

THE BHAGAVADGITA.*

BY THE EDITOR.

A NEW translation of the Bhagavadgita! It seems as if we had enough, for the Bhagavadgita has been translated and re-translated by Sanskrit scholars, and reduced to poetic form by poets and admirers, and yet Professor Böhlingk said in his comments on the text, "An impartial investigation of the philosophical contents of the Bhagavadgita, uninfluenced by any commentary, is highly desirable by some one conversant with the philosophical systems of India."

If there is any authority on ancient Sanskrit literature, since the death of Roth and Weber, it is Professor Garbe, of Tübingen, and so it is natural that we hail the present edition as the one deemed desirable by the lamented Böhlingk. Professor Garbe's solution of the problem is new and yet it will at once appeal to scholars as the only possible one. We are struck first of all with the similarity of the results of textual criticism of the Bhagavadgita as compared to that of other religious books, a parallelism not observed by our learned author, but which will go far to corroborate his results.

The Bhagavadgita is a religious book, and I do not think any one will criticise me for looking upon it as the canonical exposition of Brahmanism. The orthodox Hindu treats it as an inspired book, and it takes the same place with him that the Old Testament does with the Jew; the New Testament, with the Christian; the Dhammapada, Paraniibbana Sutta, Buddhacharita etc., with the Buddhist; and we are confronted with analogous features in the development of all these scriptures.

Professor Garbe comes to the conclusion that the Bhagavadgita, which bears traces of several redactions, is originally theistic, but has been revised by a philosophical pantheist. Although it is not consistent, it represents the development of Brahmanism from

* *Die Bhagavadgita*, aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt von Richard Garbe, Leipzig: Haessel. 1905.

the time of the first deification of Krishna down to the period of metaphysical speculation, in which Brahmanism has become the All-soul and universal principle of the universe. The Bhagavadgita, in its present shape, bears traces of all these different epochs and has thus become a book dear to every Hindu. Professor Garbe believes that Krishna was originally a real man, though he would not endorse euhemerism as a general principle of explaining religious myths, he claims that in this special instance it affords the correct solution. (Page 23.)

The Bhagavadgita is an episode in the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, but the epic element in it is of no consequence, the main topic being an ethical sermon preached by Krishna upon the battlefield.

The Kauravas and the Pandavas, two kindred races, are preparing for battle, and the old blind king, Dhritarashtra, begins to doubt whether it is right to wage war on his kin, when he is informed by his charioteer of the conversation that takes place between Arjuna, the general of his forces, and Krishna who appears before Arjuna as a charioteer and teaches him the duties of life. In the eleventh song Krishna reveals himself to Arjuna as the only God and Lord of the world, who for the present purpose has assumed a human form. The contents are too well known to be repeated here, and the fascinating thought that pervades the whole Bhagavadgita has been condensed by Emerson in his beautiful poem entitled "Brahma," from which we may be permitted to quote the following stanzas:

"If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

"Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

"They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahman sings.

"The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me and turn thy back on heaven."

The Bhagavadgita means the "Song of the Blessed One." Bhagavad is the common title given in India to the deity, the same word being applied also by the Buddhists to Buddha.

The Bhagavadgita is the Song of Songs of India, and it has exercised a great influence upon the Occident. But, says Professor Garbe, the original admiration has given place to a more correct appreciation without detracting from the worth of the poem. We may now grant that the Gita (sometimes the Bhagavadgita is simply called "the song," or the Gita) is certainly not a piece of art which has been fashioned by the genius of some inspired poet. It contains various literal quotations from the Upanishad literature. The significance and characteristics of the Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas are enumerated with genuine Hindu pedantry and the didactic spirit is patent throughout. In all the Hindu scholasticism which is contained in the Gita, with its logical subtleness, we are confronted with undeniable contradictions among which the theistic and pantheistic passages are most in evidence. Professor Garbe believes that Krishna is identified with Vishnu, and thus is considered an incarnation of God; but in the progress of Indian history, Krishna-Vishnu is identified with Brahma. Professor Garbe says:

