

ASPECTS OF WESTERN CULTURAL INTOLERANCE: ON THE HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

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ABSTRACT: There are frequent manifestations of Western *cultural intolerance* that prevent a scientific neutral approach to the intellectual achievements of other cultures, and also to appreciate them in their actual value. The authors of this article first refer to examples of this kind of intolerance in the field of Philosophy (which has been the principal object of their last investigations), Religion (Buddhist Atheism), and Linguistics (the «discovery» of Sanskrit language by Western scholars). In the present paper they specifically deal with the hermeneutical approach by Western scholars to the *Mahābhārata* that the authors consider *the most important work in World Literature*: Intolerance in this matter makes scholars find in the *Mahābhārata* a real «chaos» or conduces them to the obsessive search for the «Ur-Text», giving rise to theories that eliminate large portions of the epic poem considering their interpolations, or negating it all creativity, originality, and even its Indian essence. The last part of the article is dedicated to Kṛṣṇa, an *avatāra*, i.e. a reincarnation or manifestation, of the Supreme God Viṣṇu. Kṛṣṇa is seen as «a bizarre figure», «a cynic», «an opportunist», «a charlatan, who declares himself to be the God of Gods». These Western scholars leave completely aside the Indian tradition of almost three thousand centuries that proclaims that Kṛṣṇa is not a God, but *the God* of the Hindu people, being adored by many devoted hearts. A simple but important hermeneutical norm has been forgotten: To accept the cultural products created by another culture as they are conceived by it, and without interpreting them according to one's own cultural criteria based on the own values and beliefs.

KEY WORDS: hermeneutics, cultural intolerance, Philosophy, Religion, Linguistics, Mahābhārata, Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu, Avatāra.

Aspectos de la intolerancia cultural occidental: el enfoque hermenéutico del Mahābhārata

RESUMEN: Existen frecuentes manifestaciones de intolerancia cultural occidental que impiden un acercamiento científico neutro a los logros intelectuales de otras culturas, y asimismo apreciarlas en su valor real. Los autores de este artículo se refieren primero a ejemplos de esta clase especial de intolerancia en el campo de la Filosofía (que ha sido el principal objeto de sus últimas investigaciones), la Religión (ateísmo budista), y la Lingüística (el «descubrimiento» del idioma sánscrito por investigadores occidentales). En el presente trabajo ellos tratan específicamente del acercamiento hermenéutico de estudiosos occidentales al *Mahābhārata* que los autores consideran la obra más importante de la Literatura Universal: la *intolerancia cultural* en este tema hace que esos estudiosos encuentren en el *Mahābhārata* un verdadero «caos» o los impulsa a la búsqueda obsesiva del llamado (en alemán) «Ur-Text», dando lugar a teorías que eliminan grandes porciones del poema indio considerándolas interpolaciones, o negándole toda creatividad, originalidad, e incluso hasta su esencia india. La última parte del artículo está dedicada a Kṛṣṇa, un *avatāra*, es decir una reencarnación o manifestación, del Dios Supremo Viṣṇu. Kṛṣṇa es visto como «una figura estrafalaria», «un cínico», «un oportunista», «un charlatán, que se declara a sí mismo como el Dios de Dioses». Estos estudiosos occidentales de la Cultura de la India dejan completamente de lado la misma tradición india de casi tres mil siglos que proclama que Kṛṣṇa no es un Dios, sino *el Dios* del pueblo hindú, siendo adorado por muchos corazones devotos de la India. Una simple pero importante norma hermenéutica ha sido olvidada: aceptar los productos culturales creados por otra cultura tal como son concebidos por ella, y sin interpretarlos de acuerdo con los criterios culturales propios basados en los valores y creencias propias.

PALABRAS CLAVE: hermenéutica, intolerancia cultural, Filosofía, Religión, Lingüística, Mahābhārata, Kṛṣṇa/Viṣṇu, Avatāra.

INTRODUCCIÓN

Western cultural intolerance

In this article we shall not deal with the *Mahābhārata* from the point of view of Literature, Linguistics, or Philology, but with the way it was received, especially in Europe when it was «discovered» in the 19.th century by important Western scholars, who studied, analyzed and interpreted it. The approach of these scholars to this epic poem is another example of how the *cultural intolerance*, which cannot accept anything that does not adjust itself to one's own consecrated ideas, eliminates the possibility of a just, intelligent, impartial look, which is the basis of a *scientific* judgment. *Cultural intolerance* has its origin in blind feelings of pride for one's own culture and contempt for the foreign ones.

It is frequent to find in Western scholars belonging to diverse fields of research attitudes that reveal *cultural intolerance*, in regard to diverse aspects of Indian Culture that induce them to negate or devalue some of its great achievements. Unfortunately this has been the case in regard to the *epic poem* that we shall analyze here, after a short reference to other similar cases.

— *Philosophy*. The most known case in which this attitude of *cultural intolerance* manifests itself is *the negation of Indian Philosophy* since the time of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), the influential German philosopher. In our books¹ we pointed out coincidences between notions, ideas, principles, concepts and theories originating in Indian as well as in Western thought (traditionally considered as *philosophy*). These coincidences represent a solid argument in favour of the thesis we maintained in our book (2004) that *up to the 17.th century at least, in India on the one hand and in Greece and Europe on the other, there was frequent reflection on the same philosophical subjects, and this reflection was carried out in the same way, what leaves no place to a negation of the existence of Philosophy in India's Cultural History*. Another most important similarity we have studied between both Philosophies, the Indian and the Western ones, is

¹ Cf. DRAGONETTI, CARMEN, and TOLA, FERNANDO, *On the Myth of the Opposition between Indian Thought and Western Philosophy*, Hildesheim-Zürich-New York, Georg Olms Verlag, 2004 (Professor Ernst Steinkellner honoured us with a most positive review on this book appeared in *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Südasiens*, Band XLVIII, 2004, pp. 224-225); *Essays on Indian Philosophy in Comparative Perspective*, Hildesheim-Zürich-New York, Georg Olms Verlag, 2009; *Filosofía de la India. Del Veda al Vedānta*, Barcelona, Editorial Kairós, 2008 (2.nd edition in 2010); *Filosofía de la India y Filosofía Occidental: categorías, Génesis de los Universales, la prueba ontológica, generación espontánea, causalidad*, Buenos Aires, Las Cuarenta, 2010; *Ideología o Filosofía. El Nazismo. Erich Frauwallner y Martin Heidegger*, Buenos Aires, Las Cuarenta, 2012; *Indian and Western Philosophies: Unity in Diversity*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 2013.

what we call the «*cultural dogmas*». *Cultural dogmas* are those first principles accepted by philosophers, which are nothing else than the traditional beliefs—generally of religious origin—that are imposed by *the Past*. These beliefs are unconsciously taken for granted or assumed by a great number of thinkers, they are for them unavoidable assumptions that do not require to be demonstrated. These beliefs are based on *faith* rather than on observation and verification of facts or on valid rational arguments. The force that these beliefs possess is incomparably greater than the force of the arguments that sometimes are adduced in support of them by some thinkers and refuted by others, not being unanimity in relation to their validity. It could be said that the fact of being based on faith gives to these beliefs a force that they would not have if they were only based in logical reasoning. We do not discuss or question here the value of faith as a ground for a belief, but we think that it cannot be asserted that *an act of faith is a rational mental process*. Many thinkers have had recourse to these *cultural dogmas* as starting points, bases, or postulates to construct upon them their doctrinaire philosophical systems.

It is possible to say that as the first and necessary foundation of most of Western and Indian Philosophical constructions there is a *cultural dogma* or *first principle* that is a product of an act of faith, and this act of faith serves also to refute, deny or condemn other theories constructed in their turn on the basis of different cultural dogmas or first principles. In the next paragraphs on *Buddhist Atheism* the Western author M. Monier-Williams gives an example of how the *cultural dogmas* behaves in the religious level.

Beliefs in *reincarnation*, in the existence of an *Īśvara* (God, Lord), in the infallibility of the *Śruti*, are *cultural dogmas* of Brahmanic or Hindu thinkers; among the Western *cultural dogmas* are the belief in the existence of God, the belief in the immortality of the soul, the authority of the Christian tenets, the infallibility of the Bible, etc.²

- *Religion*. In the field of *Religion*, *Buddhist Atheism* has given rise to another example of Western *cultural intolerance*, related to that of *Philosophy* through the same concept of *cultural dogmas*. Many scholars, as for example M. Monier-Williams, belonging to Christian Religion, refused to consider Buddhism as an «*atheistic religion*», for this mere concept was in itself for them a *contradictio in adiecto*: in their opinion Religion in order to be «Religion» has to be Theistic as Christianity is—assumed as the only *true* Reli-

² Cf. TOLA, FERNANDO, and DRAGONETTI, CARMEN, *Indian and Western Philosophies: Unity in Diversity*, 2013; and Tola, Fernando, «Fundamental Principles of Indian Philosophy», in *Proceedings of the Fifth World Sanskrit Conference*, New Delhi, Rashtriya Sanskrit Sansthan, 1985, pp. 680-688.

