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Jesus and Krishna

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At the turn of the century, the childhoods of Krishna and Jesus were much discussed by Western scholars.¹ Since then, however, the comparison between these two savior figures has received little or no serious attention, even though Krishna has become widely known among Christians since the 1960s and there is great interest in interreligious dialogue. To help fill this lacuna, and to foster and promote what Hindus and Christians have in common, this article attempts to highlight similarities between the notion of salvation offered by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the notion of salvation offered by Jesus in the New Testament. As each point is examined with respect to Krishna, the New Testament is examined to see if there is a parallel with respect to Jesus. There are concluding observations on the significance of the findings for Hindu-Christian dialogue.

To begin, it may be helpful to sketch briefly the story of Krishna as he is known by Hindus. The earliest reference to him is found in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (sixth century B.C.E.), where he is mentioned as a student of philosophy (III.17.6). In the *Mahabharata* (fifth century B.C.E.) he is portrayed as a tribal hero; in the *Bhagavad Gita* (second century B.C.E.), as God incarnate who instructs Arjuna and, through him, all humankind. Our earliest source of his childhood is the *Harivamsa* (third century C.E.); an enlarged account of his life is found in the *Vishnu Purana* (fifth century C.E.). However, the most complete account of Krishna's life is that given in the *Bhagavata Purana* (ninth century C.E.).

From this vast array of literature covering several centuries emerge three Krishnas, or rather three aspects of the one Krishna of the Hindus: the tribal hero, the God incarnate, and the Krishna of the *Puranas*, which tell of his life in Gokula as the divine child, the young herdsman, and the endearing lover. The three aspects of his character are cumulative, not discrete, for each aspect melts into the others. As a hero he met the wor-

shiper's need for a divine father; as a young herdsman, for a divine lover; and as a child, for a son.

The young Krishna's love affairs have been the source of much romantic literature.² Invariably, his love for the cowherds' wives is interpreted as symbolic of the love of God for the human soul. The sound of his flute calling the women to leave their husbands' beds and dance with him in the moonlight is more than a melody. It represents the voice of God calling men and women to leave earthly things and turn to the joys of divine love. Likewise have Christians interpreted the Song of Songs.

The story of the child Krishna developed into a cult that appealed to the warm maternity of womanhood, and even today the village women of India worship the divine child. This practice closely resembles devotion to the infant Jesus common among Christians from the earliest centuries.

More intriguing is the fact that the nativity stories of Krishna and Jesus are alike in many ways. Just as Nanda came with Yashoda to Mathura to pay tribute, so Joseph came with Mary to Bethlehem to be taxed (Lk. 2:1-6; *Bhagavata Purana*, X.5; *Vishnu Purana*, V.3, V.6). In both cases a star portends miraculous birth, and that birth comes in the middle of the night as an evil king sleeps (Mt. 1:18-25; Lk. 1:26-38; *Bhagavata Purana*, X.3). The cruel king Kamsa has his parallel in Herod, and in both cases there is a massacre of infants when the king awakens (Mt. 2:14-16; *Bhagavata Purana*, X.4, X.6; *Vishnu Purana*, V.4). As wise men came to see Krishna, so wise men came to see the infant Jesus; heavenly musicians rained down songs of praise, just as Bethlehem's shepherds were startled by the angels' glorias (Mt. 2:9-12; Lk. 2:8-20; *Bhagavata Purana*, X.2, X.3; *Vishnu Purana*, V.2, V.3). The flight to Braj is similar to the flight into Egypt; in Braj, as in Israel, the parents were forewarned to take their child away to a place that lay safely beyond the despot's reach (Mt. 2:13-15; *Bhagavata Purana*, X.3; *Vishnu Purana*, V.1, V.3, V.5). Thus, Krishna's identity was hidden as he began his life in Braj, much as that of Jesus was concealed by the stables of Bethlehem and the carpenters' stalls of Nazareth (Mt. 2:19-23).³

Whatever one may conclude about these similarities, it seems certain that there is some historical basis for the story of Krishna, even though the stories of his life are diverse. Moreover, it is through faith in him that Hindus have the conviction of his existence and the truth of his teachings.⁴

The new wave of biblical scholarship points in an analogous direction with respect to Jesus. The story of his life and teachings is found in four Gospels, not to mention the many Epistles written by various authors. It is true that no serious scholar today doubts his existence, yet the Gospels, even conservatives would admit, are documents of faith molded by the needs of the early Christians to interpret the Christ-event rather than efforts to offer a literal, chronological account of what Jesus actually said and did. Understandably, many Christians now put more emphasis on the meaning and spirituality of the Jesus-story than Christians did in the past and as Hindus do with respect to Krishna.

In any event, in attempting a comparison of Krishna and Jesus, it is immaterial whether the Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita* is a historical figure or not. The essential point is that this scripture articulates the Hindu recognition of Krishna as God. This recognition merits a comparison between him and Jesus in the New Testament.

