

11-18

THE GĪTĀ EXEGESIS OF MAHATMA GANDHI

His Method and its Fruit

AAR 11-23-85

by Norvin Hein

Mahatma Gandhi's authority is not often invoked in controversies on translation of the Gītā, nor is he often cited in serious academic works like Robert Miner's **Bhagavadgītā An Exegetical Commentary**. Gandhi himself claimed no status among academics: "...my knowledge of Sanskrit is limited," he confessed, "my knowledge of Gujarati too is in no way scholarly.<sup>1</sup> This self-assessment was not based entirely on his humility. His formal training in Sanskrit began and ended in what we would call his junior high school years.<sup>2</sup> His education as an orientalist was less than that of most persons sitting in this room. Why introduce his name into this panel?

The topic today is the influence of the Bhagavadgītā upon modern life. In a thousand years no one has done more than Mahatma Gandhi to turn the Bhagavadgītā into a living force.

At the time of Gandhi's birth the Bhagavadgītā had no major place in the religious life of India. Among the Sanskrit-knowing elite some studied and esteemed it, but it remained outside the competence and

knowledge of the masses. The early nineteenth-century movements of reform gave it no place. It was British enthusiasm, not Indian, that recruited Gandhi into the study of the Gītā. A circle in London drew him into their reading of Sir Edwin Arnold's translation, **The Song Celestial**. Young Gandhi's interest blazed, and he joined a growing circle who perceived in the Gītā a guide for their life and times. His love of the Bhagavadgītā was lifelong. We find him quoting it on the day before his death.<sup>3</sup> Until his rise to national leadership in 1919 it was the book of his personal devotion. Thereafter, he never ceased to recommend it to all Hindus as their communal treasure. In the early years of his advocacy he complained that he found few hearers who really knew the Gītā: he mentions in 1927 an audience of more than a hundred Hindu boys of whom no more than eight had ever opened the book and none could claim to know its contents.<sup>4</sup> By the time of Gandhi's death the world understood the Bhagavadgītā to be a scripture of foremost rank, comparable to the Bible and Koran. The fame of Gandhi brought fame to the Bhagavadgītā because it was known to be his scripture. The impact of the Bhagavadgītā upon modern India and on the modern world is substantially Gandhi's work. Furthermore, Gandhi gave that impact a decisive pacifistic turn that was entirely his own. He deserves

the consideration of such a panel as this.

Despite Gandhi's constant references to the Gītā, it is not easy, bibliographically, to find the record of his interaction with its text. Gandhi did not consider himself to be a professional religious leader and did not consider it his duty to compose systematic works. A political activist, always on the move, he expressed his thoughts on the Gītā in speeches and letters and interviews that were reported in ragtag publications--most often his own reformist journals, **Young India** and **The Harijan**. There Gandhi left them. He left it to his disciples, if they liked, to gather snippets into compendia on various topics. There are two general anthologies of Gandhiana that contain much on the Bhagavadgītā, and at least three specialized collections.<sup>5</sup> These publications give us Gandhi's general pronouncements on the Gītā but little impression of the man as close interpreter of the text. Were it not for the wry good fortune of Gandhi's various jail sentences, this paper could not have been written. While enjoying the enforced leisure of various jails, Gandhi was able at last to compare translations, apply his schoolboy Sanskrit, give the Gītā continuing scrutiny, and jot down the results of his longer reflections. Sometimes, someone picked up his notes and published them. When in 1930 Gandhi was

jailed near Poona, for instance, week by week he studied the Gītā intensely in each of its eighteen cantos. In a long weekly letter to his disciples at the Sabarmati ashram he wrote up, in condensed paraphrase, his carefully-considered understanding of every canto. At the ashram or elsewhere the letters lay in obscurity for many years. Finally Valji Govindji Desai translated them from Gujarati into English and they were published in 1962 in V. B. Kher's collection, **In Search of the Supreme**.<sup>6</sup> This summary is Gandhi's most objective work of Gītā interpretation, displaying a trained lawyer's ability to resist tendentiousness in stating the content of a document. Its forty-five pages sometimes provide the only surviving clue to Gandhi's reaction to an important passage of the Bhagavadgītā. Our most important source, however, is another of his prison products, edited by Mahadev Desai and published by Navajivan in 1946 under the title **The Gospel of Selfless Action or the Gita according to Gandhi**. This is Desai's English version of Gandhi's complete Gujarati translation of the Gītā with his personal commentaries on eighty-one of its verses. Gandhi himself testifies in a short foreword--written, typically, in haste on a train--that Desai's understanding of his Gujarati is accurate.