³ *Buddhism, in its connexion with Brāhmanism and Hindūism, and in its contrast with Christianity*, first edition in London, 1889; Indian edition in Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1964.

gion and the unique standard to decide what can be truly called «*Religion*»—. Monier-Williams concludes his book *Buddhism*³ with these words:

«... Christianity is a religion, whereas Buddhism, at least in its earliest and truest form, is no religion at all...» (p. 537 of the Indian edition of his book).

Sir M. Monier-Williams (1819-1899), who was Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University at England, author of the most widely used Sanskrit-English dictionaries, and one of the first European scholars to publish a complete treatise on Buddhism, under the title of *Buddhism, in its connexion with Brāhmanism and Hindūism, and in its contrast with Christianity*, trying to explain in the *Preface* the aim of his book, reveals his own pejorative ideas on Buddhism, saying:

«... I think I can claim for my own work an individuality which separates it from that of others —an individuality which may probably commend it to thoughtful students of Buddhism as **helping to clear a thorny road, and introduce some little order and coherence into the chaotic confusion of Buddhistic ideas**—» (p. VIII Indian edition) [the bold is ours].

And already in the same *Preface* he acknowledges his confessional «distorted» approach to the interpretation of Buddhism and his lack of sympathy for this religion so different from his «inherited Christianity»:

«... Lastly, **I have depicted Buddhism from the standpoint of a believer in Christianity**, who has shown, by his other works on Eastern religions, an earnest desire to give them credit for all the good they contain. In regard to this last point, I shall probably be told by some enthusiastic admirers of Buddhism, that **my prepossessions and predilections —inherited with my Christianity— have, in spite of my desire to be just, distorted my view of a system with which I have no sympathy...**» (pp. IX-X Indian edition) [the bold is ours].

But it is in the last part of the book, *Lecture XVIII, Buddhism contrasted with Christianity*, that he emphatically affirms, p. 536, that Buddhism «is no religion at all». And to demonstrate this thesis he enumerates the positive tenets of Christianity —which are necessary, according to him, for a Religion could be called «Religion»— and maintains that Buddhism does not possess any of them, and consequently Buddhism is no Religion at all. The first requirement for Monier-Williams is that Religion «must reveal the Creator in His nature and attributes to His creature, man»; in other words, to affirm the existence of a Supreme God, Creator and Ruler of the universe, and consequently Buddhism, which is atheistic, cannot be a Religion.

Similarly to the case of Indian Philosophy, the nature of Religion is denied to Buddhism just because it is different from Western religious conceptions. It is difficult to find a more confessional and prejudiced attitude than Monier-Williams' one in regard to Buddhism.

Helmuth von Glasenapp (1891-1963), in his already classical book *Buddhismus und Gottessidee*⁴ clearly demonstrates, with his broadminded and careful way of approaching Indology, in this excellent study on Buddhism, the *non-theistic* nature of Buddhism, which does not eliminate from it its *religious character*, and he concludes that:

«The factum that the same objective facts, plus similar intellectual necessities, emotional moods and psychological needs within the same historical period and in the same mental situation may produce totally different dogmatic expressions —this fact cannot be more conclusively proved than by a comparison of the various religions—. Most illustrative in this context is a confrontation between Christian and Buddhist teachings, since both highly developed religions seek to bring men to salvation-liberation, and they both have much in common with regards to morality, cult, and forms of organization. They also differ radically precisely in their metaphysical foundations... The central dogma of Western religions (Parsism, Judaism, Christianity, Islamism) is the belief in a personal, transcendent creator and ruler beside whom no other divine being is conceived as active in nature. Buddhism kept the conception of the nature gods of the Indian religions, and also admitted those of other countries it entered, but it sees all devas as bound in samsāra. This difference is of secondary importance only, for in the actual teaching of liberation the Buddhist devas have no special place... More important is the difference between Buddhism and the other religions inasmuch as Buddhism does not attribute the creation and ruling of the world to a personal God».

In fact it would be no necessary to discuss on the basis of written evidence whether Atheist Buddhism is or is not a Religion; it would be only necessary to observe the behavior of Japanese, Korean, and South East Asian Buddhist believers in their visits to their temples to perceive the profound religious feelings that inspires them.

- *Linguistics*. A case, which has to do only with *Linguistics*, indicates the magnitude of the danger of being blinded by ethnocentrism. In the 19.th Century, the existence of the Indo-European family of languages was established, especially through the work, carried out with absolute scientific rigor, of the German linguist Franz Bopp, who was born in 1791 and published his revolutionary *Über das Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache in Vergleichung mit jenem der griechischen, lateinischen, persischen und germanischen Sprache* in 1816. This discovery was of enormous importance, but at the same time

⁴ *Buddhismus und Gottessidee. Die buddhistischen Lehren von den überweltlichen Wesen und Mächten und ihre religionsgeschichtlichen Parallelen*, in *Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse der Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur in Mainz*, 1954, Nr. 8, Wiesbaden: in Kommission bei Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1954 (and Alfred Kröner Vergag, 1966); translated from German into English under the title *Buddhism - a non-theistic religion. With a selection from Buddhist Scriptures*, edited by Heinz Bechert, London, Georg Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1970 (with a *Preface* by Christmas Humphreys); translated from German into Spanish (by Eduardo García Belsunce) under the title: *El Budismo – una Religión sin Dios*, Barcelona, Barral Editores S.A., 1974.

caused angry protests among great European scholars, most of whom belonged to Western Classical Studies, like Gottfried Hermann, Haupt, Westermann, Stallbaum and others: they could not tolerate the idea that *their* Latin and Greek were languages cognate to the languages spoken by the «the so-called Niggers of India»⁵, and they laughed at the studies of Bopp, to such a degree that Dugald Stewart (1753-1828), a well-known Scot philosopher, dared to claim—in order to ensure the rejection of any relationship whatsoever between Hindus and Scots—that the whole Sanskrit language and the whole Sanskrit Literature (a literature extending over three thousand years and larger than the ancient literature of either Greece or Rome) was «a forgery of those wily priests, the Brahmins».

I. THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

In the present paper we specifically deal with another very grave aspect of *Western cultural intolerance*: The interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* by some European scholars who have tried to reduce it in its extension (what implies a real deformation of the text), and even to make it disappear as an original work (through their dissolving interpretations), and also to deprive it from its aesthetic literary value⁶. Let us refer briefly to the opinions of Maurice Winternitz and Auguste Barth. Winternitz, the prestigious author of a very much used *History of Indian Literature* (vol. I, section II, *The Popular Epics and the Pūraṇa: What is the Mahābhārata?*), in p. 326 says:

«**For us** [in previous paragraphs he has expressed *What the Mahābhārata means to the Indians* revealing an absolute lack of sensibility in face of Indian Culture], however, who do not look upon the Mahābhārata with the eyes of the believing Hindus, but as critical historians of literature it is everything but a work of art; and in any case we cannot regard it as the work of one author, or even of a clever collector and compiler. The Mahābhārata as a whole is a literary monster. Never has the hand of an artist attempted the well-nigh impossible task of combining the conflicting elements into one unified poem. It is only unpoetical theologians and commentators and clumsy copyists who have succeeded in conglomerating into a heterogeneous mass parts which are actually incompatible, and which date from different centuries».

The celebrated and severe French Indologist, Auguste Barth, specialized in the criticisms of texts and publications related to India, even assigning to the

⁵ Cf. MÜLLER'S, MAX book *India What can it teach us?*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1910, p. 26.

⁶ It is interesting to remark that in the artistic field the *Mahābhārata* has been approached with a free and sensitive attitude by European artists as Peter Brook, the famed Royal Shakespeare Company director, and Jean-Claude Carrière, an important French writer. Both of them could exhibit in their works (play, film or video) on the *Mahābhārata* an openmindedness that many Indologists did not possess.

Mahābhārata a great value in the *restricted field of Indian Literature*, limits it to the local Indian sphere. The passage we quote here is taken from volume IV, p. 358, of the *Oeuvres de Auguste Barth*, Paris, Éditions Ernest Leroux, 1918, and it deserves a commentary we make on it afterwards:

«No need to look for here [, in the *Mahābhārata*,] the living personages of Homer, but to take into account the clumsiness of Hindu poetry for creating true characters; then one will be able to appreciate that those personages of the *Mahābhārata* are chefs-d'oeuvre».