GOD

In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna is God, and God is personal—"the Person eternal and divine, primeval God, unborn and all-pervading Lord" (10:13); the "all-highest Person" who bestows "being on all contingent beings" and "Lord of all the world" (10:15, 13:22); the "Person All-Sublime" who is wholly immanent and wholly transcendent (13:22, 16:16-20). Though God is the origin of all things (10:15), and the world depends on God (9:10), God does not depend on the world (9:4-5). Beyond the visible universe God has another mode of being in the heavenly home (8:20-22). Yet, as "father of the world" (9:17-19; 11:43), God is the source and sustainer of all virtues (10:4-6), the "light of lights" (13:17) who resides in the heart of all (18:61).

In the New Testament, too, God is personal. It is true that God is called the "Most High" (Lk. 6:35), "the Deity" (Acts 17:29), "Power" (Mk. 14:62), "the immortal, invisible, and only God" (1 Tim. 1:17)—affirmations of God's supremacy that do not emphasize God as person. Yet, God is our "father." The Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:9-13) is a model of reverence and simple trust in a God who is personal. As in the *Gita*, God is both transcendent and immanent, "above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:6). Though the creator of all things (Eph. 3:9) and the one who exercises care over all creation (Mt. 6:30, 23:22), God is distinct from the world (Rom. 1:25), for God "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16), and heaven is God's throne (Mt. 5:34, 23:22). As our heavenly "father," God is the source of all goodness (Mk. 10:18), the "light that shines in the darkness" (Jn. 1:5; 1 Jn. 1:5), in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

THE INCARNATION OF GOD

Although Krishna in the *Gita* is unborn and eternal, he explicitly stated that he incarnates himself in the world "whenever the law of righteousness withers away and lawlessness arises" (4:7). The purpose of his coming into the world from age to age is "for the protection of the good . . . and for the setting up of the law of righteousness" (4:8).

Krishna in the *Gita* is, therefore, true God and true human. This is also evident in Krishna's stupendous theophany: Not content with Krishna's account of his "far-flung powers," Arjuna asks to see Krishna's "Self which does not pass away" (11:1-4). Krishna grants Arjuna's request and gives him a "celestial eye" (11:8) with which to behold his transfiguration;

Arjuna, in terrified ecstasy, confesses Krishna as God (11:35-46). Aware that he has been unduly intimate with Krishna in his human form, Arjuna is filled with a sense of unworthiness and sin and appeals for the end of the terrifying vision and the return of Krishna to human forms. We see here that Krishna is no mere teacher of what is right and wrong but God who answers the prayers of God's followers. Arjuna asks for mercy, and Krishna responds, comforting him in his fear, and "once again the great-souled (Krishna) assumed the body of a friend" (11:50). There is no doubt that Krishna has a human body, for he eats, drinks, plays, and sleeps as people do (11:42).

Arjuna's sense of awe before the transfiguration of Krishna recalls Isaiah's reaction before the vision of God in the Hebrew Bible: "Woe is me! For I am undone; . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts" (Is. 6:5). It also recalls the scene in the New Testament where Peter, James, and John fell on their faces, filled with reverence, at the transfiguration of Jesus (Mt. 17:1-8).

In the New Testament, also, God became human; the purpose of God's coming into the world was for our salvation (Nicene Creed; Mt. 9:12; Mk. 2:17; Lk. 5:32, 19:10; Jn. 3:17). The clearest expression of the incarnation of God is found in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, which states that "the Word became flesh" (Jn. 1:14). That Jesus was true God and true human is also implied here, for we are told that "the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1) and "dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14). While John expressed the incarnation through the use of the philosophical term "Logos," the other Evangelists expressed a similar faith by setting their narrative in a theological framework and by the use of stories. Thus, Mark placed the work of Jesus against the preparatory mission of John the Baptist. Matthew and Luke started with the birth narrative, giving both the Virgin Birth and the genealogies of Jesus through Joseph to Abraham and Adam.

The Pauline writings also contain teaching on the incarnation in what scholars call the "christological hymns" (found in Phil. 2:6-11; Col. 1:15-20; and 1 Tim. 3:16), which may be Pauline though not written by Paul. Whether or not Paul wrote these hymns is irrelevant here, though it is usually thought that Paul adopted them to explain his exalted view of Jesus. Philippians tells us that Jesus was in the "form" of God but "emptied" himself and took the "form" of a servant. There is a possible docetism in the phrase "being made in the likeness of men," but faith in Jesus' true humanity is asserted in the phrase that he "became obedient unto death." In Colossians Jesus is called "the image of the invisible God" in whom "the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." Here, also, Jesus' humanity is asserted, for peace comes to us "through the blood of the cross." Jesus, then, like Krishna in the *Gita*, is true God and true human.

There is some diversity within the Hindu tradition in interpreting how this is so for Krishna, a diversity akin to that found in the Christian tradition. In the foundational Christian scriptures, one encounters a Jesus

who is, above all, God-for-us and human-for-us, but out of this there emerges a later conciliar affirmation of Jesus as God-in-Godself and human-in-self, which gives rise to a variety of interpretations. The similarity of Jesus and Krishna as God and human appears to be more deeply rooted the closer one gets to the origins of both religious faiths, but it perdures even as one moves into later stages of articulation that take place in cultural contexts that differ quite significantly.

