


2001

Violence in the Bible and the Bhagavad gita

Hector Avalos

Iowa State University, havalos@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_pubs

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), and the [History of Religions of Eastern Origins Commons](#)

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/philrs_pubs/12. For information on how to cite this item, please visit <http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy and Religious Studies at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy and Religious Studies Publications by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.

VIOLENCE IN THE BIBLE AND THE *BHAGAVAD-GĪTĀ*

Hector Avalos

The relationship between religion and violence has received new attention in the last couple of decades, particularly as the demise of the bipolar world has led to debate about whether the resurgence in nationalisms are necessarily associated with religious divisions (Huntington; Rashid). At the same time, postcolonial writers such as Edward Said and Richard King have been reassessing the relationships between the west and the "east," as constructed by Europeans and Americans. Such reassessments naturally precipitate the question of how the sacred texts of various religions view violence and its justification.

Recently, Regina Schwartz has argued that monotheism, particularly in the forms expressed in Judaism and Christianity, is inherently violent. Schwartz (5) says that her book "locates the origins of violence in identity formation, arguing that imagining identity as an act of distinguishing and separating from others, of boundary marking and line drawing, is the most frequent and fundamental act of violence we commit." Further, she locates violence in the concept of scarcity, claiming that religion fosters it in a unique way. Just how religion and scarcity coincide will become clear as this paper continues.

As far as this article is concerned, I am not adopting Schwartz's view of monotheism, nor am I stating that it is correct. I am, however, reporting on her viewpoint and asking my readers to consider what she says with an open mind. I think that the relationship between monotheism and violence does deserve to be explored—and either confirmed or disproved by further dialogue and scholarship. Although Schwartz has concentrated her analysis on Judaism as her paradigm of a monotheistic religion, it would be fair to ask whether other religions could also be subjected to such an analysis. For

example, how would the *Bhagavad Gītā* (BG), an important Indic text, fare under such a scrutiny in comparison to the Bible? Is Schwartz being unfair to Judaism and Christianity, or is violence inherent in other or all religious traditions, including those which use the BG as a sacred text? Or phrased more bluntly and specifically: Is the Bible more violent than the BG?

At the outset of any comparison between the Bible and the BG, we must note that the definition of the term "Bible" is itself dependent on religious tradition. Thus, for Protestants the word "Bible" means the thirty-nine books they call the Old Testament, and twenty-seven that constitute what they call the New Testament. For Catholics, the Bible has seven more books that are deemed just as inspired as those in the Protestant canon. For Jews, only what Protestants call "the Old Testament" is inspired. For Judaism, the New Testament is the work of a heretical Jewish group who no longer wished to follow God's laws. Our comparison will be based, more for convenience than for any ideological grounds, on the Catholic canon because it includes the largest number of books of western Christian traditions.

At the same time, we are aware of the problems when using the BG as a representative Hindu text (Larson). As Eric Sharpe (13) notes, the BG became a popular Hindu text, at least from a western perspective, in the late nineteenth century and in the aftermath of an imperialistic expansion of Britain into India. We are also painfully aware that S. N. Balagangadhara and other writers would argue that westerners cannot even understand what they have constructed as "Hinduism," much less pontificate on what the BG means. The critical and hermeneutic issues raised by the BG can be as complex as those raised by the Bible. The BG traditionally is seen as part of the *Mahābhārata*, which itself may have been constructed over a period approaching or even exceeding that which produced the amalgamation of books we call "The Bible." There are numerous disputes about the authorship and date of composition of the BG just as there are disputes about dating all or parts of the Bible (Minor, 1982: xxxiii-xlix). And we have not even begun to mention that the variety of intricate interpretational approaches applied to the BG rival those applied to the Bible.

