

The Gita, which forms a part of the Mahabharata, is the most popular religious poem in Sanskrit literature. It is a book conveying lessons of philosophy, religion and ethics and is available in every language and can be read in a short time. Its message is simple and is within the reach of all and is universal in its scope. The main spirit of the Gita is that of the Upanishads; only there is a greater emphasis on the religious side.

The date of its composition is not known, but it was probably written in 500 B.C. The philosophical background of the Gita as stated above is taken from the Upanishands. The author of the Gita, however, made the impersonal and the absolute of the Upanishands into a personal Ishwara. Then there are the teachings of the Sankhya, the Yoga and the Vedanta to be found in combination. These terms, however, when they occur in the Gita do not represent the classical philosophic schools of thought, but reflective and meditative methods of gaining salvation or union with God. For instance, though the Gita recognizes the distinction between Pursha and Prakriti, yet it overcomes this dualism by saying that there is a spiritual fact behind this play of nature. Pursha or spirit is not an independent reality, it is the spectator and not an actor. Prakriti or nature does everything.

Again the two doctrines, the theistic and the pantheistic, are mixed up with each other and follow each other and the two beliefs are treated almost throughout as though there was indeed no difference between them. This change of emphasis from the speculative to the practical, from the philosophical to the religious, is indeed marvelous. "The central purpose of Gita," in the words of Prof. Radhakrishnan, "is to solve the problem of life and stimulate right conduct." The Gita, therefore, is a system of speculation as well as a rule of life, an intellectual search for truth, as well as an attempt to make the truth dynamic in the soul of man.

Above all the Gita harmonizes the different ideals of life and synthesizes them all and shows the exact place and value of each of them. For instance, Gita recognizes two kinds of knowledge, that which seeks to understand the objective phenomena of existence and that which grasps the ultimate principle behind the phenomena by means of intuition. The one is called Vigyan or science and the other Gayan or knowledge, that is to say the integral knowledge of the common foundation of all existence. As a means of getting the second kind of knowledge, the Gita recommends the Yogic discipline, of which the essential steps are purification of mind, concentration and its identification with the real when we reach it. True Yoga, according to the Gita, is the control of senses and indifference to the attractions of material objects. True Gayan or knowledge is the recognition of a self-existent eternal spirit in every man. An equal emphasis is laid on Karma or action and on Bhakti or devotion. As a matter of fact the Gita coordinates Gayan, Karma and Bhakti.

THE BUDDHISTIC SCRIPTURES

We shall next take up the Buddhistic Scriptures which are in the Pali language, as they were like the Vedas, reduced to writing long after the founder of

Buddhism had given them to his disciples. The Pali language is like the old Sanskrit.

Lord Buddha or the "Enlightened One" lived from 567 B.C. to 487 B.C. and his sayings and discourses were compiled and completed two hundred and fifty years after his death and were reduced to writing in about 80 B.C. in Ceylon by his disciples after they had sifted and sorted them in the various councils held from time to time. The present translations are largely from the Pali texts.

The Buddhist scriptures are known as Tripitakas or Three Baskets and deal with the life and sayings of Buddha. They are known in Pali as Suttas. The part dealing with the discipline of monks is known as Vinaya and that dealing with the Buddhistic doctrines, such as psychology, logic and ethics, is known by the name of Abhidhamma. These constitute the Tripitakas or Three Baskets of Law.

The Buddhist thought evolved slowly, and consequently, it varied by slight degrees as the centuries passed by. Many schools of thought have therefore arisen in the past, the most two important being the Mahayana (the Greater Vehicle), and Hinayana (the lesser Vehicle)—a school that flourished in the North.

The teachings of Buddha as they have come down to us through the Pitakes may be briefly described as follows:

"Buddha taught that the seeker of salvation should be warned against the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification, both are unworthy and unprofitable."