It is to be remarked that Barth shares the tendency of many Western Indologists of comparing the intellectual productions of India with those of Greece to the detriment of those of India, and generally in an erroneous and unjust way owing to an idealization of Greek Culture and by lack of impartiality and objectivity, and in part also due to an Eurocentric attitude based in a kind of cultural intolerance. For Barth only when the characters of the *Mahābhārata* are compared to the defective personages created by the Hindus themselves, it is possible to consider the personages of the Epic Poem as *chefs-d'oeuvre*. It is a remark product of an unjust and hurried generalization in relation to the immense and valuable Hindu Classic Literature, which although is positive in regard to the *Mahābhārata* in the sense that it considers it as *the best* of Indian Literature, on the other hand it *restricts its universal value* only to the Indian context.

The *Mahābhārata* belongs to the genre of epic poems produced by cultures, whose languages derive from the Indo-European language, and are those that gather the largest number of speakers in the world in the past and now (as for instance, Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Persian, German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian, etc.). To the same group of poems belong also the *Rāmāyana* written in Sanskrit as the *Mahābhārata*, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, written in Ancient Greek, the *Song of the Nibelungs* written in Ancient German, the *Beowulf*, in the Anglosaxon or Ancient English, the *Song of mio Cid*, in Ancient Spanish, the *Song of Roland*, in Ancient French—all of them in verse—.

The central tale of the *Mahābhārata* is the history of the conflict, which probably had a historical origin, between the two branches of the same Bhārata family: the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas. The conflict, which could not be peacefully solved, gave rise to a war between both branches, supported each of them by their allies, family members, and friends. On the Pāṇḍavas side is Kṛṣṇa, a human incarnation of the Supreme Being, the God Viṣṇu, descended for the sake of mankind to defend Justice and protect the Good. During the battle Kṛṣṇa will be the charotieer and counsellor of Arjuna, from Pāṇḍavas family and the great hero of *Mahābhārata*. On the side of the Kauravas fight Karṇa, premarital son of Kuntī, the mother of the three first legitimate Pāṇḍavas brothers. Karṇa ignore his true origin and has been adopted by a family belonging to a caste, inferior to that of the Pāṇḍavas, who were members of the warrior or *kṣatriya* superior caste. Notwithstanding his presumed inferior origin Karṇa has been accepted and welcomed by the Kauravas, who granted him a superior rank owing to his great qualities as a warrior. After eighteen days of ferocious combat all

the Kauravas are defeated and killed, and almost all the Pāṇḍavas with the exception of the five Pāṇḍava brothers and their common wife, Draupadī, and the still born child of Arjuna's son. One of the paradoxical reflections that the *Mahābhārata*, an epic poem, gives rise is precisely that of uselessness of violence and the war it provokes.

Characteristics of the Mahābhārata

It can be said that the *Mahābhārata* has peculiar characteristics, which make it a unique creation in the History of Universal Literature. It is the most extensive Epic Poem among all of them, since it is constituted by more than 100,000 *ślokas*, epic stanzas, each one generally composed of two verses, what makes that the *Mahābhārata* surpasses 8 times the extension of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* together. According to Indian tradition the *Mahābhārata* was composed by a legendary old sage, called Vyāsa, in one and unique session. Of course, this traditional Indian interpretation is a product of Indian popular tradition. Scholars dedicated to the study of the Poem consider in a general way that the *Mahābhārata* has been composed as we have it now in the course of several centuries by an unknown number of authors who added new episodes to those already existing before. Between the 5.th or 4.th centuries before the Common Era and the 6.th century after the beginning of the Common Era took place the making of the Epic Poem, which ended adopting the form of what today is known as «*the Mahābhārata*». After that period the already created *Mahābhārata* suffered some changes and new passages were added to it.

Notwithstanding its extension, the diversity of its authors, the heterogeneity of the added elements, the different epochs of its constitution, the *Mahābhārata* exhibits an extraordinary unity in the development and continuity of the events that it narrates, and of the subjects that it deals with, in the psychology of the personages that take part in its episodes, in the maintenance of the moral and social values it extols, in the description of the central plot of the story, which it never abandons in spite of the numerous and many times very long interpolations with stories and themes that interrupt the development of the principal subject.

Moreover V. S. Sukthankar⁷, the illustrious Indian scholar who conceived and organized the first and unique complete critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, published by the *Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* of Pune, India, in which he also collaborated as editor, indicates some other characteristics of the *Mahābhārata* which contributed to give to it the position of unity which distinguished it from the other Epic poems which we have referred to.

In the First Volume of the critical edition, *Prolegomena*, p. LXXVII, of the *Mahābhārata* Sukthankar says:

⁷ SUKTHANKAR, V. S., et al., *The Mahābhārata for the First Time Critically Edited*, 19 vols., Pune, Bhandarkar Research Institute, 1,933-1,966.

«In the Mahābhārata we have a text with about a dozen, more or less independent, versions, whose extreme types differ, in extent, by about 13,000 stanzas or 26,000 lines; a work which, for centuries, must have been growing not only upwards and downwards, but also laterally, like the Nyagrodha tree, growing on all sides; a codex which has been written in nearly a dozen different scripts assiduously but negligently copied, chiefly as a source of religious merit, through long vistas of centuries by a legion of devout and perhaps mostly uneducated and inefficient copyists, hailing from different corners of a vast subcontinent, and speaking different tongues; a traditional book of inspiration [of ideas, beliefs, conducts], which in various shapes and sizes, has been the cherished heritage of one people continuously for some millennia and which to the present day is interwoven with the thoughts and beliefs and moral ideas of a nation numbering over 300 million souls! [= this has been written in the year 1933; today a nation of more than 1,000 millions of souls!]. The classical philologist has clearly no experience in dealing with a text of this description, an opus of such gigantic dimensions and complex character, with such a long and intricate history behind it».

The importance of the Mahābhārata in the formation of Indian Culture

The words we quote in the following paragraph belong to R. N. Dandekar⁸. They express in a lucid way the strong and spread influence that the *Mahābhārata* has had and still has in the formation and development of Indian Culture, thanks to the generalized knowledge in Indian people of the narrations that the Epic Poem presents and the moral and religious teachings it transmits⁹. Dandekar maintains that despite the theoretical importance of the *Vedas*:

«**The literary Works, which have left an abiding imprint on the socio-religious life sponsored by Hinduism, are not so much the Veda as the popular epics.** Even among these popular epics, if there is any one single work which has proved to be of the greatest significance in the making of the life and thought of the Indian people and whose tradition continues to live even to this day and influence, in one way or another, the various aspects of Indian life, it is the *Mahābhārata*, the great national epic of India. Men and women in India from one end of the country to the other, whether young or old, whether rich or poor, whether high or low, whether simple or sophisticated, still derive enlightenment, entertainment, inspiration and guidance from the *Mahābhārata*... There is, indeed, no department of Indian life, public or private, which is not vitally influenced by the great epic. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the people of India have learnt to think and act in terms of the *Mahābhārata*» [the bold is ours].

⁸ *The Mahābhārata: Origin and Growth*, Delhi, Ajanta Publications, 1981, p. 203.

⁹ BROCKINGTON, JOHN, *The Sanskrit Epics*, Leiden-Boston-Köln, Brill, 1998, Chapter Ten, pp. 496-513, has a section dedicated to *The place of the Epics in Indian culture*.

Hermann Oldenberg, the erudite German Indologist, although considering, as we shall see later on, that the *Mahābhārata* became «a monstrous chaos» in course of centuries, in his book *Das Mahābhārata. Seine Entstehung, sein Inhalt, seine Form*¹⁰, p. 2, expresses:

«There [= in the *Mahābhārata*] breathes the soul, **breath all the souls of** this people [i.e. **India**], and they infuse life into the most gigantic poetical creation [= the *Mahābhārata*]...».

It is interesting to remember that a similar phenomenon happened in Greece with the *Iliad*, the Epic poem attributed to Homer. Werner Jaeger in his celebrated book *Paideia, Die Formung des griechischen Menschen*¹¹ develops the theme of the didactic characteristic of Homer, the Greek epic author, and begins his exposition quoting Plato:

«Plato [*Politeia* 606 E] cites as a diffused opinion in his epoch, that **Homer was the educator of all Greece**» [the bold is ours].

