USES AND ABUSES OF APOCALYPTICISM IN SOUTH ASIA: A CREATIVE HUMAN DEVICE

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Introduction

If anything is clear from all the hype of Y2K and its subsequent bubble-burst into pedestrian normalcy, it should be that time in an arbitrary human construction, artfully and not-so-artfully used, as a part of a rhetoric of persuasion, to generate meaning, purpose, and the assuredness of one's convictions. The apparent arbitrariness of time is certainly seen in the divergent calendars of various religious traditions, many of which organize time around foundational or seminal events, such as the Buddha's Enlightenment, the Exodus, the Resurrection of Jesus. Religious festivals accompanying these events such as these are clearly rites of renewal, drawing time into the orbit of the sacred and imposing a spiritual order onto the world of ordinary history and change. But the arbitrariness of these diverse temporal systems is also revealed in the occasional bemusement of some non-Christian thinkers with the Western hype, fueled in part by religious rhetoric of the end times, with the turn of the millennium. Vasudha Narayanan, for example, nicely captures this sensibility in the title of her recent article on Hindu conceptualizations of time, "Y51K and Conuting."[1]

But the arbitrariness is also seen in the Christian tradition: how else to explain the fact that the 'real' birth date of Jesus, perhaps 4 BC, met with little or no apocalyptic fervor in 1996? Yet, as the year 2000 approached, deep worries over the cataclysmic end of time saw some millenialists straining to gain box seats at the apocalypse, renting or buying property in Jerusalem, among other ambitious programs of renewal. I shall argue that apocalypticism is a yet another creative human device designed to infuse added meaning and value to human conceptualizations of time. I say *added* meaning, because conceptualizations of time are themselves human constructions designed to

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[1]Vasudha Narayanan, "Y51K and Counting," *Hindu Christian Studies Bulletin* 12:1999, 15-21.

generate order, routine, and purposefulness. Indeed, the relatively recent historical process of developing universal temporal standards indicate an attempt to construct a coherent global temporal order for increased efficiency in communication and transportation. Thus even in the 'profane' world, conceptualizations of time are human constructions serving order and purposefulness; and if we accept Peter Berger's notion of religion as the "audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant,"[2] it is no surprise to discover in the history of religions an appropriation of time by religious communities as part of a broader agenda to enhance order and meaningfulness to a maximal degree. Indeed, in the West, Christian communities were among those which not only paid close attention to the regular patterns of days, weeks, and seasons, but were among the first which used timepieces to mark these patterns. Benedictines in the medieval Europe, for example, used sundials to mark the liturgy of the hours which in turn was announced by the ringing of the monastery bell; interestingly, the Latin term for clock means bell.

Such routine, infused with the spirit of contemplation, gives meaning, order and purpose to the cycles of the day, weeks, and seasons of the year. As Mircea Eliade has argued, such cycles and their festivals establish the foundation of the world, reveal the intimate connections between sacred time and sacred space, and mark ritual attempts to retrieve the cosmos from chaos.[3] The implications of time in cosmology is seen in the most ancient strata of Vedic religion. The Rg Veda conceives of time as a rotating wheel with 12 spokes and identifies the seasons with the elements of the sacrifice.[4] And both the *Satapatha Brahmana* and the *Aitareya Brahmana* represent the sacrifice as both the recreation of the world and the regeneration of time. The Vedic altar, notes Paul Mus, is 'time materialized', and supposes the abolition of profane time and the regeneration of the world.[5]

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[2]Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 28.

[3]Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Bolligen Series XLVI (Princeton University Press, 1991), ch.2.

[4]Klaus Klostermaier, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 184.

[5]Eliade, 79.

