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Theosophy across Boundaries

Transcultural and Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Modern Esoteric Movement

Edited by

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Chapter 2

Hinduism, Theosophy, and the *Bhagavad Gita* within a Global Religious History of the Nineteenth Century

Michael Bergunder

The *Bhagavad Gita* is widely considered the most important and most popular scripture of Hinduism, both within and without India. Nevertheless, there is a widespread consensus within current scholarship that its present popularity owes itself to developments of the nineteenth century.[1] According to this understanding, the *Bhagavad Gita* was remarkably well received in Europe and North America in the first half of the nineteenth century, and then, beginning in the 1880s, in India also. What remains unclear is the connection between its international and Indian reception.

The Austrian Indologist Agehananda Bharati (born Leopold Fischer) was among the first to suspect an interdependent relationship. He employs the metaphor of a "pizza effect":[2] similar to the pizza in Italy, the *Bhagavad Gita* became popular in India only after having won acclaim in Europe and America. Eric Sharpe's foundational study of the *Bhagavad Gita*'s reception shares this argument.[3] Such a narrative fits well into debates on Orientalism, which see today's Hinduism as a product of European imaginations during the time of colonialism. In this sense, the nineteenth-century reception of the *Bhagavad Gita* slots nicely into post-colonial debates,[4] and the theory of the "pizza effect" remains unchallenged. However, current scholarship has failed to demonstrate how the "Western" preoccupation with the *Bhagavad Gita* is meant to have precisely influenced Indian discourse since the 1880s. It is perplexing that recent examinations of the

Bhagavad Gita's reception in the nineteenth century have entirely refrained from tracing the historical connections between its reception in India and within European Orientalism.[5]

In the following, I argue that current scholarship has overestimated the "Western" interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* in the first half of the nineteenth century. The Indian reception of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which began in the 1880s, is no simple consequence of preceding European and American appreciation of the text; rather, it arose as a direct result of nationalist protest against a certain appropriation of Indian tradition by European Orientalism. It was Indian Theosophists who played a decisive role in this process. They were instrumental in the *Bhagavad Gita*'s eventual incorporation into Hindu reform movements, which subsequently caused its current popularity in India.

1. *Bhagavad Gita* in Precolonial India

Any appropriate evaluation of the developments of the nineteenth century necessitates a look at the preceding time period first. In precolonial India, the *Bhagavad Gita* was held in high esteem within the Brahmanical philosophy of Vedanta, where it belonged to the three classic commentaries (Skt. *prasthānatraya*), together with the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras. Vedanta philosophy was the domain of the Brahmans. Advaita Vedanta, which can be traced back to Shankara (around 800), was fostered by Smarta Brahmans, in Brahmanical Shankara monasteries, and by followers of Dashanami asceticism.[6] Besides Advaita Vedanta, there was the widespread Vaishnavite Vedanta, whose most important tributary, the Vishishtadvaita Vedanta, was and is cultivated by Brahmanical Shrivaishnavas.[7] Additionally, there were smaller Vaishnavite schools, such as the Dvaita Vedanta, all of which were also Brahmanical in orientation.

Other than the highly elite Brahmanical Vedanta, the *Bhagavad Gita* seems to have had little or no significance until the nineteenth century.[8] Occasional references do not challenge this general picture. This is illustrated by the historical impact of a free-verse translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* with an extensive commentary into Marathi, undertaken in the thirteenth century by Nath-Yogi Jnandev.[9] It was the Marathi devotional poet Eknath who in the sixteenth century revitalized and popularized the tradition of Jnandev. He penned a sort of critical edition of Jnandev's *Bhagavad Gita* translation, which has since been received as the standard text.[10] However,

Eknath himself was not particularly interested in the *Bhagavad Gita*. His major work was a commentary in Marathi on the eleventh book of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Though Eknath was influenced by Jnandev's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*,[11] he nonetheless chose a different text for his own major commentary. This is a clear indication that the *Bhagavad Gita* was of lesser standing within the literary circles in which Eknath was active.

On the other hand, the *Bhagavata Purana* was without a doubt an exceedingly popular text at the time. It also formed the basis for a Krishna bhakti, which began to make great inroads in India from sixteenth century onward.[12] Even to these ardent worshipers of Krishna, the *Bhagavad Gita* played a secondary role. The only notable exception was the Pushtimarg, founded by Vallabha at the end of fifteenth century. It displayed strong Brahmanical characteristics and, because of its Vedantic basis, counted the *Bhagavad Gita* among its central texts from the start.[13] Nevertheless, the *Bhagavata Purana* was the focus even within the Pushtimarg. Conversely, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, which also emerged in the sixteenth century and fostered a particularly intensive brand of Krishna bhakti, initially showed no interest in the *Bhagavad Gita*.[14] This remained the case until the eighteenth century, when Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Rajasthan underwent a massive Brahmanization,[15] over the course of which it came to align itself with the traditions of Vaishnavite Vedanta and refer to the *Bhagavad Gita* as one of the three classic Vedanta commentaries.

Accordingly, it were two scholars of Gaudiya Vaishnavism who first compiled their own commentaries on the *Bhagavad Gita*. The first step was made by Vishvanatha Cakravarti at the start of the eighteenth century.[16] With regard to the contents, however, he followed the *Bhagavata Purana*, in accordance with the interpretive conventions of Gaudiya Vaishnavism.[17] The second commentary to the *Bhagavad Gita* was drawn up by Baladeva Vidyabhushana in the mid-eighteenth century.[18] He sought to tie the *Bhagavad Gita* back to Dvaita Vedanta, and, in this way, tried to present Gaudiya Vaishnavism as part of the Vaishnavite Vedanta. Neither commentary, however, indicated that the majority of the followers of Gaudiya Vaishnavism had ever turned toward the *Bhagavad Gita* or to Vaishnavite Vedanta.

The central role played by the *Bhagavad Gita* in contemporary reform movements of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON), is a recent development and presupposes the popularity of the text since the end of the nineteenth century. Even the first major publication in English by the ISKCON founder A.

C. Bhaktivedanta (1896–1977) was still a commentary on the *Bhagavata Purana,* the first volume of which first appeared in India in 1962. It was not until two years after his emigration to the United States, in 1968, that he published *The Bhagavad Gita, As It Is*.[19]

In short, according to current scholarship, the *Bhagavad Gita* was neither widely read nor particularly popular in precolonial India. At first glance, this would seem to confirm the thesis of Bharati and Sharpe that it was the Orientalist reception in Europe and America that allowed for the popularization of the *Bhagavad Gita* in India.

2. *Bhagavad Gita* and Europe

The 1785 English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), who belonged to the circle of early Orientalists in Calcutta,[20] was the first Sanskrit text to be translated into a European language. There is ample reason to believe that the *Bhagavad Gita* was introduced to Wilkins as an expression of Vedanta philosophy by his Brahmanical informants in Banaras, and he himself mentions having partial access to a wide array of Sanskrit commentaries.[21] His statement that the *Bhagavad Gita* contains "all the grand mysteries of [the Brahman's] religion"[22] is reminiscent of Shankara's well-known foreword to his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita,* in which he describes the *Bhagavad Gita* as the "core essence of the meaning of the Vedas."[23]

Moreover, according to Wilkins, the central message of the *Bhagavad Gita* was to "unite all the prevailing modes of worship in those days," to teach the "unity of the Godhead," and "to bring about the downfall of Polytheism."[24] This characterization not only indicates a Vedantic frame of interpretation, but also suggests that Wilkins wanted to divorce the *Bhagavad Gita* from contemporary European criticism of idol worship and sacrifice in India at the time, because "the most learned Brāhmăns of the present times" were in truth "Unitarians," and the *Bhagavad Gita* the "downfall of polytheism."[25] This stance was shared by the Orientalist Nathaniel Brassey Halhed (1751–1830), with whom Wilkins discussed his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*.[26] Wilkins paved the way for a European interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* that, in the spirit of European deism, understood it as an alternative to traditional Christian doctrines.[27] This understanding was well received, and Wilkins's translation soon became well known in Europe. After only two years, it appeared in French translation, and it is worth noting that it has been reprinted numerous times in the near-century since.

The *Bhagavad Gita* experienced a major reception in the German Romantic philosophy, considerably advanced by its translation into Latin by August Wilhelm Schlegel in 1823.[28] This edition was reviewed extensively in 1826 by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who once spoke in a letter of his "thanks for the fortune [. . .] that allowed me to live to encounter this work."[29] Humboldt stands as an example of the "Romantic consensus," which saw a universal message of "oneness—with God and with nature" in the *Bhagavad Gita*.[30] In a way, this perspective was reinforced by Hegel in his highly critical response to Humboldt's essay. While Hegel's assessment of the *Bhagavad Gita* was the opposite of Humboldt's, it employs the same framework of interpretation. For Hegel, too, the *Bhagavad Gita* was a typical representation of an Indian philosophy of unity based on "yoga," that is to say, "meditation." However, he considered the Indian concept of unity deficient, abstract, and indeterminate ("religion of substance") because it failed to relate back concretely to the particulars of the world by developing the concept of the person and the autonomous subject.[31] This assessment is to be understood not only as a general critique by Hegel of "Eastern" religions, but above all as a critique aimed at Romantic philosophy. The *Bhagavad Gita*, as a supposedly typical example of a mysterious philosophy of unity, was thereby adapted to European debates. At the same time, its classification by Schlegel and Hegel confirmed its status as a Vedanta text.

