

STIMW 2016 Paper Proposal for Christopher Gibbons  
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(Working Title): **Sacrifice and Liberation—The Bhagavadgītā in its Epic Context**

I propose to use the opportunity this year's STIMW conference provides to present a paper on reading the Bhagavadgītā (BhG) within the broader narrative context of the Mahābhārata (Mbh). The paper allows me to incorporate some aspects of my current PhD research on meanings associated with the word *yoga* in the Mbh.

In reading the BhG, as part of the Mbh epic, I accept the well-established position that the text reflects a post-Aśokan age (*terminus post quem* c. 200BCE), in which 'non-violence' (*ahiṃsā*), and the soteriological goal of freedom from suffering and transmigration (*nirvāṇa*, *mokṣa*, *apavarga* etc.), had become powerful socio-religious ideals.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, I believe that the strident affirmation of the warrior's code (*kṣatriyadharma*) at the heart of the BhG is an orthodox Brahminical response to the post-Mauryan, especially post-Aśokan, religious landscape of the centuries either side of the turn of the Common Era. I will argue that this response seeks, on the one hand, to legitimize the ritualized 'violence' (*hiṃsā*) inherent in normative social behavior (*dharma*); and, on the other hand, to monopolize influential new soteriological ideals under the rubric of *yoga* on behalf of the pious (*dhārmika*) orthodox householder. The text's Brahmin authors achieve this, I argue, through an exemplary use of the epic's ideal Kṣatriya, Arjuna, within the narrative setting of a war that they identify with 'sacrifice' (*yajña*).

I will argue these points in four parts. In §1, I will briefly introduce the topic with reference to certain trends one finds in 'modern' interpretations of the BhG, which tend towards universalist and allegorical readings of the text, often with limited reference to its original literary and/or historical contexts.<sup>2</sup> In §2, I will establish the historical and ideological importance of the *ahiṃsā* ethic, as a counterpoint to the Brahmin authors' orthodox ideals, and suggest that in composing the BhG they had the identification of the battle with sacrifice (*yajña*)<sup>3</sup> clearly in view. Since *yajña* is the ritual means by which the cosmos is rejuvenated, regulated, and sustained, its identification with the Bhārata war, which is so often overlooked in studies on the BhG, provides the essential mechanism by which the epic poets are able to legitimize the violence inherent in Arjuna's *kṣatriyadharma* and, by extension, in normative social behavior more generally. In §3, I will show how the poets achieve an orthodox monopoly on *yoga*, by making exemplary use of the BhG's martial setting and the warrior's code, before concluding, in §4, that these crucial narrative, thematic, and historical considerations are quickly forgotten in 'modern' allegorical interpretations that universalize the text out of context.

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Fitzgerald, J. *The Mahābhārata: Book 12. The Book of Peace Part One*. UCP: Chicago, USA. 2004: 100ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Robinson, C. *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gītā and Images of the Hindu Tradition: The Song of the Lord*. Routledge: Abingdon, UK. 2005

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the description at 5.139.29ff.: Kṛṣṇa is the 'overseer of the sacrifice' (*yajñasya vettā*) and will play the role of Adhvaryu; Arjuna will be the Hotṛ etc. On the theme of the Mbh's central battle as a *raṇayajña* and for additional textual references see Feller, 2004: 253ff.