The Critical Edition of the Mahābhārata

When we refer to «the *Mahābhārata*» it is impossible not to mention its monumental Critical Edition by the *Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*¹². It was constituted on very wise philological criteria clearly explained by its Editor in Chief Vishnu S. Sukthankar in his *Prolegomena*, volume I, part I, pp. CII-CIV. We have no doubt that when we read the epic poem in its critical text we are reading what was created and transmitted as the *Mahābhārata* in the many centuries of its creation by several authors in all regions of India, leaving aside the theories of modern Western scholars about the form in which it should be presented as a result of the capricious modifications of the text introduced by them. As Sukthankar succinctly says in the *Prolegomena*, p. CII:

«The *Mahābhārata* [as edited by him] is the whole of the epic tradition: The entire Critical Apparatus. Its separation into the constituted text and the critical notes is only a static representation of a constantly changing epic text—a representation made for the purpose of visualizing—, studying and analyzing the panorama of the more grand and less grand thought-movement that have crystallized in the shape of the text handed down to us in our *Mahābhārata* manuscripts».

¹⁰ Göttingen, Bandenhoek & Ruprecht, 1922.

¹¹ First edition in German, Berlin, 1933. Cf. the Spanish translation (of the second German edition of 1936) by Joaquin Xirau and Wenceslao Roces, published in México-Buenos Aires in one volume by Fondo de Cultura Económica, in 1957, pp. 48 ff.; the Italian translation from which we quote: *Paideia. La formazione dell' uomo Greco*, traduzione di Luigi Emery, Firenze: «La Nuova Italia» Editrici, 1936: First Book: *L'Eta Arcaica*, Section: *Omero Educarore*, pp. 76-105.

¹² Cf. note 6.

Thanks to the Critical Edition the *Mahābhārata* is there, near to us, as it happens with the critical editions of ancient Greek and Latin authors, whose reliable texts have been established by Classic scholars with a notorious feeling of respect and just admiration for the ancient Western Culture. The *Mahābhārata* has to be approached in the same way, being «the greatest literary achievement of Indian Culture and one of the most important works in World Literature»¹³ —it would be better to say «as *the most important* work in World Literature»—, owing to the richness of perspectives the text offers, the variety of the perceived aspects of reality and human nature it describes, the number of brilliant unexpected situations softly introduced by the authors, the naturalness with which extraordinary passages are presented in the course of a description of current actions, the abundance of rational ethical judgments that comment the actions of the personages giving to them an unexpected value, the already mentioned characteristic of coherence and unity the text maintains in all the multiple episodes in which the narrative is developed, the intelligence and subtlety that the poem manifests everywhere, and last not least, the beauty of the Sanskrit language and the fluidity of the verses maintained by the successive authors all along the poem.

Critics concerning «the chaos» in the Mahābhārata and the search for the «Ur-Text»

V. S. Sukthankar, the mentioned Indian scholar and celebrated editor of the *Mahābhārata*, in his book *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*¹⁴ (p. 29) which contains the lectures he delivered in 1942 on the «Meaning of the *Mahābhārata*» under the auspices of the University of Bombay, expounds the diverse opinions of many renowned Western Indologists —especially German— as well as some West —inspired Indian Indologists on the *Mahābhārata* expressing a very severe criticism on them, their errors—, and their many times absurd conclusions, and finally, he maintains that all those interpretations and theories elaborated around the *Mahābhārata* by scholars, undoubtedly inspired by non scientific prejudices, and grounded in a kind of antipathetic ethnocentric feeling, are happily falling into oblivion:

«... for within less than half a century the lucubrations of these wiseacres [= those Indologists quoted by him] have approached perilously near the limbo of oblivion».

¹³ As affirmed in Alf Hiltebeitel's book *The Ritual of Battle. Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1976.

¹⁴ *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, Bombay, The Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957, p. 95. In the First Chapter of this book Sukthankar gives the names and opinions of Indologists, especially German Indologists, specialized on the *Mahābhārata*. The other chapters refer to diverse aspects of the epic poem: from the mundane, ethical, and metaphysical point of view.

Oblivion is in fact the final destiny corresponding to them.

A more recent historic account of these Western interpreters of the *Mahābhārata* (as well as of the *Rāmāyama*) is found in the book by John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics*¹⁵ (1998). Brockington thinks (p. 41) that «*unfortunately*» the central characteristic of epic studies has been from the very beginning *the tendency*:

«**To seek** for some means to get a grip of **the whole**, a theory which will slot everything into place, **before the evidence of the epics themselves has been properly assessed and interpreted**».

In the history of the hermeneutical studies on the *Mahābhārata* there has been an evident great error: A hurried *a priori* decision about the meaning of the totality (as if it were a salvific solution) much before the necessary philological establishment of the text as well as a clear understanding of its component parts in their own Indian context far from any attitude derived from cultural prejudice or any other element of intolerance.

It is very frequent to find in the authors mentioned by Sukthankar and Brockington a predominance of the philological approach to the text that brings out the great number of themes of diverse inspiration which the *Mahābhārata* develops, and that turn it —according to them— into *a true chaos*, and, on the other hand, *the anxious search for the «Ur-Text»* or «original Text» which would contain the primeval, correct and acceptable form that the Poem presented when it was composed, i.e. before the additions and interpolations it would have suffered, making it a distorted text.

1. In relation to the *disorder*, which according to the mentioned critics, exists in the *Mahābhārata*, it seems to us a great error to criticize the Poem for that reason.

Firstly, it is not possible to consider a defect of that literary work the fact that it develops at the same time diverse subjects, since *this* is the form which the Poem had *necessarily* to possess because of being an «open» literary creation, whose composition took several centuries in which collaborated many authors, who considered that to add new episodes to the original text was their right, being that a common practice, a honor to which they could aspire or something necessary to be done for a better comprehension of the work or in order to provide it with references to some matter they thought important to be mentioned there.

And secondly, in order to discard that criticism, it is necessary to take into account *a fact of common experience*, to which many persons —Indians and Westerners— have had access: the existence of many developed subjects does not contribute at all to create in the readers any confusion *when reading* the

¹⁵ Leiden-Boston-Köln, Brill, 1998, Chapter II, *The History of Epic Studies*, pp. 41-81. From page 41 to page 55: «The history of epic studies (early period)»; from page 56 to page 67: «The Critical Editions»; from page 67 to page 81: «Broader studies of the epics (since the Critical Editions)».

poem. Undoubtedly the division of the modern editions into *Parvans* and *Adhyāyās* is a great help to give a guidance to the reader of such a long Poem.

The central subject of the Poem is, as we said, the conflict between *Pāṇdavas* and *Kauravas*, and it goes on, serenely, without impediments, and without subordinating itself to the other components of the Poem of a different nature. Those different components can be episodes alien to the central subject or any teaching of moral, social, political, religious, or historical character, which in a way or other are related to the central story.

2. In relation to the search for the «*Ur-Text*» and the research works that aim at suppressing diverse portions of the Poem considering them as later additions to the «original Text», let us indicate, following Sukthankar, p. 7, that they are completely unsuccessful activities whose results are grounded in a merely subjective reasoning which follows preconceived schemes.

As an example of the conclusions which the scholars looking for the *original text* can reach let us mention the amazing thesis of the Danish Indologist Sören Sørensen (1848-1902), who is also the author of the monumental and most useful *Index to the Names in the Mahābhārata*¹⁶, first published in 1904 and reprinted by Motilal Banarsidass in Delhi in 1963 (sponsored by the Government of India) in a volume of 807 pages. Before the *Index* Sørensen published in 1893 a book on the *Mahābhārata* where he reduced the number of verses of the poem, from 200,000, firstly to 27,000 and then to 7,000, considering the difference of these numbers, to which he arrived from the traditional numbers, as interpolated additions¹⁷.

Sukthankar's critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* cannot be considered at all as an intent to reach the so coveted «*Ur-Text*», since (as he expresses, in volume I, part I, *Prolegomena* III, and part II) in the foot-notes of the text and in the *Appendices* have been included by the editors *all the variant readings of the texts* which have been elected as being the most probable constituent parts of the Poem. No manuscript has been put aside by the editors. Sukthankar's critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* has put an end to the ungrounded lucubration concerning *chaos* and *search of the original text* and stops the questions about «What the *Mahābhārata* is» and «Which is the extension of the *Mahābhārata*».

A clear proof of this conclusion is that Brockington (1998) in his account of the broader studies on the Epics (since the Critical Edition), pp. 67-80 of his quoted book, only mentions the interpretations of Georges Dumézil (1898-1986), French comparatist Philologist and Religious Studies scholar, and Madeleine Biardeau (1922-2010), a prominent Indologist from France, whose approaches

¹⁶ *An Index to the Names in the Mahābhārata with Short Explanations and a Concordance to the Bombay and Calcutta Editions and P. C. Roy's Translation*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1,904-1,925; reprinted, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1963.

