Harold Kasimow
Grinnell College

The Jewish Tradition and the Bhagavadgita

The Bhagavad-Gita has certainly influenced and transformed the lives of millions of Hindus. The questions that I shall examine in this article are: Is it legitimate for Jews to study Hindu religious texts such as the Gita? Can such a study be enriching to the lives of Jews who study such texts? In my view, not only is it permitted for Jews to study Eastern texts, but also the study of non-Western religious traditions can deepen our understanding of our own tradition.

The position that Jews are not permitted to become immersed in the study of texts that are sacred to other faiths must be given serious consideration. According to one major stream of thinking within normative Judaism, the education of the Jew should consist solely of the study of Torah. The rabbis of the Talmudic period who did not approve of the study of Greek philosophy would also have opposed the study of Eastern thought. Joseph Sarachek, writing on the Maimonidean controversy, captures this position in the following statement:

> To those who believed that the Torah contained all the knowledge necessary for mankind, explorations into the learning of other people and other languages was an affront to the God of Israel and His revealed law.[1]

That this attitude toward the study of alien religious texts is still held today by many Jews is evident from the reaction by Rabbi Chaim Zvi Hollander to a suggestion made by Rabbi Zalman Schachter that it is permissible for Jews to explore Eastern forms of spirituality.

---

1. Joseph Sarachek, *Faith and Reason: The Conflict over the Rationalism of Maimonides* (New York: Hermon Press, 1970), p. 10.

> Zalman Schachter's incredible advice is a direct contradiction of the Almighty request that we not seek out and explore the spiritual modes of the *Goyim*, even if it is for the purpose of enhancing our own spiritual experience in the service of our God.[2]

However, what Rabbi Hollander overlooks is the fact that some of the most influential Jewish sages, who have profoundly enriched and shaped the Jewish tradition, nevertheless took as their teachers people who were not Jewish. These Jewish sages certainly directed their lives to the study of the Torah, but they also turned their attention to the Greek philosophers and to the great teachers of the Christian and Muslim traditions. Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the most influential religious thinkers of our time, who himself studied traditions other than his own, speaks of the major influences on the thought of Moses Maimonides:

> He studied philosophy with utmost zeal: the teachings of Alexander of Aphrodisias and Themistius, Alfarabi and Ghazali, Saadiah and Bahya, Judah Halevi, Abraham bar Hiyya, Abraham ibn Ezra. But the only master he recognized was Aristotle: "His knowledge is the most perfect that a human being can possess, aside from those who, through divine illumination, have reached the level of prophecy, the most sublime level that exists."[3]

In this respect, Maimonides is not unusual in the middle ages. For as Louis Jacobs points out,

---

2. Chaim Zvi Hollander, "Beyond the Torah Limits," in Harold Heifetz, ed., *Zen and Hasidism* (Wheaton, Ill.: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p. 139.

3. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Maimonides: A Biography*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1982), p. 25. It is also noted here that a study of Dr. Robert Gordis' own work on the Bible reveals that the most sacred texts of Judaism were also influenced by the surrounding cultures. Dr. Gordis explains the manner in which foreign ideas were incorporated into the Bible: "The Hebrew genius adopted those elements in the surrounding culture which it found valuable, modified what was potentially useful, and rejected what it recognized as fundamentally alien." Robert Gordis, *The Book of God and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 55.

> It is not unusual in this period to find Jewish teachers quoting teachings of Muslims and Christians if these were helpful to the religious life as understood by Judaism. Bahya Ibn Pakuda, to quote one example, not only relies extensively on Sufi teachers but defends vigorously his right to use Gentiles as teachers of religion and refers to them as "saints," *hasidim*.[4]

The Jewish tradition has never denied that saints are produced outside Judaism. But somehow Jews have forgotten to stress this idea, which I believe holds great promise for future inter-religious dialogue and for the enrichment of the Jewish tradition. With the Jewish idea that saints are produced everywhere, we must not limit Jewish dialogue to Christians and Muslims, but we must also reach out to Hindus and Buddhists. If Bahya ibn Pakuda and Abraham Maimonides have enriched the Jewish tradition through their study of the Sufis, will contemporary Jewish thinkers not be enriched by the most precious books of the Hindus and Buddhists?