Brahmin ritual programs continue to show the imposition of order onto profane time. Periodic units of time - daily, monthly, seasonal—are enveloped in ritual order, thus unifying time and space in a coherent matrix of order and meaning. Moreover, since time and space, according to various versions of Hinduism, are marked by potentialities for disruption and disorder, an important function of ritual, especially formal temple *puja*, serves to assist the universe in its cosmic moments of vulnerability. Particularly weak or vulnerable junctures in the time-space continuum—the *parvans*—mark the transition from one phase to another, for example, from night to day, mid-day, and day to night. These liminal periods of temporal transition are conceived as moment charged with power and vulnerability. Temple *pujas* serve to assist the universe in an auspicious transition from one phase to another. These daily, occasional time units and the conceptual and ritual attention given to them "shape and give meaning to one's day, week, fortnight, month and solar period" as Narayanan observes.[6]

And yet that hardly begins to tell the story, or stories, in Hindu conceptualizations of time. In the well-known Hindu cosmology of time – as well in Buddhist and Jain traditions—time not only has its seasonal patterns which are embraced and infused with meaning, but also spectacularly gigantic spirals of time, replete with periodic cataclysms in which the entire cosmos devolves into primordial chaos, in effect resolving an inevitable decline of social and natural order. Primordial chaos, it appears, is the future, destiny, and answer to social and natural chaos. I wish to argue that Hindu discourse on the gradual devolution of the universe to its catastrophic—if temporary—end serves two purposes. First, as an engine of religious awakening, the rhetoric of cosmic devolution serves the psychological evolution of the adept or devotee. In this case, cosmology serves psychology; the rhetoric of macrocosmic dissolution serves the adept's preparation for microcosmic dissolution, death. And yet, implied and embedded in Indian texts on cosmic devolution are hosts of axiological, metaphysical, and social assumptions. These in turn tend to reinforce an 'orthodox' vision of the mesocosmos, or the social universe, in addition to the micro and macro cosmoi of human and inter-stellar worlds. In short, I shall examine Hindu rhetoric on the 'end times',

[6]Narayanan. 21.

illustrating its impact on esoteric and exoteric structures of mind and society. Although the focus of this essay is Hindu discourse of cosmic dissolution, shared patterns can be seen in Buddhist and Jain traditions despite their differences. Moreover, as time itself has been comprehended as a construct designed to yield order and meaning in virtually all religious tradition, the considerations marked out here serve broader theoretical and comparative purposes.

So what, precisely, is the problem with time? The potential for meaninglessness in the face of juggernaut of growth, decline, and death confronting all human and social bodies. This cycle, constituted in time, is particularly devastating for its inevitability and relentlessness. Indeed, the Sanskrit term for time, *kala,* derives from *kal,* to count; in this sense, time is the great reckoner, presiding over the coming to be and the destruction of worldly being.[7] This is perhaps no more vividly represented than in the *Bhagavad Gita* (11.32), when Krishna identifies himself as the consuming power of time: "I am time grown old, creating world destruction, set in motion to annihilate the worlds."[8] Elsewhere in the *Mahabharata,* time is conceived as the Destroyer of Creatures, wandering about the face of the earth.[9] And, as Julius Lipner reminds us, a frequent anxiety in Indian mythology is the fear of being swallowed, consumed, or devoured either by superior agents or by time itself. The term for the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, *samsara,* is often used in the sense of raging stream, which evokes the struggle to avoid being consumed by the flood.[10] Given the burden of time, poets, mystics, and lovers in every culture have striven to step out of time in moments of rapture or insight, somehow to gain a taste of immortality even if fleeting or momentary.

Conceptualizations of time and apocalyptic discourse are on the same continuum of meaning and purpose. Both are human constructions designed to generate meaning in the inevitable stream of growth and decay of all organisms. The concept of time, as reviewed above, serves to give

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[7]Julius Lipner, *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 251.

[8]Barbara Stoler Miller, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita* (New York: Bantam, 1986), 103.

[9]Klostermaier, 184.

