

knowledge production, she seems to assume delusion or ignorance whenever any contemporary ethnographers, or even Tamils themselves, see in Tamil culture or religion some of the things missionaries saw. Referring to ethnographers who represent village deities as fierce and capable of capricious violence, she says, “such stigmatized epithets completely fail to gloss the resonances of Tamil village rituals I recorded. The notion of religion encoded in the removals of drought and sorcery, for example, has nothing to do with gratuitous or erratic violence and everything to do with warranted—necessary, in fact—self-growth and transformation” (13). Here, perhaps is evidence of Clark-Decès’s own striving for precedence—*nāṅ tāṅ* first! (I am first!). Tamil villagers themselves regularly characterize some of their gods in exactly this way—as fierce and unpredictably violent. Perhaps rather than being an entirely false misunderstanding, the missionaries saw in this something worthy of further investigation that may provide still more clues into how Tamil rituals thematize “the vicissitudes of human existence” (54–55).

ELIZA F. KENT

Colgate University

The Bhagavadgītā: Doctrines and Contexts. By ANGELIKA MALINAR. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Pp xii+296. \$95.00 (cloth).

This book, which is based on an earlier, longer study, examines the Bhagavadgītā (BhG) from the perspective of two conceptions of kingship.¹ It argues that the BhG introduces a new, politically motivated theology that functions to delegitimize the claims of god-kings to absolute sovereignty.² Malinar claims that the BhG introduces a “highest god” as the “overlord and protector of all living beings” and that the “king is now regarded as subordinate [to this highest god]” (4). This review will focus on (i) the textual and philological basis for this claim and (ii) the hermeneutic presuppositions of Malinar’s interpretation.

According to the frontispiece, “in contrast to many other studies, this book deals with the relationship between the Bhagavadgītā and its epic contexts.” In actuality, it limits itself to one of the eighteen books comprising the epic, the Mahābhārata (Mbh): the Udyogaparvan (UdP). Malinar justifies this decision by claiming that the BhG is a “continuation or commentary” of “the debates on war and peace that pervade the UdP” (35). In chapter 1, she provides a history of mainly European research into the BhG. Chapter 2 establishes the UdP as the primary context for understanding the BhG. Chapter 3 presents a close reading of the BhG. In Chapter 4, Malinar summarizes the BhG’s doctrines, especially Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and “cosmological monotheism.” The final chapter relates the BhG to some findings in historical research. An extensive bibliography and an index are included.

¹ The present book is based on Malinar’s 1996 *Rājavidyā: Das königliche Wissen um Herrschaft und Verzicht; Studien zur Bhagavadgītā* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz), itself a revised version of a 1991 dissertation at the University of Tübingen (see esp. p. 9, n. 1 of this text).

² For the claim that the BhG represents a “new theology,” see 32, 125, 129, 158, 205, 221, 240, 258, 270.

Malinar claims that Kṛṣṇa represents a new conception of divinity that combines cosmic and regal functions in his person as well as in that of his earthly representative, Arjuna.³ However, there are some textual issues with this claim. Although Kṛṣṇa is referred to as *īśvara* in the BhG, the term *īśvara* (“lord”) is not equivalent to *rājan* (“king”). Malinar equivocates between these two terms, variously translating *īśvara* as “lord,” “overlord,” and “sovereign,” and forcing it to take on the semantic color of kingship. But Kṛṣṇa is never referred to as a king (*rājan*) in the BhG. The closest terms are *jagatpate* (10.15) and, metaphorically, *narādhipam* (10.27). *Īśvara* and *rājan* evoke different contexts. Although *īśvara* means “lord” or “controller,” its primary semantic domain is philosophical, theological, and esoteric. *Īśvara* implies *self*-mastery and is closer to the yogic ideal of self-restraint than to political sovereignty. Further, *īśvara* is related to *antaryāmin*, the ruler within, and is frequently an epithet of Śiva (*maheśvara*). In contrast, *rājan* is primarily an exoteric and political term. In bhakti vocabulary, god may be either a king or a lord, but this is offset by the fact that he is also called a friend, a guest, a lover, or a parent. Although the metaphorical uses of *īśvara* and *rājan* overlap, they are distinct terms, as Gonda notes.⁴ Unlike the term *rājan*, *īśvara* typically evokes philosophical and soteriological contexts. “For the Yogin God the Person, *Īśvara*, represents the actual culmination which man’s personality has to attain. It is the pattern of the perfect fruition of individuality, of self-existent wholeness.”⁵

