

THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION: ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE STUDY OF THE *BHAGAVADGĪTĀ*

by Arvind Sharma

Abstract. The *Bhagavadgītā* is a popular Hindu text containing eighteen chapters. It begins with the hero, Arjuna, showing a marked unwillingness to engage in combat on the eve of battle. He is finally persuaded to do so by Krishna, who is an incarnation of God. Krishna actually reveals himself as such to an amazed Arjuna in the eleventh chapter. The fact that Arjuna does not immediately heed Krishna's advice to engage in battle after Krishna's sensational self-disclosure has long puzzled students of the text. It is only at the end of the eighteenth chapter that Arjuna finally shows his readiness to fight. In this essay I argue that the discussion of the nine primary sensory states by Eugene d'Aquili may help resolve this issue and thus provide an instance of a case in which modern scientific study of religion enhances our understanding of a religious phenomenon, as a corrective to the usual charge that it must invariably diminish it.

Keywords: Arjuna; *Bhagavadgītā*; Krishna; negative affect; neutral affect; positive affect; primary sensory state; *Weltschmerz*.

The scientific study of religion is a product of modern Western academia, while the *Bhagavadgītā* is an ancient and popular text of the oriental religion of Hinduism. What contribution could one expect from the former toward deepening our understanding of the latter? Unlikely as it may appear, this is precisely my claim—that the modern scientific study of religion in this case actually enhances our religious understanding of that Hindu text.

In order to justify this claim I begin with Eugene G. d'Aquili's nine primary sensory states to which human experience of the world can be reduced "without involving internal contradiction" (d'Aquili 1982, 362).

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Three parameters are involved in determining these nine states: (1) whether perceptions are unitary or multiple, (2) whether relationships are regular or irregular, and (3) whether the affective valences are positive, negative, or neutral. The use of these parameters to construct a system yields the following nine primary sensory states (d'Aquili, 1982, 362):

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| 1. multiple discrete reality | — regular relationships | — neutral affect |
| 2. multiple discrete reality | — regular relationships | — positive affect |
| 3. multiple discrete reality | — regular relationships | — negative affect |
| 4. multiple discrete reality | — irregular relationships | — neutral affect |
| 5. multiple discrete reality | — irregular relationships | — positive affect |
| 6. multiple discrete reality | — irregular relationships | — negative affect |
| 7. unitary being | | — neutral affect |
| 8. unitary being | | — positive affect |
| 9. unitary being | | — negative affect |

Although all nine states thus generated are of considerable interest, we restrict our consideration here to the first three, which pertain to the waking state, characterized by multiple discrete reality and regular relationships. This corresponds to the setting of the *Bhagavadgītā*, which unfolds in the form of a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in a chariot on the battlefield—a setting characterized by multiple discrete reality and regular relationships.

The three primary states—all of them characterized by multiple discrete reality and regular relationships—are distinguished by their affective valences. These distinctions are crucial to them and crucial for our understanding of these states in relation to the *Bhagavadgītā*. It is important therefore to share their description as offered by d'Aquili.

The *first primary sensory state* is characterized by multiple discrete reality and regular relationships and possesses a neutral valence. It is described by d'Aquili in the following terms:

The first of these states involves the perception of discrete entities that are related to each other in regular ways, for example, in predictable ways. The affective valence in this world perception is neutral. I will refer to this state as the “baseline” state. It is the primary knowing state that most people are in most of the time. I presume it is the state that most readers are in at this moment; for example, most of us are quite certain of the reality of the furniture and people surrounding us. I am sure that very few if any of us would question the fundamental reality of the state we are in. It is precisely because this state appears certain while one is in it that it is a primary sense of reality. Furthermore, most people would consider this state as the only reality or the only valid epistemic state. However, the fact of the matter is that not only is this sense of reality not unique but there are two other stable perceptions of discrete reality which are also primary. These other two states resemble the state most of us are in most of the time in that the regularities of time, space, and causality are the same and in that there is the perception of the same discrete entities. Where they differ is in the affective valence, positive or negative, of the perception of the world. (d'Aquili 1982, 362–63)

This is the state in which we find Arjuna at the beginning of the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

The *second primary sensory state* too is characterized by multiple discrete reality and regular relationships but possesses a positive affect. According to d'Aquili,

The second primary sense of reality involves the same discrete entities and regularities as the baseline ordinary state of most people's perception, but it involves as well an elated sense of well being and joy, in which the universe is perceived to be fundamentally good and all its parts are sensed to be related in a unified whole. There is often in this state a sense of purposefulness to the universe and to man's place in the universe. This sense of purposefulness may defy logic and certainly does not arise from logic; nonetheless it is a primary stable perception. The onset of such an exhilarating view of reality is usually sudden and has been described as a conversion experience by a number of people. It has been described over and over again in the religious literature of the world. (d'Aquili 1982, 363)

In the *Bhagavadgītā*, Arjuna undergoes a kind of conversion experience in Chapter XI.