Anyone who peruses Gandhi's translations, aside

from commentary, has an immediate impression of being in the presence of a very literate man of modern education. Clearly he is familiar with modern scholarly translations and he has no disposition to flout them. In time, however, one comes upon a few of his renderings that are shockingly aberrant to the modern mind. And in his commentaries, where he is freer to express personal views, the meanings that he offers are exceedingly idiosyncratic. The root of ideosyncrasy in these cases proves not to be ignorance or carelessness but his stubborn application of a principle of interpretation. His method is the whole issue. To examine and evaluate Gandhi's principle of scripture-interpretation is the purpose of this paper. Gandhi's translation as it proceeds in Desai's book will provide the thread that we shall follow.

In the first page of the first canto, of course, Sanjaya begins his account of the battle of the sons of Dhṛta-rāṣṭra. In his commentary Gandhi immediately joins battle himself. His adversaries are the militaristic interpreters of the Gītā. Gandhi warns against any understanding that the Gītā is a model for religious holy war. "The human body," he says, "is the battlefield, where the eternal duel between right and wrong goes on. ...The Kauravas represent the forces of Evil, the Pandavas the forces of Good. Who is there

that has not experienced the daily conflict within himself between the forces of Evil and the forces of Good?"

For the defending of this controversial pacifistic understanding, his commentary was too slender a medium. His social action journals, alone, provided the space needed for that lifelong apologetic. Hundreds of editorial pages elucidate his pacifist doctrine but they need not concern us. Our focus is not on his social strategy but his exegetical strategy; and Gandhi's arguments for his non-violence never range far from the question of correct method in the interpretation of the Bhagavadgītā.

To Gandhi's fervent claim that the Gītā teaches pacifism scholars have responded with silence--as if responding to the pronouncements of a beloved but overaged grandfather. The notion that a favorite scripture of the warrior class taught pacifism, allegorically or otherwise, does not seem likely to us. And our experience with allegorical interpreters in the western tradition of scriptural scholarship has not been happy. We decline combat.

It is unjust, however, to lump Gandhi with our own whimsical allegorists. His methods are much more sophisticated. He is a practitioner of an ancient Hindu technique of scripture-interpretation that is far

from naive. His work on the Bhagavadgītā will give us an opportunity to study what the method may offer to the modern world.

In reading extensively in Gandhi's discussions of scriptures one soon notices his frequent resort to the conception that there are **keys** that open the way to understanding of their meaning. Sometimes he calls them **touchstones**. There are large keys and small keys, to unlock the gate of broader or narrower fields of learning. His talk of keys is sometimes tentative. On several occasions he spoke of the first verse of the Īśa Upaniṣad as a key to the whole of Hinduism. If this verse remained, he said, Hinduism would survive even though all its scriptures were burned. The rest of the Upaniṣad is only an explanation of that first verse and even the Gītā is no more than a commentary upon it. It is a touchstone for telling what is genuine and what is spurious in the whole of Hinduism.<sup>7</sup> Again, when obliged to discuss The Laws of Manu, Gandhi found in 2:1 (in his own translation!) a key to the entire work and declared, "Whatever is contrary to this touchstone must be rejected as an interpolation."<sup>8</sup>

In Gandhi's analysis of the Bhagavadgītā, the key is the body of verses between 2:54 and 3:43. These sixty-four verses are the succinct proclamation of the Gītā's gospel of desireless performance of duty.

