

False Interpretations

A Reply to a Christian Scholar's Criticisms

by Suhotra Swami

Arild Romarheim, lecturer at the Menighetsfakultetet (the conservative Lutheran congregational faculty) in Oslo has revealed a surprisingly unscholarly attitude toward the teachings of the Bhagavad-gita in his book *Krishna, Buddha, Allah eller Christ* ("Krishna, Buddha, Allah or Christ", Oslo Luther, 1974). Of course, it must be taken for granted that Mr. Romarheim, being a Christian theologian, will naturally be sceptical towards faiths other than his own, but we find his very superficial arguments against the teachings of Krishna to be unworthy of a man in a respectable academic position.

In fact, his explanation of Krishna-bhakti (the religion of devotion to Krishna) is so full of mistakes and misinformation that it is hardly worth attempting a comprehensive reply to it. But we can focus on some of his more serious errors in order to show that he is eminently unqualified to offer any opinion whatsoever on this subject.

We do not agree with Mr. Romarheim that the origin of Krishna-bhakti is Hinduism. While it is true that the term "Hinduism" is very commonly accepted in both the West and India, it is unscholarly and uncharitable. The word "Hindu" is not of Indian origin at all. It came from the Islamic Persians, and referred to the Sindh province of old India beyond the eastern borders of Persia. When, during the Middle Ages, Islamic invaders crossed these borders in search of conquest, they called the Indian people Hindus, and their land Hindustan (the place where Hindus dwell). Because the zealous Muslims considered the Indians to be heathen idolators, this word "Hindu" had very derogatory implications. Still today in the Persian language the word "Hindu" is synonymous with "thief." The European cognate of this demeaning Persian word is "Hinduism", used to designate the great world religion that today has more than 700 million adherents.

Members of the Krishna Consciousness movement do not accept the designation Hindu; it is artificial and meaningless. The proper term for India's religion is sanatana-dharma (the eternal law).

The origins of Krishna-bhakti are not found within Hinduism, but within the pure soul's eternal relationship to God. The soul is not Hindu, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist or Muslim; these terms simply designate the body. The soul is an eternal servant of the one God. Bhakti-yoga is the universal means by which this relationship can be rediscovered. Pure bhakti transcends all bodily designations; it is upon this principle that the Krishna consciousness movement has spread all over the world. Krishna does not consider those who take shelter of Him to be Hindus or anything else, because they've given up all worldly designations and returned to their original spiritual nature.

A very significant mistake in Mr. Romarheim's presentation is his contention that "Hinduism is pantheistic*, though there are monotheistic views within Hinduism, especially with regards to Krishna." He argues that monotheistic Krishna-bhakti grew as a more recent development out of the pantheistic background of ancient Hinduism. He even claims that the Bhagavad-gita, the most famous scripture of Krishna consciousness, was written only 100 before Christ, which would make it a comparatively recent work among the important scriptures of India.

But the Gita declares itself to have been spoken 5000 years ago, and there is no concrete evidence to the contrary. Opinions coming from Westerners that the Bhagavad-gita is much more recent and was not actually spoken by Krishna but was written by some nameless priest, are opinions not based on verifiable authority, and are therefore scientifically worthless.

The scriptures of sanatana-dharma are called the Vedas, which were compiled in the Sanskrit language 5000 years ago by the sage Vyasa. The Vedas comprise a vast encyclopedic storehouse of spiritual wisdom that points to the Supreme Truth from various angles of vision. The Vedic scriptures are divided into three general classifications (prasthan-traya): sruti-prasthan (the literature used by priests during sacrifice, containing hymns, ritualistic procedures, etc.), smriti-prasthan (the explanatory and historical literatures, which include Bhagavad-gita), and nyaya-prasthan (the scriptures of underlying philosophy). Those wise men who had reached the end (anta) of all Vedic learning and who could explain its essence were known since ancient times as Vedantists.

If Mr. Romarheim is correct in his assertion that "Hinduism" is originally pantheistic, then it would follow that the Vedantists of ancient times were pantheists. But this is not true. The "Hindu

pantheism" Romarheim is referring to arose from the teachings of the Vedantist Sankara (born approximately 600 A.D.). Sankara's philosophy, known as Advaita (nondual) Vedanta, is the result of the blending of Vedic knowledge with the teachings of the Buddhists. Romarheim evidently thinks that Vedanta began with Sankara, but he is very wrong. As the eminent Japanese Indologist Mr. Hajime Nakamura points out in his book *A History of Early Vedanta Philosophy*, "...it has become clear that the opinion of a great many scholars who formerly held that the Vedanta school flourished as such for the first time with Sankara, is mistaken." (p. 122) Mr. Nakamura says that the historical evidence for Vedantism can be traced back to at least 1000 years before Sankara, and that early Vedantism was decidedly not pantheistic.

