

Chapter One



Religion in the *Mahābhārata*

A brief overview of the historical context of the *Mahābhārata* might be appropriate to launch ourselves into the discussion of religion in the Great Epic.

Historical Context of the *Mahābhārata*

In his work *Brāhmaṇas in Ancient India* (1979), Govind Prasad Upadhyay offers a sketch of the historical and social climate that is encompassed in the *Mahābhārata*. I employ it here because it very economically provides the context for the literary preoccupations of the text. While scholars will differ on individual points of Upadhyay's interpretation, most will agree on the broad details. In Upadhyay's assessment, the *Mahābhārata* is a chronicle of the challenges faced by the Brahmanical community¹ between the period of 600 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. He paints a graphic picture of a group besieged by overwhelming varieties of economic, political, and social change.

Upadhyay begins by noting the geographical core of the Brahmanical community—an area known as *madhyadeśa*, “the middle country,” “heartland”; or *āryavarta*, “the land of the *āryas*.” This central space is devoted to the ritualistic sacrificial religion developed by the Indo-Aryans. Upadhyay asserts that the most basic factor contributing to the fluctuations in Brahmanical fortunes is the economic changes “which took a vigorous course from Mauryan times onwards” (30). Urbanism, mobility, trade, commerce, agriculture, the formation of guilds and artisans' communities all led to a greater degree of movement in society. More wealth and power was placed in the hands of the lower castes of society, promoting hierarchies based on class over those of *varṇa*. These new “economic ethics” provided common folk in urban society with a greater scope of options² (30).

In addition to the economic changes eroding the foundations of Vedic society, Brahmanical tradition was stressed under a variety of social and political developments. The first of these momentous events was the political ascension of Mahāpadmānanda in the Vedic *madhyadeśa* itself (c. 364 B.C.E.; 30). Mahāpadmānanda was the first *śūdra* ruler of *āryavarta*. His accession to rulership represented a mighty blow to the *varṇa*-based triumphalism of the Brahmanical tradition, which reserved this privilege only for its protégés, the *kṣatriyas*. That *śūdras* should exercise hegemony over *dvijas* was seen as a sign of the moral decline of society. Upadhyay notes that as a result of this, the Nandas are uniformly vilified in Purāṇic accounts as usurpers and uncultured barbarians.

The Nandas were overthrown by Candragupta Maurya who, with the collusion of the Greeks, established the Mauryan dynasty (324–187 B.C.E.).³ The Mauryan rulers, however, became patrons of the heterodox Buddhist tradition, which posed a serious challenge to the Brahmanical tradition. The incursions of the Greeks, moreover, inspired terror and distress. The *Yuga Purāṇa*, for example, describes the state of panic created by *Yāvana* (Greek) inroads into *āryavarta*, saying that they brought the havoc of war with them (28). True political chaos, however, came with the collapse of the Mauryan empire after the death of Aśoka.⁴ The northwest frontier of *madhyadeśa* saw a series of foreign incursions. The migration of new tribes such as the Madrakas, the Sindhus, and the Sauviras, generated increasing social upheaval. In addition, the repeated invasions of the Greeks, the Scythians, the Parthians, and the Abhiras, led to immense instability and an impending sense of chaos. In Upadhyay's assessment, Brahmanical orthodoxy was deeply strained by these invasions, which brought with them not only terrible violence, but also large foreign populations who could have no loyalties to Vedic religion, with its highly specialized ritualism and exclusivist bent. Many of the foreigners, moreover, embraced heterodox traditions, adding further to the insecurity of the orthodox. The Kuśānas, for example, became patrons of Buddhism.

Beginning about the sixth century B.C.E., serious social changes were also afoot. On the eastern fringes of this heartland evolved the *śramaṇa* movements, both Brahmanical and heterodox, with their *yogic* and ascetic ideals. Their moral idealism and reformulated soteriological goals represented a severe critique of Vedic religion, a critique that became increasingly influential within the *madhyadeśa* itself. The dissonance arising from this is reflected in the cultural tensions between the orthodox tradition of the *madhyadeśa* and the heterodox Magadha kingdom, which allied itself with the *śramaṇa*-based Buddhist movement (24). The Brahmanical tradition thus saw

itself menaced on both sides, besieged by ideological challenges on the one hand, and increasing economic, political, and social change on the other.

According to Upadhyay, the southwestern fringe of the *madhyadeśa* saw developments of a less strident, but equally significant kind. These were the rise of various devotional movements (31). There was the rise of Bhāgavatism among the Sātvata, Vṛṣṇi, and Andhaka chapters of the Yādava clan. Like Jainism and Buddhism, Bhāgavatism also originated in the tribal republics of *kṣatriyas* (the Vṛṣṇi-Andhaka tribes), and spread beyond these areas after the demise of Aśoka. Bhāgavata religion practised a non-Vedic style of religion, focused around the devotional worship of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. Upadhyay traces worship of “Sātvata heroes” such as Kṛṣṇa back to the *Upaniṣads*, and asserts that by the time of Pāṇini, Vāsudeva was a definite recipient of worship (32). In Bhāgavata religion, Vedic acts were held to be of little use and were disparaged in comparison to *bhakti*.

In addition to the Bhāgavatas, there were the *āgamic* cults of the Pan-carātras and the various Śaivite cults. Śiva is a full-fledged “monotheistic” god in the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*. Several schools of Śaivism were influential around the turn of the millennium: the Pāśupata school, the Lākulīśa Pāśupata school, and the Kāpālika school. The Pāśupata school is held to be the earliest of these (33).