The incarnation of God boggles the imagination and overwhelms human thought. Krishna mourns that "fools despise him because he has taken a human body" (9:11). There is a parallel lament in Paul, who regarded it as "a stumbling block to the Jews" and "folly to the Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). Folly or not, Krishna asserts that it is through him that human beings find salvation, "But that highest Person is to be won by love-and-worship directed to none other" (8:22; also 8:7; 9:25, 29, and 30-32; 11:55; 12:6-8 and 30; 13:18; Zaehner, 437-439). That "highest Person" refers, of course, to Krishna. Moreover, Krishna says that to follow him is "to tread the highest way" (32; also 6:45). Those who worship other gods are "anonymous Krishnas": "Whatever form . . . a devotee with faith desires to honor, that very faith do I affirm in him . . . thence he gains his desires, though it is I who am the true dispenser" (7:21-22; also 9:23-24). Krishna's "way" is parallel to the "way" of Jesus: "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6); Christians maintain this claim when they say that "there is no other name than Jesus among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Karl Rahner has expressed this theologically with his doctrine of "anonymous Christians."⁵

To reflect on what we have seen so far, we observe that, while Christianity and Hinduism are two great religions that accept the fact that God incarnates Godself as a human being, the question of one or many incarnations highlights a difference between the *Gita* and the New Testament. The difference, however, is not rooted in dogmatics but is ultimately a question of two different visions of time and history. Yet, the difference may not be as great as it first appears to be, for, on the one hand, although Jesus came once for all for this present world era, traditional Christian faith holds that he will come again. On the other hand, while Krishna incarnates himself age after age, the ages are separated by thousands of years so that the incarnation of Krishna made known to us in the *Gita* is for our present age. Moreover, in the *Gita*, there is no suggestion that other incarnations of God are other than that of Krishna. In other words, whether incarnation is one or many, Krishna is the mediator of salvation. Furthermore, the law of *karma* in the *Gita* (3:9, 4:14, 9:28, 18:60) does not work independently of Krishna. By following Krishna, history is no longer the drudgery of *chronos* but the surprise of *kairos*. The time in which we live is a new era. Salvation and freedom from rebirth are, for the first time, available to all (4:9, 8:15, 12:7, 13:25, 14:2, 20, 14:4).

What of *karma* and Christianity? The law of *karma*, the notion that we

reap what we sow, is recognized in the New Testament (2 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 6:7). The Christian hope is that we will be ushered into the presence of God, but our achievement of this hope is in some sense linked with our activity during this life. Good actions lead to God, while evil actions have consequences, the living-through of which offers the means of purification. Most of us know about the costliness of love to accept the view that all moral and spiritual progress is likely to be painful. However, many people would agree that a short life is not long enough for achieving perfection. For them the doctrine of purgatory suggests moral and spiritual evolution and resonates with the belief that God wills all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). The doctrine of God's universal salvific will expresses the Christian hope that God gives up on no one no matter how evil and alienated he or she has become. At the same time, Christianity, unlike Hinduism, recognizes the possibility of hell, of ultimate nonfulfillment based on the free rejection of God, but it has not declared that any human has been relegated to that state.

Can the law of *karma* and rebirth be brought into harmony with Christianity? Religious language is symbolic. The law of *karma* and rebirth in the *Gita* is an attempt to reconcile the justice and love of God. Rebirth affirms that God's love is so infinite that God gives us the opportunity to grow until we achieve perfection. If some Christians believe that nothing defiled shall see God and recognize that most of us need further purification at death, and if it is this recognition that has prompted the doctrine of purgatory, then the doctrine of rebirth as an opportunity for further purification, for working off our bad *karma*, has its parallel in the doctrine of purgatory. Through the doctrine of purgatory, it is possible for Christians to hope that, because God's nature is one of love, no one finally fails to make the journey to God. From a universalist perspective, then, the law of *karma* and rebirth can be harmonized with the doctrine of purgatory without denying the possibility of hell.

In spite of the issue of one or many incarnations, the teachings of Krishna and Jesus on salvation are similar in many respects, as we shall now see. In the *Gita* Krishna's offer of salvation is made in terms of grace: "Thinking on Me you will surmount all dangers by my grace" (18:58; also 9:30-31, 18:56, 18:62). However, though Krishna is the God of grace, always ready to save those who are devoted to him (9:26ff), we are free to reject his offer if we choose (16:7-20), for the efficacy of grace depends on our faith and love. Faith is trust and commitment, self-abandonment to Krishna. When we respond to Krishna's grace in faith, Krishna gives us salvation, forgiveness, and new life:

Those who cast off all their works on Me, solely intent on Me, and mediate on Me in spiritual exercise, leaving no room for others, [and so really] do honor Me, these I will lift up on high out of the ocean of recurring birth, and that right soon, for their thoughts are fixed on

Me; thenceforth in very truth in Me you will find your home. (12:6-8; also 9:30)

Further, love should be total. Krishna regards even our humblest offering as a gift of love: "Be it a leaf or flower or fruit that a zealous soul may offer Me with love's devotion, that do I [willingly] accept, for it was love that made the offering" (9:26). Whatever we do we should do for the love of God: "Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice or give away in alms, whatever penance you perform, offer it up to Me" (9:27).

