THE GITA AND WAR

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IN THE COURSE of a year spent studying the Bhagavad-Gita, I have talked about its philosophy to a considerable number of people. Whatever else they had to say, I found them, al- most without exception, agreed on one point: that the Gita "sanctions" War. Some were glad of this. Others were sorry. But all, I think, were puzzled. Educated in the Christian tra- dition, they were accustomed to a gospel which is uncompro- misingly pacifist. However deeply they might be convinced of the justice or necessity of some particular conflict, they didn't like what they regarded as a general approval of the use of military force. They themselves, mere human beings struggling in the everyday world, might be driven to fight and kill one another, but they wanted Krishna, like Jesus, to stand for a higher ideal. That was their reaction.

I do not wish to sound superior or conceited when I say that I myself do not put this interpretation upon the teach- ing of the Gita. I will try to explain why I do not: not merely for the information of the few people who may be interested, but because I want to straighten out my own ideas. The ques- tion is of the greatest importance to me, because I am myself a pacifist, and because I believe the Gita to be one of the major religious documents of the world. If its teachings did not seem to me to agree with those of the other gospels and scriptures, then my own system of values would be thrown into confusion, and I should feel completely bewildered.

Briefly, the circumstances of the Gita dialogue can be de- scribed as follows:

Two factions, closely bound to each other by ties of blood and friendship, are about to engage in a civil war. Arjuna, one of the leading generals, has Krishna for his charioteer. Krishna has told Arjuna that he will not fight, but has promised to accompany him throughout the battle. Just before it begins, Arjuna asks Krishna to drive his chariot into the no- man's-land between the two armies. Krishna does so. Arjuna looks at the opposing army, and realizes that he is about to kill those whom he loves better than life itself. In his despair, he exclaims: "I will not fight!"

Krishna's reply to Arjuna occupies the rest of the book. It deals not only with Arjuna's immediate personal problem, but with the whole nature of action, the meaning of life, and the aims for which man must struggle, here on earth. At the end of their conversation, Arjuna has changed his mind. He is ready to fight. And the battle begins.

Before trying to analyze Krishna's arguments, I must men- tion two points which certain commentators have raised with regard to the battle itself. In the first place, it is sometimes said that the battle of Kurukshetra cannot possibly be com- pared to a battle in modern war. It was, in fact, a kind of tournament, governed by all the complex and humane rules of ancient Indian

chivalry. A soldier mounted upon an ele- phant may not attack a foot-soldier. No man may be struck or shot at while running away. No one may be killed who has lost his weapons. And we are told, in the Mahabharata, that the opposing armies stopped fighting every evening, and even visited each other and fraternized during the night. In the second place, it is sometimes said that the whole battle is to be regarded allegorically. Arjuna is the individual man, Krishna is the indwelling Godhead, the enemies are man's evil tendencies, and so forth.

All this is interesting, of course. But it has nothing to do with our problem. If Krishna is only talking figuratively, or only about War under certain conditions, then the Gita is just a fable, an archaic curiosity: we need not discuss it. Per- sonally, I prefer to forget Kurukshetra and ancient India altogether, and imagine a similar dialogue taking place to- day, in a plane over the European front or the Japanese positions on a Pacific island. If the Gita has any validity, its reference is equally to this war and this very year.

To understand the Gita, we must first consider what it is and what it is not. We must consider its setting. When Jesus spoke the words which are recorded as the Sermon on the Mount, he was talking to a group of followers in the most peaceful atmosphere imaginable, far from the great city, far from all strife and confusion. He was expressing the highest truth of which man's mind is capable, in general terms, with- out reference to any immediate crisis or problem. And even in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he told Peter to sheathe his sword, he was addressing a dedicated disciple, a monk, a man who was being trained to preach and live the spiritual life. For Peter, there could be no compromise. He must learn to accept the highest and strictest ideal, the ideal of non- violence.

The Gita is very different. Krishna and Arjuna are on a battlefield. Arjuna is a warrior by birth and profession. He corresponds to the mediaeval knight of Christendom. His problem is considered in relation to the circumstances of the moment. The Gita fits into the narrative of an epic poem, the Mahabharata, and must be read in the light of previous happenings. It is not simply a sermon, a philosophical treatise.

This, I believe, is the cause of much misunderstanding. We all tend to remember most clearly the part of a book which we read first. The opening chapters of the Gita deal with a particular case: they are concerned with a soldier and the duties of a soldier. Later on, Krishna passes from the par- ticular to the general, and utters those same truths which were afterwards taught by Jesus and the Buddha. But the first impression is apt to remain. The superficial reader closes the book and remembers only Arjuna and the battle. He says to himself: "Krishna tells us that we must fight."

