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# Peering Into the Mouth of God: Reflections on the Dangerous Possibility of Really Taking Religions Seriously - 1996

Francis X. Clooney S.J.

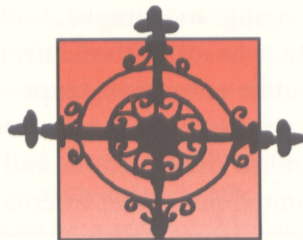
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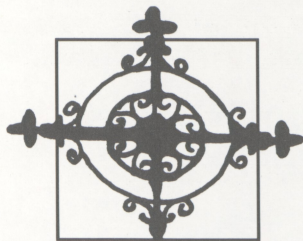
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In 1994, through the generosity of the Bannan Foundation, the Department of Religious Studies at Santa Clara University has inaugurated the Santa Clara Lectures. The series is bringing to campus leading scholars in Christian theology, who offer the University community and the general public an ongoing exposure to debate on the most significant issues of our times. Santa Clara University will publish these lectures and distribute them throughout the United States and internationally.

## Future Lectures

“What’s Wrong With Being Right?”

Mary Jo Weaver

Monday, April 15, 1996

7:30 p.m., Mayer Theatre

Dear readers:

This lecture is printed in black ink to facilitate duplication for personal or classroom use.

## Peering Into the Mouth of God: Reflections on the Dangerous Possibility of Really Taking Religions Seriously

By Francis X. Clooney, S.J.

### I. Religious Questions in Time of Change

At the beginning of the great civil war between the five Pandava brothers and their 100 cousins, the second of the brothers, Arjuna, who is clearly the foremost warrior on the Pandava side, goes forth to survey the armies arrayed for battle. In this way he plans to prepare himself psychologically for the fight.

But contrary to his expectations, he is struck rather with an overwhelmingly powerful, existential awareness of just how awful this fraternal war is going to be, as a bloody struggle within one family, among relatives, wise teachers, and their disciples. Whichever side wins, he realizes, dear ones will be killed on both sides, and the structure of family and society shattered; victory or defeat, the problems likely to result are worse than those that had precipitated the war. Fighting will destroy the very values for which the war is apparently being fought. Arjuna finds himself in a quite unexpected situation for a warrior: The very idea of fighting appalls him. Yet not fighting will also lead to ruin and contradict the ideal of always doing one’s duty, according to one’s role in life.

Arjuna surveys the scene with dismay, and is paralyzed with grief and sorrow:

*Dejected, filled with extreme pity, he said, “Krishna, I see my kinsmen gathered here, wanting war. My limbs sink, my mouth grows parched, my body trembles, the hair bristles on my flesh.*

*“The flaw of pity blights my very being; conflicting duties confound my reason. I ask you to tell me decisively: Which is better? I am your pupil. Teach me who surrenders to you!*

*“I see nothing that could drive away the grief that withers my senses, even if I were to win kingdoms of unrivaled wealth on earth and sovereignty over the gods.”*

*Arjuna spoke in this way to Krishna, and then said, “I shall not fight.” He fell silent. (1.28–29; 2.7–9)<sup>1</sup>*



Such is the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita, one of India's great religious classics. In Arjuna, the traditional religious and cultural ideals current in the 2nd century BCE are brought forward and severely questioned. With Arjuna, the entire culture stands there perplexed: Is there coherence to what we have always believed, or do our values conflict with one another at a deep level?<sup>2</sup>

One might stop there: crisis, flight, despair, and perhaps a renunciation of the world. But Arjuna's crisis is a beginning and not an end, because his needs are so deeply felt and (now) so well-articulated. This stark vision of war unsettles his settled truths, and it also makes him think, and because he is compelled to think, something very interesting and fruitful can come from his situation: He can learn. His pain is a beginning, not an end.

For the Gita shows Arjuna a way forward. Arjuna's charioteer is the warrior and divine counselor Krsna, who turns to Arjuna in his moment of crisis and undertakes to restore his ability to fight by a series of teachings that reveal what is really at stake in any of life's struggles, what it means to be Arjuna, and who is this Krsna who now speaks to Arjuna.

Even today, the Gita is meant to clear away the confusions and to allay the grief of people who are in trouble, even religious trouble. Although our world today is different from Arjuna's, and modern America different from ancient India—our wars are different, our values, our loves and hates—we too are people confronted with conflicts, new possibilities, confusions, all the dangers and hopes that distinguish our time.