Nevertheless, the effects of the Romantic enthusiasm for the *Bhagavad Gita* should not be exaggerated, lest one overlook that it did not make any significant headway into early Indology. In 1855, a new English translation by John Cockburn Thomson (1834–1860) appeared, together with an edition of the Sanskrit text and an extensive introduction to Indian philosophy, but no particular value was placed on the importance of the text.[32] Thompson did not adopt the Romantic interpretation. Instead of the "Romantic consensus," wherein the *Bhagavad Gita* teaches a monistic philosophy of unity, Thomson attributed the text to a theistic version of Samkhya and Yoga, neither of which possesses a monistic basis.[33] It is notable that his edition barely resonated in Indology, even though he advanced his own supplementary textual edition.[34]

Renowned Indologist Émile-Louis Burnouf (1821–1907), for his part, released a transliterated Sanskrit text with French translation in prose in 1861. Although in his introduction he writes that the *Bhagavad Gita*

contains the "essence" of "Brahmanical philosophy" and offers certain access to the "knowledge of India,"[35] he never gets any more specific. His edition was thought of as an exercise book for students, and he did not assign particular value to the text.[36] In the *Akademische Vorlesungen über indische Literaturgeschichte* (1852,[2] 1876, French 1859, English 1878,[2] 1882,[3] 1892) by Albrecht Weber, the *Bhagavad Gita* was dealt with simply as a part of the *Mahabharata*, just as it would be fifty years later in Arthur Anthony Macdonell's *A History of Sanskrit Literature.*[37]

If the "Romantic consensus" can be said to have experienced any progression, then it might be most clearly visible in the case of Max Müller. While on the one hand his characterization of the *Bhagavad Gita* as not very old and "a rather popular and esoteric exposition of Vedantic doctrines"[38] indicates little particular interest on his part in the text, on the other hand he at least definitively classifies it as a Vedanta work. Furthermore, he allotted an entire volume to the *Bhagavad Gita* in *Sacred Books of the East*, although this volume seems to have been largely ignored by contemporary reviewers.[39] What is also noteworthy is that this was the only volume for which an Indian translator, Kashinath Trimbak Telang (1850–1893) of Bombay, was employed. It would seem that none of the established European Indologists at the time were interested in taking over this task themselves.

The reason that Telang, who was not only a Sanskritologist, but also an influential judge and social reformer, took a special interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* is explained in detail later, as it is of critical importance to the argument put forward in this chapter. For the moment, all that need concern us is that Telang, too, dealt with the *Bhagavad Gita* as a classic text in the style of an *Upanishad*, if one of a different age, and as a commentary on Vedantic philosophy.[40] The impression that emerges from these observations is that the Romantic enthusiasm for the *Bhagavad Gita* did not develop further in nineteenth-century European Indology. However, through Max Müller, the Romantic interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* as a Vedantic text was received and further established.

3. *Bhagavad Gita* and the United States

The Romantic interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* in Europe had a rough equivalent in the United States, where Transcendentalists referred to the text. Arthur Christy even judges that "no one Oriental volume [. . .] was more influential" there "than the *Bhagavadgita*."[41] This seems, however, to have been far too generous an assessment. With the benefit of hindsight, and given the present awareness of the significance of the text, one must caution against overstating the relevance of the Transcendentalist reception of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Bhagavad Gita* was simply one of many other "Eastern" primary and secondary sources of importance to Transcendentalism.[42]

It was probably Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) who introduced the *Bhagavad Gita* to Transcendentalism. Many years later, in a letter to Max Müller from 1873, he credited his discovery of it to the study of Victor Cousin's *Cours de Philosophie* (1828, Engl. 1832), which he had read in the early 1830s.[43] In this work, Cousin attempts, in an eclectic manner, to synthesize French Spiritism, in the vein of Maine de Biran, and German Idealism, especially as characterized by Schelling. He dedicated a separate segment to Asian philosophy, in which the *Bhagavad Gita* is mentioned. However, it was not until 1845 that Emerson had the opportunity to read and, shortly thereafter, acquire Wilkins's translation. Regarding this opportunity, he writes in a letter of "the much renowned book of Buddhism [as he saw it, M.B.], extracts of which I have often admired but never before held the book in my hands."[44] Emerson soon recommended and loaned the book to his friends (e.g., John Greenleaf Whittier, Moncure Conway).[45] Nonetheless, it would seem his enthusiasm was not without its bounds, because in response to a query from a publisher he advocated against an American reprint of the inaccessible work.[46] Furthermore, one would be hard pressed to make a case for a deeper textual engagement with the *Bhagavad Gita* by Emerson. Instead, he concentrated on single verses, which he interpreted according to his own understanding. Hence, he copied to his journal verses 4–5 of the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which—according to Wilkins's translation—"the speculative doctrines and practical are one."[47] Emerson, who admired great heroes and great thinkers alike, saw his belief, that the intellectual advance toward the "Over-Soul" and the active developing of individual perfection represent two equally valid methods of human aspiration, confirmed through these two verses.[48]

Another great Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), is known to have also quoted the *Bhagavad Gita*.[49] During his time as a recluse at Lake Walden, he wrote: "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmological philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta [sic]."[50] Yet he only dedicated a single longer passage to the *Bhagavad Gita* in his work *A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers* (written

1840–1844, published 1849). Therein the scripture is simply a stand-in for an East/West dichotomy by which the Christian scriptures stand for "pure morality," and the Hindu for "pure intellectuality."[51] At that point, he considered the latter superior, an assessment that shifted considerably with his turn toward "civil disobedience." The *Bhagavad Gita* served above all as a background foil for the Transcendentalist discourse of self-realization. It was the "atmosphere, rather than the actual content"[52] that caught Thoreau's interest.

Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), a third great Transcendentalist, demonstrated an interest in Asian religions, especially because of Emerson's influence in the 1840s. During this time, he read the *Bhagavad Gita*, discussed it with Emerson, and presented on it at public lectures.[53] But in his published works, along with Asian texts in general, it is mentioned only tangentially. In 1846, Alcott advocated for the *Bhagavad Gita* to be included in a *Bible for Mankind*;[54] however, in his actual manuscript for a spiritual *Mankind Library* some years later there is no explicit mention of it, neither in the extant unpublished drafts[55] nor even in the publication project that Emerson later supported.[56] It follows that not even Alcott could be considered an exceptional admirer of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Following the American Civil War, a second generation of Transcendentalists formed, tightly enmeshed with Unitarian and liberal religious circles, in which there was renewed interest in non-Christian religions. In the 1870s, this climate resulted in, among other things, three influential works of religious comparison (Clarke, Johnson, Conway).[57] These three works held a highly authoritative status at the time. In 1892, the evangelical missionary theologian Frank F. Ellinwood names them as the most important comparative religious works in North America.[58]

All three texts refer to the *Bhagavad Gita*, though in different ways. James Freeman Clarke (1810–1888) cites it in his explanation of the philosophy of Vedanta,[59] as does Samuel Johnson (1822–1882), who was, incidentally, the only scholar who, in addition to the translation of Wilkins, also drew on the translation by Thomson, and who dedicated an entire chapter to the *Bhagavad Gita*.[60] Both thereby advanced its reception as a religious-philosophical Hindu text without privileging it in any way. In doing so, they found themselves in accord with European Indology, which also acknowledged the *Bhagavad Gita* as being above all a work of Vedanta.

The third work set a slightly different tone. The *Sacred Anthology* by Moncure Conway (1832–1907) offered a thematically organized selection of texts from different religions. With it, Conway was in a way augmenting the aforementioned Transcendentalist project, the *Bible for Mankind*. He

was not alone in this ambition: by that time, William Henry Channing (1810–1884) had also suggested something similar.[61] It was clear to Channing that the *Bhagavad Gita* absolutely ought to be included in the *Bible for Mankind*, not least because he counted it among his daily devotional texts, together with Confucius, Laozi, and the *Dhammapada* of the Pali Canon. Accordingly, the *Bhagavad Gita* was also given a place in Conway's work. We know from Conway that he learned of the *Bhagavad Gita* from Emerson, and that it "thenceforth became part of my canon."[62] Thus, in the context of the Transcendentalist conception of a *Bible for Mankind*, the *Bhagavad Gita* emerged as a central text of Hinduism. The cited passages, however, seem to have been chosen arbitrarily, and with regard to Hinduism, the *Bhagavad Gita* is neither the only nor the most cited text in the *Sacred Anthology*.[63] Thus, Conway cannot really be said to have prioritized the *Bhagavad Gita* either.

4. Theosophy and the *Bhagavad Gita*

From the evidence presented thus far, the following picture emerges. The reception of the *Bhagavad Gita* in Europe and the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century was indeed remarkable. However, it was nowhere near as far-reaching nor as clear-cut as has often been claimed. The enthusiasm of the European Romantic movement for the text stagnated. After all, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, European Indology mostly viewed the *Bhagavad Gita* as a commentary of Vedanta, if a subordinate one, as, for instance, Max Müller did. The second generation of Transcendentalists in the United States also reacted rather reservedly to the *Bhagavad Gita*. The project for a *Bible for Mankind* is something of an exception in that the *Bhagavad Gita* appears as a central text of Hinduism, albeit as one among many others. The "pizza effect," as described by Bharati and Sharpe, becomes less plausible for this reason alone. Moreover, a closer historical analysis reveals a different instigator of Indian enthusiasm for the *Bhagavad Gita*.

4.1. Christianity and the *Bhagavad Gita*

Some European Indologists were receptive to theistic Vaishnavism. In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was discussion within these circles of the possibility of Christian influence on the formation of Krishna bhakti.[64] In 1857, Albrecht Weber advanced the theory that the

Krishna cult might have been influenced by Christianity, or rather that it might constitute a misinterpretation of Christianity.[65] This idea was taken up by Franz Lorinser, a Catholic clergyman from Breslau, in the introduction to his 1869 verse translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, wherein the *Bhagavad Gita* is described as a text influenced by Christianity. The possibility is discussed sympathetically, if tangentially, in a footnote to the second edition of Albrecht Weber's *Akademische Vorlesungen über indische Literaturgeschichte* (1876).[66] Weber himself, to be sure, did not attach particular importance to the *Bhagavad Gita*. The discussion receded quickly in European Indology, as there was widespread consensus that the *Bhagavad Gita* predated Christianity and even Buddhism, and that any parallels therefore could not be conclusive evidence of any dependence.[67] Both Max Müller[68] and especially Richard Garbe[69] had emphatically rejected the possibility early on.