But even with all of these problems, the BG now is claimed as important by people that describe themselves as Hindu as well as by many westerners who study the modality, religion, or group of religions that westerners call Hinduism. It is the most translated text, the Bible excepted (Minor, 1986: 5). While the BG might have become relatively popular in the nineteenth century, it has drawn the interest of many Indian commentators, reaching

at least as far back as Śaṅkara in the seventh-eighth centuries (Minor, 1982:xvi). The BG was certainly an important text of Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948), who is acknowledged as the principal hero of Indian independence by many westerners as well as native Indians. Gandhi, like many other interpreters, deems the BG special for its pan-Hindu universality and because it is written in a language accessible to a larger number of people as opposed to some of the more esoteric texts (Jordens, 93). And, as can be seen in the works of Steiner and others, comparisons between the Bible and the *Bhagavad Gītā* already have a long tradition, for better or worse (see further Sharpe, 49). It is in such a light, then, that we can at least explore how a western secular and critical approach might view a comparison of violence in the BG and the Bible.

The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

Violence is a primary fact of life for biblical figures in the Hebrew Bible, and the biblical deity is often portrayed as the prime mover for this violence. Scarce resources play a part in this violence from the very beginning. According to Genesis 2:9, God creates a garden with two trees. One is the tree of knowledge and the other is the tree of life. These scarce resources are then placed off limits to human beings by Yahweh, the biblical god (Genesis 2:17). Human beings soon covet the fruit of these trees, and disobey Yahweh's commands. As a result of this disobedience, human beings are banished from paradise, and a curse is placed on them. One curse includes the violent relationship that will exist between the serpent and the woman in Genesis 3:14-15.

The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

Soon thereafter, one sees the first murder recorded in the Bible, the killing of Abel by Cain (Genesis 4). The murder revolved around a perceived inequality in the types of offerings that Abel and Cain had brought to God. Abel had brought the best of his flock, while Cain had brought the fruit of

the ground. Although it is not explicitly stated that Cain's offering was meant to be of lesser quality, there may be a link to the associated story of the cursing of the ground by Yahweh in Genesis 3:17. Thus, anything growing from the ground was unacceptable. In sum, God had punished the world by making food resources unequal in value.

Land becomes another scarce resource that causes conflict. Land conflicts are explicitly attributed to scarcity in the story of the conflict between Abraham and his nephew, Lot (Genesis 13:6-7). Abraham had migrated with some of his family from Mesopotamia to Canaan, but the new homeland could not support all of this family, and so a conflict ensued. The solution was for Lot to go to less hospitable territories to end the conflict.

Additional conflicts about scarce land resources arise from the biblical claim that the land of Israel is given by Yahweh to one people (Genesis 15:17-21), the sons of Jacob, but inhabitants are already there. The solution this time is ethnic cleansing. Yahweh orders the destruction of all the prior inhabitants. Thus, Deuteronomy 7:1-2.

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations mightier and more numerous than you—and when the LORD your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.

Such acts are repeated in the course of the Hebrew settlement. In Joshua 6:21, women and children are killed to possess Jericho. In Numbers 31:17, the Israelites are ordered to kill women and boys, but to save young women as slaves. In any event, it is clear that biblical god did not create sufficient habitable land for everyone, and violent conflicts ensued to possess the land that was available.

Access to the divine will is yet another cause for conflict. God does not reveal himself equally to all. This is pointed out in a story about how God reveals himself to Moses in a manner that he does not reveal himself to other human beings, in Numbers 12:6-8.

And he said, "Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my

house. With him I speak face to face—clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”

This inequality was cause for conflict between Moses and his siblings, Miriam and Aaron. Miriam eventually was punished with a skin disease for questioning Moses' authority.

But perhaps the single most important cause of conflict, according to Schwartz, is monotheism. There is indeed a debate about whether the Hebrews were monotheists (believers in the existence of only one god), or monolatrists (worshippers of one god, while acknowledging the existence of other gods). As is argued by Peter Hayman, it may be more accurate to say that the Hebrews were monolatrists, who worshipped one god, but did not deny the existence of many other supernatural entities that can be called gods.