That our world is a place of many religions is one of the great challenges before us. Though reactions to the diversity of religions will vary—some like the diversity, some ignore it, some fear it—most of us are concerned and feel challenged, and many of us are even overwhelmed by the religious possibilities that beckon to us today. Like Arjuna, we may be shocked by today's world, seeing it as a place of uncertainty and even danger, where the meaning of being a Christian is increasingly unclear as religions jostle together and diminish each other's claims to universality. Is it really possible to remain faithful to my own tradition and yet participate in this world of religious plurality?

My starting point then is to suggest that the Gita can shed light on our path too, in this age of encounter among the world religions. As we

ask ourselves how we will be involved with people of other traditions, let us ponder the teaching of Krsna to Arjuna, as an example that can illumine our experience as Christians who seek to find the right religious way to live in the world of pluralism.

Drawing on the Gita, I identify seven moments in the process of developing a mature theology and spirituality for this age of interreligious encounter:

*I. Religious Questions in Time of Change:* As we have already seen, we are in a period of genuine religious change, where religious people are faced with the religious challenge of rethinking their identities; the solution can be neither a denial of who we are and have been nor a rejection of the new possibilities around us.

*II. Recovering the Self:* We cannot proceed wisely in this situation without rediscovering a deeper, bedrock sense of that self that underlies everything else we might say about ourselves religiously: What is the core of my religious identity?

*III. Every Thing and Every One in God:* If we do discover our deepest sense of self in an honestly confronted situation of pluralism, we can then proceed to articulate an understanding of who God is, and how God is present to us in the wide variety of human experiences. This we might call *the theology of religions*.

*IV. God in Every One and Every Thing:* Alert, grounded, with a sense of God, we must still proceed to investigate the details of religious traditions, with the expectation that we shall discover God in that detail and not in abstraction from it. This we might call *comparative theology*.

*V. Seeing God Face to Face:* When we have sorted out, simplified, and focused our understanding of God and self, we must be ready for a further, open and integrated spirituality, in which a direct and simple vision of God again becomes possible.

*VI. All Kinds of People:* Whatever value we might discover in our own inquiry, we must remain mindful that all the preceding points need to be moderated in relation to the abilities of specific individuals and communities.



*VII. Disciples and Teachers:* The end of our reflection on the Gita is not the end of our quest to understand anew our identity and work in this world of pluralism; the task then just begins, we must learn more, we must learn to speak in our own voice.

We have already reflected a bit on the first moment, so let us proceed with the six that follow.

## II. Recovering the Self

As we have already heard, Arjuna's existential crisis becomes so acute that he slumps to the ground, unable to act; his confidence is shaken; he is in great need. Yet this becomes for him a teachable moment, on the basis of which a new relationship with his old friend Krsna can begin. Because Arjuna has unanswered questions, Krsna can now undertake a gentle and multifaceted effort to get Arjuna to realize his identity.

So Krsna begins to teach him, weaving back and forth a series of appeals by which to get Arjuna to examine his self, noting what he is and is not. He explains to Arjuna that his crisis is fueled by a mistaken sense of self. He grieves because he has identified himself and those he loves with what is born and dies, what changes, what is helped and hurt by things that come into being and pass away. But life and death need not be a source of sorrow, since the reality underlying them is quite wonderful:

*You grieve for those beyond grief, though you seem to speak words of insight. But the learned do not grieve for the dead or the living.*

*Never have I not existed, nor you, nor these rulers, and never in the future shall we cease to exist. (2.11–12)*

Indeed, this self

*is not born, it does not die; having come to be, it will never cease to be; unborn, enduring, constant, and primordial, it is not killed when the body is killed.*

*It cannot be cut or burned; it cannot be wet or withered; it is enduring, all-pervasive, fixed, immovable, there from the beginning. (2.20, 24)*

Krsna advises Arjuna to search out anew the basis of his identity, to realize that deeper self. He must depend only on that self, and refashion his life

accordingly, detached from all the things people want to gain or fear to lose in this life.

As self-understanding leads to detachment, it opens the way to a life that is marked by duty and not by ambition, by freedom and not by desire:

*But let a person find delight within himself and feel inner joy and pure contentment in himself; then there is nothing more to be done.*

*He has no stake here in deeds done or undone, nor does his purpose depend on other creatures.*

The enactment of this program of self-knowledge is of course more than a matter of ideas about the self; it is also a new program of action. Arjuna must learn new habits of detachment, how to integrate his life in a way that is mental and spiritual as well as physical. He must find within himself a deeper foundation beyond the changes that torment him, a peace by which he can live newly, differently, freely:

*Always perform with detachment any action you must do; performing action with detachment, one achieves supreme good. (3.17–19)*

*The disciplined person who knows reality should think, "I do nothing at all," even while seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, eating, walking, sleeping, breathing.*

