Introduction

The *Bhagavadgītā* (*BhG*) is perhaps one of the most renowned and often quoted texts in Hindu religious traditions. Commentaries, interpretations and translations abound. Yet some aspects and questions still need to be addressed. How are we to understand the text having been handed down as part of the *Mahābhārata* (*MBh*) epic? What are the threads which connect the different ideas and levels of arguments that build up the text, and how were they twisted and woven in order to put forward philosophical and theological frameworks of meaning? What are the characteristic features of the theology of the *BhG* that explain its influence and paradigmatic role in subsequent Hindu traditions? Can we adduce evidence to connect the *BhG* to specific cultural-historical contexts? The present study attempts to address these and other issues through a chapter-by-chapter analysis of the text and by relating some of its doctrines to the epic, literary context in which it is embedded. Although exegetical commentaries by academics such as Zaehner (1969) are available, no such analysis has been undertaken.[1] In this respect, the aim of the study is to fill a gap in *BhG* scholarship too. This also concerns the inclusion of the relevant secondary literature and a discussion of the problems involved in translating and interpreting the text. While this might seem not worth mentioning in an academic publication, the consideration of previous research is not the strongest aspect of *BhG* studies. Often scholars seem to start anew, which explains the proliferation, as well as the redundancy, of publications on it (cf. Minor 1987: 150, note 13). Therefore, the present study will depart from a survey of research and instead establish a referential framework for further discussion. It is against this background that the relevance of the epic context for understanding the *BhG* will be explored as well as the way in which different concepts and traditions are used in order to establish the theological framework

[1] The present study is based on my earlier book on the *BhG*, published in German (Malinar 1996). Although the approach and principle results are maintained, it includes new materials and perspectives.

for declaring Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa the 'highest'. This is followed by an analysis of the individual chapters of the *BhG*, in which the major steps of the argument will be identified and their consistency examined. In a final move, the possible historical and cultural contexts for the theology of the *BhG* will be considered. The interplay of texts and contexts and the most important doctrines and features of the *BhG* will be outlined in the following sections of the Introduction.

EPIC CONTEXTS: GODS, KINGS, DIALOGUES

One of distinct features of the *BhG*, the dialogue between the epic hero Arjuna and his charioteer, the epic hero Kṛṣṇa, transmitted in the *MBh* epic, is that it is situated at a dramatic moment in the latter. The dialogue takes place right in the middle of the battlefield between the two armies, which are ready to fight. It unfolds when Arjuna refuses to fight against his relatives. He declares that he sees no use in gaining a kingdom by shedding the blood of his kin and feels that it is better to refrain from doing so and live a mendicant's life. This crisis of the hero brings the epic plot to a halt and delays the beginning of the battle. The inevitable course of events narrated by the epic bards is temporarily suspended and thereby reflected upon. This point of departure became so characteristic of the text that it even became an object of iconographic depiction. However, it also became one of the major points of critique in academic studies of the texts. Seen as an intolerable interruption of a narrative that would be much better off without it, some scholars regarded the *BhG* as having originally been composed without any concern for the epic. Other scholars, however, took a different view and argued that the text is part of the well-attested 'didactic' dimension of the *MBh*, or even that it is intimately connected to the themes and issues of epic narrative and thus expresses an important dimension of its meaning. This debate raises important questions with regard to the possible relationship between the religious teachings of the *BhG* and the epic context, which consists not only of stories, but also of debates on ways of living, legitimate forms of kingship and power relations in the world.

The importance not only of the *BhG*, but also of the oldest extant epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, for the formation of Hinduism and potentially for the reconstruction of its cultural-historical context has long been recognised. Both epics relate a painful crisis in a royal family and include in their narrative, in different degrees, not only a plot, but also discourses on kingship, the socio-cosmic order (*dharma*), kinship and gender relations, personal loyalty and individual duty, as well as teachings