The verses in Canto Two set forth the ideal in pictorial terms, describing the characteristics of the person of perfect moral serenity. Canto Three teaches how one may live that ideally dispassionate life.<sup>9</sup> In his **Autobiography** Gandhi describes the powerful effect upon him, at the age of nineteen, of his first reading of these striking verses that were still ringing in his ears after the passage of forty years.<sup>10</sup> Their importance for him never ceased: in the last months of his life we find him quoting the whole **sthitaprajñā** passage in the Arnold translation in which he first knew it.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi takes this passage as the expression of the entire scripture. He gives it a vital function. "These verses are the key to the interpretation of the Gita," he says; "I would ever advise rejection of the verses that may seem to be in conflict with them. But a humble student need reject nothing. He will simply say, "It is the limitation of my own intellect that I cannot resolve this inconsistency. I might be able to do so in the time to come.'"<sup>12</sup>

Some listeners will remember that they have seen this approach to Hindu scriptures before. It is a very old Hindu way to unify the teaching of an apparently heterogeneous text. The method identifies a central passage as the expression of the fundamental message of

a document, and treats all other material in the text as instrumental to its purpose and subject to its authority. The tactic came into selfconscious use in the manuals of the Karma Mīmāṃsists. Their professional responsibility was the drawing of clear instructions for the performance of the Vedic sacrifices from the very heterogeneous teachings of the **samhitās** and Brahmanas. They solved the problem of incoherence through the analysis that the heart of any Vedic text is always found in a short nuclear passage, a command to action, called the **vidhi**. In the **Vidhi** the entire purpose of the text is centered. All else in the book, of whatever form, is **arthavāda**--explanatory or supportive material, subserving the act commanded in the **vidhi** by explaining, for example, why or by whom the rite should be done, by mentioning its rewards, or by praising past performers. These words of primary command have absolute authority. The **arthavāda** passages have a derivative authority only, through their participation in a scriptural guidance that is a syntactic whole.<sup>13</sup> Sound interpretation of an **arthavāda** passage must always construe its meaning in a way that does not contradict the **vidhi** or injunction that it serves.

The method developed by the Mimamsists in Veda-interpretation was applied in time to the

interpretation of later scriptures. When the Upaniṣads had to be dealt with, the Mimamsists, true to their colors, perceived them as providing philosophical training for sacrificers to enable them to carry out the performances with full self-understanding.<sup>14</sup> But to the Upaniṣad users of the Vedāntic tradition the organizing commands of scripture became something other than commands to sacrifice: the great central commands that all scripture subserves became injunctions to understand and appropriate great statements of metaphysical truth such as **tat tvam asi** (C. U. 6.8.74) or **aham brahmāsmi** (B. U. 1.4.10). In the Vedānta tradition such a formula, summing up the final truth of scripture, was given the appropriate name **mahāvakyam** or Great Utterance.<sup>15</sup>

The selecting and using of Great Utterances continues to the present day. In a modern Vedāntic interpretation of Christianity, Swami Akhilananda in his **Hindu View of Christ** finds the **Mahāvakyam** of Christianity in the Johannine "I and my Father are one."<sup>16</sup> And Gandhi perpetuates the method. A moralist rather than a mystic or ritualist, Gandhi establishes a new kind of center: the Bhagavadgītā's succinct instruction for ethical action. How Gandhi may have absorbed this approach, it is difficult to say. He was not fond of ritual or of ritual literature. No

publication records any effort of his to read any work of Karma Mīmāṃsā. As the man who invariably went to sleep when he tried to read Leviticus and Deuteronomy<sup>17</sup> he is not likely, if he tried Kumarila, to have read more than one page. Apparently the method came down to him in living tradition. The fact that Gandhi's method with the Gītā is not a personal contrivance but a cultural heritage makes it worthy of exceptional attention.

Let us see how Gandhi used his touchstone, and with what effect. We have already noticed how, in his commentary on the first verses of the Bhagavadgītā, he asserts at once his total pacifism. The average reader concludes that Gandhi's assertions are fideistic and made without any awareness of historical probabilities. The implausibility of his pose has placed him with amiable dogmatists in the eyes of many, rather than with scholars. In this matter of his Gītā-based pacifism, however, a study of Gandhi's argument will show that he was not ignorant of scholarly understanding of the origin of the Bhagavadgītā, nor disdainful of it. He freely admits that the Bhagavadgītā was not written to condemn war, that none before him had understood it to be a treatise on non-violence, and that the whole of pre-modern Hinduism was never committed to pacifism. Even Arjuna's scruple

against fighting, in the opening scene of the Gītā, does not express a pacifist's aversion to killing as such; it is only his own kith and kin that Arjuna does not want to kill.<sup>18</sup> At the time of the writing of the Bhagavadgītā warfare was not regarded as immoral.<sup>19</sup>