¹⁷ Cf. on the conclusions of Sørensen, the criticisms by scholars as Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, already quoted, pp. 6-7; Barth, *Oeuvres de Auguste Barth*, Paris: Éditions Ernest Leroux, 1918, vol. IV, pp. 351-352; Brockington, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

are completely different from those of the scholars who worked on the *Mahābhārata* before the publication of its Critical Edition:

«... the former [Dumézil] seeing it [= the *Mahābhārata*] in terms of Indo-European common themes and the latter [= Biardeau] as revealing 'a universe of bhakti', that is, the outlook of the Purāṇas, but both seeing in the *Mahābhārata* battle the transposition into epic of eschatological myth» [the bold is ours].

The scholars, who worked on the *Mahābhārata* before the publication of the Critical Edition, in the search of the «*Ur-text*» eliminated large portions of its verses considering them as late interpolations. Dumézil imagined a theory, which eliminates from the *Mahābhārata* all creativity, originality, its Indian essence, and transforms it into a work created on the basis of Indo-European tradition existing all over the regions occupied by the Indo-European tribes after their dispersion from their original place through Europe and Asia.

According to Dumézil:

«The fundamental plot of the *Mahābhārata* is the transposition of a [Indo-European] myth related to a great crisis of the world: the conflict of the forces of Good and the forces of Evil develops culminating in a destructive paroxysm and ends in a renaissance...» [p. 238 (266)].

Next Dumézil remarks that this *eschatological myth* is absent from the Vedic Mythology and it comes from an Indo-Iranian epoch or perhaps even earlier. Thus amazingly these traditions that became —according to Dumézil— the *Mahābhārata* are not mentioned in the oldest Indian Literature, especially the Vedic Literature that preceded the *Mahābhārata*.

Furthermore Dumézil transforms the Gods and Demons of that pre-Vedic eschatological Indo-European myth into the Heroes of the *Mahābhārata*:

«... the model of mythic exegesis that M. Wikander had elaborated in relation to the *Pāṇḍavas* has been easily extended to all the heroes of some importance... they and the most violent enemies of the *Pāṇḍavas* faithfully reproduce the precise divine or demoniac types. Thus a true pantheon has been transposed into human personages by means of an operation meticulous as well as ingenious» [p. 21 (51)].

How then was done this work of *transformation* that is the *Mahābhārata*? Dumézil gives, without any proof, an explanation completely unknown in India: a group of:

«old authors [= Indian pandits], erudite, sharp, constant..., [that] have succeeded to create a world of men completely similar to the mythic world [of the Indo-European people]. In this copy of the old traditions [that is the *Mahābhārata*] the relations among the Gods and the Demons, whose incarnations or sons are the Heroes, have been maintained by them» I, [pp. 238-240 (266-268)].

In pp. 238-239 (266-268) Dumézil reiterates its amazing ungrounded theory:

«The **transposition** [from mythic Gods/Demons into epic Heroes] has been a literary work fully developed and in an inflexible way by specialized sages,

clever, full of talent who have thoroughly explored the possibilities that the mythic material kept»¹⁸.

Thus the *Mahābhārata* is not a complete *Indian* work constructed with *Indian* elements, but a conglomerate of ancient *Indo-European traditions transposed* into an Indian appearance. Dumézil transforms the *Mahābhārata* from an *Indian* original creation —what it actually is— into a *transposition* from a foreign tradition of *Indo-European* myths. To end, we cannot avoid mentioning the great admiration that Dumézil manifests for the authors of the *Indo-European* tradition, who —according to him— supplied the materials for the composition of the *Mahābhārata*, reducing the *Indian authors* from the position of creators of one of the most extraordinary *Indian* production to a secondary position, that of mere «*transposers*»¹⁹.

We could make ours the words with which ends the article on «Georges Dumézil», included in the *Encyclopaedia Irannica* referring to a criticism directed to him that faults:

«... the selectivity Dumézil exercises in his presentation of evidence, and concludes that **he imposed a preconceived theory on the data** in a procrustean fashion, **rather than working from data to generate theory** [the bold is ours].

II. KR̥ṢṆA IN THE MAHĀBHĀRATA

The interpretation of the *Mahābhārata* by well-known Indologists offers another example of *cultural intolerance* that so frequently accompanies the work of great scholars trained in the most severe norms of philology, but many times unable to dispense with the cultural prejudices that cultures give rise to when they reach a superior level in their development.

It is around the figure of the God Kr̥ṣṇa that the *cultural intolerance* manifests itself in a more profound and subtle way in the hermeneutical approaches to the *Mahābhārata*. One of the most discussed issues among Western Indologists, and (some *Indian* ones inspired by Westerners), related to the *Mahābhārata*, is that of Kr̥ṣṇa's conduct. Kr̥ṣṇa can be considered as the most important and interesting personage of the *Épic Poem* (where he acts as the expert charioteer of the great Pāṇḍava hero, Arjuna) but He is judged by some Indologists as the

¹⁸ Cf. DUMÉZIL, GEORGES, *Mythe et Épopée*, the three volumes published in one by Gallimard in 1995.

¹⁹ Let us mention that in Dumézil's epoch (the first half of 20.th century, before and during the World War II) the admiration for the *Indo-Europeans* as the *European* ancestors, and the tendency to detract *Indian* Culture as such, was rather common. Erich Frauwallner furnished another example of these attitudes. See our book *Ideología o Filosofía* to be published this year in Buenos Aires by the Las Cuarenta publishing house.

immoral adviser of the five Pāṇḍava brothers in the war against their cousins, the Kauravas.

Critics against the Kṛṣṇa of the Mahābhārata

V. S. Sukthankar²⁰, the already mentioned illustrious main editor of the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*, in his book *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, gives an interesting summary of the opinions «of the modern critics of the *Mahābhārata*», with special reference to the Western critics of the *epos*, which has left many of them «*nonplused and dumbfounded*», because it is beyond their intellectual comprehensive understanding, and their capacity of a sympathetic approach to a culture different from their own. Sukthankar's account on the opinions of critics of the *Mahābhārata* is worth to be remembered here. According to these critical opinions the figure of Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* is:

«[1] 'A **bizarre figure!**', exclaims the critic. 'A Yā dāva chieftain who looks and acts uncommonly like a mortal —and a **very ordinary mortal** at that— and **who has the incredible effrontery to say that he is a god!** [2] A **cynic** who preaches the highest morality and **stoops to practice the lowest tricks**, in order to achieve **his mean ends!** [3] An opportunist who teaches an honest and god-fearing man to tell a lie, the only lie he had told in his life! [4] A **charlatan** who declares himself to be the god of gods, descended from the highest heaven for establishing righteousness on earth, and advises a hesitating archer to strike down a generous foe who is defenceless and is crying for mercy!'» [the bold is ours].

Sukthankar's quotation may be completed with another quotation taken from the *Preface* of the book by Alf Hiltebeitel²¹:

«Early epic research either **ignored Krishna** (as Joseph Dahlmann virtually did), or rested the case against him with reductionistic summations of character (Christian Lassen saw him as a **racial god**; Adolf Holtzmann, as a **deceitful adviser**; Adolf Holtzmann, nephew, as a **deified tribal hero of a frequently drunk and sensual nonbrahminical people**, later **linked with [the Supreme God] Viṣṇu through a "monstrous identification"**; Alfred Ludwig, as **the black spring sun**; Edward Washburn Hopkins, as a **demigod chieftain**; Hermann Oldenberg and Walter Ruben, as **not part of the original epic**; G. J. Held, as a **trickster**» [the bold is ours].

²⁰ *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, Bombay, The Asiatic Society of Bombay, 1957, p. 95. In the First Chapter of this book Sukthankar gives the names and opinions of Indologists, especially German Indologists, on the *Mahābhārata*. This paragraph on Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* by Sukthankar is very famous among Indian scholars as Bimal Krishna Matilal, who also quotes it in the beginning of his article «Kṛṣṇa: In defence of a devious divinity», p. 401, included in *Essays of the Mahābhārata Edited by Arvind Sharma*, Leiden-New York-Köbenhavn-Köln, E. J. Brill, 1991, pp. 401-418.

²¹ ALF HILTEBEITEL, *The Ritual of Battle. Krishna in the Mahābhārata*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1976, p.16.

The violence of the critics expressed by the mentioned scholars oblige to think that they are not inspired only by *merely technical or scientific* desire to establish the essential personality of Kṛṣṇa, but also by a cultural religious feeling nurtured by many reasons, among which predominates the similarity of Kṛṣṇa with Jesus Christ: both are Divine persons, both come to Earth to accomplish an important salvific task. This similarity may produce an unconscious rejection in Christian scholars as the mentioned in the last quotation.