[10]Lipner, 251-252.

meaning, purpose, and order to the cycles of nature and the seasons of one's life. Apocalypticism serves the same function: it is one the same continuum of meaning and purpose even as it announces the 'end of time'. Apocalypticism is a more vivid and strident call to 'redeem the time' that is, to use the ever-so-fleeting moments in the individual and social cycle of growth and decline for 'timely' efforts for liberation. We see this especially in the conceptualizations of vast cycles of time in Indian thought, called *yugas*, but such discourse aims to provoke spiritual discipline. *Yuga*, therefore, leads to yoga.

THE YUGAS

Let me begin by briefly recounting a familiar Hindu representation of the vast cycles of time and the inevitable moral and natural devolution embedded in phenomenal reality. Discussion of the 'end times' is a favoured theme in the Puranas, the earliest of which date to about 300 CE. However, significant representations of the *yugas* are seen in the *Manava Dharma Sastra* (c.100 BCE), in the *Mahabharata* (c. 400 BCE –400 CE), and still earlier in the *Atharva Veda* (c.1000 BCE)

The characterization of the cycles with their enormous periods of time defies comprehension, and this, I think, is the point. Gigantic cycles of growth and decline encompass briefer epicycles of he same pattern, though by our standards even these epicycles are long. One basic cycle – called a day of Brahma –is called a *kalpa*, some 4,320,000,000 earthly years; in this period, Brahma creates the universe and again absorbs it; during the night of Brahma, equally long, the whole universe is gathered up into his body, where it remains as a potentiality. Within each *kalpa* are 14 secondary cycles, called *manvantaras*, characterized by different human progenitors (*manus*). Each *manvantara* is divided into 71 *mahayugas*, one thousand of which from the *kalpa*. Each *mahayuga* in turn is divided into four ages, *Krta*, *Treta*, *Dvapara* and *Kali*, terms that come from dicing games, suggesting the element of chance in the structure of time. The lengths of these divine years, each of which equals 360 human years, decline by half, beginning with 4,800 years of the *Krta Yuga*. Each yuga represents a progressive decline in piety, morality and happiness and concludes in an Age of Strife, the *Kali Yuga*, characterized by injustice, miscegenation, impiety, and barbarian rule. At the end of 1000 *mahayugas*, a cataclysmic end of creation terminates the day of Brahma and marks the absorption of creation into the creator.

A.L. Basham makes the interesting observation that the view of the cataclysmic end is propounded in texts which date from the beginning of the common era, when foreign kings did in fact rule much of Indian sub-continent and established practices were shaken by competing worldviews such as Buddhism and Jainism. The beginning of the *Kali Yuga* is said to have commenced with the *Mahabharata* war, traditionally held to be 3102 BCE. But an earlier tradition would place the war at about 900 BCE, according to which the 1200 years of *Kali*, read as human years, would at this time nearing their end. Basham dryly remarks that "Evidently some pious Hindus thought that dissolution of the cosmos was imminent;"[11] he speculates that the concept of 'divine years' emerged when fear of destruction subsided, thus making dissolution of the world "comfortably distant." Although it is of course difficult to make this case decisively, we know that religious texts at least in part reflect the conditions of their times while at the same time positing a vision of how things ought to be. As we will see, cycle talk should also be seen in context of a Brahminical vision of the universe.

At face value, cycle talk escapes easy grasping. Trying to 'hold' the cycles in a linear, categorical manner is at best elusive and perhaps impossible. Instead, the implication of potential insignificance looms large in the face of these incomparably vast cycles. Yet, significance or meaning is found in the manner by which one redeems the time. At least four uses of the term *pralaya*, referring both to macrocosmic and microcosmic dissolution, can be found in the *Vishnu* and *Agni Purana*.[12] The ultimate dissolution, *atyantika pralaya*, refers to definitive and final release of the soul trapped in the consuming process of growth and decay which constitutes *samsara*. Also on the microcosmic scale, *nitya pralaya*, refers to the daily dissolution of all creatures, namely death. Both these terms are viewed in contrast to *naimittika* and *prakrtika pralaya*, the occasional dissolution of the cosmos at the end of a day of Brahma and the ultimate, if also temporary, absorption of the cosmos into the primordial chaos of *prakrti*.

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[11] A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), 321.