The same cannot be said of the debates in India. When Lorinser's theories became known there at the start of the 1870s, they unleashed a storm of outrage among nationalist-minded Hindu reformers. In 1874, none other than the aforementioned Kashinath Trimbak Telang held a lecture in front of the Students' Literary and Scientific Society to oppose Lorinser's view that the *Bhagavad Gita* derived from the Bible. In 1873, a condensed version of Lorinser's theories had appeared in English in the *Indian Antiquary*, and so had become easily accessible in India.[70] In 1875, Telang published his lecture as a comprehensive introduction to an English-verse translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Divine Lay*, Bombay 1875).[71] One can assume that Telang's interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* won widespread recognition among the English-speaking Indian elite because, as has been mentioned, he soon went on to produce an academic translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* for Max Müller's *Sacred Books of the East*, published in 1882. Telang was the only Indian academic to work on this project along with leading European Indologists and Orientalists. Telang's work demonstrates the way in which various discourses began to fuse together at the time on a global level, and he was no exception. The 49th volume of the *Sacred Books of the East* on Mahayana Buddhism was translated by the Japanese scholar Takakusu Junijirō. In addition to Telang, other Indian Indologists, such as R. G. Bhandarkar and Manilal Dvivedi, were well-known in Europe too. The influence of these Asian researchers on late nineteenth-century European Indology is still in need of closer investigation.

Telang was not only an internationally recognized Sanskritist and Indologist, but he also advocated for political reform, and in 1885 he

was among the founding members of the Indian National Congress.[72] Moreover, he was one of the important early reformers of Maharashtra, a group concerned with revitalizing Hinduism. The latter is evident not only in his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, but also in his involvement with the Prarthana Samaj.[73] In Telang's case it is, however, completely clear that, regardless of his involvement with the theistic Prarthana Samaj, he interpreted the *Bhagavad Gita* as a Vedanta text, and specifically as part of Advaita Vedanta. Hence, his explanation in the foreword to his translation in *Sacred Books of the East:* "My aim has been to make that translation as close and literal a rendering as possible of the Gîtâ, as interpreted by the commentators Sankarâkârya, Srîdharasvâmin, and Madhusûdana Sarasvatî."[74]

At the time, such an Advaita Vedantic perspective was anything but a given. A contemporaneous translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by John Davies sharply criticized any and all Vedantic interpretations;[75] instead, he emphasized Samkhya and Yoga in particular as the leading sources of the text. In doing so, Davies was, in a way, following Thomson's precedent. It is significant, then, that Davies' translation, much like that of Thomson, did not receive much attention in India or Europe.

4.2. *Bhagavad Gita* and "Eastern" Wisdom

Telang maintained close contacts to the Theosophical Society. Even if it was without any apparent particular interest in their esoteric doctrine, this was critical to the Society's further development. In the first volume of *The Theosophist* (1879/80), Telang published a three-part article on the life of Shankara, which reiterated his special interest in Advaita Vedanta. In 1884, he took part in the annual meeting of the Theosophical Society in Adyar (Madras), possibly with the goal of leading preparatory discussions about the founding of the Indian National Congress.[76] Telang's publications on the *Bhagavad Gita* therefore were well-known within the Theosophical Society when, in 1882/83, a disagreement with the English Spiritualist and Swedenborgian William Oxley took place inside the pages of *The Theosophist*. Indian Theosophists refuted "Western" interpretations of Indian sources and took over Telang's argumentation.

4.2.1. "Busiris the Ancient"

In 1881, William Oxley, who had close ties to the Theosophical Society and had even temporarily been a member,[77] published a book in which he developed his Spiritualist-Theosophical theories explicitly relating to

the *Bhagavad Gita*, even including verses from Wilkins's translation.[78] The Theosophists thought it necessary to respond to this work for several different reasons. For Blavatsky, it was probably a matter of maintaining an interpretive monopoly in matters of Theosophical doctrine. Oxley's claim to have personally encountered Theosophical Mahatmas posed a threat to her control over these contacts. However, Damodar M. Mavalankar (1857–1885?), the young Indian Theosophist charged with writing the review,[79] took issue with entirely different matters. Oxley claimed that a spirit named "Busiris the Ancient" had revealed himself via a medium as the author of the *Mahabharata*. Here Mavalankar commented that "it requires but a moderate dose of [. . .] national pride [. . .] to view the venerable Busiris as a rival [. . .] to a dignity already honourably occupied in India."[80]

Oxley tried to defend himself in a rebuttal,[81] which immediately prompted a new, extensive review by another Indian Theosophist, T. Subba Row (1856–1890).[82] The arguments and discourses of legitimization put forward would warrant a separate study.[83] In any case, it is clear that the young, Theosophical Brahmans had no wish to see the interpretation of their own traditions usurped by the "Western" side, nor indeed by somebody like Oxley, who had not even mastered Sanskrit, as was emphasized time and again. Mavalankar drives the point home:

> Being but an humble pupil of Brahman-pundits learned in the esoteric interpretation of the Bhagavad-Gita, the "Reviewer" confesses to know little of the Western "School of Thought" [on which Oxley had built his case] which interprets *our* sacred Books it its own way. But, he is pretty sure of his facts when related to Eastern or Aryan esotericism.[84]

As a result of the dispute, Indian Theosophists turned their attention on the *Bhagavad Gita* with renewed vigor and occupied themselves with its interpretation.

4.2.2. Early Theosophy and Bhagavad Gita

To understand the significance of this development, it is important to recall that the Theosophical Society had previously demonstrated no particular interest in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Founded by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) and Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907) in 1875, it had relocated

its headquarters to India in 1879. The position of the Theosophical Society with regard to the existing religious scriptures was ambiguous. Theosophy was to teach the "Ancient Wisdom" underlying all world religions, but Blavatsky nonetheless emphasized that "the main body of the Doctrines given is found scattered throughout hundreds and thousands of Sanskrit MSS., some already translated—disfigured in their interpretations, as usual—others still awaiting their turn," whose study allowed for the "verification" of Theosophical doctrines.[85]

To prove her case, Blavatsky endeavored to draw evidence as extensively as possible from all sorts of Orientalist works, which, however, also means that her works do not privilege any specific work. This must be kept in mind when Blavatsky engages with the *Bhagavad Gita* in her first major work, *Isis Unveiled* (1877). Therein, she assumes an advanced age for the *Bhagavad Gita* and states, in reference to the foreword of Charles Wilkins's translation, that "the grandest mysteries of the Brahmanical religion are embraced within this magnificent poem."[86] However, neither here nor elsewhere in the early Theosophical Society can one discern a special focus on the *Bhagavad Gita*. This was to change in the 1880s, as Indian members employed the *Bhagavad Gita* against the theory of Busiris and the presumed superiority of "Western" wisdom. This process paralleled debates about the meaning and significance of yoga that were unfolding in the same context, which similarly revolved around questions of authority on ancient wisdom.[87]

4.2.3. Theosophical Orientation toward the Bhagavad Gita

In June of 1882, the first article devoted solely to the *Bhagavad Gita* appeared in *The Theosophist*. Bengali Theosophist and administrative officer Nobin K. Bannerji (d. 1885) was its author, and T. Subba Row provided additional commentary.[88] In a footnote to the article, Blavatsky indicated that the significance of the *Bhagavad Gita* was as "a record of the ancient teachings during the Mysteries of Initiation."[89]

During this time, the *Bhagavad Gita* became the fixed reference within Theosophy for "Hinduism," in contrast to "esoteric Buddhism." The latter played a central role for Blavatsky and Olcott, with both of them having officially converted to Buddhism in 1880 in Sri Lanka. In 1882, in response to the written recommendation of Mavalankar, American Theosophist William Quan Judge (1851–1896) read the *Bhagavad Gita*.[90] The following year, the publisher of *The Theosophist* announced a new

series about "the hidden meaning of the Aryan Shastras," which was to commence with a complete commentary on the "esoteric meaning" of the *Bhagavad Gita*.[91] In this context, an "almost perfect identity between the concealed sense of this immortal epic and the Arhat Tibetan Doctrine"[92] is proposed. When William Quan Judge complained in *The Theosophist* in 1884 that Alfred Percy Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* (1883) failed to take into account that "nearly all the leading portions of the doctrine are to be found broadly stated in the Bhagavad-Gita,"[93] Blavatsky emphatically agreed and wrote that "*all* the doctrines given in *Esoteric Buddhism* and far more yet untouched, are to be found in the *Gita*," only to immediately add "and not only there but in a thousand more known or unknown MSS. of Hindu sacred writings."[94]

After Judge returned to the United States at the end of 1884, he ambitiously expanded the American branch of the Theosophical Society. For that purpose, he formed reading groups focusing on the *Bhagavad Gita* and published passages and commentaries to the text in his magazine *The Path*, inaugurated in 1886.[95] From the mid-1880s onward, the *Bhagavad Gita* got a privileged status worldwide within the Theosophical Society that grew even stronger in the subsequent years. At the same time, Indian Theosophists made an effort to bring English translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* to the Indian book market at a reasonable price. In 1885, Tukaram Tatya of Bombay undertook a new edition of the Wilkins translation, equipped with extensive introductory statements by Manilal N. Dvivedi (1858–1898) and Nobin K. Bannerji. All three were Indian members of the Theosophical Society.[96]

4.2.4. Theosophical Appropriation of the Arnold Translation of the Bhagavad Gita

At exactly the same time, a verse translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by Edwin Arnold (*The Song Celestial*, 1885) was released and immediately taken up with great enthusiasm in Theosophical circles. Edwin Arnold (1832–1904) was a journalist and successful Victorian writer, but had spent a number of years as a young man as the principal of a school in India.[97] The intersections of Victorian religious discourse are reflected in his person in a way that seems almost paradigmatic. While he was strongly anchored in the liberal Anglican Broad Church founded by his father, he also had close contact to Unitarian and liberal religious circles in England and the United States. It is worth mentioning that his second marriage

was to the daughter of his friend, the American Transcendentalist William Henry Channing.[98] Channing helped promote Arnold's works in America, and it is certainly conceivable that Arnold was incited or encouraged to complete a translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by him.