on paths to liberation and philosophical ideas. The *MBh* especially was turned in the course of the history of its composition into a confluence of different narratives, myths, legends, didactic intentions and religious orientations revolving around some of the central issues of the epic plot. These include the distribution of power in a world structured not only by moral boundaries (*maryādā*) and socio-juridical laws (*dharma*) defining social status, but also by desire, fate, fatalities, suffering, doubt and individuals' quest for liberation and spiritual empowerment. The conflict between these different referential frameworks and orientations is enacted in the epic on different levels: we see some characters transgressing the boundaries of their social position, while others are torn between social duty and the quest for liberation; a family-clan is split up and wages war over the distribution of land and power; gods and other powerful beings (sages, *yogin*s and epic bards) are involved in this encounter and interfere in the course of events; and notions of fate are introduced as explanations for the unpredictable and uncontrollable features of existence. The relationship of the gods to the story that unfolds in the epic is by no means less complex and is addressed in various aspects. There are speculations concerning divine scheming in some passages of the epic, but the latter are not made the overarching framework, as is the case, for instance, in Homer's *Iliad*. The redactors of the extant version of the epic, its 'final redaction', did not weave a coherent theistic 'red thread' into the manuscripts they produced, nor is there just one major god presiding over or pervading all the epic events. Not only are Viṣṇu, Nārāyaṇa and Kṛṣṇa praised, but Śiva and other gods are also encountered in 'visions' or other places. Although important studies of some of these issues are available, their relationship still needs to be explored in greater detail.[2] Nevertheless, the interplay and sometimes the clash between divine and human power constitute a major epic topic, addressed and dealt with by drawing on various concepts and offering different conclusions.

In dealing with these topics, the epic composers did not only use the literary device of a 'friendly conversation' (*saṃvāda*) entertained by senior family members, renowned teachers and gods and goddesses – reflections on this issue are also included in the epic narrative itself and prove to be important for the portrayal of the characters and the dynamics of the story. These discourses highlight certain aspects of the place of human activity within the cosmic order. On the one hand, human beings are able

[2] See, for instance, Biardeau 1976, 1978, 1997, Hiltebeitel 1977, Scheuer 1982, Laine 1989, essays in Schreiner 1997.

to acquire exceptional positions of power by using either ritual (kings) or ascetic (*yogins*) techniques of empowerment. On the other hand, there are factors that place a limit on human aspirations, such as fate, individual *karman* and, last but not least, god(s) and demon(s). Vedic sacrifice is one of the important arenas of divine and non-divine beings. Its elements and actors, its tropes and semantics, are dispersed throughout the epic to such an extent that sacrifice can be regarded as an idiom or paradigm that serves to connect different levels of discourse and meaning. In spite of its criticism of certain groups of sacrificers, the *BhG* draws on sacrifice in order to explore the nature of action and the chances to control its workings. It is made one of the arenas and purposes of 'detached action' and is used for explaining why karmic bondage can be avoided by people who remain active and perform their ritual and social duties. Yoga practices and knowledge of salvation are equated with ritual performances in which all defilements and desires are offered up in the 'sacrificial fire' (*agni*) of knowledge. In addition, Kṛṣṇa's supremacy is in various ways related to sacrifice: he is made the protector of all sacrifices and asks his followers to dedicate their lives to him as a continuous sacrifice.

However, the religious and philosophical doctrines of the *BhG* are connected not only to other religious doctrines and practices, but also to various political and social issues raised in the epic, many of them connected to royal power. The monotheistic theology presented in this text also offers an interpretation of kingship and royal power. In revealing Kṛṣṇa as the highest god, a new position of power is propagated that serves to reshuffle existing power relations that previously revolved around the ambiguous or double-sided position of the king. He is a figure that combines, on the one hand, aspects of a divine being when he emerges from the ritual coronation and consecration performed by the Brahmin priests as an aggregation of cosmic powers, but he remains, on the other hand, a human being and resembles other householders in that he functions as a patron of sacrifice and thus remains dependent on ritual reciprocity established by his relationship with the Brahmin priests. Since the royal power is brought about by the ritual empowerment of kings, it needs to be re-confirmed through repeated rituals and is not absolute. The structure and place of the king are shifted by introducing the position of a highest god, who is at the same time the overlord and protector of all living beings, as well as the 'highest self', who guarantees liberation for all embodied selves. With regard to the conceptualisation of kingship, this means that a king is now regarded as subordinate to Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, the highest god. The king is now defined in relation to the highest god, who unites the ascetic power of the detached