Upadhyay argues that the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas are a record of the intense anxiety experienced by orthodox Brahmanism, as a result of the foreign incursions, the changing socioeconomic environment, and the ideological challenges mounted by the various *śramaṇas*.⁵ These apprehensions, he says, were exorcised through the very gloomy thesis of *kaliyuga*, ‘the age of distress’ (25). Upadhyay states that the four-*yuga* conception is a nostalgic hearkening to a peaceable glorious past, describing the advancement of human history as one of increasing lawlessness and degeneration: “Nowhere is the *Brāhmaṇa* psychology so much deranged as in the delineation of the horror of this age” (25). Purāṇic and epic writings of the *kaliyuga* betray despondency at the apparent disintegration of orthodox culture, as well as disquiet over Brahmanical responsibility as custodians of the Vedic tradition. The many and vivid descriptions of *kaliyuga* in the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇa* rehearse the sense of foreboding generated by the age. It is feared that the *varṇa* system will collapse, and all humanity will be of one order. The earth will be full of *mlecchas* (foreigners), without rites and sacrifices. *Brāhmaṇas* will be killed and persecuted by *sūdras*, and, afflicted with fear, will rove the earth without protectors. There will be great wars. The *brāhmaṇas*, without power or fortune, will need to depend on *sūdras* for their livelihood, and will

have to honor *sūdras*. The male population will shrink as a result of war. Vedic study and sacrifice will decline, non-Aryans will follow the religion of the Aryans. The earth will belong to *mlecchas*, and there will be no more *śrāddhas* (obsequial rites). *Sūdras* will explain the *dharma*, and *brāhmaṇas* will follow. There will be the veneration of bones (a clear reference to Buddhist *stūpās*), the construction of tombs over sacred sacrificial grounds and sacred tanks. People will mix with heretics, non-Vedic texts will be the authority of heretics, and *brāhmaṇas* will mix with anti-Vedic sects. There will be many sects whose followers will be renouncers (25–29; the notion of *kaliyuga* is discussed further in Chapter Six).

In Upadhyay's view, the fervid unease of the age fermented into a period of concentrated literary and theological creativity. The Brahmanical tradition evolved various devices to overcome the setbacks suffered by Vedic religion. "The *Mahābhārata* betrays a conscious attempt on the part of *brāhmaṇas* to synthesize diverse religious systems" (37). One of the techniques developed, he proposes, is the incorporation and "vedicization" of non-Vedic deities. The Sātvata deity Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa becomes identified with the Vedic Viṣṇu (39). The *Mahābhārata* is thought to have been composed during a time when the Brahmanical tradition was reasserting itself through this kind of imaginative theological reconstruction. Upadhyay does not specify this, but implies in other ways that these artful endeavors assume the successful political defense of Brahmanical values made by the Śuṅga dynasty (second–third centuries C.E.).⁶ The *Mahābhārata* is thought to reflect the renewed sense of confidence experienced by the tradition, when various philosophical methods had been formulated for dealing with the intellectual challenges posed by the erstwhile *śramaṇa* traditions. It retains in its narrative strain the collective memory of its hoary Vedic past. At the same time, it reflects the psychological turmoil of the immediately preceding centuries, while anticipating the sophisticated theological syntheses to be chiseled and polished in classical Hinduism. The *Mahābhārata* is therefore viewed as a transitional text, synthesizing the most attractive features of all of its adversarial movements. The devotional trends of the Kṛṣṇaite and Śaiva cults are incorporated as the *bhakti* elements of the text. The *śramaṇa* worldview, with its doctrines of *samsāra*, rebirth, *karmic* retribution, and *mokṣa* (final liberation), as well as its stern ethical core, is appropriated as the ultimate interpretation of existence, and paid ideological deference. Meanwhile, the Vedic tradition is retained but increasingly reevaluated. Its sacrificial ethos is interpreted metaphorically, and its most offensive edges (animal sacrifice, for example) are intellectually scrutinized.

Elements of Upadhyay's somewhat breathless summary will be controversial—for example, the trend of viewing Kṛṣṇa as a euhemerized local chieftain has been criticized by Alf Hiltebeitel (1995), while the alleged promotion of Kṛṣṇa from local Sātvata deity to universal God also meets resistance (though it is supported by van Buitenen 1973, Brockington 1999, Hopkins 1969, and others). Similarly, scholars will differ on the dates they assign to the composition of the text.⁷ The broad details of Upadhyay's overview, are, however, affirmed by other scholars.⁸ Hence for the purpose of this study, I have used his outline provisionally, as a platform on which to situate and ground the more focused discussion to follow—with the proviso that scholars differ on individual points of this trajectory of development.⁹ There can be no doubt that the *Mahābhārata* is a product of these contested political, economic, social, and religious upheavals.¹⁰

This brings us to a more focused examination of the religious context of the epic.

Religion in the *Mahābhārata*

Nineteenth-century European stereotypes characterized India as a land steeped in religion, where the whole spectrum of experience—worldly or “otherworldly”; natural or supernatural; human, subhuman, or superhuman—is subsumed and rationalized in the religious. While this was not considered a virtue in the heyday of logical positivism and rationalist Modern thought, there is good reason for treating the subject of sexuality in the *Mahābhārata* as a religious phenomenon. All discussions of sex and gender are framed within the theological and metaethical discourses of *dharma* and *adharma*, righteousness and unrighteousness, and the study of sexuality in the *Mahābhārata* is therefore inalienable from the study of religion. It is necessary at the outset then, to take some account of the religious platform on which discussions of sex are premised.

The question of the religion of the *Mahābhārata* is complex enough to deserve a separate monograph, and there is no dearth of writing on this subject, particularly that focused on the *Gītā*.¹¹ In these texts, however, there is little consensus on the larger religious orientation of the *Mahābhārata*. As we have seen, scholars dispute whether the *Mahābhārata* was originally a Śaivite or a Vaiṣṇavite work; they dispute whether Kṛṣṇa is original to the epic; some contend that the *Mahābhārata* was not a religious text at all, but originally a heroic ballad; others view it as quintessentially religious. Nor is there any

particular consensus among traditional commentators. Śaṅkara interpreted the *Gītā* along Advaitin lines, Rāmānuja and Madhva along theist ones, the eleventh-century Abhinavagupta took an Advaitin perspective, as did the major seventeenth-century commentator Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita. Below, I add my own voice to this cacophonous chorus.

While the merits of individual interpretations may be debated, the fact that there *are* so many, and exhibiting such a disparate range of opinion, demonstrates something more fundamental: that the *Mahābhārata* is what might cautiously be termed a pluralist text, that engages a variety of religious doctrines and explicitly or tacitly permits them to coexist, without insisting on dogmatic uniformity. The text thus lends itself to multiple interpretations, and this may be telling of the historical period in which it was composed, as well as of the relatively ecumenical spirit of the text itself. Any analysis of the religious ethos of the text therefore must be at least somewhat subjective, emphasizing some currents of discourse and treating others as secondary.