There is the Middle Way, following which, according to Lord Buddha, man arrives at peace of mind, knowledge, enlightenment and attains to Nirvana or liberation. This Middle Way is the well known eightfold path of Buddha which has been described as follows:

The first step in the path is right belief, i.e., belief in the four fundamental principles enunciated by Buddha. He assumed that suffering was universal; and that we must find out the cause of this suffering and try to remove it, and then he pointed out the way which is known as the eightfold path of which right belief is the first step. Then follows the right resolution or the resolve to renounce all sensual pleasures, to have malice towards none and to harm no living creature. Right speech means that one should abstain from backbiting and slander, should not use harsh language nor tell lies, nor indulge in frivolous talk. Right conduct according to Buddha would consist in being chaste and in not taking what does not belong to one and in not destroying life. All these steps are ethical of course. Buddha also emphasizes the right means of subsistence, that is to say, that one should earn his living properly by giving up wrong occupations and then he must make right effort which means that he should acquire all the good qualities he can and overcome all the evil qualities. These are the steps to moral discipline, and in order to attain Nirvana or liberation one should undergo intellectual processes also, such as overcoming sorrow, grief and pain by thinking and meditation, till one

arrives at the last stage, the one of absorption, which is a state which transcends pain as well as pleasure, and brings perfect bliss, which is Nirvana, or liberation according to Buddha.

Rhys Davids says, "In depth of philosophic insight, in the method of Socratic questionings often adopted, in the earnest and elevated tone of these discourses, one is often reminded of the dialogues of Plato, and the success of Buddha was due to the fact that he gave to his disciples a simple rule of life and also gave them the yellow robe, the shaven head and the begging bowl and consequently millions followed him.

Buddhism today, however, is in a static state and its scriptures are in a language which very few can understand. As a gospel of renunciation and as a moral code, however, it remains unsurpassed. Buddha's emphasis was on Dharma or righteousness as the driving principle of the universe and the supremacy of the individual effort, and perfection of the human personality by the extinction of all desire and passion. He gave to the people at large the simple Dharma of love, justice and righteousness.

THE ZENDA AVESTA

The scriptures of the Zoroastrians (the Parsis of India) of whom there are about a hundred thousand living in and near Bombay, are known as Zenda Avesta or commentaries on the Avesta (Vesta means knowledge). The Avesta represents a long period of diverse development spread over about one thousand years. The original Avesta is said to have consisted of 21 volumes, but the ravages of Alexander the Great seem to have destroyed a large number of the old manuscripts. The various scattered manuscripts were later on collected by the Sassanian Kings (third and fourth centuries A.D.). The language of these scriptures is old and extinct and very few oriental scholars can understand them. The modern translations are in Pahlavi of course and the original has undergone many changes in the course of time. The Gathas, or the words attributed to the Prophet Zoroaster, form part of the Zenda Avesta.

The Zenda Avesta, like the Bible, consists of many books and extends over a period of one thousand years as stated above. The process of compilation was roughly as follows. The sayings of the Prophet Zoroaster and those who immediately followed him were the first to be recorded. These records were then edited and elaborated by successive generations. The language originally was Gathic Avestan. In course of time new explanations were added in a dialect known as the "Younger Avestan" or Zenda. The modern Zenda Avesta is in the Pahlavi language which was the spoken language in the Sassanian times and is nearer to modern Iranian. The languages and dialects of the Zenda Avesta are, however, all interrelated.

Gathas form the most important part of the Avesta and are "metrical sermons" attributed to Zoroaster himself and are regarded as revelations. These were recorded more than three thousand years ago. Considering the age, it is really remarkable that such fine literature should find birth in the primitive civilization of ancient Iran. The art of verse seems to have been very highly

developed in that age. One Gatha, however, is in prose which is a collection of prayers. The Yasna of which the Gathas form a part, is a book of liturgy meant to be used in connection with the various ceremonies current among the Parsis. Besides the Yasna there is the Vendidad which means "law against the demons." All these constitute the Zenda Avesta.

Subsequent to the invasion of Islám there were other books like Bundahisk and Zartusht Namah in modern Íránian which tell us a good deal about the life and teachings of Zoroaster. Not only the old manuscripts suffered at the hands of the Greeks, the Muhammadans also destroyed many Zoroastrian books. The Zenda Avesta therefore which has come down to us is fragmentary and mutilated and very much mixed up.

The Zoroastrian faith based on these scriptures is monotheistic in the main. Ahura Mazdah or Ormuzd as the Parsis call Him, signifies the "Wise Lord!" Before Zoroaster's coming people worshipped many kinds of spirits. He showed them that there was one Ahura (spirit) and he was Mazdah (the wise one). Justice and truth must be rendered as his service by men of good speech, good thoughts and good deeds. It sounds paradoxical, that we should find two spirits postulated, the good and the evil, thus giving a color of dualism to the teachings of Zoroaster. This dualism is not of coeternal spirits however; because it maintains that the evil spirit will ultimately succumb to the good.

