

Misinterpretation of the Gita by Dr. Zakir Naik

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The You-Tube buzz about the outrageous claims by a so-called scholar of comparative studies, Dr. Zakir Naik and President of Islamic Research Foundation of Mumbai (India), has drawn the attention of many Hindus from around the world. This globe trotting internet sensation has been accused of using selective quotes out of context from various Puranas to cast dispersion on the Vedanta philosophy, the Gita and their teachings. Using a rapid fire Sanskrit chanting technique and misquotes, this Muslim scholar entertains the vast audience, but in the process manages to offend many Hindus. At a deeper level, he is not doing any favor to the faith of Islam. First, he claims that the early teaching of the Vedanta and the Islamic prophesy and its teachings have a common root, and that the Vedanta tradition concludes with Islam and its Prophet Mohammad. Second, the early orthodoxy Hindu rituals and outdated social customs are the true teachings of Hinduism, not the liberated teachings of the Gita.

The repeated chanting of misquotes from the Vedic scriptures, in this age of Internet, is going to create a bad impression of such a wonderful tradition of the Vedic philosophy and the Gita, which was just celebrated in the Story of India BBC documentary as being no less than a gift to humanity. Such misinformation based on the innuendos and misinterpretation of the Purans and the Vedas may not help patch the religious harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims in a country like India.

Dr. Naik's false teaching of the Gita needs to be debunked by the Vedanta scholars. It has been widely acknowledged that the Gita's teaching is profoundly way ahead of its time with a vast appeal to people of many faiths and creeds.

In July 16, 1945, nuclear physicist Robert Oppenheimer famously recalled this quote from the Bhagavad Gita after seeing the mushroom cloud from the first atomic bomb test in New Mexico: *"If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the mighty one."* and *"Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."* This inscription at the testing site, aptly named as the Trinity Site, had been the source of deeper curiosity for many westerners towards this ancient text. Similarly, some scientists are awed by the revelation in the Gita that the creation and destruction, postulated in a vast time scale, are essential part of the cosmic evolution.

At the same time, the Gita seems to contain the fountain of spiritual wisdom as reflected in this quote by a famous German author Herman Hesse: "The marvel of the Bhagavad-Gita is its truly beautiful revelation of life's wisdom which enables philosophy to blossom into religion." The vast span of knowledge and wisdom in Gita, ranging from the nature's cosmic evolution and creation of the physical world to the subliminal inner self journey, has stood the test of time and space.

On the contrary, the undertone of Dr. Naik's so-called scholarly rote sermon with rapid citation against the Vedanta and its true teaching seem both childish and full of ignorance. Furthermore, his continuous push for the revival of the throw-back era of superstitions and social dogma in the India sub-continent seems to be motivated by his own insecurity in his faith. Why else would you spend so much time fighting such a profoundly secular universal teaching contained in the Gita, especially when it is not even your own religion? Because of his habit of playing fast and loose with the words and facts, many Imams held a press

conference to condemn him for his political remark in Italy about the battle in Mecca.

Through his rote memorization of the Puranas and the Vedic citations, he draws applause from the crowd. But, if you listen carefully to his words, he professes taking the Indian society back to the medieval age by undermining the liberated true teachings of the Gita. Only an insecure person like him would make an argument that the Islam and its prophet came from the Vedanta. Islam can stand on its own. He is insulting both religions.

Citing Manu Smriti and the Koran, he defends veiling of the women. Then he cites the examples of Dashrath to defend polygamy. Most offensive of all is this: "If Krishna and Dasharath can have multiple wives, then why can't we Muslims have four?" I wonder what must be going through the minds of the Muslim women in the audience. At the time for a need to fight for women's rights and against the Talibanism, Dr. Naik selectively quotes various scriptures, and professes putting women behind the parda and at the discretionary pleasure of men. All women of India should be outraged by this.