In any event, the idea that there is one supreme being who favors his worshippers at the expense of the worshippers of other gods brought conflict. Throughout the Bible, there are injunctions not to worship other gods, and such injunctions are enforced by violent means. One particular example is found in the story of Elijah's contests with the prophets of Baal, a deity seen as a rival of Yahweh. Elijah challenges the four-hundred prophets of Baal to a contest on Mount Carmel. A sacrificial altar is set up, and Elijah stipulates that the god that answers by fire will be declared the winner. Baal fails to answer, and Yahweh sends fire to ignite the sacrifice on the altar. Accordingly to 1 Kings 18:40: "Elijah said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal; do not let one of them escape.' Then they seized them; and Elijah brought them down to the Wadi Kishon, and killed them there."

Of course, Yahweh's own worshippers are the recurrent targets of violence or threats of violence by God. The paradigmatic text is Exodus 20:5-6: "I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." Disobedience to this one god can bring everything from total human destruction, as in Noah's Flood (Genesis 6), to the killing of individuals such as Nadab and Abihu, who did not follow the proper sacrificial procedures (Numbers 3:4)

There are at least three related strategies used by Jewish and Christian interpreters to address these violent texts: 1) Justification of the violence; 2)

Discontinuation of the violence; 3) The privileging of one set of texts over another. Thus, Gleason Archer (121), a conservative Christian interpreter, states, concerning some of the episodes of ethnic cleansing:

Yet there were specific situations when entire communities (such as Jericho) or entire tribes (such as the Amalekites) were to be exterminated by the Israelites in obedience to God's commands. In each case these offenders had gone so far in degeneracy and moral depravity that their continued presence would result in spreading the dreadful cancer of sin among God's covenant people. Just as the wise surgeon removes dangerous cancer from his patient's body by use of the scalpel, so God employed the Israelites to remove such dangerous malignancies from human society.

Archer thus justifies the violence by saying that the native peoples had to be exterminated for the greater good of the Hebrew settlers. Likewise, for traditional Jewish interpreters such as Maimonides, such wars fall under the idea of Holy War, which is permissible to extend God's laws (Fishbane, 26).

But note that allegorization is the one strategy not usually followed by Jewish and Christian interpreters in these texts. There usually is no attempt to say that these texts are really speaking of battles between the soul and body. There is no attempt by traditional Christian interpreters to deny that the violence ever occurred. It is true that secular critical scholars have often denied the historicity of some of these biblical narratives, but they do not deny that the biblical authors believed that such violence occurred or was justified. Allegorical interpretations, when they occur, are seen to be in addition to the literal sense of the text.

Even Anabaptists, Quakers, and other pacifist Christian groups do not deny that such biblical violence occurred or do not allegorize the violence. Rather they might say that the Hebrews were acting under a different covenant that no longer applies to Christians (Bainton, 153; Burns). Such violent tactics, in other words, were discontinued or were restricted to a particular group at a particular time. They are not to be generalized to all of God's people. Alternatively phrased, such pacifists might argue that not all biblical texts should be applied to our current situation, thus privileging one set of texts over another.

Of course, there are many injunctions to love "thy neighbor" in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Leviticus 19:18). However, this is usually interpreted to mean a fellow Hebrew, not foreigners, as is clear from texts commanding

the destruction of native inhabitants. One should also note that some Hebrew authors look forward to a time when peace will reign. Thus, Isaiah 2:4:

“He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

However, such hopes are with the understanding that violence against the enemies of Yahweh will precede such peace. Violence, thus, is a necessary instrument to gain that scarce resource we call peace.

New Testament

New Testament authors often portrayed their religion as a religion of love, in contrast to the Old Testament. Thus, Jesus himself is credited with introducing a law to love your enemy—one that was to replace a previous law to hate your enemy (Matthew 5:44). And, according to John 13:34, Jesus says: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” However, if one applies Schwartz’s perspectives, one can see that the same scarcity of resources that creates violence in what Christians call the Old Testament exists in the New. While many New Testament writers declare the death of the ethnocentricity of the Old Testament (See Galatians 3:28), in essence Christianity is simply exchanging one notion of an in-group for another, thus creating the seeds for violence.

The in-group are fellow Christians. They alone receive salvation. They alone will be granted the scarce resource called “eternal life.” This is clear in many texts, including John 14:6: “Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’” Those that do not believe in Christianity, will eventually be destroyed or tortured eternally in hell, as is clear in Matthew 25:40-41:

And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ He will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’...