Arnold also had contacts in the Theosophical Society,[99] and his youngest son is said to have later become a Theosophist himself.[100] His success as an author was owed to a poem about the life of the Buddha (*Light of Asia*, 1879), which decisively advanced the burgeoning enthusiasm for Buddhism in Europe and the United States, reaching sixty editions in England and eighty in America.[101] Besides that, however, numerous other translations of religious verse stem from him. By 1875 he had already translated the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva, a Vaishnavite bhakti poem of the twelfth century that recounts the love affair of Krishna and Radha, how they separated and then reunited, in twelve songs. In spite of the earlier positive European reception of the *Gita Govinda* (for example, by Goethe),[102] Arnold's translation remained comparatively unknown, as were further translations out of the *Mahabharata* (*Indian Poetry*, 1881; *Indian Idylls*, 1883) and his translation of the *Katha Upanishads* (*The Secret of Death*, 1885), although the latter actually should have fitted in well with the overall positive reception of Advaita Vedanta.[103] He also produced a poetic translation with commentary on the ninety-nine names of God in Islam (*Pearls of Faith*, 1883, seven editions by 1896).

Initially, the *Bhagavad Gita* seems not to have interested Arnold overmuch. He translated other passages of the *Mahabharata*, and beyond that he conceptualized a trilogy of three exemplary works of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, respectively, which were composed of his translations of the *Gita Govinda* (note: not the *Bhagavad Gita*), the life of Buddha, and the ninety-nine names.[104] It follows that the success of his *Bhagavad Gita* translation—though it could not compare with the popularity of his book on Buddha[105]—could not be traced back to a particular preference for the text by Arnold.[106] Rather, it was its enthusiastic reception in Theosophical circles that brought this about. How quickly Arnold's *Bhagavad Gita* gained popularity within Theosophy is illustrated by the will of Blavatsky written in the year of its publication. Blavatsky wrote that she wished that "yearly, on the anniversary of my death some of my friends should assemble at the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society and read a chapter of Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* and *Bhagavad Gita* [*Song Celestial*]."[107] Following her wishes, after her death Olcott established White Lotus Day in 1892.[108]

4.2.5. Interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita by Indian Theosophists

Over the course of the 1880s, two Indian Theosophists produced comprehensive interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita*. At the annual meeting of the Theosophical Society in 1886, T. Subba Row held four lectures on the *Bhagavad Gita*, which were published a year later.[109] The interpretation of the Telugu Smarta Brahman, T. Subba Row, follows Advaita Vedanta. His reading is allegorical and spiritual in its treatment of the poem. The Pandavas are the higher, spiritual side of humanity, and their enemies the Kauravas, the lower side. It is concerned with the victory of the spiritual person and the attainment of immortality. Krishna is the "Logos," who descends to the realm of souls to lend vital support. Popular Hinduism is criticized for contributing to the moral decadence of India.[110] Such commentary demonstrated the allegorical and spiritualized reading that was to become the standard interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in India.

In 1887, the commentary by T. Subba Row was backed by an English translation of Bengali Theosophist Mohini Mohun Chatterji (1858–1936). His translation followed T. Subba Row's allegorical interpretation,[111] and in his case also the alignment with Advaita Vedanta is clear. Prior to his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Chatterji had translated two classic texts credited to Shankara into English (*Atmanatmaviveka*, 1884; *Vivekacudamani*, 1885).

5. Hinduism and the Bhagavad Gita

Over the course of the 1880s, the Indian Theosophical interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* gained broader attention. This is particularly evident in the case of Vivekananda (1863–1902) and his followers, who propagated a new Hinduism, the central tenet of which they declared to be Advaita Vedanta. Their reinterpretation of Advaita Vedanta had its origin in the Brahmo Samaj, a major Hindu reform movement in colonial India. Although the *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the three commentaries of Vedanta, the early Brahmo Samaj did not refer much to it. This is apparent in the case of Rammohan Roy (1772–1833), the founder of the Brahmo Samaj. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Roy advocated for the reconception of Advaita Vedanta as a central philosophy of Hinduism. He was able to do quite well without any particular dependence on the *Bhagavad Gita* for this purpose.[112] It is only in the context of his argumentation against *sati* (immolation of widows) that he fell back on the *Bhagavad Gita*, among others, as an authoritative scripture ("Shastra") in order to confirm the rejection of "acts based on desire such as concremation," that is, *sati*, in the Hindu tradition.[113] The *Bhagavad Gita* played no part in his philosophical writings. Hence a popularization of the *Bhagavad Gita* did not happen during the reconceptualization of Advaita Vedanta in the Brahmo Samaj.

The *Bhagavad Gita* found its way to Vivekananda through Mohini Mohun Chatterji. Until the mid-1880s, Chatterji was among the most important Indian Theosophists, and he was very close to Blavatsky and Olcott. After a roughly one-year period of disagreement, in 1887, Chatterji left the Theosophical Society.[114] His *Bhagavad Gita* translation of that same year was published by a non-Theosophical publisher in Boston, presumably thanks to his acquaintance with members of the Brahmo Samaj who were in close contact with in Unitarian and liberal religious circles there. It was likely through similar circles in England, where he had undertaken a very successful lecture tour while still a Theosophist in 1884 and 1885, that the London edition of the following year was distributed.

By the second half of the 1890s at the latest, Chatterji had become an official supporter and follower of Vivekananda.[115] Although he quoted from it rather infrequently, Vivekananda referred to the *Bhagavad Gita* on prominent occasions, such as in his opening address to the World Parliament of Religions in 1893.[116] He characterized the *Bhagavad Gita* as a text of Advaita Vedanta, as the "best authority on Vedanta," and as "the only commentary, the authoritative commentary on the Vedas."[117] Evident throughout is an allegorical-spiritual interpretation of the text. Arjuna, to whom Krishan related his teachings in the *Bhagavad Gita*, was "under the control of his emotionalism," but the "goal of man" was to attain eternal consciousness, where there is no space for emotions, only "pure reason." Arjuna "is not what he should be—a great self-controlled, enlightened sage working through the eternal light of reason."[118] For Vivekananda, this demand for deed without desire (Skt. *niṣkāma karman*) is a rejection of "Western" materialism and a materialist view of the world: "Religion is the realisation of spirit as spirit."[119]

In his North American lectures, it was of particular importance to Vivekananda to emphasize that religions were not to be understood as divisive doctrines, but as forms of individual realization that could be arrived at by various routes.[120] He had already made the latter point in

his opening speech to the World Parliament of Religions in reference to the *Bhagavad Gita*. Many of his European and American followers also had a particular interest in the text. One can infer a correlation with the popularization of Theosophy in the 1880s. One notable case is that of Sarah Chapman Bull (1850–1911), one of the early and most socially influential followers of Vivekananda in the United States, who bequeathed a large amount of her fortune to the Ramakrishna Mission. She belonged to a circle of Unitarian, liberal religious-minded Bostonians. We know that her interest in Asian religions was piqued by a lecture by Mohini Mohun Chatterji, which was held in 1886 during a tour of the United States.[121]

Another important early supporter of the Ramakrishna Mission was Josephine MacLeod (1858–1949), who was active in the same circles as Chatterji and Bull. We know of her that she had already read the *Bhagavad Gita* in Boston, together with her sister Betty Sturges, before they met Vivekananda in the mid-1890s. The same is true for Laura Glenn (1867–1942), later known as Sister Devamata. She also became interested in Asian religions by reading the *Bhagavad Gita*.[122] Another example is Edward Toronto Sturdy (1860–1957), who likewise encountered Vivekananda in the second half of the 1890s. He previously had been a member of the Theosophical Society, where in the mid-1880s he purportedly had been deeply engaged in study of the *Bhagavad Gita*.[123]

The Theosophical mode of interpretation continued to influence the Hindu reformist appropriation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the following years. Annie Besant (1847–1933), Blavatsky's successor in the leadership of the Theosophical Society and temporarily president of the Indian National Congress, carried on the tradition. Together with the young Indian Theosophist and later politician Bhagavan Das (1869–1958), Besant published two editions of the *Bhagavad Gita* (1895, 1905) and personally wrote a commentary called *Hints on the Study of the Bhagavad Gita* (1906). Wholly in keeping with the spirit of the allegorical-spiritual interpretation, the central theme of the *Bhagavad Gita* was identified as the internal victory of the spirit (Skt. *manas*) over desire (Skt. *kāma*) in humanity.[124]

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) represents a particularly memorable example of the interplay between Theosophical and Hindu interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* at the turn of the twentieth century. Gandhi himself reports that his first encounter with the *Bhagavad Gita* took place in a Theosophical context. In 1889, during his stay in London, he got to know two Theosophists, Bertram and Archibald Keightley, who asked him to read the *Bhagavad Gita* together with them. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes:

> They were reading Sir Edwin Arnold's translation—The Song Celestial—and they invited me to read the original with them. I felt ashamed, as I had read the divine poem neither in Samskrit nor in Gujarati. I was constrained to tell them that I had not read the Gita, but that I would gladly read it with them, [. . .] I began reading the Gita with them. [. . .] The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth.[125]

Theosophy was more formative an influence on Gandhi than he himself admitted afterward.[126] According to his own account, he began to study the *Bhagavad Gita* more intensively with "Theosophist friends" in South Africa around 1903.[127] In 1905, he had Annie Besant's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* reprinted for the purpose of instructing Indian youths in South Africa, with her portrait on the title page.[128] When Besant protested against the use of her portrait, Gandhi apologized by saying it had happened out of "excessive reverence" for Besant.[129] In terms of content, large sections of Gandhi's version of the *Bhagavad Gita* also run parallel to the allegorical-spiritual interpretation of Theosophy.[130] Just as is in Theosophy, Gandhi formulated the *Bhagavad Gita* as the battle between humanity's higher and lower self, but does not justify the use of violence because the battlefield described is that of human nature.