Gandhi also admits that the central teaching or **Mahāvākya** of the Bhagavadgītā is not nonviolence. It is desirelessness or **anaśakti**--non-attachment to the objects of desire. That principle has primacy even over **ahimsa**.<sup>20</sup> Gandhi admits that the author of the Gītā himself, does not understand that non-violence is implied by his basic principle of dispassionate action. But poetry transcends the poet. Poets do not necessarily work out all the consequences of their ideas, nor express them fully. But the possible meanings of scripture are infinite, and they should evolve and expand. The great teaching of the Gītā is the dispassionate performance of one's duty, and on the basis of that principle, one should recognize that acts that cannot be done dispassionately should not be done at all.<sup>21</sup> Violence has anger and hatred as its source. After one has killed one's passions, how can one kill one's brother? The Bhagavadgītā that teaches cessation of hatred must be understood to teach the cessation of killing, too. Even if the author of the Gītā drew no such inference, we should not abide by the

limits of his insight. Logically the central teaching of the Bhagavadgītā entails pacifism. Even though the interpretation is new it is natural, and the making of such innovations is a time-honored procedure. The author of the Bhagavadgītā himself altered the meaning of the word **sannyāsa**, and he deleted from the meaning of the word **yajna** or sacrifice all thought of the offering of animals. Gandhi declares that he acts traditionally, then, in saying that the the ideal of the stable-minded saint expressed in the second chapter of the Gītā demands the cessation of killing altogether. The deeper one dives into the Bhagavadgītā the richer are the meanings that one gets, and one should extract from it any meaning that reinforces in one's life the effectiveness of the Gītā's central teaching.

By now it is clear, I think, that Gandhi's Gītā-based pacifism, at least, is not the cranky dogma of a mind totally devoid of historical sense. It rests upon orderly reasoning about the moral implications of a great central teaching of the Bhagavadgītā. Gandhi has enriched the traditional exegetical method with western evolutionary concepts that encourage response to new reasonings and sensitivities that arise with the passage of time. Gandhi's exegetical work, here, is as sound as the methods of those Christians who finally

declared, after nineteen hundred years, that slavery is not a Christian institution. Even in its ancient form the principle of the *mahāvākya*m allowed Hindus to find sanction for new outlooks in overlooked scriptural themes that tradition had seen as marginal. Especially with Gandhi's evolutionary amplifications, it opens up avenues of religious freedom for Hindus caught up in the processes of change that we call modernization.

In choosing the *Gītā* rather than other scriptures for public promotion, Gandhi brought out of limbo a religious resource of utmost potential usefulness for a people beginning to seize responsibility for their own civic life. In making a moral passage the very touchstone of the *Gītā* he corrected an old tendency to understand the work as only another example of salvation-seeking through the emotional methods of medieval *bhakti* religion. The device of the Great Utterance made the *Gītā* in effect even more monolithic than it is in its moral emphasis. In stressing the ethical, and in carrying a Hindu generation with him in his intense ethico-religious concern, Gandhi turned Indian religion decisively away from the unprofitable concerns of India's age-old fertility religion as well. Religion has always turned around a people's most dreadful insecurities. For long the precariousness of human control of natural forces

was the worry that was dominant in religion. Religion operated therefore as a quasi-science. In the modern age the most dreadful threats to human well-being are man-made. Modern religion turns to its appropriate modern work: man's control of himself and of his own destructive power. Longer than elsewhere, fertility religion and magical practices continued in India to dominate the religious scene. The emphatic, exclusive, one-sided moralism of Gandhi's powerful religious faith was an extreme but long-due development in Indian religion. With it, the Zoroastrian revolution began to sweep India at last. It was a Great Utterance in every sense that Gandhi proclaimed, and it had much to do with the modernization of the function of religion in India.