Here Jesus uses in-group language (“my family”) and out-group language (“you that are accursed”), which, in turn, creates the type of conflict that

Schwartz believes typifies a monotheistic or monolatrous religion such as Christianity. The new in-group, according to some New Testament authors, no longer includes Judaism, the parent religion. Such exclusion often bore the seeds of conflict which then has credited as the prime factor for anti-Judaism in western history (Klein; Sandmel).

Ironically, it is the love that most Christians believe typifies Jesus that becomes the very scarce resource that creates conflict. Jesus indeed commands people to love one another. However, such a love cannot be equal. Love is a scarce resource, and most of it must be reserved for Jesus. In Matthew 10:34-37, Jesus himself acknowledges that this will cause conflict:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”

Luke 14:26 is even more emphatic in saying that: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

Here many Christian apologists do attempt to deny the plain sense of Jesus’ sayings, as hating one’s parents appears inconceivable on the lips of Jesus. Common strategies include making “hate” mean “love more than,” as is the case in the parallel text of Matthew 10:37 (So Geisler, 283). But the Greek (*miseo* = hate) is clear. Most translations (e.g., KJV, RSV, NRSV) do in fact translate it as “hate.” But apologists do not interpret hate literally. Thus, Luke is not telling you to hate your parents; Luke is telling you to love Jesus more than your parents. But, again, such strategies are not the norm when dealing with most of the violent texts in the Bible.

The single most violent book in the entire Christian canon is probably the book of Revelation, which may be seen as a “revenge novel.” The author(s) create every single mode of revenge that they can imagine upon those that are not following Christianity in the manner approved by the author. In one instance (Revelation 9:4-5), creatures are unleashed against those that are in the out-group (“those who do not have the seal of God upon their foreheads”), and they “were allowed to torture them for five months, but not to kill them, and their torture was like the torture of a

scorpion when it stings someone.” Thus, here torture, not death, is the explicit immediate purpose of God, according to the author. Eventually, Christ returns to exact vengeance upon all of the enemies of Christianity (Revelation 19-20).

In the case of Revelation, Christians have been divided as to how much is literal and how much is allegorical (Thompson). However, the reason for the allegorization is not ostensibly to eliminate the violence. Rather the reason for the allegorization is to harmonize some of the visions, historical claims, and chronological statements with empirical reality. Indeed, answering the question of when these events are to happen has generated the larger amount of allegorization.

Thus, from a secular critical perspective, the New Testament is even more violent than the Old Testament. In the Old Testament violence upon an individual lasts a finite amount of time—basically the lifetime of an individual. You can kill an individual or a whole group, and that is the final point of any violence. Christianity, however, extends violence into the afterlife. Non-Christians will be tortured in hell forever (Revelation 20:15). Although many Christians believe in hell as symbolic, most traditional Christians have no problem in believing in the eternal torture of non-Christians in some literal fiery lake.

Even when human beings are directed not to commit violence on opponents (e.g., Matthew 5:44, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”), such injunctions are subsidiary to the idea that God will be the one to exact violence in the end. This is clear in Romans 12:19: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” Such a seemingly pacifist theology, therefore, is not so much an opposition to violence itself, as it is in opposition to the idea that human beings ought to serve as the proper agents of violence. In any event, the broader view of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament indicates that human beings or God can commit justifiable violence at some point on all of those that do not belong to the respective in-groups.

The Bhagavad Gītā

The basic background story of the BG is relatively well known (see Stoler, 4-5). The king of Hastinapura, a town located about fifty miles north of modern Delhi, had two sons, Dhritarashtra, the eldest, and Pandu. When their

father died, Pandu succeeded to the throne, as Dhritarashtra was blind. Pandu, however, eventually died and his five sons were raised by Dhritarashtra. While Pandu's eldest son, Yudhishtira, has the legitimate right to succession, Duryodhana, the eldest of Dhritarashtra's one hundred sons, attempts to ascend to the throne. After some complicated intrigues, the Pandavas are exiled, but return to claim the throne through the battle at the core of the *Mahābhārata*, of which the BG is a part.