Krishna, it must be repeated, is not talking to a monk. We ought to be glad of this, not sorry. The vast majority of man- kind are not monks, but householders. What a great teacher has to say to a married man, a soldier, is of immediate inter- est to the world at large.

We must realize, also, that Krishna, in teaching Arjuna, employs two sets of values, the relative and the absolute. This duality is inherent in the circumstances of the story. For Krishna

is both Arjuna's personal friend and his illumined teacher. He is a fellow-mortal and he is God. As God, he expresses the absolute truth, the highest ideal. As a fellow- man, he presents the relative values which apply to Arjuna's particular condition. Considered superficially, this duality of attitude may seem to produce contradictions. Carefully studied, it will be seen to compose into a complete and satis- fying philosophical picture. For life itself is double-faced; and any attempt at simplification will only bring us to ulti- mate confusion.

One circumstance renders Arjuna's compassion suspect: its occasion. Arjuna himself is dimly aware of this. "Is this real compassion I feel," he asks Krishna, "or only a delusion? My mind gropes about in darkness. I cannot see where my duty lies." Up to this moment, Arjuna has not hesitated. He has accepted the necessity of the war. He has assumed responsi- bility for its leadership. Then, suddenly, he sees the other side of the picture: the bloodshed, the horror. And he recoils.

In the years that followed the 1914-18 war, much pacifist propaganda was based on gruesome narratives of battle and books of photographs showing mutilated corpses. "This is what War is like," said the authors. "Isn't it horrible? Do you want to go through this again?" And nearly everybody agreed that they didn't. But this sort of revulsion is always short- lived, because it appeals, fundamentally, to our cowardice. When a new war-situation develops, most of us react in the opposite direction, and rightly. Men can never, ultimately be deterred from any course of action by cowardice alone. Otherwise we should never have evolved from the jellyfish. We have to go forward, and the path is always dangerous, in one way or another. Arjuna has to go forward. Krishna tells him so. Arjuna must accept the sum of his actions up to that moment-and the sum is this battle.

Krishna's reply begins by dealing with Arjuna's feelings of revulsion, on general grounds. Arjuna shrinks from the act itself, the act of killing. Krishna reminds him that, in the absolute sense, there is no such act. The Atman, the in- dwelling Godhead, is the only reality. This body is simply an appearance: its existence, its destruction, are alike illu- sory. In the absolute sense, all talk of killing or being killed is meaningless.

"Some say this Atman
Is slain, and others
Call It the slayer:
They know nothing.
How can It slay
Or who shall slay It?"

Therefore, if Arjuna is objecting to the act of killing, as such, he need have no scruples. For he only seems to kill.

Then, with one of those changes of viewpoint which may bewilder and shock a reader who opens the Gita for the first time and takes only its surface meaning, Krishna begins to talk to Arjuna as man to man:

"Even if you consider this from the standpoint of your own caste-duty, you ought not to hesitate; for, to a warrior, there is nothing nobler than a righteous war....

"But if you refuse to fight this righteous war, you will be turning aside from your duty. You will be a sinner, and dis- graced. People will speak ill of you throughout the ages...."

For Arjuna, a member of the warrior caste, the fighting of this battle, in defense of his family and property, is undoubt- edly "righteous." It is his duty. In the Gita, we find that the caste-system is presented as a kind of natural order. Men are divided into four groups, according to their capacities and characteristics. Each group has its peculiar duties, ethics and responsibilities; and these must be accepted. It is the way of spiritual growth. A man must go forward from where he stands. He cannot jump to the Absolute: he must evolve to- ward it. He cannot arbitrarily assume the duties which be- long to another group. If he does so, his whole system of values will be upset, his conscience can no longer direct him, and he will stray into pride or doubt or mental confusion. "Prefer to die doing your own duty," Krishna teaches: "The duty of another will bring you into great spiritual danger."

Socially, the caste-system is graded. The merchants are above the servants. The leaders and warriors are above the merchants. The priestly Brahmins are highest of all. But, spiritually, there are no such distinctions. Krishna is very clear on this point. Everyone, he says, can attain the highest sainthood by following the prescribed path of his own caste- duty. In Southern India, we are told of seven saints who belonged to the lowest caste of all, the untouchables. And the same principle, of course, holds true if we apply the caste- classification to the social pattern of Europe. Men have grown into spiritual giants while carrying out their duties as merchants, peasants, doctors, popes, scullions or kings.

In the purely physical sphere of action, Arjuna is, indeed, no longer a free agent. The act of war is upon him: it has evolved out of tis previous actions. He cannot choose. "If, in your vanity, you say 'I will not fight,' your resolve is vain. Your own nature will drive you to the act." At any given moment in time, we are what we are; and our actions express that condition. We cannot run away from our actions, be- cause we carry the condition with us. On the highest moun- tain, in the darkest cave, we must turn at last and accept the consequences of being ourselves. Only through this accept- ance can we begin to evolve further. We may select the battleground. We cannot avoid the battle.