Recent scholarship has tended to give weight to the theist strains in the text, as exemplified, for example in the Nārāyaṇīya portion of the Anuśāsana-parva.¹² For various reasons I am disinclined to follow this trend. No doubt all scholars aspire in their work to “let the text speak for itself.” This is, however, a special problem for a text like the *Mahābhārata*, which is garrulous in the extreme. It expatiates on religion in so many different ways that it’s entirely possible for two scholars to “let the text speak” and arrive at quite different conclusions. I have chosen to take my cue on this subject from those areas of the text that directly confront questions of religion, namely, the *mokṣadharmā* section of the Śāntiparva. I believe this is a defensible selection for two reasons. The first is that in this section, the text itself acknowledges the plurality of religious doctrines. It sifts and weighs them, and self-reflexively attempts to articulate them in some systematic synthetic form. The second is that, notwithstanding the apparent discrepancies between the “didactic” and the “narrative,”¹³ there is considerable congruence to be found between the conclusions reached in these sections, and the assumptions underlying the text as a whole. The philosophical outlook expounded in the *mokṣadharmā* section reverberates through the entire text. Echoes of it may be found in the philosophy of the *Gītā*, as well as in other segments of the text that address the questions directly. I will therefore focus on the *mokṣadharmā* as detailing most succinctly the *Mahābhārata*’s self-consciously and reflectively formulated opinions about religion, with the caveat, however, that the categories developed are not absolute but to be employed heuristically.

In the *mokṣadharmā* section of the *Śāntiparva*, the twelfth and largest volume of the text, the *Mahābhārata* explicates its own views on the nature, aims, and purpose of religion (*dharma*).¹⁴ The section forms part of a larger education imparted in three phases to the victorious Pāṇḍava elder Yudhiṣṭhira by the dying grandsire Bhīṣma. In this third and final section on *dharma*, Bhīṣma's lessons are augmented by numerous anecdotes about sages and deities. Several exalted characters appear in person to tutor Yudhiṣṭhira, Vyāsa and Kṛṣṇa among them, underscoring the wisdom and maturity of Bhīṣma's comments.

Broadly conceived, in the *mokṣadharmā* section, religious activity is said to be of two basic types. These are *pravṛtti dharma* and *nivṛtti dharma*;¹⁵ "these are the two paths upon which the Vedas are established" (XII.233.6).¹⁶ *Pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are offered as the most embracing categories for understanding the diversity of religious thought and practice in classical India. They are not new; *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* represent the *pitṛyana* ("way of the fathers") and the *devayana* ("way of the gods") respectively, a categorization already found in texts such as the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa, and the Bṛhadāraṇyaka and Chāndogya Upaniṣads.¹⁷

Taken in sum, *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are a commodious device employed by the writers to claim knowledge of the plurality of religious practices and to assign them relative value. Thus, the variety of extant beliefs and practices are typologized and hierarchalized. The hierarchy itself is of interest, and tells us something about the ultimate religious predilections of the writers. On the other hand, the fact that they sought to retain the multiplicity and to synthesize it, tells us that they found value in divergent forms of religious practice and the ruminations of the *mokṣadharmā* section are a way to rationalize them. The final product is a powerfully coherent picture of the religious values embraced by the composers of the epic, in which the diversity of religious phenomena is retained, but the value assigned them is reassessed. Thus both orthodoxy and change are accommodated. Orthodoxy is preserved in principle, but its preservation is partly illusory in that the nomenclature of *pravṛtti/nivṛtti* necessitates a two-tier system of values, in which the orthodox position is displaced of priority, ultimately relegated to a supportive position rather than the primary one.

Let us look at the details.

Pravṛtti and *nivṛtti* are conceptualized as two types of religion that are fundamentally antithetical to each other. They are, however, sought to be reconciled at nodal points in their theologies. They might heuristically be

analyzed as being distinct from each other on four counts: (1) they attract different types of practitioners, (2) they avow different goals, (3) they practice different ethics, and (4) they utilize different methods of achieving their goals. As we shall see in more detail, *pravṛtti* connotes acts of ritual engagement with the world, while *nivṛtti* implies a turning away from the concerns of the world, a thorough and cultivated disregard for the values on which the world is structured.

Pravṛtti Dharma

Pravṛtti dharma is an evolute of what the *Gītā* occasionally disdains as “the religion of the Vedas” (BG II.43–45). The word is derived from the suffix *pra* attached to the root *vṛt*. The combination has a broad semantic range, meaning “to commence, increase, grow, act, prevail, happen.” One meaning is “active life; taking an active part in worldly affairs.”¹⁸ In the *mokṣadharmā* section of the Śāntiparva, the term *pravṛtti* refers to that level of religion that is practiced by ordinary people, immersed in the ordinary activities of living ordinary lives. It is the level at which the vast majority of humanity functions. *Pravṛtti dharma* is this-worldly and pragmatic, and is characterized by an active immersion in life. This involvement in life is neither arbitrary nor personal, however. It is envisioned as being studied and ritualized, consciously enacted, contained within carefully demarcated constraints of time, space, and multiple hierarchies.

If *dharma* were bipedal, *pravṛtti dharma* would be one sturdy limb. It offers all that one might need to live a productive life in society: a vertical orientation that situates humanity in relation to the cosmos, a lateral orientation that locates one in relation to others in the world, and a somewhat underdeveloped inner anchoring that facilitates a reflective appreciation of the rest. In its vertical inclination, *pravṛtti dharma* offers a highly refined analysis of the relationship of human beings with the cosmos. This is what we know as the sacrificial religion of the Vedas. *Pravṛtti dharma* visualizes this relationship as a reciprocal exchange between human beings and the various divinities that regulate the functions of the cosmos. It also prescribes the attitudes that are appropriate for human beings to this relationship—reverence, honor, methodically precise worship. The laborious systems of Vedic sacrifice are based on this analysis. Human beings maintain their commitment to the divine by executing with scrupulous care the rituals of the sacrifice. In return,

the *devas*, supported by these ritual activities, are obligated to assist humans with their diverse agendas.