As the BG opens the Pandavas and Kauravas are deployed on the battlefield called Kurukṣetra. Soon we find Arjuna pondering what he should do in light of an impending battle with his kinsmen. Krishna counsels him, and the dialogue forms a meditation, in part, on various aspects of life itself. Insofar as violence is concerned, the central question is perhaps to be found in BG 1:37: "What happiness could we ever enjoy, if we killed our own kinsmen in battle?"

The answer to this question depends on whether we interpret part or all of the BG literally or allegorically. For an exegete like Robert Minor, it is clear that Krishna is counseling Arjuna to do his duty as a warrior (*kṣatriya*). Minor (1982: 2) says: "These allegorical interpretations are not in any sense explicit in the *Gītā* itself. The writer does not seem to intend an allegory." The same literal interpretation is favored by K. N. Upadhyaya, among other interpreters, cited by Minor.

According to such a literalistic approach, Krishna's answer is clear in BG 2:18: "fight" (*yudhyasva*), and Krishna gives the following reasons in BG 2:33-34: "Now, if you will not undertake this proper engagement thereupon, having avoided your own duty and glory, you shall incur evil (*pāpam avāpsyasi*). And also people will relate your undying infamy; And, for the honored, disgrace is worse than dying." Sri Aurobindo (89) concurs that "non-slaying would be here the sin." Later, in BG 2:38, Krishna is again direct, and commands Arjuna: "Join yourself to battle!" (*yuddhāya yujyasva*). If one were to read it literally and directly, then it would appear to be clear that the BG believes that violence is necessary, at least in some instances.

If we were to apply Schwartz's idea of scarce resources as the cause of conflict, then our analysis would also be quite simple. The scarce resource is power, especially as manifested by the institution of kingship. Only one person can be king, and that is the scarce resource that is being contested. Since Krishna seems to advocate the fight for this goal, then he is advocating the use of violence to secure a scarce resource. The creator of the universe is responsible for creating such scarce resources, and, therefore, for

any violence that ensues.

At the same time, from a secular critical perspective, there are subsidiary seeds for violence in the BG. The idea that one's life continues beyond the earthly one can be used as a justification for violence. If the body does not matter, then any violence done to the body ought not matter either. This is most apparent in Krishna's arguments in BG 2:26-30. Thus, in BG 2:27: "For the born, death is certain, for the dead there is certainly birth. Therefore, for this, inevitable in consequence, you should not mourn (*socitumarhasi*).” Likewise, there is BG 18:17, which says: "He whose state of mind is not egoistic, whose intelligence is not befouled, even though he slays these people, does not slay and is not bound (by his actions).” As noted by Sharpe (83-84), such passages were used to support violent means to overthrow British imperialism. O'Connell (44) also acknowledges that other interpretive traditions of the BG agree that "violence in some cases or at some times has been obligatory" even if at a perfunctory level.

From a secular critical viewpoint, BG 18:41-44, among other passages, also condones and promotes the caste system, which may be seen as a hierarchy of in-groups and out-groups. Thus, in BG 18:44: "Service is the inborn nature of the Śūdra.” From a Schwartzian perspective, such hierarchies can develop as a response to scarce resources, where one group wishes to monopolize or have privileged access to those resources. We might argue that labor is the scarce commodity that is being sought. The Śūdras, because of their skin color or other reasons, might then become a target for the extraction of labor. Such inequalities are inherently prone to violence as either the high status group attempts to enforce its will on the lower caste or the lower caste revolts.

But the literalistic interpretation that appears to sanction violence and social inequalities has yielded, particularly in the last one hundred years, to allegorical interpretations that deny that the BG has any reference to a real war or sanctions real social inequities. Such an allegorical interpretation is favored by, among others, Mahatma Gandhi. Allegorical interpreters would argue that such an approach is already suggested by the very first verse of the BG: "On the field of Dharma (*dharmakṣetre*), in the field of Kuru. Assembled together, desiring to fight. What did my army and that of the Sons of Pandu do, Samjaya?" Since Dharma is not necessarily a physical place, then the "field of Dharma" can be seen to be a metaphor, which one can easily extend to the whole BG in a thoroughly allegorical manner.

