimately end in transcendence to Reality. In conclusion, the Bhagavad-Gita resembles a walk on the ideal spiritual path of any Hindu, led by the supreme guide, Krishna. The Bhagavad-Gita allows the reader to have a much better comprehension of the Hindu beliefs and traditions, while at the same time giving a message of peace and thoughtfulness to a spiritually avid reader. Subsequent to reading the Bhagavad-Gita, a question still haunts me - in this day and age, are we truly accomplishing our designated mission and ensuring our way to a superior after-life, or just consuming ourselves in the darkness of the material world?