Pravṛtti dharma implies more than just the Vedic tradition, however—and in this sense is not the old Vedic religion at all, but something quite new; *pravṛtti dharma* is the Vedic tradition reconstituted and redefined, so that while it embraces the religious vocabulary of the Vedas and the symbology of the sacrifice, it extends, prolongs, and modifies it. For example, *pravṛtti dharma* extends the precision of Vedic ritual into social terrain to achieve a more refined typology of social relationships than was the case in Vedic literature. Thus in its “lateral” dimension, *pravṛtti dharma* is concerned with assigning each element its proper place and method of living. The correct relationships between human beings and other elements (nature, animals) are suggested. Also implied is the manner in which human beings should conduct themselves in relation to them. Some animals deserve affection, reverence, and protection (cows), while others are considered unclean and loathsome (dogs). In general, humans are privileged over the animal world, but this privilege is not unambiguous, because animals can have powers that supersede those of humans. Nature, in its myriad forms as earth, water, and food, is seen as being organically connected with the human world. Humans are extensions and modifications of the same elemental matter that composes nature; this attitude is an extension of the insight captured in the famous *Upaniṣadic* proclamation: “I am food! I am food! I am food! I am the eater of food! I am the eater of food! I am the eater of food!” (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 3.10.6).

Relationships among human beings are more specifically itemized at this lateral level, and the norms by which they are to be conducted are ritualized. This is what we recognize as the formula *varṇāśramadharmā*. The Vedic world, of course, was already familiar with the classifications of *varṇa* as famously evident in the *puruṣasukta* (Rg.10.90), and the Brāhmaṇas developed an analysis of *varṇadharmā*. In the *pravṛtta* strands of *Mahābhārata* religious discourse, these discussions are amplified. The fine details of *varṇadharmā* are drawn out, in maneuvers anticipating the taxonomical labors of the *Dharmaśāstras*. The duties and privileges of the various *varṇas* are elaborated at length, and several sections of the postwar books are devoted to assigning social value to embryonic subclass groups. Class hierarchies, therefore, are a crucial element of *pravṛttidharma*, of increasing consequence in determining a person’s duty. (More on this in Chapter Three).

Varṇa represents one axis of social ordering; another is achieved by the device of *āśrama*. Whereas the Vedic tradition was fundamentally the

religion of a householder, the concept of *āśrama* was designed to acknowledge and accommodate divergent lifestyles that were gaining popular sway, in particular the lifestyle of celibate mendicancy.¹⁹ In the *pravṛtta* sections of the *Mahābhārata*, *āśrama* is increasingly a point of reference in assessing one's social obligations. The signification of the word *āśrama*, however, is still fluid, connoting sometimes a *stage* in the larger life cycle of an individual, and sometimes a permanent *lifestyle* chosen by the individual.

To the evolving orthodoxies of *varṇa* and *āśrama* should be added the less heralded but equally trenchant hierarchies of sex and seniority. In actuality, more primary than either *varṇa* or *āśrama* in determining one's *dharma* in a situation is the variable of sex. As we shall see, the *dharma* of a man is almost always differentiated from the *dharma* of a woman, in each *varṇa* and *āśrama*. It is the tacit, but most fundamental ordering principle of *pravṛtti dharma*. Finally, in a classification that often passes unremarked, one's obligations may also be inferred from one's position within a familial hierarchy. Classical Hinduism had a systematization of relationships almost as elaborate and refined as that of classical Confucianism; thus, the younger member of any partnership was deemed to have different responsibilities from an elder; a younger brother, for example, had different privileges and responsibilities from his older sibling. In formulations very much reminiscent of classical Confucian thought, the younger owed the elder unquestioning filial obedience and respect. The elder owed the younger guidance, protection, and support.

The lateral level of *pravṛtti dharma* thus embraces all aspects of a person's social relationships, both domestic and public. It contextualizes individuals, situates them relationally on the interlocking matrices of sex, age, occupation, and binary relationship. All of these factors are crucial reference points in determining one's duty.

A universal ethics is decidedly absent in *pravṛtti dharma*. As far as one can determine, there is no Kantian universal person with categorical ethical obligations; while one can find the odd statement implying a universal ethics, a closer examination reveals a hoax. Ethics in *pravṛtti dharma* are almost always sex or class-differentiated. Thus, "universal duties" (*dharmān śāśvatān*) are enumerated in *Śāntiparva* XII:60.7–8, and are explicitly stated to apply to all classes: "freedom from anger, truthfulness of speech, an agreeable nature, forgiveness, fathering children upon one's own wives, purity, avoidance of quarrel, sincerity, and maintenance of dependants"²⁰ (XII.60.7–8). The reference to wives, however, immediately betrays the lim-

ited audience addressed; *pravṛtti* ethics are always contingent on the social location of the moral agent.

All of the above factors lead to the conclusion that ethics in *pravṛtti dharma* are of necessity *situational* rather than categorical; there are no deontological obligations incumbent on all beings. In the act of ascertaining one's duty, one must weigh in balance one's numerous obligations, the "*śāśvatān*" as well as those of sex, *varṇa*, *āśrama*, and seniority. Thus one arrives at one's *svadharmā*, one's own peculiar and distinctive *dharma*.

The personal, individual dimension is somewhat neglected in *pravṛtti dharma*. Fundamentally, it is a system of social ethics. To the limited extent that we can speak of individual personal goals in the *pravṛtta* context, we might allude to what the text calls the *trivarga*, also known as the *puruṣārthas*. Later Hinduism codifies these as the "purposes, aims, or goals of a human being," but in the *Mahābhārata*, this theology is tentative and evolving. In several passages, the *puruṣārthas* are cited more as the hallmarks of a truly cultured and sophisticated man; that is to say, one who is educated, urbane, and worldly-wise, is one who is schooled in the *trivarga*, the triad of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*. It is in this sense that we can understand the deer's admonition to Pāṇḍu in Ādiparva. The deer contends that Pāṇḍu should not have shot him while he was engaged in the act of mating; "You who understand the pleasures of women, and the truths of the scriptures and *dharma* and *artha*; such an unholy act is unbecoming of a god-like person like yourself"²¹ (I.109.21). The deer's assertion is that a man of cultivation and refinement would not have committed so barbaric an act as to injure a being in the process of enjoying *kāma*; he would have understood the delicacy of the moment. *Artha* and *kāma* are pursuits natural to the human condition; tempered with study of scripture and *dharma*, they should be indulged with refinement, consideration, and taste.