According to allegorical interpreters, the text makes clear that Dharma,

which is itself a difficult term to translate, is the theme of the story. Dharma need have nothing to do with war or violence in a physical sense. The battle can be interpreted to be between different aspects of the self. Thus Gandhi (Strohmeier, 2000: 16) says:

Even in 1888-89, when I first became acquainted with the Gita, I felt that it was not a historical work, but that, under the guise of physical warfare, it described the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of mankind, and that physical warfare was brought in merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring.

Gandhi (Strohmeier, 27) later adds: "It is a battle between the innumerable forces of good and evil, which become personified in us as virtues and vices. The Kauravas represent the forces of Evil, and the Pandavas the forces of Good." Likewise, Gandhi eliminates a violent interpretation of BG 18:17 by claiming that the slaying mentioned there is permissible only for God, not man (Strohmeier, 219-220).

Of course, even other Indian interpreters have not left Gandhi's exegesis of BG 18:17 and other passages unchallenged. G. W. Kaveeshwar (250, n. 1), says: "Gandhi too gives a laboured interpretation... Instead of accepting that this verse cannot be reconciled with the view of extreme non-violence, he says that like the geometrical line the Gita has here described an imaginary ideal applicable only to God, and that is not for man to attempt to follow it. As a matter of fact, there is little superhuman in this verse, its central idea being that there is nothing wrong in fighting with a non-egoistic and egoless attitude a righteous war inevitable in the pursuit of duty." Similarly, Berg (33), a western interpreter, criticizes Gandhi and other allegorizers for, among other things, "confusing the literal meaning of a text with its historical references or lack thereof."

To complicate matters, and as noted by Minor (1982: 56), the practice of "skill-in-means" (*upaya-kausilya*), could be invoked to deny the literalness of the text. Under such an approach, "the teacher begins where the pupil is, and then guides him to higher truth which might even negate his earlier arguments."

Thus, Krishna need not really mean to encourage literal violence upon other human beings. Krishna may simply wish to teach a lesson that cannot be easily perceived by the unenlightened.

Of course, Gandhi and other pacifists also point to the praising of *ahimsā*

(non-violence) to show that the BG favors a non-violent way of life. Thus, in BG 16:2-3 *ahimsā* is mentioned alongside many other laudable attributes of "those born to the divine destiny" (*daivim abhijatasya*). The idea of *ahimsā*, then, becomes, for Gandhi, one of the keys to interpreting the entire BG. Indeed, as far as life is concerned, "*Ahimsā* is a comprehensive principle (Gandhi, 1929: 228). On the other side, Winthrop Sargeant (17) regards the concept of *ahimsā* as follows: "But the advocacy of *ahimsā*, or non-violence, in the Gita, a work which might in some ways be described as a call to battle, is one of its principal contradictions."

Likewise, the caste system can be interpreted allegorically or as non-essential, and even contrary, to the BG and Hinduism itself. Thus, K. N Sen (27), says: "Indeed the caste divisions, as they exist today, are very much against the basic Hindu doctrine of the all-pervading Brahman, identified with the Ātman." The logic apparently is that, if everyone is part of Brahman, then everyone should be equal.

So is a literal or an allegorical reading of the BG the correct one? Actually, what confronts us is a classic hermeneutic impasse that occurs also in biblical interpretation. What the interpreters of both the BG and the Bible are essentially doing is attempting to read the mind of the author(s), who are perceived to be divine and/or human. But no interpreter can really prove that something is meant to be literal or not. The BG certainly can be seen to advocate violence and other inequalities that create violence, if interpreted literally. The BG can be understood to advocate non-violence if understood that any encouragement to battle really refers to a struggle between lower and the higher self or some other non-physical struggle. And there are many variations on both positions.

