

Alexis Tisdale

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Dr. Smith

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Interpretations Through Text

Writing connects people across the world, offering up a method to share and defend ideologies. Books were the start of an intertwined world: a prequel to the Internet. The printing press allowed masses of scholars, philosophers, and authors to share ideas with the rest of the world, giving people a pool of knowledge to choose from. With the availability of information, people were eventually forced to choose and defend what they believe in. Diverse beliefs interpreted by the author and translated by the reader give base for both argument and agreement. The primary focus of literature is to either test or reinforce your beliefs, not to grasp a wide variety of experience, especially in regards to religious texts.

The Bahgavad Gita is a second-century religious script detailing Hindu views and religious expectations. In the 700-verse script, charioteer Krishna explains to warrior Arjuna about the two paths to salvation: Karma and Jnana. Karma is the path through action, and Jnana is the path through inaction. According to the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres, Karma Yoga “purifies the heart by teaching you to act selflessly, without thought of gain or reward” (International Sivananda). It encourages the suppression of ego as all of the actions one does is offered up to God. It emphasizes the ideology that the person is the instrument in

God's plan, not the activist. Jnana Yoga, on the other hand, is the Yoga of Inaction and the Yoga of Mind. Considered to be the most difficult of the Yogas, Jnana requires that the person be mentally united with God by "directly by breaking the glass [and] dissolving the veils of ignorance" (International Sivananda). Jnana uses a philosophy called Vedanta, which "is said to be the philosophy which leads to the end of knowledge and too from the ending part of the Vedas [another important Hindu text]" (International Sivananda). Krishna himself prefers Karma Yoga and encourages Arjuna to follow that path. Krishna tells Arjuna, "One does not reach/ the state/ beyond action/ by abstaining/ from actions;/ nor does one/ reach fulfillment/ only by renunciation" (Bahgavad Gita 37). So for the reader taking from the Bahgavad Gita, the understanding that action is always preferred over inaction may or may not come across well depending on the reader's background.

Especially in regards to religion, people take strongly to one set of beliefs over another and generally have a closed off mind when it comes to accepting different religious beliefs. Thus in regards to ancient scriptures, those apart from one's own religious beliefs tend to either reinforce or test the reader's mindset. In Christian culture, action is strongly encouraged in order to achieve salvation. The Douay-Rheims Bible writes, "For I know that this shall fall out to me unto salvation, through your prayer, and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ..." (Philippians 1:19). In Taoist culture, however, inaction plays a far stronger role in salvation. *Tao Te Ching* writes, "When there is this abstinence from/ action, good order is universal" (*Tao Te Ching* 3). Depending on the reader's background and dedication to his religious

beliefs, The Bahgavad Gita may either strengthen his religious resolve or make him question it.

Christopher Ricks writes “one of the ways in which art is invaluable is by giving us sympathetic access to systems of belief that are not our own...” (*Dylan’s Visions of Sin* [2004], p. 377). Sympathetic access is perhaps the most apparent in religious scripture, as it is a topic of extreme passion. Readers have the ability to see the religious through the author’s eyes, giving them a true insight into being personally involved. Playing an important role in literature, sympathetic access allows the reader’s beliefs to either be tested or reinforced through honest means, giving the reader an opportunity to be empathetic towards the author. Biased works sometimes prove to be the best straightway into a particular religion because they allow the author to inject culture and passion into his writing. Thus the writing becomes more related to the religion and the reader can make accurate judgments. Sympathetic access is present in *The Bahgavad Gita*, *The Bible*, and *Tao Te Ching* as they are ancient scriptures dedicated to their respective religions. Readers can get an insight into a different religion and gain new knowledge on the outlook of life.

Additionally, the sympathetic access present in scriptures detailing opposing religious views may further develop the reader’s sense of humanity and the values he holds. Being exposed to opposing religious views, particularly ones written by a firm believer in that religion, allows the reader to appeal to a different sense of humanity. By having exposure to cultures other than one’s own, the basis of religious belief can either be strengthened with the support from other religions or it can be rethought, as new ideas are brought forward. Christian, Hindu and Taoist

cultures believe that desire is ultimately an evil, thus a Taoist or Christian reading *The Bahgadvad Gita* would have strengthened resolve regarding his belief on desire. In contrast, however, a Christian or Hindu would find mental conflict when reading *Tao Te Ching*, as it details how Taoists do not believe in a higher divinity, like Jesus or Vishnu.

As a Christian reading *The Bahgavad Gita*, it had a profound reinforcement on my beliefs, despite being from a different culture. One passage, in particular, stuck out as being very similar to Christian culture. The scripture writes “The true ones who eat/ the leftovers/ of the sacrifices/ are free from all evils;/ but the evil ones/ eat their own impurity,/ as they cook/ only for themselves” (Bahgavad Gita 39). Krishna is explaining to Arjuna how one achieves salvation. Only through good will and humility does one hope to achieve God’s grace. It is the people who are too obsessed with the material world and give into their impurities who do not achieve salvation. This is very similar to the Christian ideology of salvation, particularly regarding Jesus. Jesus sacrificed himself to die for humanities’ impurities, so those who accept him or “eat the leftovers” will be free from sin. Likewise, those who reject Jesus and are only concerned with themselves will not gain entrance to heaven. Strangely enough, being a Christian reading a Hindu scripture did not have as profound an effect as I thought it would have. I found many similarities regarding moral and ethical standards; it was almost like reading a story from The Bible. The similarities between the religions lead me to believe that it is entirely possible that the religious scriptures stemmed from the same higher power and over time branched off into different names and forms.

Religion is one of the most passionate topics that people hold closest to them, therefore making it a topic for debate. Being exposed to different cultures, however, can strengthen your beliefs or round them out, giving you the best possible knowledge to back your religious stance. *The Bhagavad Gita* allowed me to further strengthen my moral and ethical standings by having support from another religion, additionally leading me to believe that the two were once connected at some point. Religion is not an easy topic to discuss, but with the proper knowledge and forethought, one can gain immeasurable confidence and support.

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