In other passages, the *puruṣārthas* are ordered according to class. Thus, while one may generalize that *dharma* is the duty of all people of all *varṇas*, it is especially so of male *brāhmaṇas*, who are the custodians and interpreters of *dharma* for the rest of society. *Artha* is approved for all classes of male householders, but for *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas* more than for *brāhmaṇas*.²² The quest for *kāma* is similarly legitimated for all classes, but a crude and hedonistic pursuit of *kāma* is characteristic only of the lowest classes and *asuras*. The *puruṣārthas* in the *Mahābhārata* are about personal moral and aesthetic refinement, so that one's base human proclivities are tempered with cultivated restraint. It is to this limited extent that we can speak of a personal

dimension to *pravṛtti dharma*; for the most part, it is outwardly oriented, toward a social and communitarian ethics. A theology of the individual is decidedly underdeveloped.

The primary concern of *pravṛtti dharma* is the twice-born male householder, and his interrelationships with all other elements of his universe. *Pravṛtti dharma* elucidates his duties and responsibilities in every sphere of life, and in so doing also sketches out the duties of other groups. As in the Vedic tradition, wives and children are understood not as separate entities in themselves, but as adjuncts who enable and facilitate the religious life of the male householder. *Pravṛtti dharma* prolongs this tendency into classical Hinduism. The paternalist bent of Vedic religion is taken to its logical extension, so that the lives of women are inextricably entwined with that of their husbands, past, present, or future. An extensive theology is articulated, enjoining the devotion of women to their husbands. These trends coalesce in the evolution of the ideology of the *pativrata* woman, the woman “avowed to her husband/lord.” The *pativrata* woman is the dominant paradigm for ideal female behavior in *pravṛtti dharma*.

In this tri-dimensional way, *pravṛtti dharma* paves the way for the theologizing systemizations of classical Hinduism, and addresses every aspect of lived ordinary life. Its “method” of practice, therefore, is faithful and ritualized adherence to all the regulations and guidelines set in place by the Vedic tradition: participation in the Vedic sacrifice for those to whom it is permitted, in the capacity in which they are permitted to participate; compliance with boundaries in all social relations; heedfulness of all varieties of *dharma*s in the pursuit of goals appropriate to one’s station. It is preeminently the religion of the householder: “The *dharma* characteristic of *pravṛtti* is prescribed for householders”²³ (XIII.129.16). While embedded in the concept of the *āśramas* is the recognition of lifestyles other than that of the householder, renunciation still remains a distant fourth lifestyle/stage in most *pravṛtti* formulations, and is given little emphasis.²⁴ The twice-born male householder is the locus of the theologizing activities of the text.

The spiritual goals of *pravṛtti dharma* are modest, compared with those of *nivṛtti dharma*. As in Vedic religion, optimal religious engagement yields a period of residence in heaven (*svargaloka/devaloka*). *Pravṛtti dharma* is a little different from Vedic religion, however. Whereas death and heaven, with the supportive ritual activities of one’s descendants represented the end of existence in the Vedic scheme, in *pravṛtti dharma*, the *karma*-and-rebirth worldview of the *Upaniṣads*²⁵ has forged some pathways. *Pravṛtti dharma*, therefore, operates on the understanding that when the merit from one’s

works (*karma*) is exhausted, one will return again from heaven to live as a creature on earth. One will pick up again the trajectory of life interrupted with one's death, and continue in a new existence. Implicit in the theorizing of *pravṛtti dharma* is that it is a *temporary* path, a point of waiting and holding until one is mentally and spiritually ready for the true religious path. *Pravṛtti* is the domain of busy-ness, activity, and ritual worldliness, and is geared toward the ephemeral: temporary goals and temporary rewards. When one tires of its repetitive transience and begins to seek some manner of permanence, one will turn to the *uttamadharma*, the "true or ideal religion," that is, *nivṛtti dharma*. In *Mahābhārata* shorthand, *pravṛtti dharma* is therefore called the religion of acts (*karma*), and the religion that is "rebirth-oriented" (*pravṛtṭiḥ punarāvṛtṭiḥ* XII.210.4).

Nivṛtti Dharma

Nivṛtti dharma is envisioned as the structural opposite of *pravṛtti dharma*. It represents an emphatic departure from all of the preoccupations of *pravṛtti dharma*, and is geared radically toward the achievement of personal spiritual ends. The word *nivṛtti* is derived from the suffix *ni* added to the root *vṛt*. Together, the word connotes disappearance, cessation, abstinence from work, inactivity, resignation, discontinuance of worldly acts or emotions, separation from the world.²⁶ Its idiomatic use in the *Mahābhārata* suggests renunciation, a decisive rejection of worldly life, its overarching worldview, the various systems and hierarchies that support that worldview and its many social and ritual monuments. It diagnoses this life as fundamentally flawed, a wholly unsatisfactory place of entrapment, and earnestly seeks release from it.²⁷ *Nivṛtti dharma*, therefore, is vitally premised on *Upaniṣadic* views of existence. The world (*samsāra*) is seen as a place of suffering and anxiety that are perpetuated by one's actions (*karma*, both of a moral and a ritual nature). One's participation in this realm of pleasurable distraction is endlessly rehearsed through rebirth. The only worthy goal of human striving is to emancipate oneself from the shackles of birth and death (*punarjanma*), and achieve lasting peace, permanent happiness (*mokṣa*). In defiance and repudiation of all social convention, *nivṛtti* directs itself to the goal of *mokṣa*, which also represents freedom from the cyclical enclosures of birth and death. *Nivṛtti dharma*, therefore, is frequently used as a synonym for *mokṣadharmā*, "the religion of freedom."