Starting in the early twentieth century, the *Bhagavad Gita* attained increasing popularity among the educated, mainly English-speaking Hindu elite because of the growing emphasis on the *Bhagavad Gita* in Hindu reform movements. It was only then that it became considered one of the central texts of Hinduism, and the allegorical-spiritual interpretation the norm. Rai Bahadur Lala Baijnath wrote in the year 1908: "For the Hindu it is now the *one* book of books. [. . .] The Gita is as fresh as ever and just as to the Christian is the Bible . . . the Gita is to the Hindu."[131] At the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, the missionary F. J. Western described "the widespread use of the Bhagavad-Gita as a book of theology and devotion" and speaks of it as having been "re-discovered by English educated Hindus."[132] C. F. Andrews, liberal missionary and an eventual colleague of Gandhi's, pointed out in 1912 that "the Bhagavad Gita, which a century ago was scarcely known outside the learned circles of the pandits, [. . .] has been elevated from a position of comparative obscurity to that of a common and well-read scripture for the whole of educated India."[133]

The exclusive status of the *Bhagavad Gita* in India had been widely established by the late 1920s at the latest. So it was that in 1928 Gandhi spoke of how one could attain salvation after death if one carried the message of "Mother Gita" always in one's heart,[134] and that "no Hindu should let a single day pass without the study of [. . .] Bhagavad Gita."[135] Consequently, the popularity of the *Bhagavad Gita* has since been anachronistically written back into history. In 1929, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), a leading Hindu thinker of his time and the second president of India, opined that "if the hold which a work has on the mind of man is any clue to its importance, then the Gītā is the most influential work in Indian thought."[136]

6. Political *Bhagavad Gita*

The allegorical-spiritualized reading in accordance with Advaita Vedanta by Theosophists and Hindu reformers enjoys widespread acceptance in present-day Hinduism. In light of this, it is easy to forget that other conventions for interpretation also emerged, which certainly remain relevant even today. They, too, most likely built on the popularization of Theosophy in the 1880s, but aimed for a more political-nationalist reading.

6.1. Krishna as the "Ideal Man"

A number of the Indian Theosophists who championed the *Bhagavad Gita* hailed from Bengal, and they may well have been the conduits through which Theosophical discussions of the *Bhagavad Gita* became well-known. In any case, Bengali reformers discovered the *Bhagavad Gita* for their cause contemporaneously. The Krishna bhakti was deeply anchored in Bengal because of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and Vaishnavite theism experienced an upswing in the 1880s. At the same time, the reformers saw themselves confronted with Christian missionary criticism of the presumed immorality of young Krishna's love affair with Radha, which was the central motif of the Krishna bhakti in the *Bhagavata Purana*.[137]

This criticism resonated with the Victorian Indian colonial elite of Bengal. By alluding to the *Bhagavad Gita*, the reformers attempted to remodel the figure of Krishna. The Krishna of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a philosophical debater little known to Christian missionaries at that point,[138] was henceforth declared the new standard. The Bengali poet Nabinchandra Sen

(1847–1909) published the first volume of a trilogy to the *Mahabharata* in 1886, in which he recounts how Krishna had created a unified Indian kingdom that lasted for several thousand years before it was destroyed by Brahmans. This kingdom was distinguished by its righteousness, and its foundation was the *Bhagavad Gita*.[139] Just how recent the reorientation toward the *Bhagavad Gita* still was at the time is evident in the fact that Nabinchandra Sen had not yet set eyes on the *Bhagavad Gita* during the drafting of the first volume and only got hold of it afterward, with the result that he released a published and annotated Bengali translation in 1889.[140]

At the same time, over a period of two years (1886–1888), the Bengali poet Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya (1838–1894) also began publishing a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* in his magazine *Pracar*[141] that in a way flanked his major work about the life of Krishna (*Krishnacaritra*, 1886). Just as in Nabinchandra Sen's reading, the *Bhagavad Gita* served to characterize Krishna as a religious national hero, an "ideal man" who could serve as a Hindu equivalent to the figure of Christ.[142] However, even in this Bengali reinterpretation of the figure of Krishna, the *Bhagavad Gita* did not necessarily become a central Hindu text; rather, its reception remains embedded in an extensive rereading of Vaishnavite Puranic literature, including the *Bhagavata Purana*.[143]

6.2. *Bhagavad Gita* as a Call for Armed Resistance

The nationalist interpretation of the *Bhagavad Gita* as first formulated in Bengal took on a radical edge in subsequent years. Starting with Maharashtra, at the end of the nineteenth century, the *Bhagavad Gita* was made into the ideological armor of a militant wing of the anti-British resistance. Krishna's incitement of Arjuna to fight his relatives, with no regard for the consequences, to restore the dharma (Skt. *niṣkāma karman*) was understood as a justification for putting aside established moral values for the sake of the anti-colonial fight for freedom. Consequently, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920) wrote in 1897:

> Shrimat Krishna's teaching in the *Bhagavad Gita* is to kill even our teachers and our kinsmen. No blame attaches to any person if he is doing deeds without being motivated by a desire to reap the fruit of his deeds. [. . .] Get out of the Penal Code, enter into the extremely high atmosphere of the *Bhagavad Gita*, and then consider the actions of great men.[144]

Between 1910 and 1911, Tilak wrote a long commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* in prison. In an explicit critique of one-sided Advaita Vedantic and allegorical-spiritual interpretations, he posited political independence as an indispensable condition for the restoration of religious order (Skt. *dharma*).[145] Following this interpretation, at the turn of the twentieth century, the *Bhagavad Gita* began to provide the legitimization in Maharashtra and, to a lesser extent, in Bengal for an anti-colonial fight for independence that relied on assassination and bombings.[146] This political-militant interpretation, the traces of which can be found even in the Hindu nationalism of today, could not sustain majority support. Instead, it was the allegorical-spiritual interpretation that eventually pushed through in the early decades of the twentieth century. In the person of Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), these developments are made visible: while at first he followed Tilak's interpretation, around 1910, his beliefs took a spiritual turn.[147]

6.3. *Bhagavad Gita* and the Ethics of Action

This decidedly political-nationalist interpretation of the *Bhagavad* Gita shows again that it was hardly inevitable for the *Bhagavad Gita* to become one of the scriptural foundations of modern Hinduism. At the same time, political-nationalist and allegorical-spiritual interpretations were not entirely opposed to each other: not only did they share a common theoretical origin, but they also overlapped in practice. Vivekananda advanced not only spiritualistic but also nationalist interpretations.[148] He saw a clear ethic of action laid out in the *Bhagavad Gita*, whereby "a man must be active in order to pass through activity to perfect calmness."[149] He emphasizes this point particularly in regard to his Indian followers, and allows himself this dramatic utterance:

> You will understand the Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. You will understand the mighty genius and the mighty strength of Krishna better with a little of strong blood in you.[150]

Here the *Bhagavad Gita* becomes the basis for the masculine national awakening of India. To the later Indian-Theosophical interpretation, this aspect was not unknown either. Annie Besant and Bhagavan Das established that the *Bhagavad Gita* had historical significance, drawing on the

evolution of a "world logos," whereby the unification of humankind and God is made possible through outward effort.[151] Gandhi, too, understood the *Bhagavad Gita* as a call to action: "He who gives up action falls. He who gives up only the reward rises."[152] These interpretations promoting action show how it is possible for nationalist and Spiritualist interpretations to mesh. However, this changes nothing of the result, which was that the Spiritualist reading was to push through in the end.

7. Conclusion: *Bhagavad Gita* and Global Religious History

The present popularity of the *Bhagavad Gita* in India can be traced back to Theosophical debates in the 1880s about the relationship between "Western" and "Eastern" tradition. The context of its popular emergence was the nationalist protest of Indian Theosophists against European Orientalist claims. However, there is no evidence for a "pizza effect," whereby the positive reception in India is the result of the previous high regard held by the text in Europe and the United States. The historical findings as delineated in this chapter seem so self-evident that the question arises of why scholarship has overlooked the Theosophical connection thus far. The answer to this question can help us understand how theoretical presuppositions structure our view of the past. I contend that the Indian Theosophists who played the decisive role twice fell victim to common historiographical ignorance.

First, there exists a conceptual flaw in the academic study of esotericism, because it examines esotericism as a purely "Western" phenomenon.[153] Dissenting voices have not found much of an audience thus far.[154] Consequently, Theosophy is usually examined only as an expression of "Western" esotericism,[155] and its Orientalist notions come under consideration only as a product of European imaginations.[156] There is no conceptual room for questions regarding the possible contributions by Indian Theosophists to the doctrinal progression of the Theosophical Society. However, the Theosophical discussions about the *Bhagavad Gita* retraced in this article make it clear that such a narrow view is insufficient. Second, for a long time, the Orientalism debate neglected questions related to the Indian role in the conceptual formation of modern Hinduism under colonialism.[157] In the case of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this meant that the Indian reception was declared too hastily as nothing more than the adaptation of Orientalist patterns of interpretation from Europe and the United States. Thereby, the

active role of the colonized falls from view, and the far-reaching scope of the events in the 1880s outlined in this article is not recognized.

As a result, the reception of the *Bhagavad Gita* raises fundamental questions. Its scholarly investigation necessitates a theoretical foundation that critically reflects and seeks to overcome the structural reasons for current blind spots. Elsewhere I have argued that a global history approach is necessary to adequately study processes of religious transformation of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[158] A global history approach is also helpful for a better understanding of the changing importance of the *Bhagavad Gita*. For one, it deliberately interrogates the role of the colonized within the discourse of colonial power.[159] It investigates the complex forms that assimilation of "Western knowledge" by the colonized takes, and does not simply assume an identical substitution. Colonial discourses are no longer seen as monolithic or invariable; rather, it is their polyphonic and unstable character that comes into view. They exhibit a considerable dynamism and substantial potential for transformation, and in their instability they can simultaneously express resistance.[160] Recent post-colonial studies take particular interest in the entire range of articulations of the colonized. When applied to the reception of the *Bhagavad Gita*, this means that the Indian reaction automatically falls into the specific research focus and no longer runs the risk of being structurally erased.

