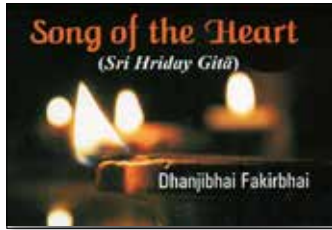


Book Reviews

Song of the Heart (Sri Hriday Gita), by Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai (New Delhi, India: APH Publishing House, 2014, pp. 189)

—Reviewed by Darren Duerksen



I thoroughly enjoyed this book, though for a Euro-American reader *Song of the Heart* can, at first, seem somewhat strange. The book is made up entirely of passages that

echo or quote the Gospels and letters of the New Testament, but they are rearranged and paraphrased in unique ways. Even the physical layout, with the binding at the top so that the reader has to flip the pages upwards, signals that this is no ordinary book. One quickly wonders what exactly *is* this *Song of the Heart* and what is it trying to do?

As the translators explain, *Song of the Heart (Sri Hriday Gita)* is a fresh translation of a book written in the mid 1950s in Gujarati. The author Dhanjibhai Fakirbhai (1895–1967) grew up in a Hindu family in Gujarat, India and, as a young man, became a follower of Christ. Unlike many Christians, however, he remained attuned to Hindu culture and philosophy and, following his retirement, reflected and wrote extensively on connections between Hindu and Christian thought and scriptures.

Song of the Heart is one such manuscript. In it, Fakirbhai attempts to reinterpret the message of Jesus and his followers using the format, style and linguistic feel of the *Bhagavad Gita*, or *Song of the Lord*. In that classic Hindu text, the Lord Krishna engages his soon-to-be disciple Arjuna in a series of dialogues. Each chapter focuses on different yogas, or paths or disciplines, that progressively reveal the true nature of reality and the purpose and path for humanity. It was, and is, a particularly important text for Hindus of the later *bhakti* (devotional traditions). In like manner, Fakirbhai arranges sayings of Jesus and his disciples in a type of dialogue, each of which highlights a different *yoga* or way in the life of a disciple. Chapter six, for example, focuses on *Premyog*, or the Yoga (or way) of Love, and includes many passages from the Gospel and letters of John, among others. In this and other chapters, Fakirbhai paraphrases the biblical passages using words and language drawn from the *bhakti* traditions.

The current volume, then, seeks to bring Fakirbhai's unique project to an English-speaking audience, though not for the first time. An English translation was published in 1969 after Fakirbhai's death. However, the Indian translators of that version made the curious decision to use and insert verses from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible rather than translate Fakirbhai's own paraphrase of verses.

To rectify this, the translators of the current edition sought to produce a translation that was more faithful to Fakirbhai's paraphrase and that would preserve its sensitivity to Hindu and *bhakti* traditions. To aid this, the translators at times use the Gujarati/Sanskrit terms with the English translation in parentheses. In addition, the book's landscape and top-bound format seeks to physically replicate the way in which ancient Hindu palm-leaf manuscripts of Hindu texts were traditionally copied and read.

Such translation choices beg the question, for whom is this book intended, and what is its purpose? There are at least two audiences that may find *Song of the Heart* interesting and helpful. The first and main group for whom it would appeal would be readers who are familiar with the *Bhagavad Gita*. For example, many English-speaking Hindus, or those from Hindu backgrounds, may perhaps recognize the format and resonate with the Gujarati and/or Sanskrit terms included in the text. In so doing, such readers may hear and understand the teachings of Jesus and his disciples more easily than they would via some of the Gospels and letters of the New Testament. Those who have worked among Hindus, or any group unfamiliar with the Bible, know how confusing certain parts of the Bible (particularly the epistles) can be to these groups. Certainly an important part of discipleship should include learning how to read and understand the Bible. However, *Song of the Heart* could provide Hindus a helpful bridge and an introduction to important teachings and themes of the New Testament, the experience of which may invite them to read and seek to understand the Bible itself.