and liberated *yogin* with the creative and protective dimensions of his being the overlord of all beings, including kings. This limits the chances of kings to depict and present themselves as divine. This re-mapping of power relations also concerns other groups of people, such as Vedic gods, Brahmans and successful ascetics, but also the 'common' and 'lower' people, including women and Śūdras. The new conceptual framework, which came into being along with the monotheistic doctrines of the *BhG*, became the model for later texts and traditions of subsequent religious traditions within Hinduism. With regard to the relationship between the *BhG* and the *MBh*, my analysis will show that studying the former in the context of the latter enriches our understanding of both. This will be shown in some detail in the analysis of the debates on war and peace in the *Udyogaparvan* of the *MBh*, the book preceding the battle books of which the *BhG* is part. The analysis will deal with the extant texts of both the *BhG* and the *MBh* in their final redactions. This does not exclude the use of a text-historical perspective in the course of the analysis. While agreeing with most scholars that an epic without a *BhG* is certainly conceivable, I argue that the *BhG* was not composed independently of the epic tradition, but in relation to the epic and even for it. The *BhG*, or more precisely the different parts of the *BhG*, were incorporated in the epic in the course of its composition.

DOCTRINES

The analysis of the *Udyogaparvan* of the *MBh* as one important epic context of the *BhG* will be followed by a study and interpretation of the various religious and philosophical doctrines presented in the *BhG*. The text established a conceptual framework that became paradigmatic for the development of later Hindu religious traditions such as those expressed in the Purāṇas. It will be argued in detail that the impact of the *BhG* lies in its attempt to mediate between two opposing referential frameworks of human aspirations: on the one hand, the realm of socio-cosmic relationships encompassed by *dharma* and based on ritual performances as transmitted in Vedic texts; and on the other, the quest for liberation from this very realm through ascetic practices and the employment of new forms of knowledge. This mediation is achieved on two levels:

(A) Ascetic practices are interpreted in terms of sacrificial activity as a detached performance of duties (*karmayoga*) for the sake of 'holding the world together' (*lokasaṃgraha*). In explaining why this activity (*karman*) is exempt from karmic retribution and thus conducive to a quest for liberation, it is argued that ascetic action means equating one's

actions with those of the cosmic cause of all activity (called *brahman* or *prakṛti*). Anyone who manages to substitute his own agency with 'cosmic' agency for the sake of 'the welfare of all beings' can be liberated, whether he is a king or an ascetic (cf. *BhG* 3). This principle is also applied when Kṛṣṇa is made the cause of all existence in that one is now asked to renounce all desires and cast all actions on him – in brief, to turn detachment from personal interests into attachment to the god.

(B) The concept of a single highest god called Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa is developed. This god represents the possible mediation between ascetic detachment and royal engagement. He combines the two dimensions of (human) aspirations that were previously ascribed to different discursive realms implying different life-styles: he is both the mighty ruler and creator of the world and its dharmic order, as well as the ever-liberated and transcendent 'highest self' (*paramātman*; *puruṣottama*). Both aspects are brought together in the depiction of Kṛṣṇa as the most powerful Lord and *yogin*. This means that he is in control of the workings of *karman*, since he has power over nature (*prakṛti*), the cosmic cause of activity, but remains at the same time detached from the created world, being forever 'unborn' and transcendent. The paradox implied in the doctrine that the god is both absent and yet present is explained by Kṛṣṇa's capacity to appear in various forms and disguises that are apparitional and can disappear at any moment because they result from *māyā*, the god's power to create forms, and are *māyā*, appearances that serve specific, well-defined purposes.

In the theological elaboration of these different levels, the *BhG* establishes a monotheistic framework that displays the following characteristic features:

1. There is a single highest god who is responsible for the creation, protection and destruction of the world. This world is based on a socio-cosmic order (*dharma*) created by the highest god, but threatened by transgressions and transgressors of all kind. According to the different tasks, the highest god has the following characteristics:
   a) He creates the world by the activation of a creative, often (his) creative powers (*brahman*, *prakṛti*).
   b) He is present in the world in different embodiments (*tanu*) or appearances (*māyā*) in order to protect *dharma* and destroy *adharma*.
2. The creation of the world, the different species of being and the common basic elements that form a body are explained by using concepts drawn from Sāṃkhya philosophy.