An evaluation of the effects of Gandhi's Gītā-interpretation upon modern life cannot omit its influence upon relations between peoples. I cannot think of any international struggle, save India's fight for independence, in which the lifeblood of millions hung upon the turn of an exegetical debate. The amicable termination in this century of foreign rule in India is one of the great success-stories in the history of human spirituality, a victory not only for India but for civilization. The settlement without slaughter was not the product of literal interpretation

of the Bhagavadgītā. On its face the Gītā legitimizes war, and in fact powerful movements in Gandhi's time used this scripture effectively and plausibly to support a policy of revolutionary violence. Bāl Gangādhār Tilak, fiery brahman of Maharashtra, cited the Bhagavadgītā in justification of Hindu assassinations of the past, and the political killing of Englishmen began immediately. From 1897 onward the use of the Gītā, one way or another, became a constant factor in the Indian national struggle.<sup>22</sup> Its early use was entirely militaristic. In Bengal, revolutionary organizations made the Bhagavadgītā a manual of indoctrination in terrorism and a part of the regalia used in the initiation of their recruits. Until Gandhi took over the leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1919 the militarists were in even competition for institutional control of that critical organization. In the decades thereafter, in which Gandhi had formal dominance, extremists of Tilak's tradition remained a turbulent opposition. In time they produced Gandhi's murderer. In Gandhi's religious journalism one picks up echoes of his brush war with their competing understanding of the ethical implications of the Gītā.<sup>23</sup> Gandhi kept the spirit of violence under control long enough and well enough to spare the world a racial war. It was an incredible

accomplishment in training and restraining the masses of a nation.<sup>24</sup> In substantial degree Gandhi's victory was a triumph in exegesis: his nation trusted him in his pacifistic interpretation of a powerful scripture.

(FINIS? 1st possibility.)

I did not set out merely to write a panegyric of Gandhi's "key" to interpreting the Gīta. The aim was to examine the effect of his method on the understanding of the entire text. Attention to the text from Canto Four onward is still to be given. In speaking of earlier chapters Gandhi was self-conscious about his method, often mentioning the key or touchstone he was using. Hereafter he will operate in a more often intuitive way and one will not know that he is not simply acting out of the inner moral sense that selected the touchstone in the first place. But awareness of the touchstone seems always to be operative in him. It is seen in his confidence that a single and uniform moral standard underlies every verse of the Gīta and informs his understanding of what its teaching is. A belief that he knows a passage of overreaching authority seems to make him bold in strong-handed interpretations of his texts. As examples of such interpretive work of his we shall pick only a few passages in which his tendencies are quite clear.

Bhagavadgītā 10:36 is a troublesome verse for Gandhi. His translation is conscientious, however: "Of deceivers, I am the dice-play; of the splendid, the splendour; I am victory, I am resolution..."--i.e., God

is the ultimate in the warrior-class "virtues" too--their trickiness, their gaudiness, and their swashbuckling qualities. The tendency of the verse is not appreciated by the sober Mahātmā. In his commentary that follows the translation, he refuses to attribute frivolity to his Lord or encourage frivolity among his readers. (Even the name of Kṛṣṇa Gopāla, it is to be remembered, seems to be non-existent in all records of his words.) He says in explanation of the verse:

"The "dice-play of deceivers' need not alarm one...it is the directing and immanent power of God that is being described. Let the deceivers also know that they are under God's rule and judgment and put away their pride and deceit."

Gandhi sees no hint of a reference to God's līlā, here the source of the sportiveness of men. He sees a warning to every tricky rogue and rascal: " Know that the omnipresent Lord will catch up with you!"

Gandhi has applied his key to this verse, and has flattened the verse and the author of the Bhagavadgītā as well.

Gītā 17:13 deals with propriety in the performance of yajña or sacrifice:

"Sacrifice done by no rule (**vidhihīnam**),

without issue of food (**aṣṛṣṭānnaṃ**)  
 or recitation of **mantra** (**mantrahīṇaṃ**)  
 or sacrificial fee (**adakṣiṇaṃ**),  
 and without faith, that sacrifice  
 is said to be of darkness."

It seems obvious that the Vedic sacrifices are being referred to. The author, despite some reserve about these Vedic practices, is saying here as elsewhere in the Gītā that they ought to be properly maintained. The Mahātmā does not easily accept that attitude. Speaking of his childhood Gandhi once told of his shock and disbelief when a Sanskritist mentioned that the holy ṛṣīs of the Vedic age practiced animal sacrifice.<sup>25</sup> In time he was forced to concede that such abominations had indeed gone on. For him thereafter Vedic religion was under a pall. The verse above implies approval of properly-performed yajña. But is it really the bloody old Vedic yajña that this word of wide meaning refers to? Gandhi resists the identification, It is true that the words **vidhi**, **anna**, and **mantra** usually refer to aspects of the sacrifice of Vedic type, but it is only the word **adakṣiṇaṃ**, referring to the priestly fee, that absolutely compels the Vedic identification. Or does it? Not if one can translate **ad<sup>e</sup>ṣiṇaṃ** as "which involves no giving up." Of course one cannot translate it thus--unless one

has some special source of insight--like a touchstone. Then the trick is done: the apparent acceptance of those bloody rites and priestly fees turns out to be a misconception, and the moral purity of the Bhagavadgītā is preserved.