In the New Testament Paul also spoke of human salvation in terms of grace: "By grace you have been saved" (Eph. 2:5); three verses later, he added that grace depends on faith (Eph. 2:8). He acknowledged, too, that we can decline God's offer of grace. For example, he wrote in Gal. 2:21 of "nullifying" the grace of God, and in Gal. 5:4 he chided his readers because they had fallen away from grace (see also 2 Cor. 6:1). As in the *Gita*, Paul instructed that we should offer to God in love whatever we do: "Whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all for the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31).

REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

In the *Gita* repentance born of love and faith effaces all sin, and no one who comes to God with a humble heart fails to win salvation. Not only the high-caste and the rich can be saved, for Krishna cuts through the sharply drawn lines of caste and sex and opens the way of salvation to all in words reminiscent of Paul that with God there is neither slave nor free, male nor female (Gal. 3:28; also Rom. 10:12-13): "none who worships Me with loyalty-and-love is lost to Me. For whosoever makes Me his haven, base-born though he be, yes, women too and artisans, even serfs, theirs it is to tread the highest way" (9:31-34). Krishna is the Good Herdsman in quest of the worst sinner who has not repented: "However evil a man's livelihood may be, let him but worship Me and serve no other, then he shall be reckoned among the good indeed, for his resolve is right" (9:30).

The New Testament also teaches the forgiveness of sins through repentance. We find it in the preaching of John the Baptist (Mk. 1:4) and in the ministry of Jesus. When Jesus came into Galilee his first message to his hearers was that they should repent (Mk. 1:15). Throughout his ministry, when people came to him in a spirit of humility and sorrow for what they had done, Jesus forgave them. As God incarnate, he claimed that he had the power to forgive sins (Mk. 2:7-12). He said that his mission was not to the righteous but to call sinners to repentance (Lk. 5:32; also Mt. 9:12; Mk. 2:17; Lk. 19:10; Jn. 3:17). There are many examples of the experience of God's forgiveness in the stories of how Jesus said to men and women individually, "Thy sins are forgiven: go and sin no more" (Mt. 9:2; Mk. 2:5;

Jn. 8:2-11). Moreover, from Jesus we learn that God not only forgives the sinner who turns to God in repentance, but God also goes out in search of the sinner who has not repented, as a Good Shepherd goes out in the wilderness to find the one lost sheep (Lk. 15:3-7). In the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:8-32), Jesus said that God's response to the repentant is like the father in the story who comes running out to meet his son and will not even allow him to finish his awkward confession of guilt. God comes to meet us in love and forgiveness, but there must first be true repentance, for God does not wish to forgive those who do not wish to be forgiven. What Jesus taught about the forgiveness of sins is continuous with what Krishna taught in the *Gita*.

GRACE, NOT WORKS

The *Gita* further teaches that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works (6:37-47). In response to Arjuna's inability to relate this teaching to the various duties, ritualistic and ethical, prescribed by the Vedic law and the Hindu tradition as necessary for salvation, Krishna says: "For knowledge of the Veda, for sacrifice, for grim austerities, for gifts of alms a meed of merit is laid down: all this the athlete of the spirit leaves behind" who knows that the law finds fulfillment in him (8:28; also 3:10-16; 11:48 and 53). In words that echo the epistle to the Hebrews, Krishna says that he is the sacrifice that links salvation in this world to the next: "I am the rite, the sacrifice, the offering for the dead, the healing herb; I am the sacred formula, the sacred butter am I: I am the fire and the oblation offered [in the fire]" (9:16). As the *Gita* comes to a close, Krishna again tells Arjuna that he is not to worry about the law but to have faith in Krishna's love and grace: "Give up all things of law, turn to Me, your only refuge, [for] I will deliver you from all evils; have no care" (18:66). That is, salvation is not something that we must try to win by our own means but to accept as a gracious gift from God. In confirmation of this teaching, Arjuna is told that the revelation of God he received was due to grace (11:47), not works (11:48).

As in the *Gita*, the New Testament teaches that we are made right with God through grace, not through works (Rom. 3:20-28). As Paul explained: "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace" (Rom. 11:6). Grace is the antithesis of law (Rom. 6:14). Successful obedience to the Mosaic law was known as works. It is this view that Paul contrasted to grace. Salvation is not our own work but God's gift (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:8). Even Paul admitted that the revelation he received was through grace, not works (Gal. 1:15).