Many Gita followers do not have any problem with other religions. In fact, the Gita teaches tolerance, and allows people to take the path of their choice. The Gita is not a book of commandments, but is a scripture of choices. As being a Muslim scholar, Dr. Naik needs to be careful not to spread rumors about another religion. In particular, such an out-of-context reference to these spiritual personalities like Krishna and Dashrath of another religion will not create harmony and understanding in a country which is already torn apart by religious strife.

We still have a fresh memory of the Danish *cartoon incident*, and how it created riots in many countries. Many Muslims around the world saw these cartoons representing a direct attack on the Prophet and on Islam. The Satanic Verses

(1988) created similar uproar around the world and became a center of protests from Muslims in several countries. The author Salman Rushdie even faced death threats and a fatwā (religious edict) by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and had to go in hiding for many years.

His patronizing behavior towards the Hindu followers in the audience is outrageously offensive. For example, Dr. Naik's reference to Krishna and Dashrath, with a smirk on his face, may be misinterpreted by many Hindus as a direct insult to Hinduism. To many Hindus, these personalities from the two of the most holy scripts of the Hindu religion --Mahabharat and Ramayan-- are divine, and they certainly do not evoke the images of polygamist playboys. We are not a mature society like the US where the front page cover of Obama and his wife as gun totting Muslims in the New Yorker hardly incites any street protests.

He also comes very close making it a holy duty of every Muslim to use violence against "terrorist America". These days, we need preachers of peace, not the promoter of violence. Furthermore, it will be very damaging to those countless people in India who are struggling to bring about social change in the society. This shows that Dr. Naik is not a spiritual person of faith, but a man of mean spirit. He is not representing the faith of Islam in good light.

In an effort to undermine the Gita, he dismisses the contribution of great personalities like Sankaracharya, Vivekananda, and Ram Mohan Roy, and brands them as misguided reformers under the influence of the British Raj. Some of his outrageous claims include: Mohammad's arrival as an avatar of Kalki was predicted in Rigveda and Bhawisya Puran, and thus Islam and Mohammad conclude the religious prophesy predicted in the Vedanta traditions. Many scholars have dismissed these claims through linguistic analysis and other scholarly arguments. He also puts forth pseudo-scientific gibberish of exploding

nebula as an argument of the Koran's creation theory. It is an insult to the true teaching of Islam.

His loathing towards the Gita does not stop here. His criticism of vegetarianism in defense of cow slaughter is quite outrageous too. He declares that the Hindu belief in non-violence deprives us human of protein. According to him, our breathing kills millions of bacteria, and thus the Hindu belief on vegetarian diet and non-violence is unnatural and ridiculous. This should be offensive to the great religions of Buddhism and Jainism. This clearly should also be unacceptable to those who follow Gandhi's path. In fact, he ridicules Jainism for influencing the early meat eating Vedic followers, and for converting them into vegetarians.

It is one thing to teach your own religion to others and show the path of understanding and hope. He, as a Muslim scholar, on the other hand, is deliberately telling Hindus to change the way of their thinking and spiritual focus by ridiculing their choice of spiritual guidance. He wants them to abandon the teaching of the Gita and follow his version of hybrid religion with full of outdated dogmas.

I wonder how the American public would feel if the Hindus here were to go around in the US telling everyone in big masses to abandon the Holy Bible in favor of the Old Testament. It is one thing to have a scholarly conversation in a seminar setting, but his huge masses seem more like a misguided sermon and propaganda rather than an intellectual discourse.

Dr. Naik needs to be careful not to get carried away in his *punditry* of Sanskrit language and the power of rote memory of the Puranas. The Gita describes these types of people as having dry knowledge but no wisdom. Rote memory alone will not bring about religious harmony in a complex country like India. A talented scholar like Dr. Naik should also do some self reflection to understand

the soulful feeling of the millions of Hindus around the world by studying the Gita more carefully.

His lecture series can be found here:

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_type=&search_query=Similarities