Kṛṣṇa's double personality

Kṛṣṇa is not only a *man*, prince and warrior, but also a manifestation or an incarnation of the *Supreme God* of Hinduism, who possesses the most precious noble qualities that are the usual attributes of any conception of a Supreme Divine Person, as He is magnificently described in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*²², the celebrated episode of the *Mahābhārata*, and in the beautiful descriptions of the Supreme God devoted to Him by the Indian philosopher Madhva²³. As the Supreme God His name is Viṣṇu. In the Hindu's *Trimurti*, *Brahmā* is the aspect of the Creator, Viṣṇu, of the Preserver, and *Śiva*, of the Destroyer.

The manifestation of the Supreme God under some form (which is not His proper form), and the descent (*avatāra*) from Heaven to Earth, in order to do something beneficial for human beings, when they or when Justice is in danger, is an essential element of the Hindu conception of the Supreme God. The manifestation as Kṛṣṇa is one of the most important among those manifestations of the Supreme God Viṣṇu.

As a manifestation of Viṣṇu, Kṛṣṇa is Viṣṇu; His essence is to be Viṣṇu; *to be Viṣṇu* is His unchanging eternal identity; and Viṣṇu's attributes do not undergo any alteration when Viṣṇu manifests Himself as Kṛṣṇa: *Viṣṇu is Kṛṣṇa*. *Viṣṇu manifests Himself* as Kṛṣṇa, but His own divine attributes are beyond normal human perception. He is Kṛṣṇa without ceasing to be Viṣṇu in His absolute integrity. This is a conception very well known in the field of Theology that must not surprise anyone, much less Western scholars, who in general belong to a Christian tradition.

Kṛṣṇa/man has the *being* of a *man*, submitted to all that is proper to a man, without loosing His *being* Viṣṇu, beyond and different from all that exists. Both are the same; both are different: Kṛṣṇa/man, possesses qualities that are proper to Him, as for instance a man's body, without loosing His *being* Viṣṇu. As a

²² Cf. the Spanish translation: *Bhagavad Gītā, El Canto del Señor*, edición de Fernando Tola, «Presentación» by Raimon Panikkar, traducción, introducción y notas by Fernando Tola, Barcelona, Círculo de Lectores, 2000.

²³ Cf. our article «Madhva (1198-1278). Pluralismo, realismo y teísmo en la Filosofía de la India», in *Pensamiento*, Madrid, mayo-agosto 2006, vol. 62, núm. 233, pp. 291-320; and also our book *Filosofía de la India*, Barcelona, Kairós, 2010 (2.nd edition), the Chapter 8: *La Vía del amor a Dios (II)*, pp. 449-513.

logical consequence of this *extra-ordinary* conception of Divinity Kṛṣṇa/man behaves, feels and reacts as a man.

In the *Mahābhārata* Kṛṣṇa does not fight, he only advises the Pāṇḍavas. His advises are clever, since they help the Pāṇḍavas to prevail in the war against the Kauravas, nevertheless many of these advises are conceived by the critics as true violations of the *Dharma* or the code of good conduct.

The Kṛṣṇa of the *Mahābhārata* is thus a complex personage of the great Indian Epic Poem, and because of that it has been difficult to understand and appreciate Him for many non-Indian readers²⁴.

Remarks on the critics' accusations concerning the double personality of Kṛṣṇa

Kṛṣṇa is both, a man and a God, and as such He is presented in the poem. There is nothing to say against this conception of Kṛṣṇa: in the poem He acts as «a very ordinary mortal»; but in the living Tradition of the Indian people He is a God, as expressed by Sukthankar, p. 95: He is «*Bhagavan Śrī Kṛṣṇa*, the adored of many devoted hearts»; and as expressed by Bimal Krishna Matilal²⁵ «in fact *Kṛṣṇa* is not a god, but the God of the Hindus». In the *Bhagavad Gītā* is unfolded this divine aspect of Kṛṣṇa.

When *Kṛṣṇa* is a *man*, He is indeed an «ordinary, common person», as the critics say, with not impressive extraordinary and supernatural features²⁶. Kṛṣṇa/man does not resort to an absolute power, His power has the limits of a human being: He can be wounded, He can even be killed as it actually happens in the poem, where He suffers an ignominious death when a hunter kill him unwillingly with an arrow shot against a hare. In volume XVI of the *Mahābhārata*, *Mausalaparva*, Kṛṣṇa does not prevent the extermination of His own kingdom in a murderous madness of His own citizens, and the mutual slaughter of His beloved subjects; and He does not prevent the fratricidal conflict between Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas either.

But *Kṛṣṇa* is also a *God* with all the divine attributes: There has not been any difficulty on the part of Indian people to accept *this* religious conception of Kṛṣṇa with these two qualifications: *man* and *God* at the same time, a warrior and a God «in one person»: in this form He is alive in the heart of many Indian religious people.

All religions adhere to beliefs that are difficult to express, to understand, and whose existence is rationally very difficult or even impossible to demonstrate. They must be respectfully accepted by faith, as dogmas.

²⁴ Cf. ALF HILTEBEITEL, *The ritual of battle. Kṛṣṇa in the Mahābhārata*, already quoted, pp. 13-21.

²⁵ In his article already quoted previously «Kṛṣṇa: In defence of a devious Divinity», p. 202.

²⁶ With only some exceptions —as are indeed the occasions of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and others— Kṛṣṇa let his *being Viṣṇu* appear.

And precisely the double or plural personality of God is one of these dogmas of faith that exist also in Christian religion. Western critics of Kṛṣṇa's personality should have always in mind that Christian Theology asserts something similar to the Hindu belief that Kṛṣṇa is a man and the Supreme God *at the same time*. It is the Mystery and Christian Dogma of Faith of the *Divine Trinity*, according to which *God is at the same time One and Three*: the Father, the Son, and the Saint Spirit, *unus et trinus* in Latin. *Trinity* constitutes a fundamental Dogma of faith for all Christians. *Jesus* is at the same time *Man* and *God*; and this Man is inseparable of His body, the Church. And when this Man acts, He acts and feels as a man: he suffers, he loves, he is humiliated, he is betrayed, he is killed; but at the same time He affirms that He is the son of God, and God Himself. And no Christian would be surprised by the fact that Jesus, being the Son of the Supreme God, and even God Himself, endowed with all kind of power, could not avoid suffering and death; nor any Christian will shun believing that, although being God, Jesus was killed, simply because for Christians this is a *Mystery* that constitutes a *Dogma of Faith* that has been taught to them by religion²⁷.

Thus this Hindu belief of the double personality of Kṛṣṇa is not an unknown and absurd idea in the context of general Religious Theology; it has to be respected such as it is expressed by the Indian authors of the Epic and as a religious feeling of the devote people of India, in the same way as the belief related to the Christian Dogma of Trinity has to be respected by persons who do not belong to Christian Tradition. These two personalities of Kṛṣṇa —man and God— do not interfere one another, do not obstruct each other, as the critics interpret.

In order to understand the *Mahābhārata* it is necessary to adopt in regard to it the point of view of the Indian tradition on Kṛṣṇa's *double personality* to be sure that one is not misinterpreting it from the point of view of a tradition different to the Indian one.

Critics' accusations concerning the moral character of Kṛṣṇa's actions and advises

It is usual among critics to connect the dogma of the double personality of Kṛṣṇa with some of His *actions*, specifically *advises*, and to conclude that a real and true incarnation of God cannot act in the way He does, and that consequently when Kṛṣṇa affirms —as in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*— that He is the God Viṣṇu it is an «incredible effrontery». In fact this is a way of thinking and feeling very different from that of an Indian believer.

²⁷ Cf. DENZINGER, HENRICUS, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, Freiburg, Herder & CO., 1937, at the end *Index Systematicus rerum dogmaticarum et moralium*, [18] *Trinitas Personarum*, and [19] *Explicationes variae et modus loquendi*. A clear explanation of this Mystery is found in the book of BARTOLOMEUS ANGLICUS, *De proprietatibus rerum, Volume I, Prohemium, Libri I-IV*, Turnhout, Belgium, Brepols Publishers, *Cap. I. De Deo et eius essentia*, p. 69.

Indian people does not ignore that in many occasions Kṛṣṇa has acted as an ordinary mortal, with contradictions in his conduct, in a way which has provoked the severe condemnation of moralists, but as Bimal Krishna Matilal asserts Indian believers are not unaware of Kṛṣṇa's particular way of acting and at the same time they adhere to:

«A tradition that is just about 2000 years old» and that «has unconsciously believed that these contradictions must have either some deeper significance, or some plausible explanation».

We think that «*there is a plausible explanation*», as we shall explain later on.

We completely agree with Matilal's interpretation, and also understand perfectly well this traditional Indian way of reacting in relation to a religious belief that is proper to Indians. Similar behavior or reactions happen to any person educated in and adhering to any other religion in regard to actions, difficult to be understood, committed in the past or in the present by persons of authority belonging to that religion.