This is the heart of the teaching on grace in the *Gita* and the New Testament: God loves us "while we are yet sinners" (Rom. 5:8). It is God who takes the initiative in reconciliation, by becoming incarnate, and it is

for us to accept God's free gift that we can never earn. What the *Gita* emphasizes so strongly has its parallel in Paul.

LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE

Reliance on grace in faith and love leads to knowledge of God. When devotion grows, God dwelling in the soul imports to the devotee the light of wisdom. The *Gita* puts it this way: "By love-and-loyalty he comes to know Me as I really am, how great I am and who; and once he knows Me as I am he enters Me forthwith" (18:55). To know the truth is to lift up our hearts to and adore God. The knower is also a devotee and the best of them: "Of these the man of wisdom, ever integrated, who loves-and-worships One alone excels: for to the man of wisdom I am exceeding dear and he is dear to Me" (7:17).

In the New Testament, too, knowledge of God is the fruit of faith and love. The twin notions of knowledge and faith occur together (Jn. 4:16, 6:69), 8:31-32). The same is true of knowledge and love, for knowing is the result of becoming one and being one with God through love: "He who loves is born of God; he who does not love does not know God; for God is love" (1 Jn. 4:7-8).

SIN AND IGNORANCE

In the *Gita* wisdom is the opposite of ignorance, which is the parent of attachment, for the roots of attachment lie in the wrong belief that we are self-sufficient. Ignorance is not theoretical error but spiritual blindness. To know the truth we require conversion of soul. Arjuna could not see the truth with his natural eyes; through grace he was granted the divine light (11:8). After his long struggle to know the will of God, it was through revelation through grace that he finally found peace: "Destroyed is the confusion; and through grace I have regained a proper way of thinking: with doubts dispelled I stand ready to do your bidding" (18:73).

For Paul knowledge was also the opposite of ignorance because ignorance is a factor of human sin (Rom. 1:18). Thus, no matter how keen and bright our intellect may be, natural wisdom is futile (Rom. 1:21), foolish (1 Cor. 3:19), and blind (2 Cor. 4:4). Paul showed this clearly when he contrasted the basic human ability to know God with present human ignorance rooted in a false sense of self-sufficiency: "For although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools" (Rom. 1:21-22). On the one hand, sinful persons by "their wickedness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18), and, on the other hand, "since they do not see fit to acknowledge God, God gives them up to a base mind" (Rom. 1:28). To have true knowledge we need to be converted to God, for only God is able to lead us to an acceptance of the

truth (1 Cor. 2:10-13). Even Paul was unable to know the truth before his conversion; only after his conversion did he come to know God's will (Gal. 1:15).

THE NEED FOR DETACHMENT

In the *Gita* to remove ignorance we must kindle the spiritual vision: "A man of faith, intent on wisdom, his senses [all] restrained, wins wisdom; and wisdom won, he will come right to perfect peace" (4:39). We must cleanse the soul from attachment to the self and the world. It is for this reason that Krishna makes detachment the key to spiritual growth: "I love the man who is the same to friend and foe, the same whether he is respected or despised, the same in heat and cold, in pleasure as in pain, who has put away attachment and remains unmoved by praise or blame" (12:18-19). Such a man holds "profit and loss, victory and defeat to be the same" (2:38), for he is undismayed by sorrow "who rejoices not at whatever good befalls him nor hates the bad that comes his way" (2:56-57). The same to him are clods of earth, stones, and gold (6:8). "Content to take whatever chance may bring his way, surmounting [all] dualities, knowing no envy, the same in success and failure, though working [still] he is not bound" (4:22).

In the New Testament, too, the removal of ignorance calls for spiritual vision, which is the result of unwavering commitment: "If any one of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God . . . and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind" (Jas. 1:5-6). As in the *Gita*, spiritual vision calls for self-denial. We must put to death what is earthly in us—"immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:5; also Rom. 6:12; Titus 2:12; 1 Pet. 2:11, 4:2); mortify the body and crucify the flesh (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:24); prefer the good of others before our own (Lk. 3:11; Rom. 14:20-21, 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:24 and 33, 13:5; Phil. 2:4); put off our old nature, which belongs to our former manner of life, and put on the new nature, created in the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9); be crucified to the world (Gal. 6:14), and not love the things that are in it (1 Jn. 2:15); and forsake all (Lk. 14:33), even lawful things (1 Cor. 10:23). In both the *Gita* and the New Testament, then, complete detachment from self leads to complete knowledge of God.