[12] I am indebted to Vasudha Narayanan for this observation; see Narayanan, 17.

While the nuanced levels of meaning of the term *pralaya* is typical of Indian thought, the fact that the term is used both for the soul's journey of cycles and epicycles as well as that of the cosmos is instructive. Rhetoric of cyclic term underscores the transitoriness of phenomenal reality and the need to transcend it. The process of attaining *moksa*, or *atyantika pralaya*, directly confronts the brutal fact of instability and decay in the time-space continuum, rendered most acute and vivid by the daily deaths—the *nitya pralaya*—of sentient creatures. The problem of transience and inevitable decline becomes a live sensibility in the *Upanishads* and becomes perduring problem in all Indian soteriologies. It is this sensibility that animates rhetoric of dissolution, confronting the subject with the brute fact of mortality, the inevitability of cosmic absorption, and the possibility of freedom from the such catastrophes. In all this, *yuga* leads to *yoga*. The fact of personal and cosmic cataclysms serves as a weak up call to one's spiritual program.

The intimate association between the cosmic and individual response to dissolution is perhaps best seen in the Sankhya cosmology, important for our purpose since its emanationist schema envelops discourses on cyclic time. For example, the accounts of the *yugas* in Manu and Suka's account of the *yugas* in the *Mahabharata* follow cosmologies which strongly reflect Sankhya thought. And of course, the *Bhagavad Gita*, while orchestrating a theistic turn on Sankhya emanationism, nevertheless adopts a realist and pluralist view of the universe using the Sankhya categories of the three *gunas*. Sankhya theories of cosmic evolution always presuppose the need for psychological devolution, that is, the need to separate from transient materiality through discriminative awareness. In this and in the *yoga darsana*, the goal appears to be to head off inevitable mortal dissolution by engaging in a concentrated program of psychological dissolution; that is, by dissolving or detaching from ego-centric boundaries and false identifications, the soul realizes its true nature, free from all vicissitudes of time and space. Mortal dissolution promotes ego dissolution which in turn 'produces' ultimate dissolution or liberation. Indeed, Eliade has argued that the practice of *yoga* itself aims at stopping time,[13] by controlling one's breath, by rendering oneself immobile through postures,

[13]Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*, Willard R. Trask, trans., Bolligen Series LVI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969). See especially ch.2.

and by developing heightened powers of concentration, one stops the agitated stream of physical and mental events and realizes the immutable, eternal self, implicated, through ignorance, in the cosmic flux. Indeed, the penultimate state of concentration, the *dharma megha samadhi,* marks a radical collapse of time, a zero-time experience at which point the *yogi* identifies his consciousness with timeless *kaivalya.*[14] Madeleine Biardea adopts the *yoga* paradigm in her theistic talk on the *yugas*; in this case, the divine itself is embodied in cosmic *samsara*; the Lord here is the Divine *Yogin*, engaging in gradual cosmic involution and ultimate absorption in *pralaya.*[15]

The fact that the personal and cosmic cataclysms are called *nitya* and *naimittika pralaya* is intriguing, for these terms are most often used to refer to obligatory and occasional scarifies, the religious rites enjoined in the Vedic worldview. The use of these terms with their obvious antecedent associations seem to wrap *yuga* talk in the wrap and woof of a particular religious worldview. This worldview is perhaps best captured by the term *dharma.*

DHARMA

The concerns of *dharma* as embedded in discourse on the *yugas* need some contexutalizaton. The earliest phase of such discourse was part of a Brahmin program of cultural consolidation in the face of heterodox advances and *Upanisadic* appeals to renunciation. The controlling paradigm for orthodoxy is *dharma*, initially the ritual activity of priests. As Wilhelm Halbfass has noted, this paradigm involves "a framework of mythical, magical reciprocity, which correlates the ritual socio-religious activities of certain privileged groups of actors with cosmic and natural phenomena."[16] *Dharma*, in this view, is the "continuous maintaining of the social and cosmic order and norm, which is achieved by the Aryan through the performance of his Vedic rites and traditional duties."[17] Halbfass and Brian Smith, among others, make quite clear the unification of macro and meso cosmic through *dharma*, especially in the early ritual sense of the

[14]Klostermaier, 186.