From the very beginning, Judaism stressed that what is essential for individual salvation is the righteousness of each individual human being. That the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come has always been an important teaching of the Jewish tradition. In his article "No Religion is an Island" Heschel cites a rabbinic source that I consider important for our time:

---

4. Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: Behrman House, Inc., Publishers, 1973), pp. 285-286. In the introduction to his work, *Duties of the Heart*, Bahya ibn Pakuda writes, "I quoted also the saints and sages of other nations whose words have come down to us; hoping that my readers' hearts would incline to them, and give heed to their wisdom. I quote for example the dicta of the philosophers, the ethical teachings of the Ascetics, and their praiseworthy customs.... The Rabbis further said 'Whoever utters a wise word, even if he belongs to the Gentiles, is called a sage'". *Duties of the Heart*, trans. Moses Hyamson, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Boys Town Jerusalem Publishers, 1965), Vol. I, p. 45. It is interesting to note that Abraham Maimonides (1186-1237), the son of Moses Maimonides, was greatly influenced by the Sufis and has much praise for them. In his *Comprehensive Guide for the Servants of God*, Maimonides claims that it is not the Jews but the Sufis who "...imitate the prophets and walk in their footsteps." See Samuel Rosenblatt, *The High Ways to Perfection of Abraham Maimonides* (Vol. II, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1938) p. 321.

> I call heaven and earth to witness that the Holy Spirit rests upon each person, Jew or Gentile, man or woman, master or slave, in consonance with his deeds.[5]

Heschel comments :

> Holiness is not the monopoly of any particular religion or tradition. Wherever a deed is done in accord with the will of God, wherever a thought of man is directed towards Him, there is the holy.
>
> The Jews do not maintain that the way of the Torah is the only way of serving God.[6]

The Jewish tradition was aware from early times that there were different paths to God. Jews certainly made a distinction between, the "daughter religions," Christianity and Islam, and those not connected with it in any specific way such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Yet it seems to me, that what was critical to the Jewish sages was not to which religion an individual belonged but how human he really was. What is most significant is not the religion of an individual but how pious the individual is. As Jacob Neusner points out "The Judaic tradition holds that a person is not what he says or what he thinks but what he does."[7] The response to an important question in the Jewish tradition, namely "what is the purpose of worship?," will help to support the view that what is essential is the transformation of human character. In the Midrash we find the following response :

> Rab said : The precepts were given in order that men might be refined by them. For what does the Holy One, blessed be He, care whether a man kills an animal by the throat or by the nape of its neck? Hence its purpose is to refine/try/man.[8]

Interpretation of this statement by Rab will help us to understand what is really at stake here, the traditional Jewish position with regard to "reasons for the Commandments."

---

5. Abraham J. Heschel, "No Religion is an Island." *Union Seminary Quarterly* (January, 1966), p. 130.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Jacob Neusner, *Understanding Jewish Theology ; Classical Issues and Modern Perspectives* (New York : Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1973), p. 8.
8. *Midrash Rabbah : Genesis* London : The Soncino Press, 1961), Vol 1, p. 361.

> The meaning of this Midrashic passage would seem to be that the deed in itself can have no significance so far as God is concerned, but it is the effect of the deed on the human character that He wants. The command to slaughter animals in this way rather than at the back of the neck, has as its aim the inculcation of kindness and compassion. By slaughtering animals in the most painless way rather than by cruel methods man's character becomes refined.[9]

According to this Midrash, then, what God does require is that we "...do justly....love mercy and walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8). The element of divine worship enters when man fulfills these requirements. Worship is the way for man to keep his evil inclinations in check, a way which can help us to become more human. The major aim of the Commandments is to enable us to live harmoniously with other human beings and have a proper relationship with God. I would contend that the idea that the individual life of each human being is of greater significance than one's own particluar religious tradition is part of the Jewish tradition.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Jewish scholars have totally ignored the idea that saints arise outside of the Jewish tradition. Rabbi Jacob Agus, a frequent participant in dialogue with Christians and Muslims, finds rabbinic sources that support the idea that there may have been Gentile prophets who were greater than Moses.[10] For Ben Zion Bokser the idea of the righteous Gentile means that other religious traditions are also valid. "The classic Jewish position that the righteous of all nations and all faiths have a share in the world to come implies the legitimacy of diverse paths to God."[11]

---

9. Louis Jacobs, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

10. Jacob B. Agus, "Context and Challenge - A Response," *The Bulletin*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (Spring, 1968), p. 38: "...occasionally the thought is also expressed that prophets greater than Moses have appeared among the nations. Thus, when the Torah says that there was no prophet greater than Moses, the Midrash asserts - "Among the Jews, there was none greater than Moses." But among the nations there might well have been."

