

Thomas Merton and the *Gita*

A Testament to Freedom and Transcendence

William Apel

While the *Vedas* provide Hinduism with its basic idea of cult and sacrifice and the *Upanisheds* develop its metaphysic of contemplation, the *Bhagavad-Gita* can be seen as the great treatise on the 'Active Life'. But it is really something more.¹

Thomas Merton

Introduction

By the mid-1960s, Thomas Merton had been studying Eastern religions and philosophy for more than ten years. He saw, in doing so, that there were many differences between his Christian views and those of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and the Japanese Zen traditions. But Merton also discovered certain affinities between these various religious traditions and his own Christian faith. From 1965 until his death in 1968, Merton wrote a flurry of books on topics relating to Eastern religions including: *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968).

Often overlooked because of this prodigious outpouring of his works on Eastern religion is a little essay, quoted above, related to Hinduism entitled 'The Significance of the *Bhagavad-Gita*'. This brief article touched on one of the great affinities found between Hinduism and his Christian faith. It involved the issue of transcendence in the midst of everyday life – something very central to his religious tradition but fast disappearing in the modern era, particularly in the Western world.

The article first appeared in 1968 as a preface to Bhaktivedanta Swami's *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is*. In this article, Merton reaffirms what

many have said, that 'the *Bhagavad-Gita* can be viewed as the great treatise on the "Active Life".' In the very next sentence, however, Merton declares, 'But it is something more.'

How many times have those of us who are readers of Merton heard him say something like this? He takes a straightforward statement and complicates it by writing that there is something more that needs to be said. It's as if he is saying that life is messy, it cannot be explained by simple abstract definitions and over-simplified assertions.

What then is the 'more' that Merton adds to his essay on 'The Significance of the *Gita*'? This is the question that this article seeks to answer. This will be accomplished by a four part exploration. The first part will provide an introduction to the *Gita*, regarding it as a 'Song of God'.² The second part will deal with Merton's attitude toward spiritual writings other than those of his own faith. The third section will consider how Merton relates to key spiritual writings within his own religious tradition. The final section will explore in depth what Merton means by the 'more' in relation to the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The *Gita* – a Song of God

Sometimes called the Gospel of India, the *Bhagavad Gita* is the most widely read and best known of all Hindu spiritual writings. The story of the *Gita* (as it is commonly known) has helped shape and form Hindu life for well over two millennia. It is as popular today as ever. Thomas Merton writes, 'The fact that the *Gita* remains utterly vital today can be judged by the way such great reformers as Mohandas Gandhi and Vinoba Bhave both spontaneously based their lives and actions on it, and indeed commented on it in detail for their disciples.'³

The centrality of the *Gita* in Gandhi's life, by itself, is enough to warrant Merton's fascination with the *Gita*. He knew that there was something in this text that he needed to know and experience for himself. This significance of the *Gita* was more than a text of passing interest. It addressed existential matters of the utmost concern. Merton noted that its translation as a 'Song of God' suggests that it is a kind of wisdom literature that can be found in his own scriptures. He has in mind *The Song of Solomon*, or as it is sometimes designated, *The Song of Songs*. For Christians this portion of scripture celebrates the divine wisdom and grace of the Holy One in all of life, especially in one's daily life.

Merton declared that the *Gita* was indeed a 'Song of God'. For the Hindu, it was a 'Song of Krishna'. Krishna is one of the major Hindu gods and considered the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. Ultimately, he is a

manifestation of Brahman, the Ultimate One, in whom all things live and move and have their being.⁴

As the story of the *Gita* begins, Arjuna, the saintly warrior, along with his trusted chariot driver, who is in fact Lord Krishna in human form, find themselves overlooking a great battlefield in which a civil war is about to be fought between two warring factions of Arjuna's own family. Faced with the dilemma of having to fight and kill members of his extended family Arjuna slumps down in his chariot unable to face this gruesome predicament. Arjuna is told by his chariot driver to stand up, that his unwillingness to do his duty (*dharma*) as a warrior is beneath him. That this is the response of a coward. That as a high caste Hindu, a member of the Khasastra caste, it is his duty to defend his countrymen, even when those on the other side of the conflict are his relatives. Sometimes this episode in the *Gita* is read as a divine sanction for waging war. But certainly Gandhi, as he considers the *Gita*, could not accept this conclusion. The story is first and foremost about fulfilling one's duty or caste responsibility (one's *dharma*). In this case, Arjuna is to act in defense of his country.