Non-Hindu background readers may also find *Song of the Heart* interesting, though Christian readers may be confused by the way in which biblical passages are pulled from their original contexts and juxtaposed with passages from other parts of the New Testament. This may particularly be the case for those of us who are used to hermeneutical approaches that interpret a given verse in relation to its literary context. However, it was helpful for me to remember that the Christian church has periodically arranged and presented Scriptures according to themes for the purposes of teaching and worship, such as in catechisms and liturgies. If the *Song of the Heart* can be understood as a type of catechism that organizes and introduces passages of the New Testament according to certain themes, readers may encounter refreshing or even new understandings of Jesus' teachings.

The book may provide a window into the way in which a Christian in a Hindu context, particularly one influenced by Hindu bhakti or devotional traditions, might read and understand aspects of the gospel.

In addition, missiologists and scholars of World Christianity may find *Song of the Heart* to be an interesting example of a locally produced, vernacular theology. Viewed in this way, the book may provide a window into the way in which a Christian in a Hindu context, particularly one influenced by Hindu bhakti or devotional traditions, might read and understand aspects of the gospel. In the following paragraphs, I will suggest some possible areas and connections that scholars could explore more fully in this regard.

One area that could be explored regards the ways in which aspects of the *Bhagavad Gita* and its hermeneutic tradition may imbue *Song of the Heart*. For example, the *Bhagavad Gita* is normally considered by Hindus to be *smṛiti*—or extensions of truth arising from past Vedic scriptures that were “remembered” and written down. *Smṛiti* texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* serve to awaken within its hearers the memory of fundamental truths (Rosen, xi). In a similar sense, while not claiming to be scripture itself (since it is a paraphrase), *Song of the Heart* nonetheless seeks to highlight for its Hindu hearers aspects of God’s intent and teaching that they had heard, or only partly heard, but not fully understood. Just as the *Bhagavad Gita* sought to draw together and represent strands of thought from the Vedas, so *Song of the Heart* seeks to draw together and represent strands of thought from the New Testament in ways that address the questions and devotional sensitivities of modern Hindus.

Another area for exploration is the ways in which *Song of the Heart*, similar to Hindu texts, seeks to not only convey meaning, but also more importantly, to help readers experience truth. Whereas much Western biblical hermeneutics focus on the *meaning* of a text, Hindu hermeneutics has traditionally sought to evaluate the *experience* a text like the *Bhagavad Gita* creates. As R.D. Sherma has pointed out in her discussion of the *Bhagavad Gita*, most Hindu hermeneutical schools of interpretation prioritized the importance of “practical” methodologies, evaluating a text and its theory based on its capacity to give rise to a practical experience (Sherma, 10). In other words, scriptures such as the *Gita* were authoritative insofar as their teaching evoked experience, including bhakti devotion. Could it be that *Song of the Heart*, reflecting this sensitivity, prioritizes this hermeneutic and seeks to help people experience a love for God? It would certainly explain why Fakirbhai felt the freedom to paraphrase and re-arrange biblical texts. His desire was perhaps to help Hindus *experience* the gospel, hoping that they would subsequently turn to the Bible for fuller understanding. Again, those of us schooled in Western biblical

hermeneutic traditions may wonder at this, but it remains an important area for further reflection and study.

Whether as a devotional text or an example of a local, devotional theology, *Song of the Heart* is certainly worth reading. And, perhaps most importantly, it is worth sharing with those from Hindu backgrounds who are interested in learning about the way of Jesus. **IJFM**

References

- Rosen, Steven.
2007 *Krishna's Song: A New Look at the Bhagavad Gita*. Praeger.
- Sherma, Rita D.
2008 “Introduction.” In *Hermeneutics and Hindu Thought: Toward a Fusion of Horizons*. Edited by Rita D. Sherma and Arvind Sharma. Springer.