3. The highest god is the liberated 'highest self' who guarantees the chance of liberation for all selves when they realise that they are part of it. This can be achieved by ascetic practices and devotional attachment (*bhakti*).
4. The double-sided relationship of the god to the world and to individual embodied selves is indicated by making him a supreme *yogin* ('mighty lord of yoga') with regard to his power over nature and his supremacy over all cosmic regions and other gods (the 'mighty lord of all worlds'), as well as in relation to the individual self striving for liberation, the 'highest self' and 'supreme *puruṣa*'. He is the one and only, the unique god who combines supreme royal and cosmic power with ultimate detachment.
5. Sacrifice is acknowledged as the major arena of enacting and acknowledging the mutual dependence of all living beings in the world, thus securing their prosperity. Ritual reciprocity is necessary to maintain the socio-cosmic order, to 'keep the world together'.
6. The Vedic gods are subordinated to the highest god and regarded as dependent on ritual transactions.
7. New forms of ritual communication with the highest god are endorsed (offerings of flowers etc., so-called *pūjā*, recitation of mantras at the moment of death, complete ritualisation of one's life) and are declared to be available to all, irrespective of their social status, gender or rules of ritual purity.
8. A new interpretation of *bhakti*, loyalty and affection, is proposed that calls for one's exclusive devotion to the god as the means of salvation and is considered accessible to everyone, irrespective of social status, ritual purity, gender or karmic baggage.
9. Kings are subordinated to the highest god by emulating his altruistic concern for 'the welfare of all beings', which occasionally implies using violence against the enemies of socio-cosmic order.

Scholars were often hesitant to categorise or give these doctrines a name. This theology was rather loosely called 'theistic', or a 'concept of god', and some spoke of 'monotheism'. However, most scholars seem reluctant to apply the term 'monotheism' to Hindu religious traditions, since they differ in certain respects from the somehow normative 'monotheism' taught in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. While these differences indeed have to be acknowledged, this need not mean that there is only one form of monotheism. Other cultures, such as ancient Egypt and ancient India, developed a different type of 'monotheism', which can be called, with J. Assmann (1993: 10), 'cosmological monotheism'. Its characteristic feature is the acceptance of other gods either as partial manifestations of the one and only, transcendent god, or as 'lower' divine powers responsible for certain

tasks or domains in the world. It is a theology that proclaims the 'one' in relation to the 'many' and establishes its sovereign and transcendent character in relation to other gods or powerful, cosmic beings. This does not necessitate the abolition of all other gods, since they are subordinated to the highest god and turned into domains of his being. This is signified in the *BhG* by the appearance of Kṛṣṇa in his cosmic 'All-Form' (*viśvarūpa*). The important point here is that these appearances are not regarded as contradicting the god's ultimate, transcendent state of being. Paradoxically, his cosmic presence and power are based on his distance and absence as the ever-liberated 'highest self'. This distinguishes him from older concepts of cosmic power and sovereignty as the unification, coagulation and embodiment of cosmic powers and regions in one being, called *brahman* or *mahān ātman* in the Upaniṣads (see van Buitenen 1964). Yet the depiction of Kṛṣṇa as 'cosmic' draws on these older notions, showing that the new theology not only mediates between the ascetic aspiration for liberation and empowerment on the one hand and social duties and a quest for happiness in the world on the other, but also includes the polytheism of the Vedic pantheon and older notions of kingship in its cosmological re-mapping. Seen from a historical perspective, this form of monotheism can be understood as emerging from the exploration and use of earlier interpretations and speculations about the 'one' and the 'many' in the Vedic and Upaniṣadic traditions (and perhaps also other traditions such as the Iranian). On the one hand, this concerns models of relationship established between the different gods of the Vedic religion, such as reciprocity, mutual dependence, the formation of alliances and distinct domains of power. On the other hand, it relates to reflections and models of a 'one' as, for instance, a 'source' of the many, as already formulated in cosmological speculations in late Vedic texts, such as the *Atharvaveda*, or as a power that lends them unity and cohesion as expressed in Vedic discourse on sovereignty and kingship. Although some of these historical and discursive connections still need to be studied in detail, the *BhG* provides enough evidence for its 'working' on and with older ideas of polytheism, which means exploring unions and alliances between them as well as their possible relations to the 'one' or 'highest' being often articulated in discourses on sovereignty.[3] However, one must also include the other dimension of its theology, which represents an already extant critique of these Vedic notions: discourses on renunciation, asceticism, teachings of empowerment and liberation in yoga and concepts of 'nature' (*prakṛtî*) and consciousness developed in early Sāṃkhya teachings, as well as the presence

[3] Cf. Assmann 1986, Hornung 1971 on ancient Egypt.