... But not the truth about the author's historic attitudes. That is lost.<sup>26</sup>

\*

Equally difficult for Gandhi are three favorable references to the śāstras that occur in the last verses of canto sixteen. Lifelong, Gandhi had only negative things to say about anything going by the name of śāstra. They are the law books that provide the charter and code of Hindu caste discrimination which Gandhi loathes. He says he does not consult the śāstras on questions of what is good or bad,<sup>27</sup> (the very questions that dharmasāstras undertake to settle). He had said that they could be death-traps for any who approach them for comprehensive guidance with regard to conduct.<sup>28</sup> But the Gītā verses in question (16:23f) clearly say that there is no salvation for the self-indulgent who reject the śāstra's injunction. The śāstra is the authority on what should and should not be done, says verse 24, and one should know and do what is laid down in śāstra regulation. The translation of the passage is not debatable.

As a Gītā-lover Gandhi cannot, under the circumstances, repeat in his commentary his dictum that the śāstras are potential death-traps. But he can deny that the śāstras that the Gītā commends here have anything to do with the well-known orthodox social codes. He explains:

"**Shastra** does not mean the rites and formulae laid down in the so-called **dharmasāstra**, but the path of self-restraint laid down by the seers and saints,"

and again,

"Let no one be a law unto himself, but take as his authority the law laid down by men who have known and lived religion."

Gandhi could find a dictionary pretext for such an unspecific understanding of the word. The meaning of śāstra at its broadest is very general. Dictionaries begin with the renderings "precept, direction, advice, good counsel." The possibility is purely nominal, however, that the author of the Bhagavadgītā, in this particular context, is merely urging the worldly to find responsible counsellors. The passage refers to śāstras that contain specific commands (vidhi, vidhāna) that will curb the conduct of self-indulgent persons who live by their wilful desires--i.e., to dharmasāstras. The writing of dharmasāstras was a

literary activity that went on contemporaneously with the writing of the Mahābhārata and using the same type of verse. There is no reason to suppose that the author of the Gītā, writing in a mid-epic period, is not approving dharmasāstras.

"I exercise my judgment about every scripture, including the Gita", Gandhi said in one of his own declarations.<sup>29</sup> Theoretically, he could and should have declared the Gītā wrong in blessing these codes of caste that he considered immoral. But the Gītā was his scripture. Not willing to reject its teaching, instead he makes its teaching "right",-- by the standards of a twentieth-century social reformer.

\*

Finally we come to Gandhi's handling of the famous **carama śloka** of the Śrīvaiṣṇavas, Bhagavadgītā 18:66, with the two verses immediately following. Gandhi's translation again is not objectionable:

"Abandon all duties and come to Me, the only refuge. I will release thee from all sins  
 .....Utter this never to him who knows no  
 austerity, has no devotion, nor any desire to  
 listen, nor yet to him who scoffs at me."

Precisely to whom this promise is made, and with what precondition, is a question puzzling to all, but it is at least clear that by this plan the requirement

for salvation consists of correct attitudes rather than positive moral attainments. In the light of 9:30f. also, which recognizes the effective righteousness of a person whose only moral distinction is right **resolve**, 18:66 too should mean that **mokṣa** is promised to those sincerely dedicated to God, even if moral attainment is quite beyond their capacity.