*When talking, giving, taking, opening and closing his eyes, he keeps thinking, "It is the senses that engage sense objects." (5.8–9)*

By this steady process of integration—a yoga that is both spiritual and moral—Arjuna has to learn to stop seeing things as other people see them, to see the world with an even, wide-open eye:

*Self-contented in knowledge and learning, his senses subdued, on the summit of existence, impartial to clay, stone, or gold, the person of discipline is disciplined.*

*He is set apart by his detachment toward comrades, allies, enemies, neutrals, nonpartisans, foes, friends, both the good and the evil.*

*"He does not waver, like a lamp sheltered from the wind": This is the*



*simile recalled for a person of discipline, restrained in thought and practicing self-discipline.* (6.8-9, 19)

Then he will be free, then he can re-enter the field of action without the internal encumbrance of fear or need.

This teaching opens up many possibilities for us, as we seek a spiritual response to religious pluralism. The Gita invites us first to examine our commitments, habits of mind and heart, to reflect on how we have integrated our lives or not—before we turn our attention to the possibilities and challenges posed to us by religious pluralism. We need first to clarify our Christian self, letting go of anger and fear and animosity, learning to live within our own Christian tradition without being attached to anything in it. If we are not free as Christians, how can we be free in our meetings with people of other traditions? With Christian commitment and freedom as a starting point and not a conclusion, we are enabled to act intelligently and freely in relation to religions.

The Gita may also be taken as pushing us further, calling us to a deep spiritual equanimity by which we would not consider even “Christianity” something to be clung to; it calls us to a detachment by which we would learn to look with open eyes on every religious possibility we encounter, constrained neither by fears nor by ambitions. This is a perfect indifference that enables us to be free even in relation to our own Christian tradition.

I think here of the words of St. Paul:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3.7–8a)

This spiritual equanimity would not be a generic embrace of everything religious, but something simpler and deeper, a way of being Christian that is not rooted in fear or attachment or anger. It would have to do with the possibility of moving about in today’s religious world peacefully and openly, because of an ever-deepening self-knowledge—seeing ourselves as God sees us.

### III. Every Thing and Every One in God

As Arjuna learns about himself, he learns about Krsna, for knowledge of

self opens into knowledge of God. Once he has been strengthened with self-knowledge and a sense of the integral way to his own self, he is ready for knowledge of God and the way to God—for theology in its more direct form. In chapter 9, Krsna promises to show him the highest of mysteries, who God is:

*I will teach the deepest mystery to you, since you find no fault; realizing it with knowledge and learning, you will be free from misfortune.* (9.1)

This ninth chapter—theology on the battlefield, in the midst of real life—is good and interesting theology; it makes many highly interesting claims about the nature of God, how we relate to God, and how we evaluate the ways in which other people relate to God.

Let us note several of these claims. We hear first that all of reality must be understood in God and not independently:

*The whole universe is spun by my unmanifest form; all creatures exist in me, but I do not exist in them.*

*These creatures are really not in me; behold the power of my discipline: My self quickens creatures, sustaining them without being in them.* (9.4–5)

Even religious practice subsists in Krsna:

*I am the rite, the sacrifice, the libation for the dead, the healing herb, the sacred hymn, the clarified butter, the fire, the oblation.* (9.16)

Indeed, all the various ways people have acted religiously in seeking to relate to the divine can be understood as ways of reaching Krsna:

*When devoted people sacrifice to other deities with faith, they sacrifice to me, Arjuna, however aberrant the rites.* (9.23)

Not all paths are equally good—the traditionally revered ways of reaching him remain privileged—but one can reach Krsna in any way that is motivated by a pure heart. Every religious path is really a path to Krsna, for ultimately he is near to every person who acts with devotion:

*The leaf or flower or fruit or water that he offers with devotion, I take from the person of self-restraint in response to his devotion.*



*Whatever you do—what you take, what you offer, what you give, what penances you perform—do as an offering to me, Arjuna! (9.26–7)*

The way to God is open; although the categories by which we divide people up are not forgotten, they are pushed to the side:

*I am impartial to all creatures, and no one is hateful or dear to me; but people devoted to me are in me, and I am within them.*

*If he is devoted solely to me, even a person of evil life must be deemed a person of virtue, for his resolve is right.*

*His spirit quickens to sacred duty, and he finds eternal peace; Arjuna, know that no one devoted to me is lost.*

*If they rely on me, Arjuna, women, commoners, people of low rank, even people born in wombs of evil, reach the highest way.*

*How easy it is then for holy priests and devoted royal sages—in this transient world of sorrow, devote yourself to me! (9.29–33)*

We can draw many valuable lessons from this chapter—beginning with the obvious point that there is a developed and nuanced theology in an ancient, Asian tradition! Following the line of development that unfolds in the Gita, we can say that an integral response to religious pluralism requires us to articulate together an understanding of God and how our understanding of God opens a way to understand other religions. We must construct an adequate theology to account for what we believe so that we can understand our relationships with others, learn from them, and speak to them.