11. Ben Zion Bokser, "The Bible, Rabbinic Tradition and Modern Judaism," *ibid.*, p. 16.

There are today other Jewish voices which encourage a Jewish-Christian dialogue,[12] but to my knowledge very few Jewish scholars have ever even considered dialogue with the Eastern religious traditions. However, two of the most influential thinkers from the conservative movement in Judaism have suggested that dialogue with the East could be beneficial to Jews. Robert Gordis, in *Faith for Moderns*, suggests how elements of Hinduism may be valuable for the West

> Yet as a critique of the excesses inherent in the pursuit of the world's physical blessings, the spirit of Hindu thought is perennially valuable. Western religion, reflecting the temper of the civilization in which it functions, is predominantly activistic, but this trait easily passes over into useless bustle and the fever of motion for its own sake. The stress and struggle of achievement often mask little more than acquisitiveness and greed, so that life is robbed of all serenity and peace. Here Oriental religion, with its stress upon the contemplative life as the summum bonum, supplies a much needed balance to the perils of activism. The "truth" lies neither with the West nor with the East, but in a creative tension between the two.[13]

In *God in search of man*, Abraham Joshua Heschel also emphasizes that Judaism could be enriched if dialogue would occur "between the river Jordan and the river Ganges."[14] He believed that it was "vitally important. . .for Judaism to reach out into non-Jewish culture in order to absorb elements which it may use for enrichment of its life and thought."[15]

---

12. An advocate of Jewish-Christian dialogue, Manfred H. Vogel, writes: "According to an old rabbinic saying, God is, so to speak, nourished and strengthened when two Jews discuss matters pertaining to the Torah. Today, one should firmly believe that this is also the case when Jew and Christian discuss matters pertaining to their respective beliefs." "The Problem of Dialogue between Judaism and Christianity," *The Death of Dialogue and Beyond* ed. Sanfred Seltzer and Max L. Stackhouse (New York: Friendship Press, 1969), p. 192.

13. Robert Gordis, *A Faith for Moderns* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1960), p. 295.

14. Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955), p. 15.

15. *Ibid.* It is interesting to note that the Center for Integrative Education whose "main areas of interest have been the mediation of Eastern and Western thought" has realized that Heschel was interested in Eastern thought and asked him to become a member of their Board of Correspondents. A copy of this letter dated June 9, 1972, was given to me by Dr. Heschel.

My contention is that the Gita can be enriching to the lives of Jews. In my examination of the Gita, I will consider three classes of ideas found in the Gita and their relation to the Jewish tradition.

First, ideas stressed in the Gita that from a human perspective seem totally incompatible with the Jewish tradition. The most striking example of such an idea is the doctrine of Incarnation which is as central to the Gita as it is to the Christian tradition. According to the Gita, Krishna is an incarnation (*avatāra*) or appearance of God in human form.

A study of the Jewish response to the Christian doctrine of Incarnation shows that Jews, and I may add, Muslims have not been able to reconcile this idea with their own Scriptural notion of God.[16] However, this idea may still be valuable for Jews in supporting the Biblical affirmation that God is concerned with the lives of human beings in the world. This is a central doctrine of the Gita.

---

16. A Jewish theologian who comes to grips with the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation is Michael Wyschogrod. In my view his position holds great promise for authentic interfaith dialogue. According to Wyschogrod, "The disagreement between Judaism and Christianity on the incarnation must be neither underestimated nor overestimated. We overestimate the difference when Judaism is made to teach not only that the incarnation *did* not happen but that it *could* not have happened. . . I do not think that the Bible is very sympathetic to human preconceptions about what God will or will not, can or cannot do." "A New Stage in Jewish-Christian Dialogue" *Judaism*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Summer, 1982), p. 363.

In answer to the question raised by the Catholic scholar, Clemens Thoma, whether the Incarnation is in opposition to the spirit of the Hebrew Bible, Wyschogrod responds: "Here, I think, We cannot give a clear-cut yes or no answer. The God of the Hebrew Bible is one who enters into relation with man. He has motives and expectations, some of which are fulfilled while others are not. From time to time he comes down to earth from his place of abode and is to be found in specific places on earth. Some of these become his abode on earth, e. g., the Temple of Jerusalem. Even if these expressions are not interpreted completely literally, if they are not to lose all recognizable meaning they must retain some of their normal meaning and, if they do, while we are certainly not left with a God who is a human being, we are left with a God who is not totally dissimilar to a human being." *Ibid.* p. 364.