Gandhi always found the doctrine of salvation by grace morally objectionable when confronted by its Christian forms.<sup>30</sup> He thought no better of it as a possible meaning of these verses in the Bhagavadgītā. "These two **shlokas**," he said, cannot possibly have any reference to him, who no matter how he conducts himself, can give a flawless reading of the Gita while conducting himself anyhow."<sup>31</sup> Gandhi's resort to caricature reveals the depth of his revulsion. The words **sarvadharmān parityajya** are incredible to Gandhi in the rendering "abandon all duties" that he has been obliged to give. In spirit, his commentary contradicts his translation. How could the cessation of moral effort be the prelude to the salvation of anybody? What he feels he **must** find in the verse is expressed in the summary of it that is contained in the Gītā-summary published by Kher. Exploiting the greater freedom of a close paraphrase Gandhi gives us what he thinks the author of the Gītā really meant to say: "...abandoning

all conflicting **views**, [italics mine] you should come to Me alone for shelter, and thus be freed from sin."<sup>32</sup>

The rendering "abandoning all conflicting views" is a desperate one. Its understanding of **sarvadharmān** has a grain of plausibility only if we resort to the permissible meanings of the word in modern Hindī. In Hindī one can use the noun **dharma** in the sense of "a religion," "a sect." If one takes up that meaning, one will then understand Kṛṣṇa to be calling upon persons of other sects or religions to come to him, abandoning their former faiths. For Gandhi, however, to conversion-calls are nasty acts, embarrassing even if issued by the Lord himself. So he eases the embarrassment by a veiled translation: not "abandoning all [other] faiths" but "abandoning all conflicting views." The rendering is anachronistic. Also it is impossible in the context, which says that the message, far from being a call to the world, is a secret to be mentioned only to the most devoted and obedient of Kṛṣṇa's devotees.(v.67) Gandhi's suggestion shows how far he was willing to go when confronted with a teaching that in his eyes contradicted the central moral position of the Bhagavadgītā. Even if Kṛṣṇa said those words, Gandhi must explain in the light of the Bhagavadgītā's key proclamation what the Lord

really meant.

\*

We have described Gandhi's method as well as we can. It is time for final reflections on what it enabled him to accomplish.

We have already spoken of how it liberated Gandhi, and, through him, others, from bondage to the past. The method permitted the finding of new centers in old scriptures, and the making of new inferences and new applications from old principles. Through it Gandhi broke the hold of social orthodoxy and even shifted the dominant interest of Hindu religion into areas of more critical modern importance.

The effect of the method upon historical understanding of the Bhagavadgīta is another matter. In Gandhi's hands, at least, the method produced distortions of the ancient author's attitudes and interests. Interests of the author that were not strictly moral were made to disappear: his compromises, his whimsy, his tolerance for popular cults, his human inconsistencies all vanished through the exaggeration of his undoubtedly deep moral concern.

Some of the distortion appears to be inherent in the method itself, however well applied. When a portion of a text is raised to a position of central

importance, it can possess that eminence and authority only by reason of the unimportance attached to lines deemed marginal. What is marginal can be justly ignored--as Gandhi ignored almost the whole of the theological, philosophical and mystical teaching of the Bhagavadgītā. As material that exists only to subserve and elucidate other texts, marginal ideas can be not only subordinated but subverted--overridden in interpretation because they have no status of their own, and very little force. The method by its nature, desensitizes readers to minor themes and causes the message of atypical passages to be overlooked.

Gandhi's own particular use of the method had particular shortcomings. His touchstone passage might have yielded better results if it had been informed by better historical scholarship and if it had been more objectively understood. To be soundly used in the interpretation of an author's entire composition, a "touchstone passage" must be rigorously understood in the author's terms only. Gandhi used a touchstone already crusted over with developments of his own creation: his pacifism, for instance, and the ethical positions of a twentieth-century reformer. The center to which he conformed the Gītā was therefore sometimes a center that had its existence in him, not actually in the Gītā. The result was violence to texts, justified

by Gandhi's belief that he applied a superior criterion of truth.

Academics of our type evaluators are very unforgiving about distortion of history. We have their own **mahāvakyam**. With you as judges who are assembled here, I fear that Gandhi's work on the Bhagavadgītā will not get by. Me may not get his Ph.D. What can I do to soften your judgment?

I can say that Gandhi and his methods threaten little harm to Indological science. It has endured and survived much worse, from much more ambitious and aggressive leaders. Gandhi did not pretend to be a scholar, nor aspire to degrees, honorary or earned. His work with scripture was in another cause. His great overruling conviction was that nonviolence in human relations is supported by Ultimate Truth. Making that faith effective in mighty and bitter contests was the real accomplishment of his interpretive work. In that area his interpretation was sound, and resoundingly successful. He was indeed a mahātmā, a great soul. Another such mahātmā is even more needed in the world just now than another Ph.D.