The Gita prompts us to write this theology imaginatively and comprehensively, with an appreciation of God that is authentically Christian, yet large enough to find ways of including all kinds of religious experiences. We can draw the general pattern of this theological openness from the Gita, but then also listen more attentively to other words that speak of God's inclusive power. I am reminded for instance of the appeal to the fullness of Christ that we find in Ephesians:

[May you] have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the

fulness of God. (Ephesians 3.18-19)

However we go about stating this open understanding of God, it is most important to note where the Gita locates this understanding: It comes *after* an initial realization and admission of need, and *after* the consequent retrieval of self; to reassess and state our understanding of God is yet a third step to take. Though God may be first, theology is not. Personal and communal self-knowledge are preparatory for a fuller understanding of who God is; once personal and social identity are set forth in a way that shows how integration is possible and even simple for those who choose it, then theology can be set forth, and with this theology one can begin to locate more clearly what one learns from other religions.

We do well to listen to the Gita in this regard, since otherwise the theology we compose in the face of pluralism may be an abstraction—an intellectual construct that has no specific, concrete grounding—or just a project motivated by a self-protective instinct, by ambition or fear. If we pay attention to the world of religious pluralism, and if we recover a root sense of Christian identity, *then* we can theologize more fruitfully, in a way that is more able to respond positively to other people's ways of being religious—with an openness to how easy God makes it for us, for all human beings, to find our way home to God.

#### IV. God in Every One and Every Thing

Though chapter 9 has a certain completeness to it, the Gita does not end there. If a proper understanding of God is not a beginning, neither is it an end; if a theology of religions is not the first step in our understanding of other religions, it is not the last, either. The theological presentation of who Krsna is and how he subsumes all other religious realities into himself, is itself simply the starting point for yet another round of reflective, spiritual, and theological investigation. Chapter 10 offers a basis for the “experimental” approach that builds on the theory mapped out in chapter 9 while clearly going beyond it. In chapter 10 the value of finding God in all things is tested and put into action, as Arjuna asks to know in detail who Krsna is, concretely:

*Tell me without reserve the divine powers of your self, the powers by which you abide, pervading these worlds.*

*Lord of discipline, how can I know you as I meditate on you—in what diverse aspects can I think of you, Krishna?*



*Recount in full extent the discipline and power of your self, Krishna,  
I can never hear enough of your immortal speech. (10.16–18)*

Krsna responds by proclaiming who he is, in detail:

*I am the self abiding in the heart of all creatures; I am their beginning,  
their middle, and their end.*

*I am Visnu striding among sun gods, I am the radiant sun among lights, I  
am lightning among the wind gods, the moon among stars.*

*I am the song in sacred lore; I am Indra, among the gods;  
I am the mind of the senses, the consciousness of creatures.*

*I am gracious Shiva among the howling storm gods, the lord of wealth,  
among demigods and demons, fire blazing among the bright gods, I am  
Meru among mountains. (10.20–23)*

Of course, God is always more than the sum of the concrete ideas about God we are able to achieve. Krsna concludes by saying that this attention to detail opens a process that will never end:

*Fiery hero, endless are my divine powers,  
of my power's extent I have barely hinted.*

*Whatever is powerful, lucid, splendid, or invulnerable, has its source in a  
fragment of my brilliance.*

*What use is so much knowledge to you, Arjuna? I stand sustaining the  
entire world with a fragment of my being. (10.40–42)*

We cannot take the time to find God in everything, but there is room for some experiments and investigations, as we learn to see religious realities as exemplary, opening up from and into God—as we learn to look for God in the details of life, religious life, in particular. Then, in the end, we realize that God is more than we can ever imagine, concretely.

Chapter 10—specificity, attention, discovery in practice of what faith might predict—models for me what I have in mind when I speak of the practice of “comparative theology,” a way of faith that seeks to understand, even itself, through attention to what lies beyond the Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> This concrete theological practice is consequent upon the long ascetical

process of coming to know oneself and coming to know God, first generally, now in detail. We examine the specific realities of the world around us, and discover the ways in which God is present in them, concretely.