"The *original* Bhagavadgita was composed when Krishna-Vishnu had become the highest god in Brahmanism, or we may as well say had become God. At the time when Krishna was first identified with Brahma, and Krishnaism as a whole first began to be vedantized, the pantheistic redaction of this poem originated, including also those parts which in my translation are plainly indicated as later additions. In the Gita, Krishna at first appears identified with Brahma only in quite isolated instances. In some passages Krishna and Brahma still stand side by side as distinct ideas, so that it almost seems as if the redactor tried to avoid emphasizing the identity of Krishna and Brahma in the obviously theistic character of his material. Indeed Arjuna says to Krishna (Bhagavadgita x, 12)—'Thou art the most exalted Brahm,*' and in the passage already cited (vii, 19) it reads 'Vasudeva is the All,' (similarly xi, 40); but in viii, 1, Arjuna asks 'What is this Brahm?' and Krishna answers in the third verse, not 'I am it,' but 'The Brahm is the immortally Supreme,' and gives a different explanation of himself in verse 4b. In xiv, 26, 27, Krishna says, 'Whosoever serves me with a constant, loving devotion, he will partake of the Brahm, for I am the foundation of the Brahm.' In xviii, 50-53, it is taught by what means the perfect ones may attain to the Brahm, but immediately after (verses 54-55) we read that he who has become Brahm possesses the greatest love for Krishna, and in consequence enters into Krishna.

* Professor Garbe makes a distinction between *der Brahman* and *das Brahman* which necessarily is lost in an English translation in which the gender can not be differentiated. Accordingly we replace the neuter *Brahman*, the expression of the philosophical principle, by "Brahm" and the god by "Brahma," which is common English usage.

"Accordingly in these passages Krishna and the Brahm are expressly distinguished from each other. However, they are different gods, not only here but throughout the entire poem, excepting just those passages where the Vedantic redactor has completely identified and confused the two notions. In the old poem Krishna speaks of himself (and Arjuna, of Krishna) as of one individual, a person, a conscious deity. In the interpolations of the redaction the neuter Brahm appears as a supreme idea, and is placed on an equality with Krishna. In short Krishnaism which is based upon the Samkhya-Yoga philosophy is preached in the old poem; while in the interpolations of the redaction the Vedanta philosophy is taught.

"We have known for a long time that the teachings of the Samkhya-Yoga constitute almost entirely the foundation of the philosophical observations of the Bhagavadgita, and that in comparison with them the Vedanta takes a second place. How often the Samkhya and Yoga are mentioned by name, while the Vedanta appears only once (*Vedantakrit*, xv, 15) and then, indeed, in the sense of Upanishad, or 'treatise'! Accordingly, when we think merely of the rôle which the philosophical systems play in the Gita as it has been handed down to us, and when we consider the irreconcilable contradictions between the Samkhya-Yoga and Vedanta, which can only be done away with by carefully distinguishing between the old and the new, the Vedantic constituents of the Bhagavadgita prove not to belong to the original poem. Whether we investigate the Gita from the religious or philosophical side, the same result is reached.

"Since Mimamsa and Vedanta are very closely united in the philosophical literature of Brahmanism, we can easily understand that the redactor of the Gita has introduced Mimamsa teachings side by side with Vedantic ideas, in this popular work which is religious rather than strictly philosophical. The fact that the poem in ii, 42, 46, and viii, 66, is decidedly opposed to the service by works (sacrifice, ritual etc.) of the Vedas has not restrained the redactor from making interpolations in which he represents the ritualistic standpoint and vigorously recommends Vedic sacrifices (iii, 9-18, and iv, 31). In the old poem iv, 25 *et passim*, sacrifice is considered throughout in the allegorical and spiritual sense."

The final redactor of the Gita has introduced the main philosophical doctrines of India into the poem, but the Vaisheshika and Nyana are ignored, while the Mimamsa and Vedanta are only occasionally introduced.

The Gita is the religious exposition of a faith which Professor Garbe calls the Bhagavadgita religion, the main ideal of which is *bhakti* a faithful and confiding love of God.

Professor Garbe discusses the origin of the word *bhakti*, and refutes the proposition that it should be of Christian origin. The idea itself is historically pre-Christian, and we can trace its development in the religious evolution of India. It is, as Barth says, *un fait indigène* and its origin must be placed about 300 B.C.