While *pravṛtti dharma* is the religion of the ordinary—practiced by ordinary folk in society, using the familiar method of sacrificial religion,

aimed at the modest goal of worldly prosperity, *nivṛtti dharma* is by definition the religion of the extraordinary, requiring exceptional effort. “The wise say that birth, death, and other afflictions rule over and are beyond [the control] of human beings”²⁸ (XII.306.106). If one hopes to control one’s life, therefore, instead of being controlled by it, one must engage in uncommonly arduous work. In contrast to the communal leanings of *pravṛtti dharma*, the goals of *nivṛtti dharma* are ambitious and squarely soteriological; it aims for nothing short of absolute liberation from the cycle of deaths and rebirths intuited in the philosophy of the *Upaniṣads*. It therefore refers to itself as “the highest path” (*nivṛtṭiḥ paramā gatiḥ* XII.210.4). Its method of practice is correspondingly extreme and rigorous, and intended only for the exceptionally focused, hardy few.

Mokṣa is unequivocally articulated as the final goal of *nivṛtti dharma*, but the *Mahābhārata*’s views of the content of *mokṣa* are still under construction. Is it achievable while still living? Where does one’s body go when one achieves *mokṣa*? Should it be visualized as a physical space, or as a mental or emotional realm?²⁹ Who has the *adhikāra* to *mokṣa*? What are the duties of the renouncer, or should he or she have any? These details have not been worked out in the text, although it anticipates some of the directions in which classical Hinduism evolved.

It would seem that the composers of the text were open to the proposition that *mokṣa* may be achieved in a variety of ways. These are most famously indicated in the *Gītā*, whose theology of the “three paths” came ultimately to represent the core of Hinduism. Although the *Gītā* never formally speaks of three paths, it discusses the possibility of liberating oneself through the modes of *jñāna* (contemplation of one’s true identity), of *karma* (the path of a peculiar type of disciplined action), and ultimately of *bhakti* (earnest devotion to God, in the *Gītā* conceptualized as *Kṛṣṇa*, elsewhere accommodating Śiva). It would seem that trodden with earnestness, any and all of these pursuits might bring one to the desired destination of *mokṣa*. In the *mokṣadharmā* section, the path most privileged is that of *jñāna*, of immersing oneself in the contemplation of one’s true identity as the Self (*ātman/puruṣa*). While later Hinduism expands on the techniques of *bhakti* and *karmayoga*, in the *Mahābhārata* I would argue the archetype of the *nivṛtti* practitioner is the ascetic, the *tapasvin* characterized by acts of extreme asceticism, involving the deprivation, chastisement, and ultimate mastery over the body.

Through the denial of all bodily comforts, through dire and extreme acts of self-torture, the *nivṛtti* practitioner symbolizes his or her understand-

ing of the temporality of the body and of the enchantments of *samsāra*, and rejects them, often torturing them out of existence. The activities of *tapasvins* generate *tapas*, a burning, dangerous fund of heat that is both literal and metaphorical. It can destroy those who transgress them, or alternatively it can be used to scorch the seeds of attachment to the world³⁰ (XII.204.16). Through acts of asceticism, therefore, *tapasvins* combat the attractions of the world, accruing a psycho-spiritual power that paradoxically rivals and surpasses the powers of the temporal world.

According to many passages in the *mokṣadharmā* section, success in *nivṛtti* engagements is crucially linked to the extent to which one identifies oneself with other beings, and cares for their suffering. “When one sees all beings in oneself and oneself in all beings, then one has realized the individual soul that is *Brahman*”³¹ (XII.231.21). The ideal person is “one who [sees the identity] of all beings with himself, and the welfare of all beings [with his own]”³² (XII.321.23). Kṛṣṇa echoes this philosophy to Arjuna in the *Gītā*, “Through [true knowledge] you will see all creatures without exception within yourself and then within me”³³ (BG.IV.35). The goal, then, is wisdom. This is particularly so in the *mokṣadharmā* section of the *Śāntiparva*, and is evident in statements such as “Man has only one enemy, o king, and no second. This enemy is known as ignorance. Impelled by it, one is led to perform terrible and pitiless acts”³⁴ (XII.286.28).

The natural logical corollary of intuiting deeply one’s identity with other beings is treating beings with gentleness and compassion. The ethics professed by *nivṛtti dharma* therefore are demanding. At once simpler and sterner than those of *pravṛtti dharma*, the values of rigorous self-discipline take precedence over the goals of social harmony. *Nivṛtti dharma* defines *dharma* as “that which strives for the benefit of creatures; *dharma* is so called because it is wedded to *ahimsā*”³⁵ (XII.110.10). It removes *dharma* from the obfuscations of social relationships and renders it a simple dictum: “People know that the eternal *dharma* is that which is ancient, which is friendliness, and [which works for] the welfare of all”³⁶ (XII.254.5). *Dharma* is not about calibrating one’s social obligations, weighing one’s social position in relation to others. *Dharma* enjoins care of all beings, irrespective of social standing or even species: “*Dharma* is so called because it supports [all creatures]. Creatures are protected by *dharma*. Because it is inalienable from its support [of beings], it is called *dharma*” (XII.110.11).³⁷ A person devoted to *nivṛtti* ethics, therefore, is identified by his or her solicitude and kindness towards others.

Ideal *nivṛtti* adherents are described by their calmness, their patience, their perfect balance of mind. Pāṇḍu captures the archetype in a passage from

the *Ādiparva*, where he determines briefly to adopt *nivṛtti* practices. “If one man chops my arm off, and another anoints it with sandalpaste, I shall wish neither good upon one, nor ill upon the other. I shall do nothing out of a will to live, or a will to die; and neither rejoice at life nor hate death”³⁸ (I.110.14–15). Yudhiṣṭhira hankers after this ideal on the various occasions when he tries to opt out of *pravṛtti dharma* after the war. The *nivṛtti* sage is described in the *Śāntiparva*: “He is one into whom words enter like frightened elephants into a well and never come out. He hears no evil of others. He remembers no evil. When dispraised, he is silent” (*tūṣṇīmāsīt nindāyāṃ* XII.237.10). The same passage continues, “He can make a spot teeming with people seem perfectly still”³⁹ (XII.237.11) . . . [Such a person] is never glad when honoured, never angry when insulted, assures all creatures of his compassion”⁴⁰ (XII.237.14). One who practises *nivṛtti* is one “whose life is the practice of *dharma* (*jīvitam yasya dharmārtham* XII.237.23), who feels distressed at causing grief to others, and who embraces noninjurious conduct (*ahimsā pratipadyate* XII.237.19). Such a person is “the refuge of all creatures”⁴¹ (*śaraṇaḥ sarvabhūtānām* XII.237.20). His cardinal ethic is that of nonharmfulness, of avoiding injury to other beings. As one *nivṛtti* practitioner challenges a *pravṛtti* one: “If there is any ethic evident that is superior to *ahimsā*, that is rooted in righteousness instead of the *āgamas* or *śāstras*, if you see it, do explain it”⁴² (XII.260.19).