Allow me to quote St. Paul on the spirit of this search:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4.8)

It is easy enough for us to say that God can be found in all things; the Gita invites us to act accordingly. If comparative study is undertaken with a sense of self and God, it can show us God over and over, in old and new ways.

Indeed, this whole lecture is just one example of comparative theology, by which I am inviting you to think through some Christian theological positions within the frame of the Gita. What do we in fact find as we enter more deeply into reflection on the details of our own religion and those of others? Are we able to find God in the midst of this reflection on the Gita?

## V. Seeing God Face to Face

But the experiments of the comparativist are not the end either; the Gita does not end with the realization that Krsna is present in each detail of life. Arjuna wants something clearer, simpler, more direct, a vision that is in keeping with what he has already learned and discovered. He wants to see what he has heard:

*To favor me you revealed the deepest mystery of the self, and by your words  
my delusion is dispelled.*

*I heard from you in detail how creatures come to be and die, Krishna,  
and about the self in its immutable greatness.*

*Just as you have described yourself, I wish to see your form in all its  
majesty, Krishna, supreme among all people.*

*If you think I can see it, reveal to me your immutable self, Krishna, lord  
of discipline. (11.1–4)*



That this vision actually occurs is a gift, for it goes beyond anything Arjuna can count on. Krsna gives him a divine eye, and he begins to see more clearly than he has ever seen before:

The vision mounts in intensity as Arjuna actually begins to see. As his vision grows clear, he sees first with delight and then with awe and fear; he sees that God is more than he has imagined God to be:

*If the light of a thousand suns were to rise in the sky at once,  
it would be like the light of that great spirit.*

*I see your boundless form everywhere, the countless arms, bodies, mouths,  
and eyes; Lord of all, I see no end, or middle or beginning to your totality.  
(11.12, 16)*

As he looks into the mouth of Krsna, Arjuna realizes that to see the infinite God is to see too much, all at once:

*Seeing the many mouths and eyes of your great form, its many arms,  
thighs, feet, bellies, and fangs, the worlds tremble and so do I.*

*Visnu, seeing you brush the clouds with flames of countless colors, your  
mouths agape, your huge eyes blazing, my inner self quakes and I find no  
resolve or tranquility.*

*Seeing the fangs protruding from your mouths like the fires of time, I lose  
my bearings and I find no refuge; be gracious, Lord of Gods, shelter of the  
universe. (11.23–25)*

The vision has this terrible culmination because seeing God has to do with going beyond both theory and measured practice, letting go of all finite, lesser realities, finding them consumed by God. It reaches a terrifying ultimacy, but even this ultimacy mirrors for Arjuna his human situation, his initial sense of the conflict. Here too, as in chapter 1, he is physically afflicted and convulsed; here too, he is overwhelmed by memory, by a sense of what he had previously taken for granted. He sees how he had taken his familiarity of Krishna for granted—a familiarity that now seems rightly, terribly lost:

*Thinking you a friend, I boldly said, “Welcome, Krishna! Welcome,  
cousin, friend!” Beside myself—or from love—I failed to know your great-  
ness.*

*If sometimes in jest I offended you, alone or publicly, at sport, rest, sitting,  
or at meals, I beg your patience, unfathomable Krishna. (11.41–42)*

All of this is too much for Arjuna—the intensity of the vision, the realization that to see God is to see time and death, the way in which this takes apart his ordinary, everyday reality—so in the end he asks for yet another grace, the grace to see less, the grace of the familiar, ordinary life:

*I am thrilled, and yet my mind trembles with fear at seeing what has not  
been seen before. Show me, God, the form I know—be gracious, Lord of  
Gods, Shelter of the World.*

*I want to see you as before, with your crown and your mace, and the dis-  
cus in your hand. O Thousand-Armed God, assume the four-armed form  
embodied in your totality. (11.45–46)*

The Gita advises us that good theology must open up and make way for a desire for vision, for ever greater and fuller experience—for us as individuals, and for the whole Christian community. Theology must open into knowledge of God, into direct experiences of God that are made possible by words to which God can never be reduced. When we arrive at the possibility of vision—after self-integration, after our theory about God, after our discovery of God in the details—we still have to come to a direct realization of what we have been looking for we have to see God.