Arjuna is bound by the law of Karma, the law of cause and effect which has brought him face to face with this particular situation. Now he is compelled to act, but he is still free to make his choice between two different ways of performing the action. Krishna introduces this great theme-the prin- cipal theme of the Gita-in the passage which immediately follows. He proceeds to define the nature of action.

In general, mankind almost always acts with attachment: that is to say, with fear and desire. Desire for a certain result, and fear that this result will not be obtained. Attached ac- tion binds us to the world of appearance, to the continual doing of more action. We live in a delirium of

doing, and the consequences of our past actions condition the actions we are about to perform. According to the Gita, it is attached action which compels us to revisit this world, to be reborn again and again.

But there is another way of performing action; and this is without fear and without desire. The Christians call it "holy indifference," and the Hindus "non-attachment." Both names are slightly misleading. They suggest coldness and lack of enthusiasm. That is why people often confuse non-attach- ment with fatalism, when, actually, they are opposites. The fatalist simply does not care. He will get what is coming to him. Why make any effort? Fatalists are apt to get drunk or spend most of the day in bed. The doer of non-attached ac- tion, on the other hand, is the most conscientious of men. He does not run away from life: he accepts it, much more completely than those whose pleasures are tinged with anx- iety and whose defeats are embittered by regret. No matter whether he is sweeping out a room, or calculating the posi- tion of a star, or taking the chair at a meeting, he does it to the utmost limit of his powers-so carefully, so devotedly, so wholeheartedly, that the dividing-line between the chosen activity and the necessary chore disappears altogether. All work becomes equally and vitally important. It is only to- ward the results of work that he remains indifferent. Perhaps a dog runs across the clean floor with muddy paws. Perhaps his researches are recognized by Harvard University. Per- haps somebody throws a rotten egg at him. It doesn't matter. He goes right on with his job. We find something of this spirit in the lives of all truly great men and women, includ- ing the professed atheists and agnostics. Madame Curie re- fuses the Legion of Honor with the matter-of fact words: "I don't see the utility of it." Lenin, in 1921, with the White armies converging on Moscow, his regime apparently doomed, his work brought to nothing, calmly sits down and writes the order: "The peasants in the localities of Gorki and Ziianova are immediately to be supplied with electric light." This, in its highest development, is the attitude of the saint. When action is done in this spirit, Krishna teaches, it will lead us to true wisdom, to the knowledge of what is behind action, behind all life: the ultimate Reality. And, with the growth of this knowledge, the need for further action will gradually fall away from us. The law of Karma will cease to operate. We shall realize our true nature, which is God.

It follows, therefore, that every action, under certain cir- cumstances and for certain people, may be a stepping-stone to spiritual growth-if it is done in the spirit of non-attach- ment. All good and all evil is relative to the individual point of growth. For each individual, certain acts are absolutely wrong. Indeed, there may well be acts which are absolutely wrong for every individual alive on earth today. But, in the highest sense, there can be neither good nor evil.

"The Lord is everywhere
And always perfect:
What does He care for man's sin
Or the righteousness of man?"

Because Krishna is speaking as God Himself, he can take this attitude, and advise Arjuna to

fight. Because Arjuna has reached this particular stage in his development, he can kill his enemies and actually be doing his duty.

There is no question, here, of doing evil that good may come. The Gita does not countenance such opportunism. Arjuna is to do the best he knows, in order to pass beyond that best to better. Later, his fighting at Kurukshetra may seem evil to him, and it will be evil-then. Doing the evil you know to be evil will never bring good. It will lead only to more evil, more attachment, more ignorance.

How, in this complex world, are we to know what our own duty is? There is no greater problem. Yet, somehow, we have to find our position and make our stand. For the majority, much self-analysis, much trial and error, would seem to be the only way. But, having found that position, we must ac- cept it in its entirety. The soldier has many responsibilities and duties besides fighting. The pacifist has much else to do besides refusing to fight. These duties and responsibilities ex- tend equally over wartime and peace: they cover our whole life. But, in every case, the final ideal is the same.

The Gita neither sanctions War nor condemns it. Regard- ing no action as of absolute value, either for good or evil, it cannot possibly do either. Its teaching should warn us not to dare to judge others. How can we prescribe our neighbor's duty when it is so hard for us to know our own? The pacifist must respect Arjuna. Arjuna must respect the pacifist. Both are going toward the same goal. There is an underlying solidarity between them which can be expressed, if each one follows, without compromise, the path upon which he finds himself. For we can only help others to do their duty by doing what we ourselves believe to be right. It is the one supremely social act.

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