Zoroaster's teaching therefore is monotheistic, behind which was a tendency to philosophic dualism based on moral grounds. It is false to assume that Zoroaster taught the worship of the sun or any of the elements of nature. He took fire as a symbol of Divine purity. In short, the ethical code laid down by Zoroaster stands very high. Purity is enjoined for the self which can be kept clean by good speech, good thoughts and good deeds. The Parsis, however, lay more emphasis on external purity than on the internal.

Judaism and Zoroastrianism have many things that are common, but it appears no contacts existed between the Zoroastrians and the Jews in the past. Both are non-proselytizing faiths, and in both there is the dualistic trend such as Satan and God, Evil and Good, Virtue and Vice, Heaven and Hell, which runs through Christianity as well as Islám. As a matter of fact, Zenda Avesta passed in course of ages through many hands and was colored with the ideas current in different times. Among others we may mention the Magian, the Greek, the Hindu and the Muslim influences. At present the Zoroastrian faith is in a static condition and these scriptures are of historical interest only.

THE HOLY BIBLE

The Bible consists of the Old Testament and the New. The Old Testament is composed of many books written in different times of the world's history. It contains some fables, to us incredible, and teachings that occasionally contradict each other. But, for the Jews and for the Christians the Old Testament remains a book of splendor. It tells, in psalm, in laws and in prophecy, how man has been seeking God through the ages. The Old Testament has rightly been called "History's Psalm."

The New Testament, on the other hand, centers around Jesus, though Jesus wrote none of it. The Apostles differing from each other in intelligence wrote down what they thought Jesus had said and done. The Gospels show that Jesus Christ made very little reference to the Old Testament, though He had fully imbibed its spirit. The Apostles really provided the frame for the picture of this Great Teacher and they made it so well that the picture and the frame seemed to have merged into one. The New Testament that is in our hands today was compiled from scores of writings in 397 A.D. at Carthage by a Council of learned Christians.

In studying the Old Testament, we should remember that all its tales were written hundreds of years after the events they purport to describe. They are not history but are more like parables with a moral for the people of Israel. The Old Testament may be conveniently divided into the Pentateuch, (five books) containing the ordinances of Jewish ethics and laws as taught by Moses, the old books, the books of the prophets, and the chronicles of the kings of Israel, together with historical narrative and legend. These contain many sublime religious truths expressed in song, prayer and prophecy. It is, however, in the Psalms of David that the Old Testament finds its best expression. The essence of the Jewish religion lies in the immense stress which it lays on the moral life upon earth, as the truest exemplification of our belief in and love of God.

We see the Semitic nomads, freed from the captivity of the Pharaohs of Egypt under the leadership of Moses, enter Canaan and become the “chosen people” of their racial God, Jehovah, “who from a governor of a single family, becomes a tribal governor, then a race governor; a friend of monarchy; the destroyer of monarchy; and lastly the inspirer of a prophecy about a Messiah following an Exile and thus the dispointer of all Jewish hopes thus raised.”¹

1. The Human Bible by Eric Robertson.

Once the Jews had made Palestine their home, they did not think of military conquest. The quest of righteousness became their chief passion and their highest vision. As a matter of fact, Judaism inculcates a high ethical teaching. So much about the Old Testament.

The claim made for Jesus that He was the Messiah offended the Jewish divines and led to His crucifixion. Many legends have grown around the person of Jesus and many miracles, such as healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, and even raising the dead have been attributed to him. The idea of a divine eternal Christ, however, came from non-Jewish sources, and it was St. Paul who connected it with the idea of Jesus as Messiah and thus made Christianity appear different from Judaism. There has been a great divergence on many points such as Trinity, Resurrection and Salvation through Christ, and the two religions have grown and developed along different lines, the Jew remaining where he was before the Advent of Christ. This much however is common, that the Christian Church has retained the Old Testament along with the New, thus

demonstrating the continuity of two religions which had as a matter of fact one source. Later it appears the Prophet of Arabia built Islám on the foundations laid down by the Prophets of Israel and elaborated by the Apostles of Jesus Christ.