For another reason, the concept of a global religious history demands to understand colonial history as "entangled histories," because "those entities that stand in relation with one another are themselves in part a product of their entanglements."[161] Entangled histories follow the insight of recent post-colonial theories, whereby all articulations within a discourse refer to each other as "citations." This means that not even Europe experienced history autonomously; rather, because of its "entanglements" with the colonies, the identity formation of Europe was "entangled" with that of the colonies. Even though European knowledge had a hegemonic position, European colonialism was also marked by entanglement. Within such a perspective, it is no longer necessary to conceive of a self-sustained "Western esotericism."[162] Instead, the study of esotericism within religious studies will only benefit from recognizing its subject as a global one.

Finally, global religious history rests on a genealogical approach in the vein of Foucault, who demanded a strict historicizing of research subjects.[163] In this historical sense, "precolonial" can only denote the time directly before the nineteenth century, rather than vaguely indicating

thousand-year-old Indian traditions, the continuity of which is simply presupposed.

This chapter provides a concrete example of how fruitful a global perspective is for the writing of religious history. From the perspective of global religious history, however, at least three further central aspects of the reception of the *Bhagavad Gita* that have thus far been insufficiently researched come to light. It demonstrates a need for stricter historicizing of the connection between pre- and post-colonial understandings of the *Bhagavad Gita*. The role of the *Bhagavad Gita* in eighteenth-century India bears particular consideration. If indeed there is an Indian pre-colonial root for the colonial reception of the *Bhagavad Gita*, it must be located in this period. Past research has missed its chance to follow up on this question in depth. A fruitful point of departure would surely be the Brahmanization of Krishna bhakti in Rajasthan in the eighteenth century, mentioned at the outset of this chapter. The related reorientation toward Vaishnavite Vedanta generated renewed interest in the *Bhagavad Gita* within the worship of Krishna. The effect of this development on colonial Hinduism has yet to be examined, even though it seems to have had a direct impact, for example, on Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850–1885).[164] Furthermore, the Indian reception of the *Bhagavad Gita* in colonial India would benefit from a more detailed examination of the various *Bhagavad Gita* commentaries that were published in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in regional Indian languages.[165]

Finally, there is a need for future studies of Theosophy in line with a global history approach. If it is true that greater appreciation of the *Bhagavad Gita* within Theosophical circles in England and the United States developed as a result of discussions that took place in the 1880s in India, then this lays bare an entanglement, the implications of which for the ongoing development of Theosophical doctrine at the end of the nineteenth century must be taken into greater consideration. Future research must also strive to examine the Indian influence on Theosophical discussions in Europe and the United States. In the broadest possible terms, it is a matter of recognizing Theosophy as having been a global phenomenon. The same is true of the question of tracing back the present-day popularity of the *Bhagavad Gita* in Europe and the United States. There is much to suggest that the European Romantic and American Transcendentalist preoccupation with the *Bhagavad Gita* did not, as is commonly assumed, play a decisive role. As shown, the influence of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism has been

overestimated. Is, then, the present-day popularity of the *Bhagavad Gita* outside India instead a reaction to its Indian popularization since the 1880s? This would explain why the zenith of Indological research into the *Bhagavad Gita* did not occur until after 1900 and continued for about forty years thereafter.[166] In light of global entangled histories, it is to be assumed that the particular Indological interest in turn reinforced the Indian focus on the *Bhagavad Gita*. In any case, a thorough examination of this web of complex questions would be worthwhile. To conclude, the perspective of global religious history generates unexplored avenues for the further investigation of colonial discourses. It is precisely herein that we find the reason for its relevance.

Notes

1. Eric J. Sharpe, *The Universal Gita: Western Images of the Bhagavad Gita: A Bicentennary Survey* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985); Friedrich Huber, "Religion und Politik in Indien," *Zeitschrift für Mission* 17, no. 2 (1991); Rahul Peter Das, "Die Rolle der Bhagavadgita im indischen Nationalismus der Kolonialzeit," in *Religiöser Text und soziale Struktur*, ed. Walter Beltz and Jürgen Tubach (Halle: Universität Halle, 2001); Catherine A. Robinson, *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gita and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord* (London: Routledge, 2006); Richard H. Davis, *The Bhagavad Gita: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

2. Agehananda Bharati, "The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns," *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1970): 274.

3. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 169–70.

4. Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999), 120–21.

5. Robinson, *Interpretations*; Shruti Kapila and Faisal Fatehali Devji, *Political Thought in Action: The Bhagavad Gita and Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Davis, *Bhagavad Gita*.

6. Matthew Clark, *The Daśanāmī-Saṃnyāsīs: The Integration of Ascetic Lineages into an Order* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Christopher Minkowski, "Advaita Vedānta in Early Modern History," *South Asian History and Culture* 2 (2011).

7. Dewan Bahadur K. Rangachari, *The Sri Vaishnava Brahmans* (Madras: Madras Government Museum, 1931); Gérard Colas, "History of the Vaiṣṇava Traditions. An Esquisse," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

8. Ursula King, "The Iconography of the Bhagavad Gita," *Journal of Dharma* 7, no. 2 (1982).

9. Catharina Kiehnle, *Jñāndev Studies I and II. Songs on Yoga: Texts and Teachings of the Maḥārāṣṭrian Nāths* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1997); Davis, *Bhagavad Gita*, 65–71.

10. Shankar Gopal Tulpule, *Classical Marāṭhī Literature from the Beginning to A. D. 1818* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979), 359.

11. Hugh van Skyhawk, *Bhakti und Bhakta: Religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zum Heilsbegriff und zur religiösen Umwelt des Śrī Sant Ekanāth* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1990), 19.

12. Alan W. Entwistle, *Braj, Centre of Krishna Pilgrimage* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1987).

13. Helmuth von Glasenapp, "Die Lehre Vallabhâcāryas," *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Iranistik* 9 (1933/34); Richard Barz, *The Bhakti Sect of Vallabhācārya* (Faridabad: Thomson Press, 1976).

14. Joseph Thomas O'Connell, "Caitanya's Followers and the Bhagavad-Gita: A Case Study in the Bhakti and the Secular," in *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 1976); Tony K. Stewart, *The Final Word: The Caitanya Caritāmṛta and the Grammar of Religious Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

15. Monika Horstmann, *Der Zusammenhalt der Welt: Religiöse Herrschaftslegitimation und Religionspolitik Mahārājā Savāī Jaisinghs (1700–1743)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009).

16. Viśvanātha cakravartī: *Sārārtha-varṣiṇī* (Skt., ca. 1704–1709), quoted from Adrian P. Burton, "Temples, Texts, and Taxes: The Bhagavad-gītā and Politico-Religious Identity of the Caitanya Sect" (PhD diss., The Australian National University, 2000).

17. Burton, "Temples," 2–4.

18. Winand M. Callewaert and Shilanand Hemraj, *Bhagavadgītānuvāda. A Study in Transcultural Translation* (Ranchi: Satya Bharati Publications, 1983), 182; Burton, "Temples," 93.

19. Reinhart Hummel, *Indische Mission und neue Frömmigkeit im Westen* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980), 52.

20. Mary Lloyd, "Sir Charles Wilkin, 1749–1836," in *Report for the Year 1978*, ed. India Office Library and Records (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1979).

21. P. J. Marshall, ed., *The British Discovery of Hinduism in the 18th Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 194.

22. Ibid., 193.

23. Alladi Mahaveda Sastry, *The Bhagavad Gita with the Commentary of Sri Sankaracharya. Translated from the original Sanskrit into English* (Madras: Samata Books, 1977 [1897]), 4; P. J. Thomas, *20th Century Interpretations of Bhagavadgita: Tilak, Gandhi and Aurobindo* (Delhi: I. S. P. C. K, 1987), 10. (Skt. "tat idaṃ samastavedārthasārasaṃgrahabhūtaṃ.")

24. Marshall, *British Discovery*, 193.

25. Ibid., 194.

26. Rosane Rocher, *Orientalism, Poetry, and the Millennium: The Checkered Life of Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, 1751–1830* (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 1983), 123–24. See also the "Unitarian" interpretation of Advaita Vedanta by Rammohan Roy (Dermot Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition: The Teape Lectures 1990* [Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt and Grevatt, 1993], 135–37).

27. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay of Philosophical Understanding* (Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass, 1990), 56.

28. Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gita: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the German Reception of Indian Thought, 1778–1831* (London: Routledge, 2006).

29. Günter Kronenbitter, ed., *Friedrich Gentz: Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VIII, 5 (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 2002), 300 (letter by Wilhelm von Humboldt to Friedrich Gentz, March 1, 1828).

30. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 20.

31. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 84–99; Andreas Nehring, "Religion und Kultur. Zur Beschreibung einer Differenz," in *Religious Turns—Turning Religions: Veränderte kulturelle Diskurse—Neue religiöse Wissensformen*, ed. Andreas Nehring and Joachim Valentin (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008).

32. J. Cockburn Thomson, *The Bhagavad-Gita, or a Discourse Between Krishna and Arjuna on Divine Matters: A Sanskrit Philosophical Poem, Translated, with Copious Notes, an Introduction on Sanskrit Philosophy, and Other Matters* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1855); John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History and Literature* (London: Trübner, 1879), 43–44, 82–83.

33. Thomson, *Discourse*, xvii–cxix.

34. J. Cockburn Thomson, *The Bhagavad-Gita, or The Sacred Lay: A New Edition of the Sanskrit Text, with a Vocabulary* (Hertford: Stephen Austin, 1855).

35. Émile Burnouf, *La Bhagavad-Gîtâ ou le chant du bienheureux: poeme Indien* (Paris: B. Duprat, 1861), VII.