The severe qualifications that are pronounced by some critics against many of Kṛṣṇa's actions or advises are mentioned by Sukthankar in his quoted text. We think that they can easily be rejected. Let us express some ideas we have concerning these matters:

- How a person must behave when he approaches a literary production originated in other Culture that professes a different religion from his own -for instance, a Western Christian person who reads the *Mahābhārata* or an Indian Hindu who reads Milton's *Paradise Lost*? Of course, nobody is obliged to adopt the religious beliefs of others reflected in a book belonging to another Culture, but when somebody reads a book of another Culture and wants to know, appreciate and understand it, he is indeed obliged to respect, to accept and to take into account, as they are, these religious beliefs that constitute a part of the structure of the book. The critics' qualifications on the *Mahābhārata* do not comply at all with this criterion and hinder a correct understanding of the text, not having a full comprehension of the moral quality, the psychology, and the essential nature of the personages involved in it.
- If an Indian author introduces in his work the deeds of an incarnation of a God, Kṛṣṇa in the present instance, whom he venerates with full faith, and his work is dedicated to readers that share his own faith, it is improbable that he presents that divine incarnation acting with «effrontery», as a «cynic», as an «opportunist» and as a «charlatan» —as the critics say— especially if we have in mind, as Indians have, that the reincarnations of a Supreme God are to benefit mankind, to make Justice prevail and to punish evil-doers. No Indian would enounce such qualifications on the person of Lord Kṛṣṇa. It is *a priori* impossible that the author of the *Mahābhārata* could have created the personality of a reincarnated God who could deserve such attributes as «cynic», «opportunist», and «charlatan», who could be accused of acting with «effrontery».

- To appreciate the real moral value of Kṛṣṇa's deeds and advises, and be able to judge them, it is necessary to analyze these actions in the context of the whole totality of the facts described by the *Mahābhārata* in its integrity. Animosity between Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas began very soon in their common history, when in their youth they were learning military arts. The Pāṇḍavas became superior to the Kauravas, and naturally this fact provoked the emulation and then the enmity and the hatred of the Kauravas. These feelings provoked many aggressive, unethical, and even criminal acts of the Kauravas against the Pāṇḍavas. And the Pāṇḍavas have been victims of many misdeeds done by the Kauravas. The Kauravas were thus the first to begin the conflict between the two families. The attitude of the Kauravas in relation to the Pāṇḍavas, as well as their military power superior to that of the Pāṇḍavas, and their possibility of victory over the Pāṇḍavas, must be taken as important elements when Lord Kṛṣṇa's conduct is to be judged.

Analysis of the «misdeeds» of the Kauravas and their allies

- The first criminal intent against the Pāṇḍavas was accomplished by **Duryodhana**, who was the first born of the Kauravas and their chief and representative. When both, Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, went together in a walk to the forest near the river, Duryodhana taking advantage to the fact that the Pāṇḍavas were resting and Bhīma was very much tired and profoundly asleep, bound him with ropes made of lianas and threw him into the river. But Bhīma awoke, repelled or killed the serpents of the water, the Nāgas, and escaped the danger (cf. *MhB*, critical edition I, 119, 32-35).
- Another criminal intent from **Duryodhana** and some of his brothers and friends to exterminate the Pāṇḍavas was when they set on fire the house in which the five Pāṇḍava brothers with their mother inhabited. The Pāṇḍavas helped by Vidura could escape being killed as plotted by the Kauravas (cf. *MhB*, critical edition I, 124-138).
- Soon afterwards King **Dhṛtarāṣṭra**, well-advised by Bhīṣma, Droṇa and Vidura, ceded half of the Bhārata Kingdom to the Pāṇḍavas, as it was just and legal, although opposed to the will of his own sons. (Cf. *MhB*, critical edition I, 195-202). This act of King Dhṛtarāṣṭra increased the hatred of the Kauravas. Duryodhana and Karṇa, his loyal friend and great warrior, were thinking to begin a war against the Pāṇḍavas, but **Śakuni**, brother of Gāndhārī, the wife of Dhṛtarāṣṭra, gave Duryodhana an advice to defeat and destroy the Pāṇḍavas without having recourse to war: to challenge Yudhiṣṭhira, who knew nothing about gambling, for a game of dice. Yudhiṣṭhira, who as a *ksatriya* could not refuse, accepted Duryodhana's challenge. This advice will be the cause of the *Mahābhārata*'s war and of the almost complete destruction of these two illustrious noble families.
- In the game of dice Duryodhana is replaced by Śakuni, who was a skilful and crooked gambler. The game ended disastrously for the Pāṇḍavas:

Yudhiṣṭhira suffered loss of his riches, kingdom and members of his family, including the beloved common wife of the five Pāṇḍavas, Draupadī. Then all the Pāṇḍavas became slaves. At that occasion **Duryodhana**, **Duśasana**, and **Kaṛṇa** behaved in a very shameful way with her, humiliating her, without the possibility for the Pāṇḍavas to intervene in her help. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, becoming conscious of the injustice done to the Pāṇḍavas, annulled the game and the Pāṇḍavas recovered their freedom. But soon afterwards Dhṛtarāṣṭra, under the pressure of the strong request of his beloved son, Duryodhana, ordered a new game of dice, and gave his consent to the harsh conditions imposed by his son: If the Pāṇḍavas win, they will recover all they had lost; and if they lose the game, they must accept the exile in the forest during thirteen years. As Yudhiṣṭhira lost again, the Pāṇḍavas were obliged to go to the forest and to remain there for thirteen years. On coming back from the exile the Kauravas refused to give back to them their possessions as had been agreed. Again the Pāṇḍavas were victims of another misdeed done by the Kauravas. Soon afterwards the war between the two families began.

Also the way of acting of Bhīṣma, Droṇa and Kaṛṇa in relation to the Pāṇḍavas could be considered not correct at all. Their behaviour could also be criticized and it affords many reasons that can justify Kṛṣṇa's conduct in regard to them.

- **Bhīṣma** was the wise and intelligent grandfather of all the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas, and he loved them all, specially the Pāṇḍavas. When the war began, even recognizing the full right of the Pāṇḍavas to get back their properties, he decided to be the allied of the Kauravas.

There is another aspect of Bhīṣma's conduct that is also difficult to understand and judge, and which could be considered as contrary to the norms of loyalty. Bhīṣma is a great warrior and the chief of the Kauravas' army. The victory of the Kauravas depends on him, but in the famous text of the Critical Edition VII, 107.85, Bhīṣma, asked by the Pāṇḍavas, explains them how they must act in the battle in order to kill him, finishing his advice saying to Yudhiṣṭhira these ominous words: «Thus victory is certainly yours... Do this, o virtuous son of Kuntī, and then you will be able to kill in the battle all the Dhṛtarāṣṭra's sons together». Thus Bhīṣma has handed over his own army and himself to the enemy. Arjuna having learnt Bhīṣma's decision is reluctant to fight with Bhīṣma and to kill him following Bhīṣma's own advice. It is only when Kṛṣṇa intervenes and remembers him that to fight is the eternal duty of warriors that Arjuna decided to fight with Bhīṣma and kill him.

- **Droṇa**. After the death of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, the master of arms of the sons of both families, was designed chief of the Kauravas' army. Notwithstanding his great estimation for the Pāṇḍavas, and especially for Arjuna, he decided to be on the side of the Kauravas, and during the war fights furiously against the Pāṇḍavas.

A fact of great importance, in our opinion, occurred in the course of the battle. When Droṇa was carrying out a ferocious massacre in the Pāṇḍava army, an important group of great and famous Ṛṣis, Sages of the past, appeared and severely reproached Droṇa for being a Brahmin and nonetheless being dedicated to a cruel warrior activity. Droṇa, as the *Gītā* would say, was *well accomplishing* the duty of a *ksatriya* and *not accomplishing* his own duty as a Brahmin. Moreover the Ṛṣis announced that Droṇa's life was finishing (cf. *MhB*, Critical Edition VII, 164, 86 ff.); and in fact he was cheated by an untrue information given to him by Yudhiṣṭhira, who following the advice of Kṛṣṇa, made Droṇa believe that his son, Aśvatthāma, was dead. Droṇa falls into a state of depression and abandons fighting, and soon after is killed.

- Karna was also an allied of the Kauravas from the very moment he met both, the Kauravas and the Pāṇḍavas. He had been humiliated by Arjuna as being the son of a driver; he became a loyal friend of Duryodhana, and was full of hatred against the Pāṇḍavas.