of the Buddhist and Jaina traditions. They also contributed to the depiction of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa as the transcendent being and to the delineation of the paths that lead to him. The yogic and ascetic road-maps make the quest for liberation an upward movement through the different levels of the adept's 'manifest self' and connect it to the cosmic planes that represent the general version, the 'matrix' of the individualised levels. They play an important role in the *BhG* and are integrated into the monotheistic framework. However, the *BhG* also offers a new way of establishing connection to the 'highest' by proclaiming the accessibility of the god in the world in his appearances. While these appearances are given the definite purpose of removing disorder (*adharma*), they mark the god's presence in the world and become legitimate targets of worship. It comes as no surprise to realise that this theology needs no special reconciliation with the emergence of image worship and temple cults. Indeed, for some forms of the god described in the *BhG* we have pictorial representations, some of them dating back to the second century BCE. This points to another feature of 'cosmological' monotheism which distinguishes it from Christian or other forms of monotheism: it is not iconoclastic, but allows images of the god. However, as is repeatedly pointed out in the *BhG*, this does not mean 'idolatry', since the image must not be confused with the 'true' god, who is forever 'unborn', the liberated 'self'. Yet the god's temporal appearance is fundamental for establishing a direct relationship, not only between the god and the cosmos, but also between himself and individual beings, the 'embodied selves'. This is one important feature of the concept of *bhakti*, the reciprocal, loving relationship between the god and his followers, presented in the *BhG*. The god is thus not only 'the all' in terms of his relatedness to the cosmos, but he is also 'for all' in that he is connected to all individual beings. Neither kinship nor gender nor other possible or desirable alliances determine this relationship, since it can be established, or rather activated, by all beings, irrespective of the rules and boundaries that usually structure social relationships. Therefore everyone can be his follower, his *bhakta*, which means to become 'dear' (*priya*) to the god to the same extent as the god is 'dear' to him. This means realising that one actually and solely belongs to the god, that one is his 'own' (drawing on the older connotation of *priya* as 'one's own'; cf. Scheller 1950). While these features will be studied in detail in the course of the analysis of the *BhG*, this general outline may explain what is meant in what follows by the term 'monotheism'. I propose to use this notion of 'cosmological monotheism' for the theology of the *BhG* because it accounts for many of its features and may invite further comparative and historical studies within and beyond the Indian traditions.

EPIC CONTEXTS: KINGSHIP AND *BHAKTI*

This 'cosmological monotheism' results in a re-mapping of power relations, not only with regard to the traditional Vedic gods who possess power over distinct realms of the cosmos and can be approached through rituals, or to well-known causes of creation and realms of liberation, such as the Upaniṣadic *brahman*, but also in respect of kings. This aspect seems no less important for the depiction of Kṛṣṇa as the 'mighty lord of all beings', which gains additional dimensions of meaning when seen in the context of the debates on kingship. The concept of a supreme god results in a reinterpretation of the socio-cosmic position of the kings by subordinating them to the higher power of the god while at the same time making the king the representative and protector of the god's cause on earth. This affects the older, Vedic interpretation of royal sovereignty. While the king is regarded as occupying a very high, if not the highest, position on earth, since he unites in his consecrated body the powers of the gods and the cosmos, his power depends on repeated ritual consecrations and is thus intimately connected to continual priestly endorsement. This concept, like much of the epic and the *BhG*, confirms a characteristic feature of kingship pointed out by Quigley (2005: 1f.): 'Kingship is an institution that develops its full reality in a world where the political has not emerged as an autonomous sphere from the ritual.' According to the Vedic ritual idiom and practice of empowerment, the king emerges from his consecration as an aggregation of the different powers that have been conferred on him. His body consists of the qualities of different gods, his virtues belong to him through his association with those who are in charge of them, etc. Yet he does not retain this divine position, but returns to the world and needs to prove himself a king by promoting and protecting the prosperity of the people and by retaining his 'virtues' (see Heesterman 1957, Gonda 1959). The epic not only describes 'royal rituals', but generally testifies to the idea that the powers and qualities of a king are conferred on him (see Hopkins 1931, Gonda 1966, Hiltebeitel 1976). This paradigm is also confirmed by means of negative examples, as time and again the epic deals with kings who fail to keep their power or to live up to the standards of royal virtue and in consequence lose everything. Deserted by Śrī, the goddess embodying royal fortune, they roam around in disgrace or exile. On the other hand, for example, in Duryodhana, the epic highlights kings' claims to absolute power and sovereignty that extends even to the gods, which causes destruction and ruin. This claim, put forward in the *Udyogaparvan* of the epic, expresses a notion of kingship that is not endorsed in the *BhG*.