The problems with Malinar’s argument have been noted previously, in other contexts. Heesterman notes: “I do not entirely agree with Malinar. Krishna is not the ideal king. One may even wonder whether India knows such an ideal king. . . . More than elsewhere, in Indian civilization kingship is dubious. A king, that is, lacks transcendent authority because he is and is supposed to be fully worldly. Krishna, however, is both above and outside this cosmos, and simultaneously encompasses the cosmos—a form of doing the splits which only he, not the king, no matter how ideal, is capable.”⁶ Chakravarti concurs: “Malinar’s view of Krishna as the ideal king is highly problematic. . . . Krishna is not to be so easily ascribed ideal kingship. . . . His origins are as a princeling of a small state; his primary base . . . is in the lowly cow-herd clan of Yadavas; at no time does his formal intervention in the affairs of his cousins amount to royal action; it is as emissary, as cousin to both parties, and, elusively, as a transcendental presence, that he appears in the Mahabharata.”⁷

Nor is Arjuna ever portrayed as a king in the Mbh. His relationship to Kṛṣṇa is modeled on the relationship of two warriors rather than one between a king and

³ Compare 235 (Kṛṣṇa as “paramount sovereign” and “king of kings”), 237 (as “ruler and creator of the cosmos”), 239 (as “lord and king over the manifold beings”), 268 (as “ultimate ruler and king of the universe”), 269 (as “a neutral, most powerful king”). For Arjuna, cf. esp. 4–5.

⁴ Jan Gonda, “The *Īśvara* idea,” in *Change and Continuity in Indian Religion* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1997), 138–63.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 158.

⁶ Quoted in Lourens Minemma, “Divided Families and Social Conflict: Comparing a Greek Tragedy and an Indian Drama,” in *Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation: Multifarious Ideals and Realities*, ed. Jerald D. Gort, Henry Jansen, and H. M. Vroom (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 75.

⁷ Quoted in “Divided Families,” 75–76.

a god.⁸ Among contradictory debates on kingship in the UdP, Arjuna is depicted as an aspect of the divine being itself (cf. Mbh 5.48.20–21, especially *nārāyaṇo naraś caiva sattvam ekaṃ dvidhākṛtam*). Bhīṣma warns Duryodhana, who is obsessed with kingship, that Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna are the ancient warriors and seers Nara and Nārāyaṇa. The divine pair not only transcends Brahmā but the cosmic order itself.⁹ Malinar ignores this lengthy passage (Mbh 5.48.1–25) entirely.¹⁰

Instead, Malinar states that Arjuna is depicted as the “ideal king” (13), where “the relationship between the highest god and the potential king is made the model of the new theological interpretation of *bhakti* which implies exclusiveness and subordination” (11). Malinar argues that Arjuna is depicted “as the ideal king” on two grounds: (1) Arjuna “is made the ideal *bhakta*, the loyal follower who can expect to receive his share of Kṛṣṇa’s power” (13); (2) The BhG’s theology makes the god “the model of sovereignty, king [*sic*] has to live up to it, in addition being turned into a devotee. . . . The king . . . must also cherish this dependence” (234).

Even if we overlook this circular argumentation, other problems remain. In the introduction, Malinar claims that the “specific knowledge” Kṛṣṇa reveals “is called *rājavidyā*, the ‘knowledge of kings’ or royal knowledge” (12; cf. also 145)—a grammatically questionable translation. Compounds of the form *rāja-* (e.g., *rājadanta*) are best translated as “best of” or “highest.” Pāṇini *sūtra* 2.2.3 (*rājadantādiṣu param*) applies here. The usual order is inverted in *rāja-* compounds and the *upasarjana* moves to the end. Accordingly, *rājadanta* is not “the tooth of kings” but “eyetooth.” *Rājavidyā* should be translated as “the best of knowledges” rather than as “the knowledge of kings,” as Malinar does.

Malinar claims *rājavidyā*, in the sense of knowledge of kings, “is the only designation given to the doctrine of the BhG that occurs in the text itself and it programmatically summarizes the aspects discussed earlier” (145). She cites 9.1–2 in defense: “I will explain now to you . . . the highest secret (*guhyatama*). . . . It is knowledge of kings (*rājavidyā*), the highest means of purification to be guarded by kings (*rājaguhyā*)” (147). Malinar’s equation of *guhyatamam* with *rājavidyā* in the sense of “knowledge of kings” is textually problematic, since the words *guhyam* and *guhyatamam* recur in contexts that are explicitly not political (see 11.1, 15.20, 18.64, 18.75).

Verses 11.1 and 15.20 are especially problematic for Malinar. At 11.1, Arjuna says that he has heard “this ultimate secret [*paramaṃ guhyam*] known as the highest self.”¹¹ At 15.20, following his speech on transcendence, Kṛṣṇa says: “O sinless one! This most secret teaching [*guhyatamam śāstram*] has been thus uttered by me. Understanding this [*etad buddhvā*], one would become enlightened [*buddhimān*] and would have done what is to be done, O Bhārata!”