Later, the *Gita* moves from the scene on the blood-stained battlefield to an account of a theophany in which Krishna reveals himself in all his divine splendour. He is no longer Arjuna's chariot driver; he is a fully revealed incarnation of God (*Brahman*). He instructs Arjuna as to what kind of human being is pleasing to Him. This person, Arjuna is told, 'should not hate any living creature. Let him be friendly and compassionate to all.'⁵ This is clearly opposite to the way Lord Krishna had advised Arjuna earlier whilst overlooking the battlefield. In this remarkable theophany, the fully revealed divine Krishna made appeals to the deeper self of Arjuna, the true, innermost, universal and most human self. Merton and Gandhi would have seen this as a strict prohibition against war. Indeed, there are far more passages in the *Gita* that call us to peace and non-violence than the few that seem to justify war.

Spiritual Readings – an openness to others

How was it that Merton, as a dedicated Trappist monk and contemplative, had such a profound openness to spiritual writings outside Christianity? What was it that drew him toward a Hindu spiritual writing on the active life? Why did he write about the *Gita* at all? The answer to this goes all the way back to his college days. Merton and his friends at Columbia University had developed a close relationship with a Hindu holy man, an Indian named Bramachari. Among his many interest in his Columbia

days, Merton had a curiosity about mysticism as found in the spiritual writings of Eastern religions.

In this sense, Merton had a passing interest in the spiritual writings of the East at a time when his interest in Western Christianity was almost non-existent. He had assumed that one had to look to the East for texts on mysticism. It was in June 1938 that Merton, along with his friends Seymour Freedgood and Robert Lax, met with Bramachari at Grand Central Station. Merton was surprised when Bramachari counselled him to read books from his own religious tradition. He told Merton, 'There are many beautiful mystical books written by the Christians. You should read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and *The Imitation of Christ*.... Yes, you must read those books.'⁶

Merton never forgot this wise advice from Bramachari. Once he had become a Catholic and entered the monastery, Merton as a Trappist soon came to love the ancient works of the Desert Fathers, and later those of medieval writers such as St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich. Bramachari was correct — there were treasures buried deep in Merton's own Christian tradition.

When in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as Merton began his study of spiritual writings from outside his Christian tradition, he was freed up to do so because was so well grounded in his own faith and tradition. He was able to listen non-defensively to the wisdom and truth that was coming from other religions and their writings. As his interfaith friend the Bengali poet and world scholar Amiya Chakravarty observed in his preface to *The Asian Journal*:

Readers of Thomas Merton know that his openness to man's spiritual horizons came from a rootedness of faith; and inner security led him to explore, experience, and interpret the affinities and differences between religions in the light of his own religion. That light was Christianity.⁷

To sum up, Merton was secure in his own spiritual skin. He knew his light was Christianity; perhaps better said, his light was Christ, the living Christ. Just as in the *Gita*, Arjuna was encouraged to have a Krishna consciousness, so Merton had developed a Christ consciousness. And much of this consciousness came from the inspiration of his holy scripture, the Bible.

The Bible – a story of transcendence

According to Merton, the study of the Bible as his tradition's sacred scripture was not a priority in his training to be a Trappist monk. He later lamented, 'How little scripture I used to read in the novitiate.'⁸ It is no exaggeration to say that as a young Trappist monk he, like most of his contemporaries, was biblically illiterate.

This all began to change for Merton when he was charged with teaching the scholastics, and then all the novices, about the monastic life. He realized, even before the reforms of Vatican II, that there was a gap in the education of new monks. He resolved that his own lack of training in Scripture should not be perpetuated in his students' spiritual education.

One group of Catholics that had not ignored Scripture was that of Catholicism's leading theologians. As far back as Origen in the second century, the Bible had a central place in their life and thought. As Brother Patrick Hart reminded me more than once, Thomas Merton gained his entrance into serious study of the Bible through the writings of many of the church fathers.⁹

One of the great influences in Merton's life in learning how to read the Bible was through his friendship with the rabbi and biblical scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel. For Heschel the Hebrew Bible (Christianity's Old Testament) was not simply man's words spoken loudly, but rather God's actual word given in revelation. These scriptures were not of human making. Heschel was the rare combination of a biblical mystic and prophet. No one could plumb the depths of biblical understanding like Heschel, nor could anyone 'see' more clearly the biblical prophetic charge to work for justice and peace in opposing America's racism and the unjust war in Vietnam. His influence on Merton is clear from the letter Merton wrote to Heschel in January 1963:

It is a great pleasure to have received your fine book on *The Prophets*.... You take exactly the kind of reflective approach that seems to me most significant and spiritually fruitful, for after all it is not the Prophets we study but the word of God revealed in and through them. They offer us examples of fidelity to Him and patterns of suffering and faith which we must take into account if we are to live as religious men in any sense of the word. The book is in many ways just the kind of reflection germane to monks.¹⁰

Merton was to join Heschel in his own opposition to the same social

injustices and perpetration of violence. Like his Jewish friend of long standing, Merton learned not simply to follow the love, justice and peace Scripture mandated, but to the best of his ability to *be* that love, justice, and peace. It is little wonder then that when he discovered a spiritually powerful text like the *Gita*, he could understand it from the deep existential perspective he had gained from his own Scriptures.