For a discussion of traditional Jewish sources which speak of God as revealing himself in different forms especially as "A certain beautiful and praiseworthy young man" see Arthur Green "The Children in Egypt and the Theophany at the Sea," *Judaism* (Fall, 1975), pp. 446-456.

It appears to me that the Hindu doctrine of the Incarnation may be less problematic for Jews than the Christian doctrine. Since unlike the Christian doctrine in which Christ becomes a human beng with a real body, Krishna is only an appearance of God in human form with only an apparent body.

The Bhagavad-Gita explains God's purpose for appearing in the world in human form in the following verses:

> Whenever there is a decay of righteousness and a rising up of unrighteousness, O Bharata, I send forth myself.
>
> For the preservation of good, for the destruction of evil, for the establishment of righteousness, I come into being age after age (IV : 7-8).[17]

There is certainly an affinity between this idea presented in the Gita and the Jewish notion that God will send the Messiah when there is much suffering in the world. And just as Krishna comes "for the destruction of evil, for the establishment of righteousness," God sends the Messiah to bring about peace, justice and righteousness.

A second class of ideas found in the Gita may be considered in full agreement with the Jewish position. In his book, *The Significance of the Bhagavad-Gītā for Christian Theology* Geoffrey Parrinder points to two doctrines in the Gita that he considers helpful to Christian theology, "belief in survival of death, and faith in personal God."[18] These two concepts are also important for the Jewish tradition. But I would like to stress other central Jewish ideas with which the Bhagavad-Gita is in agreement.

Hillel's statement, "Do not withdraw from the community," (Avot:II:5) is a cardinal teaching of the Jewish tradition. God demands that human beings devote their energies not only to God, but that they must be involved with other human beings. Human beings must not be divorced from the world of the everyday and should not separate themselves from other human beings. This is also a demand made by God in the Bhagavad-Gita.

---

17. Quotations from the Bhagavad-Gita are from the translation by Eliot Deutsch, The *Bhagavad-Gita* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston 1968), and from the more recent translation by Kees W. Bolle, *The Bhagavadgītâ : A New Translation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1979).

18. E. Geoffrey Parrinder, *The Significance of the Bhagavad-Gita for Christian Theology* (London : Dr. William's Trust, 1968), p. 21.

> Not by abstention from action does a man gain freedom, and not by more renunciation does he attain perfection(III :4)
>
> Perform thy allotted work, for action is superior to inaction; even the maintenace of the body cannot be accomplished without action(III:8)

Dr. Radhakrishnan writes :

> It is incorrect to assume that Hindu thought strained excessively after the unattainable and was guilty of indifference to the problems of the world. We cannot lose ourselves in inner piety when the poor die at our door, naked and hungry· The *Gītā* asks us to live in the world and save it.[19]

Both the Jewish tradition and the Bhagavadgita agree that human beings must not renounce the world; they also agree on how our actions in the world are to be performed.

Rabbi Yose speaks for the entire Jewish tradition when he states, "Let all thine actions be for the sake of Heaven." (Avot: II : 17) All our actions should be performed not out of fear of hell, or desire for paradise, but for love of God. This is also the tendency of the Gita. In fact the prominence which the Gita gives to this idea may be very helpful to Jews in understanding their own tradition more fully.

The Gita states :

> Therefore, always perform the work that has to be done without attachment, for man attains the Supreme by performing work without attachment (III : 19).

This is a central path through which human beings can attain perfection, the path of *karma yoga*, the path of action. But in the Gita *karma yoga* is combined with *bhakti yoga*, the path of love and devotion. This is most clearly explained by Eliot Deutsch.

> In order to act without attachment, without those egoistic motives for the fruits of action that bind one to the world,

19. S. Radhakrisnan, *The Bhagavadgitā* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973), p. 67.

> one must concentrate one's attention upon the Divine: one must fill one's consciousness with the power of loving devotion. Implicit in the whole teaching scheme of the *Gita* is the belief that there is no other way to establish non-attachment than through a new attachment to that which is greater, in quality and power, than that to which one was previously attached. One overcomes the narrow clinging to results, the passionate involvement with the consequences of one's action, only when that passion is replaced by one directed to the Divine. *Bhakti* or devotion is thus in no way excluded from *karma yoga*, but is on the contrary, a necessary condition for it.[20]