TRUE KNOWLEDGE IS EXPERIENTIAL

In the *Gita* complete knowledge of God is experiential knowledge that we abide in God and God abides in us (11:54 and 55). It is through experiential knowledge that the knower of God is established in God (5:20). It is the great purifier: "For nothing on earth resembles wisdom in its power to purify" (4:38). It has the power to destroy the effects of sin: "Who knows my godly birth and mode of operation thus as they really are, he . . . is

never born again; he comes to Me. Many are they who, passion, fear, and anger spent, inhere in Me, making Me their sanctuary; made pure by wisdom and hard penances, they come [to share] in my own mode of being" (4:9-10). It is worth noting in passing that, in this passage, meditation on the birth and incarnate life of God, combined with the stilling of the passions through the discipline of detachment, leads to an experiential knowledge of God, as in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola.⁶

In the New Testament true knowledge is also experiential in character. It is the revelation of the mystery of God (1 Cor. 2:6ff), which God gives to those who have faith in God (1 Cor. 2:10-16, 12:8). The believer knows, because God dwells in her or him (Jn. 14:7) and transforms her or him into God's likeness (1 Jn. 3:2). Those who have this knowledge know the truth, and the truth sets them free from sin (Jn. 8:3-32). It is a blessed vision that is the fruit of a perfect life lived in and for God. As the beatitudes state, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Mt. 5:8).

KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION

The experience of God is not the final goal of faith and love, for in that case the *Gita* would have ended with Arjuna's tremendous experience of the celestial vision of Krishna (11:9-55). Arjuna cannot forget the thrilling scene he saw, but he has to work it into his life. He has seen the truth, but he has to live it by transmuting his whole nature into the willing acceptance of the Divine. By taking Arjuna beyond the visible universe, Krishna merely broadens his horizon; that is, Krishna makes possible Arjuna's ability to work for the good of others.

To put it more generally, true knowledge expresses itself in action. It must bear fruit in the lives of those who love if it is to be effective in leading people to salvation. Thus, Krishna says that those who reject action are ineffective (3:4), self-deceiving (3:5), hypocritical (3:6), antisocial (3:16, 20), and uninformed (3:27), then sets out ethical requirements for the person he loves:

None hurting, truthful, free from anger, renouncing [all] begins, free from nagging greed, gentle, modest, never fickle, [a]rdent, patient, enduring, pure, not treacherous nor arrogant—such is the man who is born to [inherit] a godly destiny. (16:2-3; also 12:15-17; 16:4, 6-7)

In the *Gita* the necessity for action becomes clearer when we note that God works for the good of the world: "If I were not to do my work, these worlds would fall to ruin" (3:24; also 4:14 and 9:9). The central event of God's activity in history is the coming of Krishna into the world for the protection of the good and the establishment of righteousness in the world (4:8). Most importantly, he invites all to join him in this enterprise: "Whatever the noblest does, that will others do: the standard that he sets all the

world will follow" (3:21). Here the "noblest" refers to Krishna himself. That is, God's activity is the norm and model of all worldly actions. We must imitate God's work without selfish desire and imitate God's concern for the welfare of the world. Action is what Krishna wanted Arjuna to be interested in. Action is unavoidable; hence, the renunciation of action is impossible, but the renunciation of the fruits of action is possible (3:5, 33; 18:5-6). In the words of the *Gita*: "To work alone you are entitled, never to its fruit. Neither let the motive be the fruit of action, nor let attachment be to non-action" (2:47).

For the *Gita*, then, the realm of God is not exclusively an interior reality. It enters into the exterior life of the human being in the world. In fact, the very purpose of the dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna is to persuade Arjuna to do his duty to society. Arjuna wanted to flee from the world and save his soul in isolation from the world. He wanted to seek refuge in religious quietism, but Krishna dissuaded him from doing so and asked him to work for the welfare of others: "It is better to do one's own duty, though devoid of merit, than to do another's, however well-performed. By doing the work prescribed by one's own nature, a man meets with no defilement" (18:47). It seems clear, then, that discipleship in the *Gita* has two aspects: a focus on the activity of God in the world, and an emphasis on detachment through which the individual participates in this activity.

In the New Testament, also, experiential knowledge born of love must express itself in action. Thus, in the Gospels, Jesus makes moral demands upon those who would follow him: "If you love me, keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15); "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me" (Jn. 14:21); "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" (Lk. 6:46); "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven," but the one who does God's will (Mt. 7:21). According to Paul, the love of God makes moral demands on us: "Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices at the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

The necessity for action in the New Testament is also evident, since we are told that God works for the benefit of the world (Mt. 6:25-31; Lk. 12:24-27; Jn. 5:17, 10:25, 14:10-11). At the center of God's activity in the world is God's incarnation in Jesus to inaugurate the divine realm (Mk. 1:15). Like Krishna, Jesus also invites us to become magnanimous co-workers with him in his activity, for the harvest is great and the laborers are few (Mt. 9:36-37). In fact, he repeatedly calls us to labor with him as his disciples (Mt. 5:19, 8:22, 9:9; Mk. 1:17). In the New Testament then, as in the *Gita*, the realm of God is not just an interior reality but enters into the visible reality of the world, for opposed to God's activity in and through Jesus is the growth of evil in the world. Following Jesus liberates one from spiritual captivity. However, the struggle for the realm of God against the

powers of darkness demands our faithful cooperation with Jesus through detachment from the self (Mt. 10:38-39; Mk. 8:34; Lk. 17:33; Jn. 12:25). The salvation of the world calls for action, because God's plan for the world is at stake.