During the first period of the Bhagavadgita religion Krishna was identified with Vishnu. The second period, which covers the

time from about 300 B. C. to the beginning of the Christian era, is characterized by a Brahmanization of Krishna. The great popularity of the Krishna legend must have attracted the attention of Brahman thinkers, and they found it convenient to explain their ideas in the deified hero, who now became a mouthpiece of Brahmanical law. The development is completed in the third period when Krishna-Vishnu is positively identified with the highest Brahma. This is the time when the final redaction of the Bhagavadgita was completed, and so Professor Garbe believes that the original poem was composed about 200 B. C., and that it received its final shape about 200 A. D.

Considering the fact that the doctrines incorporated in the Gita are contradictory, we must not be astonished at the inconsistencies of its ethics. We find two methods of salvation recognized. One is retirement from the world-life and an aspiration for purer knowledge, while the other is the ideal of desireless action according to the duties of life. The second part is repeatedly called the better one, but the path of world renunciation, the ideal of asceticism is nowhere rejected.

We have here again the product of a communal consciousness, and not the exposition of one consistent thinker.

It is difficult to understand what the devotees of the Bhagavadgita religion understood the state of the soul to be, after it has been emancipated and has entered the deity. The terms used in the Gita in regard to the condition of the emancipated one, are colorless and do not contribute anything toward the solution of the problem, for as we know, the state may be one of absolute unconsciousness, which is frequently described as perfect rest or highest rest (*para* or *naishthiki santi*). It may mean a state of happy peace of a soul which continues to preserve its individuality in the presence of God.

The term Nirvana is frequently used, but this does not necessarily bespeak a Buddhistic influence upon the Gita, for the word is not strictly Buddhistic, but generally Indian, and it is not impossible that it has been directly introduced into the Gita from the Samkhya philosophy.

Professor Garbe has not compared the faith of the Gita to corresponding works of other religions, but it is interesting to notice the influence of dogma upon the final form of canonical scripture. The religio-philosophical ideas which animated the leading minds of India existed first, and then modified the traditional epic which is handed down from generation to generation as the most favorite method of religio-poetic instruction. It is true, as Prof. W. B.

Smith says, that "a doctrine must in general antedate its literal exposition, and when we find the exposition in a higher composite apophthegmatic form, we may be sure that it has been forged on the common anvil beneath the alternate strokes of more than one hammer."

The same is true of the Bhagavadgita as of the canonical writings of other religions, especially of Christianity. They can no longer be looked upon as the teachings of one man, either apostle, evangelist or prophet, but as the product of the leading minds of generations. It will be interesting to note in this connection what Professor Smith says of the New Testament Scriptures:

"It has, in fact, been everywhere and everywhen tacitly assumed that there was in each case a unique autographic original, and that the problem of textual criticism was to discover that autograph, restore that original, and explain the manifold deviations therefrom. It is no reproach to criticism to have made this assumption and upheld it for centuries. No other was so natural or so plausible; none the less, it has proved unsatisfactory. In the face of the widening and multiplying diversities of the text-tradition, we can no longer range the Gospels and Epistles side by side with the Greek histories and the Letters of Cicero and ask how did Luke or Paul write it, just as we ask how did Thucydides or Plutarch or Pliny phrase it? In the Greek and Latin classics we recognize the works of the individual consciousness, here and there marred and corrupted, but each, in the main, single, solitary, self-consistent. Not so in the New Testament Scriptures. There we are confronted less with an individual than with a collective and communal consciousness. This consciousness is not always the same. By no means. It varies widely from the Synoptics to the Johannines, from the Paulines through the Catholics, to the Apocalypse. But it is nowhere individual, nowhere unital, nowhere self-consistent; it is everywhere communal, everywhere complicate, everywhere harmonistic. Indeed, Syncretism is by all odds the most conspicuous and impressive phenomenon it presents, a syncretism without a parallel in literature, unless in the Old Testament."

Professor Garbe's translation of the Bhagavadgita reminds us in many respects of the Polychrome Bible of the Old Testament Scripture. He analyses the contents by showing the original poem in large print, while the inserted passages of the redactor appear in smaller print. We need not say that some of the most beautiful passages belong to these later interpolations.