Conclusion

So is the Bible more violent than the BG? The answer is as relativistic as the types of viewpoints we have examined. If interpreted literally, at least some portions of the Bible are quite explicit in advocating violence as the proper means to settle conflicts that ultimately derive from unequal access to scarce resources, including land, God's revelation, and human authority. Such directives reach back to God himself. If interpreted literally, the BG can also be seen as supporting violence. Krishna directs Arjuna to participate in war. Krishna supports the caste system that in itself may be a sort of violence to those that are in the lower echelons. Krishna devalues bodily

suffering and death, which can logically lead to devaluing violence as well.

If we extend the logic of Schwartz, it might be that all religions, not just monotheistic ones, are ultimately violent. All religions ultimately depend on creating, rather than just addressing, scarce resources. And more importantly, the scarce resources created by religion are generally accepted as unverifiable, which itself leads to violence. That is to say, since no one can externally verify that transcendent forces exist, and since no one can conclusively verify that any particular god wills one thing rather than another, religion creates conflicts that might be seen as unnecessary. Access to the divine will itself become the scarce resource that either creates divisions, or exacerbates pre-existing in-group and out-group divisions. People will fight about which version of a god's will is really the true one, when, from a secular critical viewpoint, the whole notion of a divine will is a mere projection for the believers' own wishes and wants.

But still there are differences regarding violence in the Bible and the BG. One difference is the sheer number of episodes of violence in the Bible as compared to the *Bhagavad Gītā*. There is scarcely a book in the Bible in which violence is not either sanctioned, condoned, or just reported without value judgment. The number of passages advocating peace or love are really a minority. Yet, such a comparison may be unfair to the Bible for the principal reason that the length of the works is not the same. The BG is smaller, and so might have fewer episodes of violence. A better comparison might be the Bible with the *Mahābhārata*, but then there is a disparity in size there as well that may not be fair to the *Mahābhārata*.

But if size and quantity of violent language is not comparable, we can definitely say that the difference between the Bible and the BG resides in the history of interpretation of passages relating to violence. It is true that the acceptance of literal interpretations of violence and the caste system in the BG have a far longer history than allegorical ones, and even the literal ones have various approaches when dealing with the violence of the text. Nonetheless, the followers of the Bible historically have not usually interpreted in allegorical terms the texts commanding violence or condoning violence. Rather, the prominent strategy in Jewish and Christian interpretation has been to justify the violence rather than to allegorize it. Like Gleason Archer, for example, such interpreters would say that the circumstances for violence were extraordinary or that God had a goal in mind that we must respect. If there are allegorical interpretations, they are in addition to the literal one, not substitutes.

The same is definitely not the case with the BG. The pacifist interpretations have been just as prominent as the literal ones, especially since Gandhi's time. And many traditionalists are ready to accept the allegorical dimension that lay at the basis of these pacifistic interpretations. Such allegorical readings are, in a sense, more consistent and thorough than the literal, at least regarding violence. Moreover, there at least seems to be willingness on the part of modern readers of the BG to accept such allegorical interpretations. And this can be extended to the larger epics, and so it is not quantity of violent episodes and passages that is really at issue. Rather it is a difference in the preference for allegory versus literalism on the part of the interpreters of the BG. In addition, the violence in the BG and the *Mahābhārata* always seems to be a last resort and part of an agonizing decision as opposed to the Bible, where violence, with few exceptions (e.g., Judges 21:3-7) seems to flow without much deliberation. This is an important point. A close look at the *Mahābhārata* reveals that violence is engaged after much consideration and regret by the Pandava heroes. Thus, even a literal reading reveals that violence is not preferred according to the teachings and background of the BG.

In conclusion, the comparison we have undertaken really has served as a plea to shift our attention to the history of interpretation. If we are really interested in comparing violence, whether in a Schwartzian perspective or otherwise, then we should begin to ask why it is that the Judeo-Christian interpretive tradition has not allegorized passages that ostensibly encourage, condone, or command violence. Why have most Bible-based traditions not seen those texts as metaphors for inner struggles? Why not allegorize them as fights between lower and higher selves, as is often done with the BG? The better question is why the Judeo-Christian tradition has primarily developed a hermeneutic for the justification of violence rather than the allegorization of violence. In sum, we should ask why allegorical interpretations of violence are such a scarce resource in Judaism and Christianity as compared to the allegorical interpretations, even if relatively recent, applied to the *Bhagavad Gītā*.