THE HOLY QUR'ÁN

There are very few among the Hindus who make a careful and a critical study of this sacred scripture of the Muslims. The present writer assures the readers that such a study will be fruitful in results. In addition to familiarizing a Hindu with the technique and terminology of the three Semitic faiths—Judaism, Christianity and Islám—the study of the Qur'án will produce in him a sympathy for the Muslim point of view and also generate a tolerant attitude of mind for the followers of faiths different from his own.

Very good translations of this scripture are available in almost every language of the world, and by a rapid reader the book can be gone through in a week or ten days at the most. The Muslims regard the Qur'án as a revelation from God through the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be on Him) Who Himself was an unlettered person. The earlier revelations such as those incorporated in the Old Testament and in the New were in the Hebrew language, but the Qur'án was revealed in the Arabic language. As regards its style and diction, it is as simple and sublime as the previous revelations and with a little effort can be read in the original also.

The Holy Qur'án was revealed piecemeal during a period of twenty-three years out of which the Prophet spent 13 years in Mecca and 10 years in Medina. Since the collection was made from various sources and mostly from the memories of the people, the chronological order could not be observed and hence there is repetition in the verses of the Qur'án. There are altogether 114 chapters called Súrihs of which some are longer than others. Each chapter or Súrih is divided into sections which are not connected with each other. And yet for the last thirteen centuries and more this scripture has inspired the lives of millions of Muslims all over the world. The Qur'án is the fountain-head from which all the teachings of Islám are drawn and the book is regarded as an absolute and final authority on almost everything by the people of Islám.

In addition to the Qur'án there is the Hadíth or tradition which signifies the precept and example of the Prophet and is regarded as a secondary source of the Law of Islám. These traditions were collected after the death of the Prophet and have been handed down to us through various channels, some authentic and others perhaps spurious.

The Qur'án enjoins a belief not only in what has been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, but also in the previous revelations as embodied in the Torah and the Gospels, or the revelations vouchsafed to Moses and to Christ. As a matter of fact the Qur'án regards the previous revelations as well as its own as of Divine origin and the Prophets that have gone before are regarded as true Prophets from God. For example we read: “And verily we gave unto Moses the scripture and we caused a train of messengers to follow after him, and we

gave unto Jesus, son of Mary, clear proofs (of Allah's sovereignty), and we supported him with the holy spirit. It is ever so, that when there cometh unto you a messenger (from Allah) with that which ye yourselves desire not, ye grow arrogant and some ye disbelieve and some you slay." (Surih II, 87)

M. Muhammad 'Alí in the introduction to an English translation of the Qur'án says: "Revelation according to the Holy Qur'án, is not only universal but also progressive. . . . A revelation was granted to each nation according to its requirements and in each age in accordance with the capacity of the people of that age."

This view is confirmed by what has been said in John XVI, 12-13. "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when He the spirit of truth is come, He will guide you unto all truth."

It is evident that the doctrine of the Qur'án is mainly based on the earlier scriptures revealed to Moses and Jesus and there is a close resemblance in the teachings of these three faiths. Take for example the doctrines of the Unity of God, the Day of Judgment, Heaven and Hell, Sin and Satan and the principle of punishment and reward—all these occur and re-occur in the Old Testament and in the New as well as in the Qur'án. Many of the institutions, such as that of prayer, fasting, charity, the observance of Sabbath, etc., are common to the three faiths. All three—Jews, Christians and Muslims—are called the "People of the Book" and all subscribe to faith in a God and His Messengers. The Qur'án makes mention of Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, David, and many other Biblical Prophets and the accounts tally even in minor details. Read for example the Súrîh of Joseph and you will see the whole story narrated in the Old Testament also.

The function of a Prophet is to give the lead to the people among whom he appears, and considering the age and the country where Muhammad proclaimed the Message, He had wonderful success. He faced opposition and was forced to teach a defensive warfare to the ignorant tribes of Arabia. He took them out of the mire of superstition and taught them to fear God and obey His commandments. The Qur'án was in fact a reminder for the Christians as well as the Jews, who had forgotten the teachings of their own Prophets and had been led astray. What Christ did for the lost sheep of Israel, that Muhammad did for the wild tribes of Arabia. The study of the Qur'án will drive home to us the gigantic work of reform taken up by Muhammad thirteen hundred years ago. If for nothing else, then for the sake of knowing the great work that Muhammad did, every Hindu should take up the study of this great and noble scripture. Here are a few verses from the Qur'án taken at random. These speak for themselves.