36. Ibid., V–XI.

37. Arthur Anthony Macdonell, *A History of Sanskrit Literature* (London: W. Heinemann, 1900). See Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 51. On the bibliography of Albrecht Weber, see Asko Parpola, "Publications of the Great Indologist Fr. Albrecht Weber," *Studia Orientalia* 97 (2003).

38. Friedrich Max Müller, *India: What Can It Teach Us?* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 272, see also 109–10.

39. Mishka Sinha, "Corrigibility, Allegory, Universality: A History of Gita's Transnational Reception, 1785–1945," *Modern Intellectual History 7* (2010): 306–7.

40. Kashinath Trimbak Telang, *The Bhagavadgîtâ with the Sanatsujâtîya and the Anugîtâ*, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 7 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1882).

41. Arthur Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau, and Alcott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), 23.

42. See the list of references in Christy, *Orient*, 278–301.

43. Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981), 47; Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 21–22.

44. Ralph L. Rusk, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), III, 209 (letter by Emerson to Elizabeth Hoar, June 17, 1845). See also Christy, *Orient*, 287; Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 50; Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 22. On the problem of Emerson's mixing up Buddhism and Hinduism, see Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 56.

45. Christy, *Orient*, 23, 167–68; Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 50, 134.

46. Christy, *Orient*, 287; Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 52–53. The first U.S. American reprint was probably first published in New York in 1867 (Geo. P. Philes, New York University), while Thomson's 1855 translation seems not to have found many readers in North America.

47. Christy, *Orient*, 26. (The Sanskrit original has *samkhya* for "speculative doctrine" and *yoga* for "practical doctrine.")

48. Ibid., 26.

49. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 26–31.

50. Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 298.

51. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 27.

52. Ibid., 28.

53. Christy, *Orient*, 242; Jackson 1981, *Oriental Religions*, 70–73.

54. Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 100 (journal entry from May 1846).

55. Christy, *Orient*, 240–48; Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 99–104.

56. Jackson 1981, *Oriental Religions*, 59.

57. Samuel Johnson, *Samuel Johnson: Oriental Religions and Their Relation to Universal Religion (India, China, Persia)*, 3 vols. (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1872); James Freeman Clarke, *Ten Great Religions: An Essay in Comparative Theology* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1871); Moncure Conway, *The Sacred Anthology: A Book of Ethnic Scriptures* (New York: H. Holt, 1874). On the background, see Carl T. Jackson, "The Orient in Post-Bellum American Thought: Three Pioneer Popularizers," *American Quarterly* 22 (1970). One should take note that the main interest in the United States at this time increasingly concentrated on Buddhism (See for instance Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 141–56; Thomas A. Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000 [1992]).

58. Frank F. Ellinwood, *Oriental Religions and Christianity: A Course of Lectures Delivered on the Ely Foundation, before the Students of Union Theological Seminary, New York 1891* (London: Nisbet, 1892).

59. Clarke, *Ten Great Religions*, III, 6.

60. Johnson, *Samuel Johnson*, I, 411–40.

61. Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 111–13.

62. Jackson, "Orient in Post-Bellum American Thought," 78.

63. Conway, *Sacred Anthology*, 479–80.

64. Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth-century Banaras* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 401 note 60.

65. Ibid., 392–93.

66. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 53; Dalmia, *Nationalisation*, 394.

67. Putative parallels between the *Bhagavad Gita* and the New Testament, especially the Gospel of John, were still brought up by Indologists in later periods, as the examples of Edward Washburn Hopkins (1895 and 1901) and Paul Deussen (1906 and 1911) show (Richard Garbe, *Indien und das Christentum. Eine Untersuchung der religionsgeschichtlichen Zusammenhänge* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1914], 211 note, 246–49).

68. Friedrich Max Müller, *Natural Religion: The Gifford-Lectures Delivered Before the University of Glasgow in 1888* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1889), 99–100.

69. Garbe, *Indien*, 228–54. See also Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 51–58, 110–13.

70. "Traces in the Bhagavad-Gītā of Christian Writings and Ideas: From the Appendix to Dr. Lorinser's Bhagavad-Gītā," *Indian Antiquary* 2 (1873): 283–96.

71. G. A. Natesan, ed., *Kashinath Trimbak Telang: A Sketch of His Life and Career* (Madras: G. A. Natesan, s. a). It is noteworthy that Harichand Chintamani, who was from Bombay as well, had also published an English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the previous year. (See note 86 below.)

72. Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 188.

73. Ibid., 108.

74. Telang, *Bhagavadgîtâ*, 35.

75. John Davies, *Hindu Philosophy. The Bhagavad Gita or The Sacred Lay. A Sanskrit Philosophical Poem*, Translated, with Notes, 4th ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1907 [1882]), 207–8.

76. Matthew Lederle, *Philosophical Trends in Modern Maharashtra* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1976), 223.

77. On William Oxley and his relationship to Theosophy, see Helena Petrowna Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, 15 vols. (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1950–1991), IV, 99–101, 190–93, 398–99, XI, 302. On the problem of the alleged visits by Mahatmas, see also Alfred Trevor Barker, ed., *The Mahatma Letters To A. P. Sinnett from the Mahatmas M. & K. H.: Transcribed and Compiled by A. T. Barker, in Chronological Sequence Arranged and Edited by Vicente Hao Chin, Jr.* (Chennai: Theosophical Publishing House, 1998), 135–41, 252–53, 267–68.

78. William Oxley, *The Philosophy of Spirit, Illustrated by a New Version of the Bhagavat Gítá, an Episode of the Mahabharat, one of the Epic Poems of Ancient India* (Glasgow: Hay Nisbet, 1881).

79. *The Theosophist*, December 1881, 62–64. This article was published anonymously, but in a different replique (*The Theosophist*, March 1882, 150, footnote), the "reviewer" reveals himself with the initials "D. M."

80. *The Theosophist*, December 1881, 63.

81. *The Theosophist*, March 1882, 150–53.

82. N. C. Ramanujachary, *A Lonely Disciple: Monograph on T. Subba Row, 1856–90* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1993).

83. *The Theosophist*, May 1882, 192–96 (Subba Row); September 1882, 298–303 (Oxley); October 1882, 18–20, February 1883, 121–23 (Subba Row).

84. *The Theosophist*, March 1882, 150, footnote.

85. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, Seventh (Adyar) Edition, Collected Writings 1888, 3 vols. (Adyar, Madras: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1979 [1888]), I, xxiii.

86. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled*, New Edition, Revised and Corrected, and with Additional Material, Collected Writings 1877, 2 vols. (Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1972), II, 562–63. It should be noted that Hurrychund Chintamon (Harichand Chintamani) from the Arya Samaj in Bombay, the first contact person in India for Blavatsky and Olcott, had already penned a commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* in 1874 (*A Commentary on the Text of the Bhagavad-Gítá*, London: Trübner; he adopted the English translation by John Cockburn Thomson from 1855). It is not known, however, whether Blavatsky was aware of this edition, which appears not to have been spread widely. To my knowledge, she never refers to this edition. On Harichand Chinatamani, see Marion Meade, *Madame Blavatsky: The Woman behind the Myth* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), 181, 195–97, 254–55, and J. T. F. Jordens, *Dayānanda Sarasvatī: His Life and Ideas* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978), 203, 209–14.

87. Karl Baier, "Theosophical Orientalism and the Structures of Intercultural Transfer: Annotations on the Appropriation of the Cakras in Early Theosophy," in *Theosophical Appropriations. Esotericism, Kabbalah, and the Transformation of Traditions*, ed. Julie Chajes and Boaz Huss (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2016).

88. *The Theosophist*, June 1882, 229–31.

89. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, IV, 124.

90. Sven Eek, ed., *Dâmodar and the Pioneers of the Theosophical Movement* (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1965), 74.

91. *The Theosophist*, August 1883, 265. This plan could apparently not be implemented right away. The "Notes on the Bhagavad Gita" by T. Subba Row did not appear there before 1887.

92. Blavatsky 1950–1991: V, 68.

93. *The Theosophist*, February 1884, 122.

94. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, VI, 147.

95. Meade, *Madame Blavatsky*, 420.

96. *The Theosophist*, August 1885, 278. A second edition was published in 1887. On Dvivedi, see Thaker, *Manilal Dvivedi* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1983). At the same time, the Tamil translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by Villavarambal Kuppuswami Iyer was advertised within the Theosophical Society (*The Theosophist*, September 1885, 310). On Tukaram Tatya, see the obituary in *The Theosophist* (Olcott 1898).

97. On Arnold, see Brooks Wright, *Interpreter of Buddhism to the West: Sir Edwin Arnold* (New York: Bookman, 1957).

98. Christy, *Orient*, 248–53.

99. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, XII, 718–23. When Arnold embarked on a trip to South Asia in 1885–1886, he was received in grand style by Sumangala, one of the highest Buddhist dignitaries of Sri Lanka, upon mediation by Olcott, who was also present at the reception (Wright, *Interpreter*, 115–16).

100. Wright, *Interpreter*, 56.

101. Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 143.

102. Translations of *Gitagovinda*: English (William Jones, 1807), German (Friedrich Rückert, 1837), and Latin (Christian Lassen, 1836). Klaus Mylius, *Geschichte der Literatur im alten Indien* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1983), 192–95.

103. Mohini Chatterji briefly reported the publication of the work in *The Theosophist* (March 1885, 146).

104. Edwin Arnold, *The Song Celestial, or Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1885), 188.

105. According to the (not entirely reliable) catalogs of the British Library and the Library of Congress, ten editions were published in England until 1906, while there was no separate new edition in North America, but only a reprint within a collected works edition from 1889.

106. Edwin Arnold praised Davies's translation and probably made heavy use of it (Arnold, *Song Celestial*, 9–10; Wright, *Interpreter*, 125–26).

107. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, VI, 322.

108. Blavatsky, *Collected Writings*, VI, 323–24.

109. First in the journal *The Theosophist* in 1887, then as a stand-alone book in 1888, published with Tukaram Tatya in Bombay.