A note on translations*

*Translations of the BG are my own adaptations of those in Winthrop Sargeant. Unless noted otherwise, all biblical citations are those of the *New Revised Standard Version*. National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989.

*My thanks to Lynken Ghose, Christopher Lee, and Whitney Sanford, colleagues at Iowa State University, who provided helpful references and comments, as well as to Diana Carson, my research assistant. None of them are responsible for any of my errors.

Bibliography

- Archer, Gleason. *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982.
- Aurobindo, Sri. *Essays on the Gita*. First Series. Calcutta: Arya Publishing House, 1944.
- Bainton, Roland H. *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1960.
- Balagangadhara, S. N. "The Heathen in His Blindness..." *Asia, the West and the Dynamics of Religion*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994.
- Berg, Richard A. "The Bhagavad-Gita on War: The Argument from Literature." In Arvind Sharma, editor. *New Essays on the Bhagavadgita: Philosophical, Methodological, and Cultural Approaches*. New Delhi: Books and Books, 1987: Pages 25-35.
- Burns, J. Patout, editor. *War and its Discontents: Pacifism and Quietism in the Abrahamic traditions*. Washington, D.C. : Georgetown University Press, 1996.
- Caldwell, Sarah and Brian K. Smith. Introduction: Who Speaks for Hinduism? *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68 (4, 2000): 705-710.
- Fishbane, Michael. *Image of the Human in Jewish Tradition*. In Leroy Rouner editor (see below) pages 17-32.
- Geisler, Norman and Ronald Brooks. *When Skeptics Ask*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1990.
- Gandhi, M. K. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1929.
- *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi*. John Strohmeier, translator Berkeley. Berkeley Hills Books, 2000.
- Hayman, Peter. "Monotheism-A Misused Word in Jewish Studies?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1, 1991): 1-15.
- Huntington, Samuel P. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Jordens, J. T. F., "Gandhi and the Bhagavaditā." In Robert Minor, editor, *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgītā* (Albany: SUNY, 1986), 88-109.
- Kaveeshwar, G. W. *The Ethics of the Gita*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1971.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion : Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

- Klein, Charlotte. *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology*. Translated by Edward Quinn; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978.
- Larson, Gerald J. "The Bhagavad Gita as Cross-Cultural Process." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 18 (14, December 1975) 651-659.
- Miller, Barbara Stoler. *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*. New York: Quality Paperback, 1998.
- Minor, Robert. *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgītā*. Albany: SUNY, 1986.
- . *Bhagavad-Gītā: An Exegetical Commentary*. New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1982.
- O'Connell, Joseph T. "Caitanya's Followers and the Bhagavad-Gītā: A Case Study in Bhakti and the Secular." In Bardwell Smith, editor, *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976. Pages 33-52.
- Rashid, Salim, editor. *The Clash of Civilizations? Asian Responses*. New York: Oxford, 1997.
- Rouner, Leroy S. ed., *Human Rights and the World's Religions*. Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press, 1988.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1978.
- Sandmel, Samuel. *Anti-Semitism in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978.
- Sargeant, Winthrop. *The Bhagavad Gita: A Magnificent New Translation and Annotation of the Sanskrit Classic*. New York: Doubleday, 1979.
- Schwartz, Regina. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Sen, K. M. *Hinduism*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961.
- Sharma, Arvind. *The Hindu Gītā. Ancient and Classical Interpretations of the Bhavagadgītā*. London: Duckworth, 1986.
- Sharpe, Eric. *The Universal Gītā*. La Salle: Open Court, 1985.
- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Bhagavadgita and the Epistles of Paul*. New York: Anthroposophic Press, 1971.
- Thompson, Leonard L. *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*. New York: Oxford, 1990.
- Upadhyaya, K. N. "The Bhagavad Gita on War and Peace." *Philosophy East and West* 19 (2, April, 1969), 165.