[15]Madeleine Biardeau, *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization,* trans. Richard Nice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 101-102.

[16]Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1988), 315.

[17]Ibid., 317-318.

term. The early use of *dharma* indicates a primeval opening, a separation and holding apart, shown in cosmogonies such as *Rg Veda* 6.70.1 and the *Purusha Sukta*. And indeed, the verbal root *dhr*, from which the term *dharma* derives, means "to sustain" or "to support". Ritual *dharma* then becomes the reactualization of the original cosmogony which both upholds and separates. The *Purusha Sukta* reinforces this primeval separations socially, as well as cosmically, by the creation and particular distinctions of the four *varnas*.

The sense of separation and upholding is clearly seen in the *Dharma Sastra* literature, especially in Manu. Here, as Halbfass notes, ritual performances and social norms uphold and support "both the moveable and immovable creation", i.e., society as well as the world. *Dharmic* acts, the ritual and social activities of those initiated in the *varnasrama* system, now perpetuate and renew the primeval sacrifice with its explicit separation and polarizations.[18] The universe is marked out, boundaries are established, and identities made clear, with prestige granted to the most pure, i.e., Brahmins, and no small scorn accorded to the least pure, i.e., *Sudras*, outcastes, and *mlecchas*. As Halbfass notes *dharma* in traditional and orthodox Hinduism appears as an "essentially anthropocentric, sociocentric and moreover, Indocentric and Brahmanocentric concept."[19] *Dharma* helps to constitute the Brahminic world view and in doing so legitimizes Brahmins as teachers and guardians of *dharma*.[20]

It is in this context that rhetoric on cyclic time must be read. In chapter one of the code of Manu, the author promulgates a vision of society that has divine sanction owing to Sankhya cosmology. Moreover, the description of the ages in Manu have clear normative implications. Set at the beginning of Manu's teaching, the vast cycles of time and their consequent moral decline suggest the imperative: follow *dharma*, which of course is the premier concern of priests, who, according to Manu are "eternal physical form of *dharma*," "born for the sake of *dharma*", and set

[18]Ibid., 318.
[19]Ibid., 319.
[20]Ibid., 320.

to "guard the treasure of *dharma*."[21] The descriptions of decline in Manu serve to re-orient and to remind the reader of the intimate connections that obtain between individual, society, and cosmos. Attending to one's *svadharma* upholds the meso-cosmos and, by extension, the macro-cosmos. The failure to attend to *dharma* is of course a central theme in the *Bhagavad Gita*. What is the prescription of Krishna in the reigning chaos? Do your duty. Indeed, better is one's duty done poorly, than other's duty done well (3,35), a sentiment echoed in Manu (6.66). The fact that Krishna's early lecture on duty is modulated later in the *Gita* by his discourse on *bhakti* is hardly contradictory. S an exoteric text, the *Gita* represents a further consolidation of the Brahminical synthesis seen in the *Manava Dharma Sastra*. Against competing heterodox world views and even Upanisadic programs of renunciation, the *Gita* affirms the social vision expounded in the *Sastras*, now with the assurance that *moksa* is attainable in and through society. While it perhaps overstates the matter to say that Manu pays lip service to renunciant traditions, there is no doubt that he considers the householder state to be superior among the *asramas*, for it supports the other three (Manu 3.78, 6.89).

Manu articulates a coherent view of the social universe and at the same time legitimates civil authority to reinforce it. This latter plank in Manu's agenda is seen in his discussion of the duties of royalty. Manu's social program is given divine sanction not only by the cosmology in the beginning of Manu, but by the king, who is constituted by divine essence and is charged with upholding *dharma*. The linking of the social norms with royal power serves as a vivid backdrop to Manu's own discussion of the *yugas*, which Ariel Glucklich quite correctly calls "an ethical eschatology" and "moral cosmology."[22] It serves as a device, now not merely to wake up to a private program of liberation, but to wake up to certain kind of social responsibility, a commitment to a worldview stipulated by priests.