Jewish sages throughout the ages struggled with the difficulty of reconciling living fully in the world yet not becoming too attached to the things of this world, They were aware that attachment can lead human beings away from love of God. In their attempt to reconcile this polarity within the Jewish tradition, a number of the most influential Jewish ethical writers, such as Bahya ibn Pakuda and Moses Hayyim Luzzatto, began to stress the world to come and created a strong ascetic tendency in the Jewish tradition that went beyond the teachings of rabbinic Judaism. Julius Guttmann clearly realizes this tendency on the part of Bahya ibn pakuda, "In point of fact, Bahya goes far beyond the clues provided by the Talmud; for though the Talmud places man's ultimate aim in the World to Come, it does not view the moral and religious task of this life exclusively from the viewpoint of the hereafter."[21] In its combining of the path of action with the path of love, the Gita could be a helpful model for Jews who seek to harmonize some of the polarities found in the Jewish tradition.

When one examines the way in which actions are to be performed, it must be emphasized that the Bhagavad-Gita is also speaking of

20. Eliot Deutsch, *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York : Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), p. 163.

21. Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, trans. David W. Silverman (New Yoak: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), p. 108. For Bahya ibn Pakuda the greatest obstacle to complete love and devotion for God is love for this world : "... it is impossible for the love of the Creator to be firmly established in our hearts if love of the world is fixed there." *Duties of the Heart*, Vol. II, p. 341.

specific ritual actions. In an era in which ritual is being attacked, it is important to show that the Gita places a great deal of stress on ritual performed with integrity.

In his essay, "On Translating the Bhagavadgita," Kees Bolle discusses the difficulty that modern scholars have in coming to grips with this aspect of the Gita.

> Over and over the text speaks of the tradition, the age-old customs *(dharma)* that should be *followed, practised.* Ritual work, cult (*karma*) is to be performed, and specific sacrifices (*yajña*) are to be brought, all in accordance with the established liturgy (*vidhi*). It is quite obvious from the existing translations that most scholars had a hard time evaluating all those references positively. Their sloppiness in choosing terms to render the terms in the text speaks an unmistakable disdain for "primitive" and fortunately bygone customs, for magical and superstitious beliefs. In fact, this sloppiness and this disdain are quite wrong, for the cultic topics in the text are articulate, carefully expressed, and coherent. In fact, without an understanding of them, a good deal of the teachings of the Bhagavadgītā is lost on its listeners.[22]

Modern scholars have deemphasized the ritualistic element of the Gita. Ritual, however, occupies a central position in Hinduism. Because this is such a striking parallel to Judaism, I would like to cite several verses from the Gita which stress ritual.

> That man knows renunciation and is disciplined
> who does the required cultic acts not counting
> on their results,
> Not he whose sacrificial fire is extinct
> and who avoids all rituals (VI : 1).
>
> Cult is the way for the sage who aspires
> to discipline (VI : 3).

22. Kees W. Bolle, *The Bhagavadgītā : A New Translation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles : University of California Press, 1979), p. 240.

Think of me, be devoted to me.
Revere me while sacrificing to me.
Thus disciplining yourself, wholly
intent on me, you will come to me (IX : 34).

If a man neglects the scriptural ordinances
and lives according to his desires,
He cannot be successful
or attain happiness or the highest goal.

Therefore, let the Scriptures be your criterion
for distinguishing duties and violations.
You should perform actions and rites which
you know are enjoined in the Scriptures (XVI : 23-24).

Men who do not build upon the result of rituals
perform sacrifices as they are ordained.
"It is our duty," they know, and they concentrate.
Their sacrifice is one of integrity.

A sacrifice is in the order of passion
when it is aimed at results,
Or when it is offered
without honesty (XVII : 11-12).

It is my definitive, supreme judgment
that these works must be performed,
But only after giving up attachment
to them and their effects (XVIII : 6).

The message is clear ; God demands that human beings perform ritual acts with integrity. Another parallel to the Jewish tradition emerges from these verses. Faith in God and love for God are not sufficient ; love must be combined with worship.

Worship and love me (IX : 33).
Through love and worship he [man] recognizes
me [God] XVIII : 55.

Even the person who has attained perfection, union with the divine, may not abstain from performing ritual acts.

Still he performs all actions, all rites (XVIII : 56).

Another significant parallel between Judaism and Hinduism can be seen in the way these two faiths view the nature of God. At the core of the Jewish tradition is the idea that God is demanding. Judaism is not only a religion of love, but also a religion of obligation.