110. T. Subba Row, *Philosophy of the Bhagavad-Gita: Four Lectures Delivered at the Eleventh Annual Convention of the Theosophical Society, Held at Adyar, on December 27, 28, 29 and 30, 1886*, 2nd ed. (Madras: Theosophical Publishing House, 1994 [1912]). See also Ronald W. Neufeldt, "A Lesson in Allegory: Theosophical Interpretations of the Bhagavadgita," in *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, ed. Robert N. Minor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 13–15.

111. Mohini M. Chatterji, *The Bhagavad Gita or the Lord's Lay, with Commentary and Notes, as well as Reference to the Christian Scriptures*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1888 [1887]). See also Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 93–94; Neufeldt, "Lesson in Allegory," 15–19.

112. Dermot Killingley, "Rammohun Roy's Interpretation of the Vedanta" (PhD diss., University of London), 154, 342; Killingley, *Teape Lectures*, 86–87.

113. Killingley, "Roy's Interpretation of the Vedanta," 154–55 [from the last Bengali treatise on Sati, 1829]. See also Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 13–14.

114. Eek, *Dâmodar*, 638–39.

115. Vivienne Marie Baumfieldt, "Swami Vivekananda's Practical Vedanta" (PhD diss., University of Newcastle upon Tyne, 1991), 49–50.

116. Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Mayavati Memorial Edition (Reprint), 9 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1959–1997), I, 4.

117. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, VII, 57. (July 18, 1895, Thousand Island Park) ("The Bhagavad Gita is the best authority on Vedanta."); Ibid., III, 244–45 (1897 in Victoria Hall in Madras?) ("As I told you the other day, the only commentary, the authoritative commentary on the Vedas, has been made once and for all by Him who inspired the Vedas—by Krishna in the Gita.")

118. Ibid., I, 460.

119. Ibid., I, 469.

120. Ibid., I, 4, 470, 473–74.

121. Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta and the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 92.

122. Ibid., 95.

123. Marie Louise Burke, *Swami Vivekananda in the West: New Discoveries*, 6 vols. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1984), III, 213.

124. Neufeldt, "Lesson in Allegory."

125. M. K. Gandhi, *The Life and Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 44, CD-ROM Version, ed. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India (New Delhi: Icon Softec, 1999), 142.

126. Michael Bergunder, "Experiments with Theosophical Truth: Gandhi, Esotericism, and Global Religious History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82 (2014).

127. Gandhi, *Life and Works*, vol. 44, 286–87.

128. Gandhi, *Life and Works*, vol. 4, 271–72, 275. See also I. M. Muthanna, *Mother Besant and Mahatma Gandhi* (Vellore: Thenpulam Publishers, 1986), 82–83.

129. Gandhi, *Life and Works*, vol. 4, 271.

130. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 116–19; J. T. F. Jordens, "Gandhi and the Bhagavadgita," in *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, ed. Robert N. Minor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

131. Rai Bahadur Lala Baijnath: The Bhagavad Gita in Modern Life, Meerut: Vaishya Hitkari, 1908, 50, quoted from Robert N. Minor, ed., *Modern Indian*

Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 4 (emphasis added, M. B.).

132. World Missionary Conference, ed., *Report of Commission IV. The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions. With Supplement: Presentation and Discussion of the Report in the Conference on 18th June 1910* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, 1910), 313–14.

133. C. F. Andrews, *The Renaissance in India: Its Missionary Impact* (London: Baptist Missionary Society, 1912), 146.

134. Gandhi, *Life and Works*, vol. 37, 107 (from "Discourses on the 'Gita' "; the quoted entry is from March 27, 1926). See also Gandhi, *Life and Works*, vol. 64, 255; Friedrich Huber, *Die Bhagavadgita in der neueren indischen Auslegung und in der Begegnung mit dem christlichen Glauben* (Erlangen: Verlag der Ev.-Luth. Mission, 1991), 6.

135. Gandhi, *Life and Works*, vol. 41, 89 (Hindi preface to a Tamil translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* by S. Bharati, 1928).

136. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: George Allen, 1929), I, 519.

137. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 85–86.

138. For general information, see Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 32–46. In the conflicts between Christians and Hindus in the first half of the nineteenth century, the *Bhagavad Gita* seems not to have played any role (see Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* [Vienna: Institut für Indologie der Universität Wien, 1981]). Even a reception of the Lorinser's thesis that the *Bhagavad Gita* was influenced by Christianity is hardly visible in missionary literature (see Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 49). However, compare the interesting argument by the Indian theologian Ram Chandra Bose on the *Bhagavad Gita* (see Ram Chandra Bose, *Hindu Philosophy Popularly Explained* [New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1884], 399–420).

139. Das, "Rolle der Bhagavadgita," 102–3.

140. Ibid.

141. Hans Harder, *Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya's Srimadbhagavadgita: Translation and Analysis* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

142. Ibid., 173–75.

143. Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, "Bankimchandra and Neo-Puranism," in *Bankimchandra Chatterjee: Essays in Perspective*, ed. Bhabatosh Chatterjee (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1994).

144. From an article of the journal *Kesari* (April 8, 1905), translated from the Marathi original in "Indian Home Proceedings" (London: Indian Office Records), Public Proceeding No. 356 (May 1898). Quoted from John R. McLane, ed., *The Political Awakening in India* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970), 56. See also Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 71.

145. Lederle, *Philosophical Trends*, 246–78; Robert W. Stevenson, "Tilak and the Bhagavadgita's Doctrine of Karmayoga," in *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, ed. Robert N. Minor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

146. McLane, *Political Awakening*, 61–69; Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 72, 81–82; Minor, *Modern Indian Interpreters*, 223; Varuni Bhatia, "Sisir's Tears: Bhakti and Belonging in Colonial Bengal," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 21 (2017): 5, 13–14.

147. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 77–83; Alex Wolfers, "The Making of an Avatar: Reading Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950)," *Religions of South Asia* 11, no. 2–3 (2017); On the role of Ghose, see also the chapter by Hans Martin Krämer in this volume.

148. On the following, see Harold W. French, "Swami Vivekananda's Use of the Bhagavadgita," in *Modern Indian Interpreters of the Bhagavadgita*, ed. Robert N. Minor (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986).

149. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, I, 40 (Karma-Yoga).

150. Vivekananda, *Complete Works*, III, 242 (1897?).

151. Neufeldt, "Lesson in Allegory," 25–28.

152. Gandhi, *Life and Works*, vol. 46, 172.

153. Bergunder, "Experiments"; Michael Bergunder, " 'Religion' and 'Science' within a Global Religious History," *Aries* 16 (2016).

154. Kocku von Stuckrad, "Western Esotericism: Towards an Integrative Model of Interpretation," *Religion* 35 (2005); Kennet Granholm, "Locating the West: Problematizing the Western in Western Esotericism and Occultism," in *Occultism in a Global Perspective*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Gordan Djurdjevic (London: Acumen, 2013); Egil Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," *Correspondences* 2, no. 1 (2014); Kocku von Stuckrad, *The Scientification of Religion: An Historical Study of Discursive Change, 1800–2000* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

155. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jeffrey D. Lavoie, *The Theosophical Society: The History of a Spiritualist Movement* (Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press, 2013); Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Olav Hammer and Mikael Rothstein, eds., *Handbook of the Theosophical Current* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); see also the chapter by Wouter J. Hanegraaff in this volume.

156. Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, "The Theosophical Society, Orientalism, and the 'Mystic East': Western Esotericism and Eastern Religion in Theosophy," *Theosophical History* 13, no. 3 (2007); Isaac Lubelsky, *Celestial India: Madame Blavatsky and the Birth of Indian Nationalism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012).

157. Michael Bergunder, "What Is Religion? The Unexplained Subject Matter of Religious Studies," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 26 (2014).

158. Ibid., 275–280.

159. Ibid., 277–278.

160. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994 [1988]).

161. Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria, "Einleitung: Geteilte Geschichten—Europa in einer postkolonialen Welt," in *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus: Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Sebastian Conrad and Shalini Randeria (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2002), 17.

162. Goodrick-Clarke, *Western Esoteric Traditions*; Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*.

163. Bergunder, "What Is Religion?," 269–273.

164. Dalmia, *Nationalisation*.

165. The Hindi versions by Byas Ji (Lucknow 1880), Umadatta Tripathi (Lucknow 1888), Bhimasena Sharma (Etawah 1897), Ramsvarupa Sharma (Lahore 1897), and Laskhminarayan (Agra 1898) are in particular need of analysis. Important translations into Bengali are those by Hitlal Misra, Kedarnath Datta (= Bhaktivinoda Thakur [1838–1914]), Bhudharcandra Chattopadhyay, Krishnaprasanna Sen, and Gaurisankara Sarman Tarkavisa Bhatta, Kali Prasanna Simha, et al. Translations of the *Bhagavad Gita* into Marathi include those by Moropanta (Bombay 1864), Ramcandra Sastri Modak (Bombay 1851), Vamana (Bombay 1861, Ratnagiri 1862), and Muktesvara (Bombay 1861), and a version in Gujarati is available by Kavi Dhandas (Ahmedabad, Bombay 1850). See Adolf Holtzmann, *Die neunzehn Bücher des Mahabharata* (Kiel: Haeseler, 1893), 129–30; Harder, *Srimadbhagavadgita*, 161; Ulrike Stark, *An Empire of Books: The Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007). (My thanks go to Ulrike Stark [Chicago] for important bibliographical suggestions.) See also Callewaert & Hemraj, *Bhagavadgītānuvāda*, 111–233.

166. Angelika Malinar, *Rajavidya: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht: Studien zur Bhagavadgita* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 17. In this phase, there is a discussion about whether the *Bhagavad Gita* may originally have been a purely theist text, which was only later reworked into a Brahmanistic-"pantheistic" one (e.g., Adolf Holtzmann, 1891; Richard Garbe 1905), whether it may have been the other way around (Edward Washburn, 1895; Paul Deussen/Otto Strauss, 1906), or whether both may have already been fused originally (Hermann Jacobi 1918).

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