THE GOAL OF ACTION

In the *Gita* the twofold end of action is the salvation of the individual and the welfare of humanity (3:25), for when action is performed in view of the welfare of humanity, based on the pure love of God, action and the true knowledge of God are fused, and the double concern of the salvation of the individual and the love of neighbor is achieved. Commitment to action has its basis in the longing to bring about the welfare of all and is based on God's own caring for the world. God works to secure the wealth of all contingent beings (5:5, 12:3-4); it is in doing and being like him that salvation consists (2:71; 10:10; 12:13, 15, 18; 18:53). Love of God has to be expressed in concern for one's neighbor.

In the New Testament the goal of action is also twofold: the salvation and perfection of one's self, and the salvation and perfection of one's neighbor: "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself . . . do this, and you will live" (Mt. 22:35-40; Mk. 12:18-31; Lk. 10:25-28). Whoever loves God must also love his or her neighbor. When action is performed by the total person in complete union with God, action and the knowledge of God interpenetrate one another to a perfect unity, in which the love of both God and neighbor is achieved. Work done for the sanctification of others is not only the highest expression of the love of neighbor but also of the love of God, insofar as all the work is undertaken for the love of God, as a surrender of one's self entirely to God's plans and wishes in order to cooperate in the divine redemptive mission in the world.

SALVATION

In the *Gita* cooperation with God through action is not only for the welfare of the world; it is also salvific. It is *moksha*, salvation from the world. We work in the world with selfless devotion because we know that our ultimate end is to be united in love with God beyond the world. As Krishna says: "They come to Me, 'they come to my own mode of being'" (4:10); "Do works for Me, make Me your highest goal, be loyal-in-love to Me, cut off all [other] attachments, have no hatred for any being at all: for all who do thus shall come to Me" (11:55; also 7:28; 9:14, 28, 34; 10:10). This is the real message of the *Gita*: salvation is eternal communion with a living God in God's heavenly home. It is only fitting that the book should end by again stating its main theme: "And now again to this my highest Word, of all the most mysterious: 'I love you well.'" Therefore, I will tell

you your salvation. Bear Me in mind, love and worship Me, sacrifice, prostrate yourself to Me: so you will come to Me, I promise you truly, for you are dear to me" (18:64-65).

In the New Testament, too, "your homeland is in heaven" (Phil. 3:20); "there is no eternal city in this life but we look for one in the life to come" (Heb. 13:14). Salvation is communion with God forever, as is evident in much of Jesus' teaching about the reign of God that pictures it as a messianic banquet (Mk. 14:25; Lk. 13:28-29; 22:1-14, 18, 29-30), as do the parallels of the mustard seed (Mt. 13:31-34), the tares (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43), and the dragnet (Mt. 13:47-50). Eternal communion with God is the same good conferred in salvation by the New Testament and the *Gita*.

CONCLUSION

In highlighting the similarities between the notion of salvation offered by Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the notion of salvation offered by Jesus in the New Testament, we have seen that it is God who takes the initiative in reconciling us to Godself by becoming incarnate; that God's offer of salvation is through grace; that grace leads to repentance and the forgiveness of sin; that grace is a free gift of God and cannot be won by works; that through grace we grow in knowledge of God; that ignorance of God is rooted in our false sense of self-suffering, and knowledge of God involves detachment from the self; that true knowledge is experiential and expresses itself in action out of the pure love of God; that the end of action is twofold: the salvation of one's self and the welfare of humanity; and that our ultimate salvation is eternal communion with God beyond the world. What Krishna taught in the *Gita* has its parallel with what Jesus taught in the New Testament. Of course, an investigation of differences in the notion of salvation in the two scriptures would complement this study, but that calls for another article.

Nevertheless, it is appropriate to ask what the implications are of the findings of this article for interreligious dialogue between the followers of Krishna and of Jesus. This study both corroborates and refines the recent theocentric approach to Hindu-Christian dialogue. Concretely, we have seen that God takes the initiative in reconciling us to Godself by becoming incarnate in Krishna and Jesus. This theocentric view of salvation allows Christians to continue to affirm that God has really spoken in Jesus, but it does not compel them to say that God has not spoken through Krishna, especially when we recall that the notion of salvation offered by Krishna and Jesus is similar. In other words, in dialogue with Hindus, Christians can be fully committed to Jesus and at the same time can be fully open to Krishna's message in the *Gita*. In the theocentric view, both Krishna and Christ are important for the history of salvation.