The *third primary sensory state* also is characterized by multiple discrete reality and regular relationships but possesses a negative affect. Its character is less than self-evident, and it has central importance for the development of the theme of this article. D'Aquili describes it thus:

We now come to the third primary sense of reality which is also a very stable one. This sense of reality is like the first two in that it deals with the world of multiple discrete beings and has the same high degree of regularity of causal, spatial, and temporal relationships. It differs from the first two in that the basic affective valence toward the perceived universe is *profoundly negative*. This has been dubbed *Weltschmerz* in the psychiatric literature and consists of a sense of exquisite sadness and futility, as well as the sense of the incredible smallness of man in the universe, the inevitable existential pain of the world, and the suffering inherent in the human condition. Often there is the perception of the whole universe as one vast pointless machine without purpose or meaning; a mild form of this often occurs with high school or college students and other young adults. In its full-blown form, however, it is similar to the cosmic consciousness or illumination described above in that it occurs with a suddenness that leaves the individual totally perplexed. Since 1969 I have treated twelve individuals, who came to me with this as a problem in the full-blown form, and all but two experienced it with sudden onset. Usually the individual wakes up with a profound sense of loss and meaninglessness to the world which never leaves. It is the basic sense of reality which appears to underlie much existentialist thought, particularly in French existentialist literature. It is the sort of perception in which the universe is apprehended not in any way as neutral but as essentially absurd, and often suicide is thought to be the only truly human response. (1982, 364; emphasis added)

It is significant that Arjuna in the *Bhagavadgītā* virtually contemplates suicide (I.46). It is equally significant that such a state overcomes Arjuna *all of a sudden* on the eve of the battle, as described in the first chapter of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

A brief word now about the *Bhagavadgītā*, before the analysis of the three primary epistemic states is applied to it for the light they might shed on the text.

The *Bhagavadgītā* is in the form of a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna and consists of eighteen chapters. The first chapter discloses Arjuna, the warrior-hero, on the field of battle. Before the chapter is over, however, he develops a case of nerves. Its description has become classic and runs as follows in an English translation (Zaehner 1969, 46–47):

“Krishna, when I see these mine own folk standing [before me], spoiling for the fight, (29) my limbs give way, my mouth dries up, trembling seizes upon my body, and my [body’s] hairs stand up in dread. (30) [My bow,] Gandīva, slips from my hand, my very skin is all ablaze; I cannot stand and my mind seems to wander. (31) Krishna, adverse omens too I see, nor can I discern aught good in striking down in battle mine own folk. (32) Krishna, I do not long for victory nor for the kingdom nor yet for things of pleasure. What should I do with a kingdom? What with enjoyments or [even] with life? (33) Those for whose sake we covet kingdom, enjoyments, things of pleasure, stand [here arrayed] for battle, surrendering life and wealth—(34) teachers, fathers, sons, and grandsires too; uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law—kinsmen all. (35) Krishna, though they should slay [me], yet would not I slay them, not for the dominion over the three worlds, how much less for the earth [alone]! (36) Should we slaughter Dhritarāshtra’s sons, Krishna, what sweetness then is ours? Evil, only evil, would come to dwell with us, should we slay them, hate us as they may. (37) Therefore we have no right to kill the sons of Dhritarāshtra and their kin. For, Krishna, were we to lay low our own folk, how could we be happy? (38) And even if, bereft of sense by greed, they cannot see that to ruin a family is wickedness and to break one’s word a crime, (39) how should we not be wise enough to shun this evil thing, for we clearly see that to ruin a family is wickedness. (40) Once the family is ruined, the primeval family laws collapse. Once law is destroyed, then lawlessness overwhelms all [that is known as] family. (41) With lawlessness triumphant, Krishna, the family’s women are debauched; once the women are debauched, there will be a mixing of caste. (42) The mixing of caste leads to hell—[the hell prepared] for those who wreck the family and for the family [so wrecked]. So too their ancestors fall down [to hell], cheated of their offerings of food and drink. (43) These evil ways of men who wreck the family, [those evil ways] that cause the mixing of caste, [these evil ways] bring caste-law to naught and the eternal family laws. (44) A sure abode in hell there is for men who bring to naught the family laws: so, Krishna, have we heard. (45) Ah! Ah! So are we [really] bent on committing a monstrous evil deed? Intent as we are on slaughtering our own folk because we lust for the sweets of sovereignty. (46) O let the sons of Dhritarāshtra, arms in hand, slay me in battle though I, unarmed myself, will offer no defence; therein were greater happiness for me.”