For instance, the ancient Svetasvatara Upanishad is clearly a devotional scripture that describes God as purusham mahantam (the Supreme Person). To know Him is the vedante param guhyam (supreme secret wisdom of Vedanta). Nakamura informs us that the doctrine of a supreme spiritual eternal person as the root cause of all existence was "the fundamental concept of the Vedanta school" in ancient times. (p. 239) In *Bhagavad-gita* Krishna declares Himself to be the Supreme Purusha, and says "By all the Vedas I am to be known; indeed, I am the compiler of Vedanta, and I am the knower of the Vedas." (B.g. 15.15) The *Bhagavad-gita* does not teach a novel doctrine distinct from the main flow of Vedic ideas; the *Bhagavad-gita* is a precise presentation of the essentials of those ancient ideas, called Vedanta, which originated from time immemorial. It is Sankara's pantheism that is the novel exception. Traditional Vedanta is decidedly monotheistic.

Mr. Romarheim is quite concerned with the problem of good versus evil. It is certainly true that Christian theology has a different answer to this problem than does the teaching of Krishna in the *Bhagavad-gita*. But in order for this difference to be properly understood, each answer has to be presented correctly. Mr. Romarheim has not done this. Instead of imparting to his readers Krishna's own words on the subject of good and evil he has given his own convoluted speculations on what he imagines Krishna is saying. In this way he has unnecessarily complicated and confused the issue, which is really quite simple.

As far as the Christian position on the problem goes, Mr. Romarheim explains that simply: "The Bible doesn't try to explain evil.

Christians simply want to be free from evil. Jesus taught us that. He did not explain evil."

The Bhagavad-gita, however, does explain the origin of the duality of good and evil in a very succinct way, but apparently Mr. Romarheim has failed to grasp this explanation, which is found in B.g. 13.22: "The living entity in material nature thus follows the ways of life, enjoying the three modes of nature (the states of goodness, passion and ignorance). This is due to his association with that material nature. Thus he meets with good and evil amongst various species."

In other words, the problem of good and evil is a problem of the soul's attempt to enjoy matter. It is clearly stated in the above cited verse, bhunkte prakrti- jan gunan: "his aim is to enjoy the conditions of life produced by material nature." This enjoying mentality is due to lust (kama), which is the "original sin" (maha-papma; see B.g. 3.37)

The soul is meant to enjoy spirit (brahma-bhuta prasannatma; B.g. 18.54), because the soul itself is spiritual, not material (B.g. 7.5). When the spirit soul falls under the sway of lust and associates with matter, which is God's illusory energy (maya), the soul is bewildered by the duality of material nature in the form of sad-asad, good and evil.

The "good" and "evil" known within this material world are not eternal principles, because they are simply perceptions of the temporary body and mind. We think "good" as being that which is pleasing to our senses, and "bad" as being that which is displeasing. These perceptions have no ultimate reality, and thus no ultimate value. Mr. Romarheim attempts to prove by very fallacious argumentation that the Bhagavad-gita makes Krishna responsible for the sufferings and enjoyments of the living entities, but this is nonsense. God does not cause anyone to act sinfully or piously; living beings are entangled in good or evil deeds due to ignorance of their own spiritual nature (B.g. 5.15). Mundane good and evil have their origin in us, not in God: "The living entity is the cause of the various sufferings and enjoyments in this world." (B.g. 13.21)

In the ultimate sense, God is the only Good, and ignorance is the only Evil. Bhagavad-gita was spoken by Krishna to destroy all ignorance, and thus all evil (B.g. 4.42). Yet Arild Romarheim says that the Gita teaches that evil is inseparable from God. This is a distortion

of the facts. Krishna clearly declares that the world of ignorance is bhinna, "separate" from Him (B.g. 7.4). Though Krishna is the origin of the material world, it was not in His interest that He created it. The material world is created due to the desire of the living beings to enjoy themselves separately from God. Thus the world of ignorance, evil and duality is from the start a world separate from Krishna, though by His mercy He still maintains this world in His unmanifest form of all-pervading consciousness (B.g. 9.4). Yet again, in the next verse Krishna warns that His stating He is all-pervading is not to be mistaken as an affirmation of pantheism. "Though everything is situated within Me," He explains, "still My Self remains distinct as the source of everything." Thus Romarheim's repeated references to pantheism in the Bhagavad-gita are groundless.

Romarheim focuses on Krishna's dancing upon the head of the serpent Kaliya as the example proving Krishna does not come to destroy evil, but to keep it in temporary abeyance. Here again he is simply imposing his own interpretation upon the Krishna-bhakti scriptures. The Kaliya serpent is not equivalent to the Devil of the Bible; he is not universal evil incarnate. Kaliya was a victim of evil who came to his senses and repented when punished by Krishna.

If I were to write, "Christ and the Devil are one and the same" or some such speculation and claim that this is the real meaning of the Gospel, Arild Romarheim no doubt reply that I haven't grasped the true meaning of Christ's teachings, and that I should clear my mind of my own misconceptions and understand the Bible properly. Such a response on his part would be only fair and reasonable. Judging from what he writes about the Bhagavad-gita, it is only fair and reasonable for me to advise him to either study the Gita properly, under tutorship of a bona-fide guru, or forget about it and stick to the Bible. No doubt, Romarheim styles himself as a guardian of Christianity, but quis custodiet ipsos custodes (who will guard the guardians)?

*Pantheism = the belief that God is not superior to material nature as its spiritual origin, but rather that God is the totality of material nature. Pantheists say, "Everything, and everybody, is God."