⁸ Moreover, as Fitzgerald has shown, the issue of kingship is complicated even in the case of Yudhiṣṭhira, the primary candidate to kingship. See *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 7, trans. James L. Fitzgerald (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 79–164. Van Buitenen notes that the epic intentionally complicates the succession issue, central to claims to legitimate kingship. See *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 1, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), xviii.

⁹ And consequently, political order as well.

¹⁰ For further evidence of missing contextualization, see below.

¹¹ All translations of the BhG are my own unless otherwise noted.

This (and not *rājavidyā*) is the only designation given to the doctrine of the BhG that occurs in the text itself: the BhG is a *śāstram* (authoritative text); it is knowledge of how to attain enlightenment (*buddhi-*) and not an esoteric doctrine of kingship, as Malinar claims. At stake is individual transformation, culminating in *īśvara*-hood, rather than a grab for power. Malinar remains silent on this verse in her close-reading.

This text is uncritical of its hermeneutic presuppositions. Malinar invokes the principle of the “hermeneutic circle” (14) but seems unaware of the work of Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer and that the “hermeneutics of suspicion” implied in the hermeneutic circle apply primarily to the interpreter’s own presuppositions. Malinar does not reflect critically upon the tradition within which she operates, or upon the historical contingency of her own interpretative presuppositions.

Malinar forces the text into a predetermined framework according to which the BhG is allegedly composed of multiple “layers.”¹² I am unclear about the exact number of “layers” Malinar attributes to the text, since she is rather free in her invention and classification of “layers.” Malinar initially distinguishes three layers: (1) a nontheistic Sāṃkhya layer; (2) a nontheistic Yoga layer; and (3) a theistic/monotheistic layer in which Kṛṣṇa is proclaimed the highest god (54–55). However, Hildebeitel and Sukthankar (whose erudite and pertinent *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata* is not cited) have shown that the “layers” hypothesis is untenable. To account for the text’s complexity, Malinar is forced to introduce further “layers.” Thus, there are now “*ātman*-interpolations,” a “theistic interpretation of the Sāṃkhya model” (93), a “reinterpretation of *saṃnyāsa* in the framework of Sāṃkhya and Yoga concepts” (108), “‘classical’ Sāṃkhya,” “‘epic Sāṃkhya’” (115, cf. also 192), “the doctrine of *bhakti*, which is presented in this [ninth] chapter as something new and unheard of” (145), not to mention Vedic and Brāhmaṇic strands of thought (cf. 205), “political and socio-cosmic dimensions” (224), but this list could be extended indefinitely. Indeed, Malinar herself notes that “in each layer others could be traced” (30), thus dissolving the text. This is the chimera of historicism replacing the task of hermeneutics.

Malinar systematically neglects the philosophical and pedagogical aspects of the BhG. Thus, whereas van Buitenen translates 2.43 as “This flowering language which the unenlightened expound, they who delight in disputations on the Veda, holding that there is nothing more [*nānyadastīti*] . . . brings on rebirth as the result of acts,”¹³ Malinar translates: “The followers of the Veda serve as an example of a ‘lack of discrimination’: they are without real knowledge, but indulge in flowery language (*puṣpītām vācam*) and in the Vedic doctrine (*vedavādarata*) that teaches ‘There is no alternative’” (72). However, Kṛṣṇa does not criticize the Veda *tout court*; his criticism is directed against the materialist prejudice “there is nothing beyond this” (*nānyadastīti*). In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Yama tells Naciketas that

¹² Although Malinar cites previous scholarship, she does not clarify why hypothetical text-historical reconstructions of the BhG should be accepted unquestioningly. She does not engage alternative approaches that consider the text a unified work, especially philosophical interpretations.

¹³ *The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahābhārata*, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 77–78.

“one who constantly thinks that there is only this world, and none other [*nāsti*], repeatedly comes under my sway” (1.2.6).¹⁴ This parallel shows that what is at stake here is the urgent task of overcoming mortality rather than pedantic disputation. Intratextually, the Mbh’s first book, the *Ādiparvan*, provides further evidence that the epic’s central concern is the problem of time and eternity (cf. Mbh 1.1.187–90 and 193–95).

I close with some comments on the contextualization of the BhG in terms of the UdP (chap. 2). This is the strongest chapter in the book and casts genuine light on one aspect of the text. However, the narrow focus on Duryodhana vitiates an otherwise useful discussion. The diurnal political debates in the UdP occur against the background of nocturnal philosophical discussions. These discussions once more establish the referential context of the BhG as knowledge of *brahman*; Sanatsujāta declares that *brahman* is the foundation of the universe and transcends beings (Mbh 5.44.15–20).¹⁵ Whereas the diurnal political debates focus on issues concerning *rājan*, these nocturnal, mystic revelations point to the *īśvara* ideal.¹⁶ Although one could dismiss these discussions as “interpolations,” and Malinar seems to suggest as much, this is a risky strategy.¹⁷ At what stage does one stop tailoring these texts to suit one’s own interpretive bias?