But it is basic to chapter 11 that visions of God that give us hope and those that terrify us cannot be taken separately: To look into God is to begin everything altogether, what we want to see and what we don't. We see our God and our death at the same time, the renewal of our tradition and the end of it as we thought we knew it. Here I think of Deuteronomy, in which these powerful words come to us:

*Behold, the Lord our God has shown us his glory and greatness, and  
we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire; we have this day  
seen God speak with a human and he still lives. Now therefore why  
should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice  
of the Lord any more, we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that  
has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of fire,  
as we have, and still lived? (Deuteronomy 5:24–26)*

Or as Isaiah says,



In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a person of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." (Isaiah 6.1–5)

In today's world of religious pluralism, the Gita may also be taken as suggesting that such a vision of God can be realized even across religious boundaries, provided we *ask* for it and learn a way to overcome both our fear of pluralism and our efforts to name and theorize about it.

To see anything of God today, we have to be willing to look and keep looking, though the vision of God may be unsettling, frightening. Crossing familiar boundaries because God calls us to a more direct experience of God is dangerous, and reflecting on this encounter beyond boundaries can be unsettling, terrifying. It disorients, dislocates, opens a new world not limited by any particular expectation we might have already in place. It deserves more than a utopian confidence that would make it vague and vaguely attractive, safely at the horizon, comforting. We cannot bargain, settle for just part of God, even if in the end, like Arjuna, we want to find smaller, more comfortable ways to nurture our relationship with God.

This mingling of fascination, love, and dread always comes to the fore when we seek after God, when we look for God in a world of religious pluralism. The crisis, confusion, dangers, and possibilities of pluralism, and not some oasis apart from them, make up the place where we shall see God. When we have seen God, we still have to look again at this world in which we live; there is no way around it.

As we begin to take our own religion and other religions seriously, it is not wise for us to speak glibly of progress; because pluralism is a religious issue, it is not simply a comforting or troubling fact of modern life. It is about finding God in new ways, seeing more of God, differently, and this is in part a dangerous experience. The possibilities must be felt, and then we can talk about, and from, the feeling. There has to be an upheaval, a

shock. It can begin in words; but it cannot come just from words; it has to be a kind of vision that both appalls us and opens us to God. The vision that comes in the end may be overwhelming, shattering, no matter how well we understand it. And that is good for us.

## VI. All Kinds of People

The great vision in chapter 11 is not the end of the Gita; many incidental questions remain,<sup>4</sup> including the important one, who is this Arjuna? Is he just an individual? The beloved of Krsna? The model warrior? Every human being? So, too, today we ask, Who wants all of these religious possibilities to be opened, who will dare to follow through on them, all the way? Who cares enough about tradition to love it deeply, and yet stand open as to where it might lead? A key point in the last chapters of the Gita is that such questions must be asked, since the teaching of the Gita, however powerful, has always to be assessed in terms of the kinds of people who might be receiving it. Not everyone wants to see God; not everyone is ready for the Gita.

In several key passages in these latter chapters, the issue of identity comes to the fore: There are many different kinds of people, and this is a religiously and theologically significant fact that tells us much about what to expect and do. According to the Gita, all reality, including human reality, is made of three basic constituents that serve as the basis for material and human reality: what one might call the dull *tamas*, the energetic *rajas* and the perceptive *sattva*. The Gita says there are three basic types of people in whom one or another of the three constituents predominates. First, there is the lazy person made mostly of *tamas*, who degenerates even within his or her own place. Second, there is the passionate and energetic person made of *rajas*, who enthusiastically undertakes activities, driven by the stimulations of the moment. Third, there is the person made of *sattva*, who proceeds with awareness and understanding, neither fleeing from reality nor violently seeking to change it. The person of *sattva* is connatural with the way things really are (*sat*), the truth (*satya*), and he or she is most likely to be able to respond honestly to reality, in and from the truth.

Different people, different ways of being religious, for better or worse: Unless one recognizes people for what they are—in some ways the same, in many ways slightly or largely different, on all kinds of matters, including religious issues—one will inevitably be disappointed by them. As the Gita tells us, we must find out where we belong:



*Each one achieves success by focusing on his own action;  
hear how one finds success by focusing on his own action.*

*Worshipping the source of all creatures' activity, by which all this was  
spun, by his own action a person finds success.*

*Better to do one's own duty imperfectly than to do another's well;  
doing action intrinsic to his being, a person avoids guilt. (18.45–47)*

As is implied by this quotation, these chapters also constitute a discourse on caste, for attention to the nature of the individual is always accompanied by attention to the makeup of society as a whole.

Various kinds of people, complex communal identities: In our inquiry across religious boundaries, we need to take an honest look at who we are, as individuals and as community. High ideals do not help, unless they are connected back to who we really are.