## Endnotes

1. **The Gospel of Selfless Action, or The Gita According to Gandhi**, ed. Mahadev Desai (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1948), p. 122
2. M. K. Gandhi, **An Autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth**, (Ahmadabad, Navajivan Press, 2nd ed. 1963), p. 6, 205.
3. M. K. Gandhi, **Delhi Diary, Prayer Speeches 1947-48** (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1948), p. 390
4. **Young India**, quoted in V. B. Kher, ed., **In Search of the Supreme**, vol. 3 (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1962), p. 228.
5. V. B. Kher, **In Search of the Supreme** (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 3 vols., 1961-62); **Hindu Dharma** (Navajivan, 1950); R. K. Prabhu, ed., **The Message of the Gita** (Navajivan, 1959); Jag Pravesh Chander, **Gita the Mother** (New Delhi, Indian Printing Works, 1957); and Anand T. Hingorani, **The Teaching of the Gita** (Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962).
6. Kher, *op.cit.*, vol. 3, pp. 230-275
7. **Harijan** Jan. 30, 1937, and June 23, 1946, in Anand T. Hingorani, ed., **The Teaching of the Gita** (Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962), pp. 91-95.
8. **Harijan** Feb. 25, 1933, in V. B. Kher, **In Search of the Supreme**, vol. 1 (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Press, 1961), pp. 117.
9. **Young India**, Aug. 6, 1931, and **Harijan**, April 7, 1946, quoted in Hingorani, *op. cit.*, pp. 19, 50.
10. M. K. Gandhi, **An Autobiography or the Story of My Experiments with Truth** (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 2nd ed. 1963). pp. 41f
11. **Harijan**, Aug. 10, 1947, in Hingorani, *op.cit.*, pp. 101-103.
12. **Young India**, Nov. 12, 1925, in Hingorani, *op. cit.*, p. 13
13. P. V. Kane, **History of Dharmasastra**, vol. 5 pt. 2 (Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1962), pp. 1283-1309.

14. Kumarila Bhatta, tr. G. Jha, **Tantravarttika** (Calcutta, Bibliotheca Indica, 1924), p. 20.
15. Sadananda. tr. Swami Nikhilananda **Vedāntasāra**, (Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1949), sec. 148 p. 191.
16. Swami Akhilananda, **Hindu View of Christ** (N.Y. Philosophical Library, 1949), p. 95, quoting John 1:11.
17. **An Autobiography**, p. 42
18. **Young India**, Feb. 26, 1925; **Harijan**, Sept. 26, 1936; Oct. 3, 1936; Sept. 1, 1940, in Hingorani, **op. cit.**, pp. 28-34.
19. **op. cit.**, p. 7.
20. **Harijan**, Sept. 1, 1940, in Hingorani, **op. cit.**, pp. 33f.
21. Mahadev Desai, ed., **The Gospel of Selfless Action or the Gita According to Gandhi** (Ahmedabad, Navajivan Publishing House, 1946), p. 129f.
22. A.C. Underwood, **Contemporary Thought of India** (N. Y., Alfred A. Knopf, 1931), pp. 29-66.
23. **Young India**, Nov. 3, 1927, and **Harijan**, Sept. 26, 1936, in Hingorani **op. cit.**, pp. 41 and 29.
24. **Oxford History of India**, 3rd ed. 1958, p. 765.
25. [To be supplied.]
26. Gandhi obscures the Gita's qualified acceptance of Vedic religion also in his rendering of 3:11f. where he makes "cherish the devas" mean "cherish the whole creation of God," and in 4:14, where we are asked to believe that an injunction to worship the gods (*devatās*) does not sanction worship of the Vedic pantheon, but cultivation of the forces of nature.
27. **Young India**, Sept. 29, 1927, in **Hindu Dharma**, p. 22.
28. **Young India**, July 29, 1926, in **op. cit.**, p. 21.
29. **Harijan**, Dec. 5, 1936, in Chander, ed., **Gita the Mother**, p. 48.
30. **An Autobiography**, pp. 76 and 83.
31. Desai, ed., **op. cit.**, p. 379

32.Kher, **op. cit.**, vol. III p. 272.

32.Kher, *op. cit.*, vol. III p. 272.