Contrasted with *pravṛtti*, *nivṛtti* ethics may therefore be characterized as personal, self-cultivational, and mystical. While *pravṛtti* values are oriented to the social and pragmatic, *nivṛtti* ethics typically concern themselves with the care of other beings, with truthfulness, charity, patience, self-restraint, and compassion. At least in theory, *nivṛtti dharma* therefore refuses to recognize social differences as in any way authoritative. “If these [high qualities] are evident in a *śūdra*, but are not found in a *brāhmaṇa*, then the *śūdra* is not a *śūdra*, and the *brāhmaṇa* is not a *brāhmaṇa*”⁴³ (XII.182.8). While limited to the exceptionally gifted few, *nivṛtti dharma* is in this sense paradoxically more egalitarian than *pravṛtti dharma*. “My scale” says Tulandhara, one *nivṛtti* adherent, to his adversary Jajali, “is evenly balanced for all creatures”⁴⁴ (XII.254.12). “A wise man is one who looks equally upon a *brāhmaṇa* who has disciples and wisdom, a cow, an elephant, a dog and a dog-eater”⁴⁵ (XII.231.19). *Nivṛtti dharma* insists that true worth is to be measured by conduct, not by birth: “The birth of great souls, who have purified themselves is through austerities. [Such people] are unaffected by low birth. Those learned in the Vedas hold a virtuous *śūdra* to be equal to a *brāh-*

maṇa. I myself look upon such a one as Viṣṇu, who pervades and supports the whole universe"⁴⁶ (XII.285.28). Liberation (*mokṣa*) is an achievement of one's mental rectitude, one's personal effort, and is divorced from consideration of one's social station. It is achievable by all who undertake the proper *yoga*, or means: "Whether a person is of low caste or a woman who is attached to *dharma*, both, by following this path [of *yoga*] may achieve the highest end"⁴⁷ (XII.232.32). Ignorance is the only obstacle to liberation. To obliterate ignorance, one should with reverence accept instruction from whomever has the wisdom: "Acquiring knowledge from a *brāhmaṇa* or *kṣatriya* or *vaiśya* or even a *śūdra* of low birth imparted graciously, one should accept it with confidence . . . All *varṇas* are *brāhmaṇas*. All are born of *Brahman*, and all constantly utter *Brahman*. With the knowledge of *Brahman*, of truth and of the *śāstras*, I say this whole universe is pervaded by *Brahman*"⁴⁸ (XII.306.85–86).

Nivṛtti dharma is therefore pursued by the uncommonly tenacious and spiritually rugged few who, the ideal holds, may come from any walk of society. Its goal is radical and immoderate. Its primary method of accomplishment is ascetic renunciation of the world. It is accompanied by a stringent code of ethics whose most compelling injunction is that of nonharmfulness to other beings (*ahiṃsā*). The primary orientation of *nivṛtti dharma*, therefore, is vertical, toward *mokṣa*, toward release from the cycles of death and rebirth. Whereas *pravṛtti dharma* is geared toward a more harmonious existence within the cyclic world (*saṃsāra*), *nivṛtti dharma* aims to transcend the limitations of *saṃsāra* forever, and entails a renunciation of interest in the values of *pravṛtti*.

Nivṛtti dharma may also be understood as being tri-dimensional. The difference is that its other dimensions are conceived more as aids or adjuncts to the primary spiritual pursuit than as ends in themselves. Thus, in its personal dimension, *nivṛtti dharma* is deeply and intensely introspective, and calls for a psychological transformation in the individual. It calls on a person to reorient his or her physical, mental, and emotional patterns toward the achievement of equanimity. While the practice of *nivṛtti dharma* must begin with this earnest internal transformation, however, the underlying soteriological objective is paramount; it is the crucial inspiration for one's efforts. Similarly, the lateral dimension of *nivṛtti dharma* also emerges out of its more fundamental spiritual striving: care of other beings is at once the prerequisite and the outcome of one's *nivṛtti* directedness. In order to achieve true equanimity, one must learn to conduct oneself in nonharmful ways. Conversely, in

the seeking after the highest end, one is of necessity altered into a more sympathetic human being, full of compassion and generosity for the suffering of others.⁴⁹

Reconciling Domestic and Ascetic Ideals

These are the two basic impulses of religion described by the *Mahābhārata*. In the *Śāntiparva*, the two are contrasted. Scholars of Hinduism have often talked about the tension at the heart of Hinduism, the tension between the world-denying and the world-affirming elements of the tradition.⁵⁰ Some have argued that this tension was never resolved.⁵¹ The basic ambiguity in attitudes to “the world,” physically, socially, and theologically construed, is as evident in the *Mahābhārata* as in other strands of Hindu literature. In the *mokṣadharmā* section of the text, however, the superiority of the *nivṛtti* path over *pravṛtti* is strenuously asserted, both in terms of its goals and in terms of its ethics. “In this, all the three worlds, with their animate and inanimate elements are established. *Nivṛtti dharma* [leads to] the unmanifest eternal *Brahman* . . . *Pravṛtti* is [the path of] rebirth. *Nivṛtti* is the highest end”⁵² (XII.210.3–4). *Pravṛtti* is explicitly connected with worldly and temporal concerns, while *nivṛtti* is associated with the highest objectives of humanity. In parallel constructions encountered repeatedly in the section, *nivṛtti dharma* is elevated above *pravṛtti dharma* in value. As Bhīṣma summarizes, for example: “The ascetic who discriminates between good and evil, who is always intent upon achieving the highest knowledge, who observes *nivṛtti dharma*, achieves that high end”⁵³ (XII.210.5).