The *Gita* – witness to freedom and transcendence

Philip Novak's summary of the message of the *Gita* in his book *The World's Wisdom* gives us a good starting point to examine Merton's thesis about the 'more' in his understanding of the significance of the *Gita*. Novak writes:

The message ... is that each human life has but one ultimate end and purpose: to realize the Eternal Self within and then to know, finally and fully, the joy of union with God, the Divine Ground of Being (Brahman).... [I]t may be attained in the midst of the world through nonattached [selfless] action in the context of devotion (bhakti) to God.¹¹

The close of Novak's statement urges the person of action not to forget that all their actions should be done in devotion to God. Attention is never to be drawn to oneself, but always and only to God. This constant remembrance to turn away from oneself and toward the Eternal is very close to what Merton meant by the 'more' in relation to the 'Active Life'. Merton reminds us that the 'Active Life' in the *Gita* 'tends to fuse worship, action, and contemplation in a fulfillment of daily duty [*dharma*] which transcends all three by virtue of a higher consciousness.'¹²

All three – worship, action, and contemplation – are part of the whole, and all these practices transcend themselves into a higher consciousness. This new consciousness becomes 'an obedient instrument of a transcendent will'.¹³ Something entirely new has been created. Rather, this new consciousness is not new at all, but the restoration of something very old indeed.

The *Gita* reinforces Merton's move away from the West's egocentric viewpoint. In his estimation modern men and women had become one-dimensional, characterized by 'the Western mind in the simple-minded dedication to only half of life: that which is exterior, objective, and quantitative.'¹⁴ He saw the modern mind as captive to its own sense of self-importance. Merton is reacting to theologians in the West during the

1960s who were announcing the 'death of God', the loss of the transcendent. They lived with the illusion that this life in the here and now is all that there is. With this view humans ascend to a high place of their own authority over life. Sadly, this was creating an idolatry that was quite dangerous. Merton wrote within his essay on the *Gita*:

The 'death of God' and the consequent death of genuine moral sense, respect for life, for humanity, for value, has expressed the death of an inner subjective quality of life: a *quality* which in the traditional religions was experienced in terms of God-consciousness.¹⁵

For Merton, the *Gita*, like the Christian Gospels, reminds us that there has been a loss 'of an ultimate ground of reality and meaning, from which life and love could spontaneously flower.'¹⁶

In very practical terms, Merton declares:

The *Gita*, like the Gospels, teaches us to live in awareness of an inner truth that exceeds the grasp of our thought and *cannot be subject to our own control* [italics are mine]. In following mere appetite for power we are slaves of appetite. In obedience to that truth we are at last free.¹⁷

These are the closing words of Merton's essay on the significance of the *Gita*. Here is the 'more' to which Merton was pointing. We are finally, once and for all, to remove ourselves from the center of our self-constructed universe and, 'In obedience to that truth we are at last set free.'

We no longer have to bear that self-imposed burden. We are free at last, free of ourselves, free for others and free for God. This indeed is the ultimate message of the *Gita*. It is a truth that comes from beyond ourselves. It is the Beyond in our midst.¹⁸ This is the transcendence at the very heart of the *Gita*, and for Merton, also at the very heart of the *Gospels*.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, 'The Significance of the Bhagavad-Gita', *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (London: Sheldon Press, 1974), p. 348. The essay was first published as a preface to *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is* by Bhaktivedanta Swami (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

2. The Bhagavad Gita was written in Sanskrit. The word bhagaved means 'relating to God', gita means song. Thus Bhagavad Gita translates as 'Song of God'.
3. *The Asian Journal*, pp. 348-349.
4. See Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1958), pp. 59-63.
5. Philip Novak, *The World's Wisdom* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), p. 27.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1975), p. 198. Also see the entry for Bramachari in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 30.
7. *The Asian Journal*, p. vii.
8. Thomas Merton, *Entering the Silence – The Journals of Thomas Merton, vol. 2*, edited by Jonathan Montaldo (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), entry for August 5, 1949, p. 345.
9. This persistent point was graciously made by Brother Patrick Hart in a conversation he and I had at Gethsemani Abbey in April 1996. (The quote above from Merton's journal continues: 'I did read the Fathers commenting on Scripture, but more to get the thoughts of the Fathers than anything else.')
10. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love – Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1990), letter dated January 26, 1963, p. 431.
11. *The World's Wisdom*, p. 24.
12. *The Asian Journal*, p. 348.
13. *The Asian Journal*, p. 348.
14. *The Asian Journal*, p. 349.
15. *The Asian Journal*, p. 349.
16. *The Asian Journal*, p. 349.
17. *The Asian Journal*, p. 353.
18. The concept of the 'Beyond in our midst' is derived from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's way of speaking of God in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*. See also William Apel, *Silent Conversations* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2000), pp. 108-120.

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