(47) So saying Arjuna sat down upon the chariot-seat [though] battle [had begun], let slip his bow and arrows, his mind distraught with grief.

Arjuna’s charioteer, Krishna, who is regarded within the Hindu tradition as God incarnate, tries to talk Arjuna out of his state of “funk.” Ten chapters go by, but Arjuna is unmoved. Then in the eleventh chapter Krishna reveals himself as God. Arjuna is overcome with emotion. Zaehner summarizes the chapter as follows:

THIS chapter is the climax of the Gīta. In it Krishna reveals Himself in all his terrifying majesty.

Arjuna, not content with the account of Krishna's "far-flung powers" of which he had heard in the last chapter, asks to *see* his "Self which does not pass away" (I-4).

Krishna grants his request and gives him a "celestial eye" with which he may behold his transfiguration (5-8). The rest of the chapter is an account of the tremendous vision in which the universe in all its variety is seen as Krishna's body—all its multiplicity converging onto One (9-13). Arjuna then describes what he sees: the entire world is rushing headlong into Krishna's mouths (15-31).

Krishna then explains that He is all-consuming Time and that as such He has already killed the Kaurava hosts: Arjuna is to be but the occasion (32-46). The vision over, Krishna resumes his human form, and ends up by telling Arjuna once again to worship Him with love that he may enter into Him (47-55). (Zaehner 1969, 303)

Remarkably, even after God's self-disclosure Arjuna is not ready to take up the struggle.¹ This has struck many as odd, and some have even suggested that the original text perhaps ended here or soon after and that chapters 12-18, which also seem less inspired, are later additions.

Finally, at the end of the eighteenth chapter, Arjuna indicates his willingness to join the struggle (XVIII.73), and the *Bhagavadgītā* soon ends.

It seems to me that d'Aquili's analysis of the three primary sensory states with their different valences not only enhances our understanding of the *Bhagavadgītā* but also helps solve a riddle of the *Bhagavadgītā*. Arjuna is in the third primary state—that of *Weltschmerz*—by the time the first chapter ends. He does not want to fight. His feelings are profoundly negative. Things remain more or less that way, although with diminished intensity, until the eleventh chapter, when the theophany catapults him dramatically into the second primary sensory state, characterized by a "cosmic consciousness" generated by the revelation.

However, Arjuna is still not ready to fight. Earlier, he was depressed to the point of panicking; now he can't fight because he is elated to the point of being terrified! He wants God to return to his normal state and himself too. This explains why the *Bhagavadgītā* does not end here—because Arjuna can only resume fighting in the *first* primary sensory state, what d'Aquili calls the baseline state. He takes some time, and an additional six chapters, to reach it.

Thus, d'Aquili's first three primary sensory states are extremely helpful in analyzing the religious psychology of Arjuna and thereby shed a flood of light on the *Bhagavadgītā*. In this case at least, the scientific study of religion has deepened our appreciation of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

NOTE

1. Scholars have had to explain this fact, or explain it away. One example is as follows:

Zaehner calls the opening verses of the twelfth chapter "one of the biggest anti-climaxes in literature." Though it follows smoothly from Krishna's discussion in chapter eleven, its dispassionate tone seems to show no reaction to the vision of that chapter. Numerous suggestions have been made for the fact that chapter eleven is not the final chapter of the *Gita*. Zaehner says that chapter twelve follows so closely on 10.10 that one is tempted to rearrange the text. Those who believe that the highest reality is the impersonal Absolute and not the clearly personal divinity of the vision see the following chapter as teaching that which is beyond and above that vision. Thus, Radhakrishnan says (on 11.55), "The Gita does not end after the tremendous experience of the celestial vision. The great secret of the Transcendental Atman, the source of all that is and yet itself unmoved forever is seen. . . . The search for abiding reality, the quest of final truth cannot end, in emotional satisfaction of fitful experience." Yet the *Gita* does in fact seek a higher experience or a higher reality. The remaining chapters elaborate upon what was seen but do not go beyond it experientially.

Deutsch suggests as a solution that after the vision Arjuna needs to learn again about the nature of the ordinary, everyday world. Otherwise it is likely that Arjuna might forget the world completely after such a great vision, or even become proud for having experienced it. Thus, further teaching is needed to bring Arjuna down to earth. As Maitra puts it, this represents the descent of the soul to the human plane after it has realized its cosmic purpose. The final chapters, he notes, are devoted to "the discussion of the proper subjective attitude in view of the immeasurable gulf that separates the individual from God." (Minor 1991, 361)

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