Whatever merit a theocentric model of dialogue may have, however, both the *Gita* and the New Testament suggest that a liberation theology of relig-

ions may be a more fruitful approach to Hindu-Christian dialogue. According to the method of liberation theology, that which unites Hindus and Christians in common discourse and praxis is not how Christ and Krishna are related to God but to what extent they are engaged in promoting salvation—the welfare of humanity. As the New Testament asserts, it is not they who say "Lord, Lord" of Jesus who will enter the reign of God (Mt. 7:21-23). The *Gita* makes the same point when Krishna says that work for the welfare of others is necessary for salvation (3:4-6). As our discussion of action in the *Gita* and the New Testament has shown, love of God must be verified in concern for one's neighbor. Indeed, the soteriologies of the scriptures would seem to suggest that the liberation of the poor and the disadvantaged is central to the purpose of Hindu-Christian dialogue. This dialogue calls for interreligious sharing and praxis. The result should prove encouraging, since, as we have seen, the goal of salvation in the *Gita* parallels that found in the New Testament.

The emphasis on praxis in a liberation theology of religions may even help theologians of religion to discern not only whether but also how much Krishna and Christ are ways of salvation. All Hindu and Christian claims on behalf of Krishna or Christ will have to grow out of, and be confirmed in, the praxis and lived experience of these claims. Granting that the disciples of Krishna and Christ are those who seek the reign of God and God's justice (Mt. 6:33), by evaluating the fruits of discipleship with respect to Krishna and Christ, theologians may find reason to affirm that it is Jesus and not Krishna who unifies and fulfills all efforts toward a full humanity. Or, they may discover that Krishna offers a means of salvation equal to that of Jesus. At least, as in a theocentric approach to dialogue, they may find that Krishna and Christ are important for the history of salvation.

NOTES

1. George Grierson, "Modern Hinduism and Its Debt to the Nestorians," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1907), pp. 311-335; J. Kennedy, "The Child Krishna, Christianity, and the Gujars," *ibid.* (1907), pp. 951-991; J. Kennedy, "The Child Krishna and His Critics," *ibid.* (1908), pp. 505-521; Arthur B. Keith, "The Child Krishna," *ibid.* (1908), pp. 169-175.
2. W. G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957); Deben Bhattachaya, tr. *Love Songs of Chandidas: The Rebel Poet-Priest of Bengal* (New York: Grove Press, 1970).
3. For a fuller comparison of the nativity stories of Krishna and Jesus, see John S. Hawley with Shrivatsa Goswami, *At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 52-59; and S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969; orig.—1939), p. 182.
4. On the historicity of Krishna, see S. Radhakrishnan, tr. *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973; orig.—1948), pp. 28-29. Arthur Llewellyn Bashiam, *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the Culture of the Indian Sub-continent*

before the Coming of the Muslims (New York: Grove Press, 1959), pp. 305-306; and Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1966), pp. 17-18. On archaeological evidence for the cowherd Krishna as early as the second century B.C.E., see Sukumar Sen, *A History of Brajabuli Literature* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1935), p. 480.

5. Karl Rahner, "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), pp. 115-134.

6. On the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Gita*, see Ovey N. Mohammed, "Ignatian Spirituality and the Bhagavad Gita," *Thought* 62 (December 1987), pp. 423-434.

All quotations from the *Gita* are taken from R. C. Zaehner, tr. *The Bhagavad Gita* (Calcutta: H. C. Dass, 1987).

For the *Harivamsa* citations, see M. N. Dutt, *A Prose Translation of Harivamsa* (Calcutta: H. C. Dass, 1987).

For the *Vishnupuranam* citations, see M. N. Dutt, *A Prose Translation of Vishnupuranam* (Varnasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1972).

For the *Bhagavata Purana* citations, see J. M. Sanyal, tr. *The Srimad-Bhagavatam of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyassa*, 5 vols. (Calcutta: D. N. Bose, n. d.); also in 2 vols. (New Delhi: Munishiram Maroharlal, 1973).

Christ and Buddha

SEIICHI YAGI

SIDDHARTHA GOTAMA AND JESUS OF NAZARETH: WHAT AND HOW THEY TAUGHT

How are Siddhartha Gotama and Jesus of Nazareth, the founders of two great religious traditions, to be compared? This is not solely a problem of the science of religion or of so-called comparative religion. Today this question must be asked in the context of interreligious dialogue with reference to the "absolute uniqueness of Christianity." In the following I would like to demonstrate the possibility of understanding both Gotama and Jesus as great figures who, in each situation and tradition, found and realized religious truth common to all humanity.

First, we will examine the problems young Gotama had. Usually a legend is told of the young Gotama who went out of the four gates of his castle and saw, first, an aged man, then a sick man, then a funeral, and finally a monk and a bird picking an insect. Realizing the pains of life, he left his status as the prince to search for freedom from pain.

Hajime Nakamura and an older tradition have shown us a different picture.¹ Young Gotama left his family, according to Nakamura, not because he found human life full of sufferings. Rather, he was troubled by an irrational self-assertion. All human beings must age or get sick and die. However, silly men and women disdain the inevitable. They are ashamed of suffering and abhor it. "It is also the case with me," thought Gotama, and that was the starting point of his reflections.

If Nakamura's version is correct, then Gotama's problem did not lie in the fact that to live was to suffer. If he had found his problem just in the pain of living, he could have sought a way to ignore or forget his suffering. He could, for instance, practice austerities in order to attain agelessness