The *nivṛtti* critique of *pravṛtti* follows various avenues. The intelligence of *pravṛtti* followers, immersed in their pretensions of culture and ritual observance, is held to be inferior. For example, one section, comparing the types of people engaged in both activities, concludes: “Of the two, the intelligent tread the higher path [of *nivṛtti*]”⁵⁴ (XII.205.3). The ritual supports of *pravṛtti dharma* are also questioned. The *devas* to whom worship is addressed in sacrificial culture are dispensed with as being of little use, and as sharing the fortunes of all other beings; they must return from age to age to enjoy the fruits of their *pravṛtti* orientation, hence are not much different from human beings⁵⁵ (XII.327.43–60). They are said to have departed from the *nivṛtti* path because it was too difficult to practice, and to have become enjoyers of sacrificial libations for their own gratification (XII.327.7). The sacrificial world and its theology of prosperity and progeny are held in con-

tempt: Medhavin says, “How can one like me worship with animal sacrifices involving cruelty? . . . I am born of *Brahman* through *Brahman*. I am established in the Self, though I am childless. In the Self alone shall I be. I do not require a son to rescue me”⁵⁶ (XII.169.31, 34).

Vyāsa, reputed author of the Great Epic, reinforces these judgments in his instruction to his son Śuka. Having discussed the two paths of *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, the one characterized by Vedic acts, and the other by knowledge, he says: “By acts, a being is bound. By knowledge, however, he is freed. For this reason, *yogīs* who see the other shore never engage in acts”⁵⁷ (XII.233.7). The renunciation of (ritual) acts, the very hallmark of *nivṛtti dharma*, is stated to be the highest penance (*tapā uttamam* XII.214.4).

The unrivalled excellence of *nivṛtti* is thus repeatedly affirmed in the *mokṣadharmā* section. Yet, the activities associated with *pravṛtti* religion are not discarded altogether. They are recast instead as lower-order values. This process is tackled with the help of myth. The origins of both types of religion are located in a myth that we find in the *Śāntiparva*. In this myth, the great ascetic sage deity Nārāyaṇa calls together the seven *ṛṣis*, and asks them to produce an authoritative treatise on the two types of religion, *nivṛtti* and *pravṛtti* (XII.322.26ff.). Nārāyaṇa then allocates each to different beings in the universe. He himself remains avowed to *nivṛtti*, thus reinforcing it as the religion of the enlightened, but he makes the deities, including Brahmā, share in the sacrifice, which is the very essence of *pravṛtti*. The divergent ideals of the two traditions are thus sought to be reconciled in this way. The famous *saptārṣi* (seven sages, also called here the *citraśikhaṇḍins*) of Vedic lore are cast as the progenitors of the religion of *pravṛtti*. A parallel seven *ṛṣis* are said to have been created for *nivṛtti*. These are: Sana, Sanatsujāta, Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanatkumāra, Kapila, and Sanātana (XII.327.64). These *ṛṣis* are envisaged as eternal *brahmacārins*, who have never been involved in the tumultuous confusion of the world. They appear periodically to offer didactic support to those in need.⁵⁸

The above myth accommodates *pravṛtti* within *nivṛtti* by proposing that different creatures are created for different ends—some for *pravṛtti*, some for *nivṛtti*. While there is no doubt as to the precedence of *nivṛtti*, the existence of *pravṛtti* may be tolerated, and in some instances, may be accepted as being necessary for some people, who are spiritually less evolved. This allows for a hierarchalization of values, in which the values of *nivṛtti* supersede those of *pravṛtti*. *Pravṛtti* is recognized, but cast as a pedestrian householder religion. *Nivṛtti* in the same stroke is hailed as the acme of religious understanding. The *mokṣadharmā* continues its intimations that “Acts cleanse the body.

Wisdom, however, is the highest end”⁵⁹ (XII.262.36); “He who surrenders himself to penance [*nivṛtti*] for a long time avoids birth and death”⁶⁰ (XII.307.7). *Nivṛtti* is paid unambiguous ideological deference. It alone targets the critical malaise of existence, and it alone treats it.

In later Hindu tradition, the thesis of two religions is regroomed so that *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* no longer represent two alternatives for religious practice, as proposed earlier, but two levels of rehearsal of the same basic *dharma*. This tendency is visible even in the above-quoted passages of the *Mahābhārata*. Later tradition refines and institutionalizes this in its elaboration of the *āśrama* system. An ordinary man may thus immerse himself in *pravṛtti* engagements until the fourth *āśrama*, *saṁnyāsa*, now interpreted as a consecutive stage of life. After he has lived a rich and productive domestic life, contributing to society, in *saṁnyāsa* a man may soak himself in *nivṛtti* practices to the fullest extent that he desires. The *saṁnyāsa āśrama* thus works as one of the points of interlude between the two traditions.⁶¹ In the *mokṣadharmā* section of the *Mahābhārata*, however, these niceties are still in the process of refinement, and *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti* are understood as two options of religion, albeit not of equal spiritual worth.⁶²

Historical Antecedents

The sharp philosophical differences between the two “religions” may be better understood by examining their different historical antecedents. As suggested, *pravṛtti dharma* is a direct descendant of the rewards-oriented sacrificial religion practiced by the Vedic Aryans.⁶³ The religion of the ancient Vedas was primarily this-worldly, aimed at gaining health, material prosperity, and success. It aimed for the acquisition of heaven—a space where one could enjoy all of the pleasures of material existence, without encountering any of the difficulties. At its higher levels, it was based on an intuition that there was an intrinsic and natural harmony to the universe (*ṛta*). Vedic religion was geared at cherishing and supporting this harmony through scrupulously correct behaviour in every arena of life—ritual, social, and personal. *Nivṛtti dharma*, on the other hand, is inspired by the varieties of *śramaṇa* and *yogic* traditions that had been operating for centuries on the fringes of the Aryan *madhyadeśa*, “heartland.” These traditions are thought to go as far back in their practices as Indus Valley religion. They had always been critical of the ritualistic and exclusionary aspects of Vedic sacrificial religion. In particular, the use of animals in Vedic sacrifice invited repeated and sharp criti-