"Seek help in patience and prayer; and truly it is hard save for the humble-minded."

"O ye who believe! Seek help in steadfastness and prayer. Lo! Alláh is with the steadfast."

“Alláh is the Protecting Friend of those who believe. He bringeth them out of darkness into light.”

"Alláh hath blighted usury and made alms—giving fruitful. Alláh loveth not the impious and guilty.”

“Deal justly, that is nearer to your duty. Observe your duty to Alláh.”

One could go on quoting passage after passage calling people to righteousness and to God and setting a high ethical ideal for the people of that age. Every Hindu should take up the Qur’án and read it for himself and form his own opinion about it. That is the least that is expected of a student who is interested in the fascinating study of religion.

THE BAHÁ’Í SCRIPTURES

The scriptures of different faiths of which we have spoken above were all collected and collated long after they had been revealed. This was of course due to the want of proper means of recording and reproducing at the time. The scriptures of which we are going to speak now were recorded by the founder of the Bahá’í Faith Himself under the shadow of the prison walls of ‘Akká (Palestine). From this prison Bahá’u’lláh wrote letters to the crowned heads of the world, to Queen Victoria, the Czar of all the Russias, the Presidents of the American Republics, Napoleon III of France, to the Emperor of all Austria, the Kaiser of Germany, the Sháh of Persia and the Sultán of Turkey, exhorting them to desist from war and to be just and kind to their subjects. Among Bahá’u’lláh’s other works may be mentioned Íqán (Book of Certitude) which explains the functions of Prophets and the true significance of their messages. Hidden Words and Seven Valleys are beautiful books which are worth studying. In the Alwáh or Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh are incorporated many exhortations and teachings, and besides these there is one book Al-Aqdas which is in Arabic and gives the Bahá’í Law in full detail.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the son of Bahá’u’lláh, is the interpreter of the words of His Father and His letters (Tablets) written to His followers in all parts of the world have been collected, compiled and translated into English. Among the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá we may mention the Mysterious Forces of Civilization*, Some Answered Questions and Letters or Makatibs. His discourses delivered in America and Europe, which He visited in 1912, have also been collected and translated into English and these should be regarded as part of the Bahá’í writings.

“The Bahá’í revelation is the spirit of this age. It is the essence of all the highest ideals of this century. The Bahá’í Cause is an inclusive movement; the teachings of all religions and societies are found here. Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muhammadans, Zoroastrians, Theosophists, Freemasons, et al., find their highest aims in this Cause. Socialists and philosophers find their theories fully developed in this revelation.

“The Bahá’í message is a call to religious unity and not an invitation to

a new religion, not a new path to immortality. God forbid! It is the ancient path cleared of the debris of imaginations and superstitions of men, of the debris of strife and misunderstanding and is again made a clear path to the sincere seeker, that he may enter therein in assurance, and find that the word of God is one word, though the speakers were many.”

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Thus we see that the scriptures of the old historical faiths merely gave the message and called people to righteousness, they did not give a comprehensive program of uniting the races, the nations and the religions of the world. The study of the Bahá’í Literature, however, would open out a large vista for the student of comparative religion and reveal to him the fundamental spiritual fact that all the different faiths had a Divine origin and were really one in essentials and in basic principles and that all the Prophets gave the same teaching of love, of good will and of brotherhood and it will also reveal a new fact that we have not only to see unity in this diversity, we have to make that unity an accomplished fact in real life. Unless Jews and Christians, Muslims and Hindus, Zoroastrians and Buddhists come and sit on the same platform and live under one canopy and walk under the same banner and follow one Universal Faith, the great teachers of religion and their scriptures would not achieve the real object of religion—viz., the unification of all mankind. Every historical faith and its scriptures put forward a claim to be universal, but the followers of each invite others to their own particular fold and make no attempt to bring about real unity so needed in the sphere of religion in an age like ours. The comparative method of study of these scriptures would at least put us on the road to such a reconciliation.

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