During the leadership of Karna, who followed Droṇa as the chief of the Kauravas' army, took place his fight with Arjuna. Kṛṣṇa, seeing Arjuna was pressed by Karna's arrows, ordered Arjuna to shoot his fearful arrows and kill Karna. (Cf. *MhB*, Critical Edition VIII, 66, 57). At that very moment one of the wheels of Karna's chariot sank into the earth and he was obliged to descend from the chariot in order to liberate the wheel. Karna asked Arjuna to comply with the norms of conduct in the battle fixed by the *Dharma* which order to stop fighting when something like Karna's chariot accident occurs during a battle.

It is Kṛṣṇa who answered Karna reminding him the numerous occasions he had violated the *dharma* when he wanted to harm the Pāṇḍavas, and that he cannot resort at that moment, in his own favor, to the same *Dharma* he had rejected before:

Then Kṛṣṇa asked Karna where was the *Dharma* for him when he took part together with other Kauravas or their allies in all the bad actions that Kṛṣṇa enumerates in his rethorical questions: humiliating the frightened Draupadī, the wife of the Pāṇḍavas, on the occasion of the game of dice bringing her, wearing a single garment, into the assembly hall; inducing Yudhiṣṭhira, who did not know gambling, to play with and be defeated by the expert śakuni; laughing at Draupadī as she, being in her menses, was coerced by Duśasana in the assembly hall; challenging the Pāṇḍavas for desire of power, relying upon the King of Gandhāra, śakuni; advising Duryodhana to kill Bhīma by means of poisoned food or snakes and (drowning him in the river, cf. I, 119, 32-35); setting on fire the Pāṇḍavas' house, trying to kill them all together with their mother; agreeing with the Kauravas in not giving back their properties and richness to the Pāṇḍavas after the exile of thirteen years in the forest, when they had complied with their exile of thirteen years in forest; molesting the irreproachable Draupadī exhorting her to choose another husband since her husbands were lost, gone already to hell; participating with many

powerful warriors in the death of the boy Abhimanyu, the beloved son of Arjuna, killing him in the battle²⁸.

Finally, after expressing these misdeeds of Karna, Kṛṣṇa said again to Arjuna: «Shoot», reiterating his previous order (variant 1148, 5)²⁹.

Accusations that were adduced against Kṛṣṇa for His advises to the Pāṇḍavas

In previous sections we have referred to how Yudhiṣṭhira, who was the King of *Dharma* and never had lied in his life, advised by Kṛṣṇa, cheated **Droṇa** saying him that his son has been killed in battle, provoking Droṇa's despair and death; how Arjuna killed **Bhīṣma** in the battle, exhorted by Kṛṣṇa to accomplish his duty of warrior; and how Karna was killed in battle by Arjuna also following Kṛṣṇa's exhortation, also violating a rule of combat.

The last intervention of Kṛṣṇa is in relation to **Duryodhana's** and Bhīma's duel. Most interesting is the talk between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna when the duel begins. Kṛṣṇa says to Arjuna that in his opinion Duryodhana, the Kaurava, will certainly kill Bhīma, the Pāṇḍava, because Duryodhana is much better trained than Bhīma, although Bhīma is stronger. In order to win this duel, decisive for the final victory of the Pāṇḍavas, Bhīma, according to Kṛṣṇa, must resort to prohibited ways of fighting. (Cf. *MhB*, Critical Edition IX, 57, 1-13). Arjuna agrees and indicates Bhīma that he must strike Duryodhana's thighs and break them. Bhīma follows his brother's advice, given to him by Kṛṣṇa, and Duryodhana is deadly wounded and defeated. Soon afterwards he dies reproaching Kṛṣṇa his unfair way of acting.

It is necessary to observe that the intervention of Kṛṣṇa in the episodes of Droṇa/Yudhiṣṭhira (*MhB*, Critical Edition VII, 164, 98), Karna/Arjuna (*MhB*, Critical Edition VIII, 66, 57), and Duryodhana/Bhīma (*MhB*, Critical Edition IX, 57, 1-18) are in situations where the Pāṇḍavas run the risk to be defeated and consequently destroyed, what would have been the great victory of *Adharma* (Wickedness) represented by the Kauravas. That would have been the failure of Kṛṣṇa and of His descent from Heaven.

²⁸ Cf. *MhB*, Critical Edition VIII, 66, 57-65; and 67, 1-37, and the other misdeeds of Karna which are included in the variants readings of the Critical Edition.

²⁹ We think that for the understanding of this passage concerning the participation of Kṛṣṇa it is not convenient to separate the section 67 from the section 66, as the Critical Edition does, since both are strongly connected: in section 66, v. 57, Kṛṣṇa orders Arjuna to shoot his arrows against Karna in the very moment when the wheels of Karna's chariot sank into the earth. Karna reminds then Arjuna to act according to the *Dharma*. It is in section 67, where Kṛṣṇa refutes Karna reminding him all the actions he accomplished *not according to the Dharma*. And after Kṛṣṇa's words on the *Dharma*, Arjuna, who has listened the impressive words of Lord Kṛṣṇa, shot his arrows and killed Karna. Thus we think that section 67 would be better to be included at the end of section 66, in this way, the order given by Kṛṣṇa is absolutely connected with the actions or misdeeds of Karna: he is not the person to adduce the *Dharma* in his favor, being a person who violated the *Dharma* in such a way. The words of Kṛṣṇa have served to convince Arjuna and make him reject the request of Karna.

The deaths of Bhīṣma, Droṇa, Karṇa and Duryodhana, four powerful and first class warriors that fought for the Kauravas, meant the defeat and punishment of the Kauravas and the triumph of the Pāṇḍavas, and what interested most Kṛṣṇa, the triumph of Justice. Kṛṣṇa had fulfilled his task, the task he had assumed as the Supreme God Viṣṇu: to come to Earth as a human reincarnation in order to restore Justice, helping the Pāṇḍavas to win and destroying the Kauravas without abandoning his human possibilities and ways of acting. Once His task fulfilled, Kṛṣṇa dies and reassumes his splendid existence as the Supreme Being, Viṣṇu, beyond Good and Evil.

CONCLUSION

When any person reads or studies or interprets a book belonging to his own culture or a foreign culture, he must accept the personages of the book as they are conceived by the author or authors of the book, without judging them according to his own criteria or the criteria established in his own culture. This hermeneutical norm is frequently forgotten by the scholars who have done research on Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata*. Kṛṣṇa in the *Mahābhārata* cannot be judged in the way He is in the Sukthankar's and Hiltebeitel's quotations we included in this article, and He is not at all any of the personalities that are mentioned there. The reason is very simple. The author to whom we owe the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, a part of the Poem, has said very clearly who Kṛṣṇa is, and consequently how he must be judged.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Kṛṣṇa, the king, the warrior, the protector of the Pāṇḍavas, the great friend of Arjuna, reveals his true Divine personality in an extraordinary and impressive Theophany: He is the Supreme God, Viṣṇu. This is strongly corroborated in other places of the *Mahābhārata*, as for instance in V, 65-69 Critical edition, where names of Viṣṇu are used for Kṛṣṇa.

Viṣṇu himself mentions His *avatāras* (*Mhb.* VI, 26, 7 and 8):

*yadāyadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata /
abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmy aham //7//*

Whenever the *Dharma* weakens,
O Bhārata,
and Wickedness increases,
then I manifest myself in the world. //7//

*paritrāṇāya sādḥūnāṃ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām /
dharmasaṃsthāpanārthāya saṃbhavāmi yuge yuge //8//*

For the protection of good men
and for the destruction of evil-doers
in order to strength the *Dharma*,
in each Period of the world,
I come to existence. //8//

And He finally declares that He is beyond the impurities of action and desire (*Mhb.* VI, 26, 14):

*na mām karmāni limpanti na me karmaphale sprhā /
iti mām yo 'bhijānāti karmabhir na sa badhyate //14//*

Actions do not stain me,
I feel no desire for the fruits of actions -
whoever knows that I am thus,
he is never bound by actions. //14//

We are expressly told by the *Mahābhārata* itself that Kṛṣṇa is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, that as such He has come to Earth to protect Justice and destroy those who act against it, and that He is beyond action and desire. Indians accept what the poet says, because they believe in their God and the *Mahābhārata* is a spokesman of the same belief that has been respected by them for centuries.

Kṛṣṇa is thus beyond judgment. If notwithstanding this fact somebody persists on judging Him, he is compelled to leave aside, to contradict or to deny all that the *Mahābhārata* affirms about Him: the facts that Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme God, that He is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, that He is beyond the reach of the impurities of actions and desire. In this way what the *Mahābhārata* expresses about Kṛṣṇa and has been believed and accepted during centuries in India has been transformed by these scholars' interpretations into an absurd creation. The judgment of Kṛṣṇa, which these interpretations imply, corresponds thus to a personage that is not the personage conceived, created and presented by the *Mahābhārata*, but an artificial super-imposed Eurocentric production of very erudite scholars.

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