> The first thing a Jew is told is: you can't let yourself go; get into harness, carry the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. .... the predominant feature of Jewish teaching throughout the ages is a sense of constant obligation.[23]

Abraham Heschel considers the primary question for the Jew to be, *what does God demand of us ?*[24] Heschel is true to the Jewish tradition when he states that, "... man is above all a commanded being, a being of whom demands may be made."[25]

The God of the Gita should also be interpreted as a demanding God. In the first chapter of the Gita, Arjuna, the warrior, stands ready to enter into battle. Yet he is overwhelmed by sorrow when he realizes that his own relatives will perish by his actions. At this point God explains to him that it is his duty as a member of the warrior caste to fight for a just cause. A human being must perform the tasks ordained by God no matter how undesirable such duties may seem.

> But if you will not engage in this
> just war,
> You give up your duty and your fame
> and will incur demerit (II : 33).

Thus God's central purpose in the Gita is to convince Arjuna of his obligations. Of course man being no match for God, Arjuna ultimately realizes that he must fulfill God's demands.

> My delusion is cast out ; I have gained understanding
> by your grace, Unshakable One.
> I stand firm ; my doubts are dispelled.
> I shall act according to your word (XVIII : 73).

---

23. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Philadelphia : The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966), p. 240,
24. Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism, op. cit.*, p. 168.
25. Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 107.

The third set of ideas, which I consider the most promising, are those found in the Gita and very much part of the Hindu tradition, but which are rarely stressed in the Jewish tradition. Contemporary Jews, on first exposure to these concepts, would likely judge them to be in conflict with the Judaic tradition. I propose that since these ideas are so crucial to the unity of the religious history of the world, Jewish scholars must re-examine their own tradition in order to give these ideas a more central place in the lives of Jews.

A fundamental doctrine found in the Gita is the idea that there is more than just one religious path that is acceptable to God, and that human beings can be completely transformed by following one of these paths. Some paths may be superior to others in some respects, but any path which includes love and devotion to God can lead to the perfection of man.

God states in the Gita :

> However men draw near to me and wheresoever
> they may be it is always in my path they go
> and I return their love just so (IV : 11).

Radhakrishnan sees in this verse, ". . . . the wide catholicity of the *Gita* religion."[26] He states further that,

> "The *Gita* does not speak of this or that form of religion but speaks of the impulse which is expressed in all forms, the desire to find God and understand our relation to Him. The same God is worshipped by all".[27]

The Gita in this verse does not claim that all religious traditions are equally true. It merely claims that all human beings who devote themselves to their God are really worshipping the same God. That this idea is not foreign to Judaism can be seen from Abraham Heschel's interpretation of a passage from the prophet Malachi:

> For from the rising of the sun to its setting My name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name is great among the nations, says the Lord of Hosts (Malachi I : 11).

26. Radhakrishnan, *op. cit.*, p. 150
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159

> This statement refers undoubtedly to the contemporaries of the prophet. But who were these worshippers of One God? At the time of Malachi there was hardly a large number of proselytes. Yet the statement declares: All those who worship their gods do not know it, but they are really worshipping Me.
>
> It seems that the prophet proclaims that men all over the world, though they confess different conceptions of God, are really worshipping One God, the Father of all men, though they may not be aware of it.[28]

In this article I have argued that it is legitimate for Jews to study and absorb the ideas of foreign texts. I have also attempted to show how a specific Hindu text, the Gita, can enrich Judaism. In my discussion of the Gita I have shown that some critical ideas found in the Gita are incompatible with the Jewish tradition. I do not advocate the idea that all religions are essentially the same, nor would I obliterate the sharp distinctions that exist between Hinduism and Judaism. However, in this study I have emphasized the similarities rather than the differences between Judaism and Hinduism. By becoming aware of the common elements of the great world religions which support each other, the Jew is more likely to be open to the possibility that Hinduism is also a spiritual path in which God is involved. Viewed from this perspective, it is clear that saints may arise in the Hindu tradition.

I have especially stressed the Hindu idea of tolerance for other spiritual paths. The Jew who finds this idea attractive can then return to his own tradition and reexamine the Jewish expression of tolerance, that saints arise among all the nations of the world.

For the Jew who is open to the possibility that his life may be enriched by an encounter with the Hindu tradition, the Bhagavad-Gita, one of the most important sacred texts of Hinduism, may be recommended.

---

28. Abraham J. Heschel, "No Religion is an Island," *op. cit.*, p. 127.