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[21]Wendy Doniger, trans., and Brian K. Smith, *The Law of Manu* (London: Penguin, 1991), 13 (Manu 1.98). I have replaced Doniger's use of the term 'religion' with the original term, dharma, since 'religion' carries excessive Western overtones.

[22]Ariel Glucklich, *Religious Jurisprudence in the Dharmasastra* (New York: Macmillan, 1988),6.

Manu's discussion of the *yugas* in the context of the mesocosmos clearly implies the need for discipline, both spiritual and civil; cosmology serves not only to reinforce a rhetoric of social obedience but also the civil authority to reinforce it. As Glucklich notes, the *Kali Yuga* is characterized by universal vice, disharmony, and disobedience to social norms; it is the duty of the king to 'restore some semblance of order..., establishing on a local and immanental scale the ideal vision of the golden age."[23] The function of the king on this view is to restore stolen wealth and property to those who obey *dharma*, attempting to establish a renewed *Krta Yuga.* This is the most important duty of the king, for otherwise the undisciplined inclinations of his subjects run rampant and social chaos unfolds. In this case, the rhetoric of *yugas*, especially the rhetoric of the *Kali Yuga* suggests a 'normative dimension of social creation.' In a view that anticipates the realism of Machiavelli (not to mention Kautilya), Manu warns that "if the king did not, without tiring, inflict punishment on those worthy to be punished, the stronger would roast the weaker, like fish on a spit."[24]

In this case, we see a cosmos that is destined for trouble, owing to innate human predilections to desire and greed, predilections that are found, incidentally, in embryonic form in the *Krta Yuga* as well. But the inevitability of moral decline justifies civil and legal authority to restrain and to punish untoward manifestations of desires, selfishness, and greed. As Glucklich notes, "Only punishment, properly inflicted by the king, can keep the world in its proper order, maintain the sanctity of property laws, social justice, and precise religious observances."[25] The king, embodying particles of the gods and acting in accord with *dharma*, saves his kingdom from destruction, or at least postpones it.

Here we have the ideal king as guardian and even saviour. In the *Kali Yuga*, conformity to *dharma* rests on coercion and fear of retribution.[26] As we noted earlier that Krishna identifies himself as Time in the *Gita*, so he also identifies himself with the *danda*, variously translated as the 'scepter of authority' or the 'rod of punishment,' "I am the scepter of rulers, the

[23]Ibid., 22.

[24]Doniger and Smith, 130 (Manu 7.20).

[25]Glucklich, 23.

[26]Ibid., 24.

morality of ambitious men."[27] However, the king enforces *dharma* and does not determine *dharma*; this is the scope of Brahmins, and so a symbiotic relationship obtains between political and religious leaders. The ideological intimacy between religion and politics, however, is perhaps best illustrated by the role of the king during social dissolution. In the face of the discord of *Kali Yuga*, the king wields his authority, thus projecting the order of *Krta Yuga* in his kingdom. The king, embodying the divine, obedient to *dharma*, protector of *dharma* is a proto-messianic figure striving to maintain order.[28] However, to fulfill this role righteously requires legitimization. Programs of political legitimization were advanced by Brahmin ideology and Brahmins in turn gained privileges, not the least of which is the authority to establish the conceptual, ritual, and ethical links between the micro, meso, and macro cosmoi. Other privileges of course included, in the early and late medieval eras, considerable land grants, temple patronage, and access to the royal court.