Some of the possibilities can be described imaginatively. Some people have a strong dose of *tamas* in their spiritual identities; they see only the woeful side of things, if anything at all. One might imagine such persons to be liberal or conservative, interested in religions or not, but they are likely only to make things worse by their thoughts on religions. Some people are on fire with *rajas*, and we might imagine them to be able to make contributions that are wonderful, but tinged with fear or anger; they often do a bit too much, pushing things further than they are ripe to go. They need to slow down. Some people radiate *sattva*, and it is attractive to imagine that such persons, in tune with the world as it really is, can develop a more open and productive encounter with people of other religions.

But even if we do not begin to speculate on kinds of persons in so concrete a fashion, taking the Gita seriously in regard to this diversity in human nature means that our expectations must be limited; we must not try to force everyone into the same mold. We need a differentiated sense of the people who make up the church, their particular and appropriate goals and visions. People remain themselves in the religious context, too. No matter how powerful a vision, people will receive it (or fail to receive it) in different ways, different things happening with different people, at different stages. Interreligious encounter is not for everyone; indeed, we are all better off if some people do not undertake it, neither trying it out nor attacking it.

A reasonable goal is for us to heighten our expectations regarding those for whom a certain kind of religious encounter does seem to be a promising possibility—but also to dampen our expectations regarding others among us who seem neither interested nor capable of such endeavors, now. What we might think of as universally important may not be received in that way by others. That's how people are, that's how we are—parts, not wholes, we have our own limits; we have to learn to live with ourselves just as we are.

As we think about kinds of individuals, we must also think about the nature of the communities to which we belong. In the Gita, the discussion of the kinds of people is connected with a discussion of caste, i.e., of the complex of interrelationships among those involved in the system. Though the teaching on contentment with caste raises warning signals in our minds—it is always in danger of becoming a tract in genetics or race—one basic point is worth our consideration: We need a sense of community, and this must always be differentiated according to smaller groups within that whole, groups that can live and work together.

Any of us, perhaps most of us—willing and consciously or not—already dwell religiously across boundaries, our lives are already more complicated than we imagine them to be. Yet in today's rather heated environment, the boundaries of the “we” are likely to be more severely defined—like Arjuna, we see diversity, we grow anxious about who we are, we draw back—and also more provisional, open as real changes take place. Two points are worthy of mention.

First, and in the immediate future, we have to keep asking ourselves within the Christian community how it matters that in our midst we have many different ways of relating to other religions—that in turn means that we now have differing ways of articulating our Christian identities. If we sort out and nuance our understanding and expectations regarding one another, the possibilities and challenges before us can be better understood and practically assessed, and we will be more likely to meet them well, in community as well as by ourselves.

Second, new possibilities lead to new crises and new visions, and communities are reshaped, new boundaries drawn. While the names by which we call ourselves—Christian, Catholic, Hindu—can be reaffirmed, they will also be ever so slightly inaccurate when compared with the communities we actually share. We are Christians, and above all we share commu-



nity with Christians, who share with us a commitment to Christ; but our viable community may in fact also include people from other religious traditions, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims. Whether these newly gathered communities will flourish or fade or fracture remains to be seen; but at least the Gita calls us to see these new gatherings as truly religious invitations for us to belong to new communities. Of course, it takes a great deal of wisdom to see communal change as a good development; forming religious community in a world of pluralism is a very great task indeed. Perhaps this is why the Gita's reflection on kinds of persons and kinds of community occurs primarily later and not earlier in the text.

## VII. Disciples and Teachers

This presentation has been an experiment, for I have been trying to examine with you what we can learn from the Gita as we take religious pluralism to heart, seriously and vulnerably, as a deeply religious opportunity to change radically (chapter 1). In turn, we have seen how the Gita advises us to ask who we are religiously, and to explore how we can let go of what we usually think ourselves to be as Christians, and deepen our basic commitments, all for the sake of true religious, Christian freedom in a world of pluralism (chapters 2 through 6). It becomes possible to articulate just how we understand who God is and how God is at work in the world, inside and outside our expected religious boundaries (chapter 9). And then we can pay close attention to other religious traditions—their spirituality and ethical practices along with their philosophies and systematic syntheses—in order to know God in the particulars of these traditions (chapter 10). In turn, all of this can be taken as a prelude to a newer and fuller experience of God (chapter 11). The entire project might or might not work out, depending on the kind of people we are (chapters 13 through 18, in part). In the end, the Gita invites us to hope, we can find union with God, a more solid sense of self, and then return to action in this world.

Thus far my experiment with the Gita.

A practical question then arises: What next? Even if we grant that we *can* undertake an extended reflection of this sort on the Gita and, if I am right, *can* find our current situation illuminated by the Gita, still I have not intended to argue that the Gita has any singular, privileged value for the Christian. It is not our answer to religious pluralism, though it can richly inform how we respond. This reflection must be complemented by drawing on other traditions—and by renewed attention to the Christian

tradition itself.