These problems underscore the dangers of overlooking the history of reception (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*) as well as the effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of a text. As Gadamer demonstrates, these are essential moments in our understanding of texts and cannot be ignored. But Malinar dismisses classical Indian philosophical commentaries on the BhG as well as “modern Hindu interpretations of the text” on the grounds that “each author establishes his own hermeneutics on the basis of the religious or philosophical tradition he adheres to” (17). Not one of these interpretations supports Malinar’s thesis because it is untenable for the reasons stated above. Moreover, I am unclear why precisely these interpretations should be excluded, since Malinar’s logic applies to every writer.

This book is a brave and laudable attempt at reading the BhG afresh, especially given the philosophical genius of Śāṅkara and others. Although the central argument does not work, Malinar indicates a way of reading the epic and the BhG together. This provides a useful avenue for further research. Malinar rightly responds

¹⁴ The parallels between the BhG and the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* are too well documented to require expansion here.

¹⁵ Compare also Mbh 5.45.5–15, which describes the *yogin*’s vision of *brahman* as the seed of the universe, the full, the supreme, the swan, the Person, and Mbh 5.45.25, which declares *brahman* to be the “I,” the *ātman*. (Modified from van Buitenen’s summary of the UdP) *The Mahābhārata*, vol. 3, trans. J. A. B. van Buitenen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 285.

¹⁶ Compare Mbh 5.41.6, especially *suguhyaṃ api*. As in the BhG, *guhyaṃ* is predicated of soteriological knowledge rather than doctrines of kingship. That this diurnal/nocturnal contrast is intentional can be seen from BhG 2.29 (“The self-controlled man is awake in that which is night for all beings. For the sage [*muneḥ*] who sees that is night in which beings are awake.”). It is thus impossible to reject the nocturnal passages as “theistic interpolations” (35), without also violating the UdP’s narrative structure.

¹⁷ “Therefore the *UdP* also includes texts in which Kṛṣṇa is presented as the highest god . . . thus pointing to the influence of the theology of the *BhG* in some parts of the *UdP* that are then regarded as being later than the *BhG*” (35).

to the creation of the *Critical Edition*, although her book would have been even stronger had she engaged less with dated pre-*Critical Edition* views on the BhG and focused more on a cogent and generous philosophical interpretation of the text.

VISHWA ADLURI

Hunter College

Dreaming in the World's Religions: A Comparative History. By KELLY BULKELEY. New York and London: New York University Press, 2008. Pp. xi+331. \$23.00 (paper).

"*Humans are a dreaming species*—history and science join together in confirming this simple fact" (211, italics in original). In his ambitious new book, Kelly Bulkeley elegantly responds to Wendy Doniger's call for a "bottom-up" approach to comparative religion, one that draws its strength from the universally shared "facts on the ground" of human existence, such as being born, crying, loving, or dying (*The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth* [New York, 1998]). Like these other bodily realities or "facts," dreaming has both physical and meta-physical dimensions in complex relationship and thus has been religiously construed throughout history in myriad ways. Unlike other bodily "facts," however, the physical dimensions of dreaming have tended to elude the lens of scientific research. Dreams offer little to no external manifestation beyond the accounts of the dreaming subject who paradoxically, when rendering them, is in an entirely different state of consciousness than when they were experienced (namely, waking), and thus such accounts may always be charged with distortion or unreliability. In reductionist ways, some schools of neuroscience and psychology have claimed human dreaming as their exclusive province, thus ignoring the central importance of dreaming and dream interpretation in world religions.

A scholar who, unusually, has devoted his career to the study not of one religious tradition or historical period but rather to one phenomenon of great religious importance—the significance of human dreaming—Bulkeley is as fluent in the current state of scientific dream research as he is in the history of religions. He is thus able to provide us with a truly interdisciplinary study of dreaming, bringing this fluency to bear in the pursuit of the book's telos: a cross-cultural phenomenology of ideas about dreaming that is informed not only by religious histories but also by neurophysiology and psychology. For a comparativist adequately to address any "facts on the ground" in an intelligible way, she needs to have such depth and eclectic training. Ironically, she usually does not, because ever-constricting academic specialization sometimes marginalizes the project of comparative religion, thereby making such training unavailable except to brilliant mavericks like Bulkeley, specialists of a different sort, who refuse to be constricted. The result is that the religion scholar of say, rituals of dying, is often ignorant of the "science behind the thing," the subtle physiological processes that are so often closely observed and elaborated on by ritual response, if only one knows what to look for. The same blindness can be true of the material scientist who studies a phenomenon of religious importance and heavy-handedly treats its life in that sphere