Normative implications embedded in the descriptions of the *Kali Yuga* can be seen in the *Vishnu Purana* as well. For example, in Book 6, Parasara narrates a rather colorful description of Kali Age in which , "four footed *dharma* suffers total extinction."[29] Disorder rules, again characterized by rejection of duties appropriate to caste and stage of life. Laws, customs, sacrifice and above all the Vedas –all of which represents a body of knowledge controlled and transmitted by Brahmins –lose their commanding appeal. Instead, any and every text will be scripture, for those who choose to think so, youths, disregarding the rules of studentship, will study the Vedas on their own. The corrupted will say, "Of what authority are the Vedas? What are gods or Brahmans? What need is there of purification of water?"[30] This disregard of Brahminical values accelerates social disorder. Princes will plunder, rather than protect their subjects. Vaisyas will abandon agriculture and gain livelihood by servitude. Sudras will assume the outward sings of mendicants, but will become impure followers of heretics. And yet, this is not the end of troubles: social

[27]Stoler Miller, 94 (10.38); Glucklich, 25.

[28]Glucklich, 24.

[29]H.H. Wilson, trans., *The Vishnu Purana* (Calcutta: Punth Pustak, 1961), 487. Wilson render dharma as 'virtue', which I have replace with the traditional Sanskrit term, for the same reason as above.

[30]Ibid., 490.

disorder entails natural disorder, revealing again the intimate connections between the social and natural worlds in the Brahmin vision of the universe. Parasara spells out this connection directly, "The path of the Vedas being obliterated, and men having deviated into heresy, iniquity will flourish, and the duration of life will therefore decrease."[31] Children will die in infancy, women will bear children between the ages of 5-7, and man will be gray by the age of 12, and no one will live past the age of 20. The normative implication embedded in this description is of course: follow the path of the Vedas. Indeed, while the *Kali Yuga* introduces a kind of dispensation –merely the recitation of the name of Hari grants salvation – Vyasa nevertheless adds that women and Sudras are blessed. How so? They merely have to do their duty –their *svadharma*—in order to be saved.[32]

What the *Vishnu Purana* and Manu show is the profound rhetorical force of the *Kali Yuga*. The cosmology that wraps discourse on cyclic time becomes a powerful persuasive device; the brute fact of inevitable dissolution serves as a wake up call to spiritual discipline –*yoga* in its many permutations. In this case, the fact of cosmic dissolution promotes the quest for ego dissolution and ultimate identification with the transcendent beyond time and space. At the same time, the blunt warnings of dissolution have a concomitant social impact as well. The rhetoric of the *Kali Yuga* serves as a wake up call to social discipline, the need to do one's duty, a duty prescribed and transmitted by Brahmins. Although I do not have the 'time' to discuss other versions of rhetoric on Kali Yuga—such as is found in Tantra and in the so-called heterodoxies –we can expect to see such discourse as promoting both individual and social ends, now circumscribed in a competing vision of the micro, meso, and macro cosmoi. Moreover, we can expect similar analyses in Western religious discourse on the 'end-time.' The bearded eccentric bearing a sandwich placard announcing "The End is Near" on a busy downtown street in Chicago operates with the same archetypal construct of psychic dissolution found in *yuga* talk. The vast relativizing of all things under he steamroller of time serves as a perennial wake-up call to those sensitive to time's relentlessness. On the other hand, political associations such as the Moral

[31]Ibid., 489-490.

[32]Biardeau, 105.

Majority in America gain strength from rhetoric on moral chaos in attempt to reconstruct a nostalgic golden age. But their aggressive attempts at moral renewal, informed by a particular conservative religious worldview, come packed with a host of conservative political assumptions as well. In this case, as in the case of Manu, rhetoric on moral and social dissolution characteristic of 'end times' discourse becomes a powerful ideological tool for social and political assertion. While this in itself may not be a bad thing, 'uses' of apocalypticism segues into 'abuses' when the assertion of political and social control is gained at the expense of marginalized members of society. It behooves not only political scientist but scholars of religion to critically examine such discourse in order to facilitate a genuine liberation of human person and human society, one which his less characterized by patterns of domination and control but instead by principles of dignity, compassion, and justice. In this case, scholars of religion offer no mere analysis of ideology or rhetoric but perform a constructive role in the very evolution of religion itself.