One might look at classic texts that speak of religious vision, for example, *The Life of Moses* so powerfully and richly retold by Gregory of Nyssa: What does it mean to begin to see God, how does one become the kind of person who can see God, and where does vision lead? Or one might make use of the pedagogy of Bonaventure's *Journey of the Mind to God* to trace a path upward toward God, inward toward the holy of holies, while making the imaginative connections necessary to see this as a way of tracing religious truths. And so on. I am sure each of us can suggest other examples that, like the Gita, will help us to imagine our way through the comparative venture.

Or one might simply begin with scenes from the Gospels. For example, I have found it helpful to reflect on the story of the woman at the well in the Gospel According to St. John, taking this lovely tale as a paradigm that represents a deeply ordinary, human encounter that also cuts across religious boundaries and makes it possible for the woman and her neighbors to find God.

But what comes to mind just now is another Gospel story, one of the primal moments in Christian consciousness: the fundamental call to discipleship, where vocation, learning and self-realization serve as the beginning of one's work in preaching the Good News. I think of this simple, lovely, powerful Gospel narrative where Peter marks the way for us:

While the people pressed upon him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret. And he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. And when he had ceased speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a great shoal of fish; and as their nets were breaking, they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink.

But when Simon Peter saw this, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying,



“Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful person.” For he was astonished, and all that were with him, at the catch of fish that they had taken; and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, “Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching human beings.” And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him. (Luke 5.1–11)

Like Peter, like Arjuna, we do our work and live by what we have been taught, but sometimes the process breaks down; we can no longer do what is expected of us; we are frustrated and sink dejected to the ground. But then we meet God by chance, in the course of life’s ordinary troubles, and sometimes we learn to listen and be surprised by what lies within ourselves, by who God is. Then we are truly changed and begin a new time in our life, speaking in our true voice, wanting more and more of God.

Near the end of the Gita, Krsna reminds Arjuna that his real task is now to teach as he has been taught, to put into words as well as deeds what he has learned about himself and his God:

*Keep your mind on me, be my devotee, sacrificing, bow to me—you will come to me, I promise, for you are dear to me. Relinquishing all sacred duties to me, make me your only refuge; I shall free you from all evils, do not grieve.*

*You must not speak of this to one who is without penance and devotion, or who does not wish to listen, or who finds fault with me. When he shares this deepest mystery with others devoted to me, giving me his total devotion, a person will come to me without doubt.*

*No mortal can perform service for me that I value more, and no other person on earth will be more dear to me than he is. I judge the person who studies our dialogue on sacred duty to offer me sacrifice through wisdom.*

*Krsna, my delusion is destroyed, and by your grace I have regained my memory; I stand here, my doubt dispelled, ready to act on your words. (18.65–70)*

Arjuna returned to the battlefield, now a warrior for righteousness, Simon Peter began his new work, now a fisherman for God’s sake. Like Peter and Arjuna, for us too there is a new spiritual journey to be taken, on which we can find ourselves and our God, in ways we had not imagined in

our encounters with religions. Like Arjuna and Peter, we, too, can then speak from that experience, in our own voice.

If we listen to one another in our own communities—however we define where it is that we belong—and if we pay close attention to the changing world around us, with our eyes and ears wide open, then we will be better able to hear God’s word and see God too, and put all of this into practice without discouragement, fear, or anger. We will have something to say at the great and small meeting points of religions, and lead our brothers and sisters to find God too.

The last words of the Gita are Arjuna’s final response to Krsna; no longer dejected by life and what it expects of him, he stands up straight, puts aside his doubts, and returns to the task that awaits him:

*Krsna, my delusion is destroyed, and by your grace I have recollected my self.*

*I stand up now, my doubts dispelled, ready to act on your words. (18.73)*

And that, indeed, is one very fine lesson to be learned from the Gita.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout, all translations are taken from Barbara Miller, *The Bhagavad Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), with occasional slight adaptations.

<sup>2</sup> For more background on the Bhagavad Gita, see R.C. Zaehner, *The Bhagavad Gita With a Commentary Based on the Original Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). For a Christian reading of the Gita, see Bede Griffiths’ *River of Compassion: A Christian Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> On the nature of comparative theology, see Francis X. Clooney, S.J., “The Emerging Field of Comparative Theology: A Bibliographical Review (1989–95),” in *Theological Studies* 56.3 (September 1995) 521–50.

<sup>4</sup> These chapters in particular do not reduce smoothly to any particular theme, and I have selected only one from many.