

BOOK REVIEW

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Hindu studies in a Christian, secular academy

Vishwa Adluri 

Correspondence:
vadluri@hunter.cuny.edu
Hunter College, New York, USA

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But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

—Paul, *Letter to the Romans* 7:6

Why, do we then nothing? Do we work nothing for the obtaining of this righteousness? I answer: Nothing at all. For the nature of this righteousness is, to do nothing, to hear nothing, to know nothing whatsoever of the law or of works . . .

—Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*

Introduction

The concept of *dharma* is central to Hinduism, underpinning its ideas of rebirth, existence, salvation, and even cosmogenesis. Yet this concept is seldom understood and frequently misrepresented. One of the key sources of difficulty is the confusion between substantive and normative senses of *dharma*, and the tendency to represent *dharma* as merely a social construct. More importantly, scholars have viewed *dharma* on analogy with Judeo-Christian ideas of the law, and drawn, from its seeming inability to provide justification, the negative conclusion that *dharma* is inefficacious in salvation. Yet this conclusion is premature, as this article will argue. I will focus on a recent interpretation of *dharma* in the Mahābhārata, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahābhārata* (Hudson 2013), to show how Judeo-Christian ideas of the law—more specifically, a Protestant critique of Jewish law—stand at the background of many contemporary accounts of *dharma*. My aim in doing so, however, is less to critique this particular interpretation than to illustrate the latent Protestant foundations of the discipline of the history of religions. The wider argument I will make is that without much greater attention to the presuppositions of our work than hitherto, we risk degrading our scholarship to a mere restatement of Protestant norms and values, because of the way those norms and values have been inscribed at the heart of the academic study of religions (Smith 2010, 1139–170).¹

Disorienting Dharma

In my review of *Disorienting Dharma* (Adluri 2016), I showed that Hudson failed to understand the concept of *dharma* in the *Mahābhārata* (see *ibid.*, 5–7). Rather than reprise those criticisms here, I wish to show that this failure was not accidental: it

derived directly from the application of an implicit Protestant hermeneutic to the text to generate an antinomian reading of *dharma*. Let me begin with a key observation of that review, namely, Hudson's failure to adequately conceptualize the relationship of *dharma* to *adhharma*. I argued that "within *pravṛtti*, *dharma* exists in an essential tension with *adhharma*" (ibid., 6). Unlike Christianity, Hinduism does not contemplate the possibility of a perfected world—either now or in some distant future. Consequently, when the epic problematizes *dharma* its aim is to recommend neither lawlessness nor despair. Rather, it undertakes an analysis of *dharma* and *adhharma* precisely as a propaedeutic to *mokṣa* (final liberation). "*Mokṣa*," Van Buitenen notes, "is release from the entire realm which is governed by *dharma*, that is, in the picturesque phrase, the Egg of Brahmā." *Mokṣa*, thus, stands in opposition to *dharma*, "but the opposition is of another kind than that of *adhharma* to *dharma*. *Dharma* upholds the established order, while *adhharma* threatens it; *adhharma* is sheer lawlessness. *Mokṣa*, however, is the abandonment of the established order, not in favor of anarchy, but in favor of a self-realization which is precluded in the realm of *dharma*" (Van Buitenen 1957, 37). Thus, when the epic illustrates the limitations of *dharma* (for example, that heaven is finite or that individuals, though innocent, suffer due to the *adhharma* of others), it does this as a way to recommend pursuing the *mokṣa* option (see Sullivan 2006).² Contrary to Emily Hudson's suggestion that we ought to follow the *dharma as though* it mattered, the epic is unwavering in its commitment to *dharma*. This is seen both in the epic's setting up of the Kurukṣetra battle as a conflict carried out on the field of the Kurus, "supremely firm in the Law" (*paramadharmiṣṭhe deśe bhūdoṣavarjite*, Mahābhārata 1.2.10; all translations of the Mahābhārata, unless otherwise stated, are Van Buitenen's) and in Vyāsa's gesture at the epic's conclusion, when he says: "with uplifted arms I cry out, but no one hears. From *dharma* [springs] wealth as well as pleasure. Why should *dharma*, therefore, not be pursued? One should not abandon *dharma* for the sake of either pleasure or fear or desire. *Dharma* is eternal; pleasure and pain, however, are not so . . ." (Mahābhārata 18.5.49–50; my translation).³

Thus the problem of *dharma* has to be seen within the context of the progression of the *yugas*, with the inevitable decline in order characteristic of the cosmic cycle, and within the context of the restitution of *dharma* through *bhārāvatarāṇa* (Mahābhārata 1.58.35–51, 1.59.1–6). Hudson does not mention Nārāyaṇa's descent, even though the Mahābhārata clarifies up front (in the Ādiparvan) that his descent is the essential step required for *dharmasamsthāpana*.⁴ The epic self-consciously sets up a mimetic universe, in which both *dharma* and *adhharma* can unfold, so that it can ultimately, through the *raṇayajña*, declare the victory of *dharma* over *adhharma*. Hudson misleadingly downplays the fact that the Kuru conflict is yet another episode in the periodic conflict between the gods and the titans (Mahābhārata 1.61.80–89). She ignores the careful staging of the epic's narrations, which clarify that the problem is not one of how to obtain heaven (the epic is retold retrospectively, after the current generation of heroes has already attained heaven), but of how, through hearing of the characters' fates and seeing that death is the face and fate of all *phusis*, to achieve ontological *deśaisie*. *Ahimsā dharma*, a key concept in the epic's ethics (see Mahābhārata 1.11.12a, 3.198.69c: *ahimsā paramo dharmah*),⁵ features only at the margins of her discussion (see 38, 39, and 222; in the last reference, it is dismissed with the words that, like *anṛśamsya*, it is a merely "negative category"). She also ignores the Bhagavadgītā, even though her questions regarding *dharma*—especially the question: "If the path of *dharma* not only does not protect one from misfortune and

sorrow, but, on the contrary, potentially is implicated in the problem of suffering, is the dharmic path even a noble or worthy pursuit?" (103)—are already anticipated by this text (see Bhagavadgītā 3.1 and 6.37–39). Focusing on the concept of *svadharmā* in the Gītā would also have permitted her to articulate her question more precisely, which, if it can be taken to mean *anything*, must mean something like: the characters' *svadharmā* fails to protect them. This formulation would still be erroneous, because *svadharmā* protects not in the manner of ensuring worldly success,⁶ but in the manner of a purification and a self-formation,⁷ but at least the question in this form has *some* content and would have been intelligible to those familiar with Indian thought.

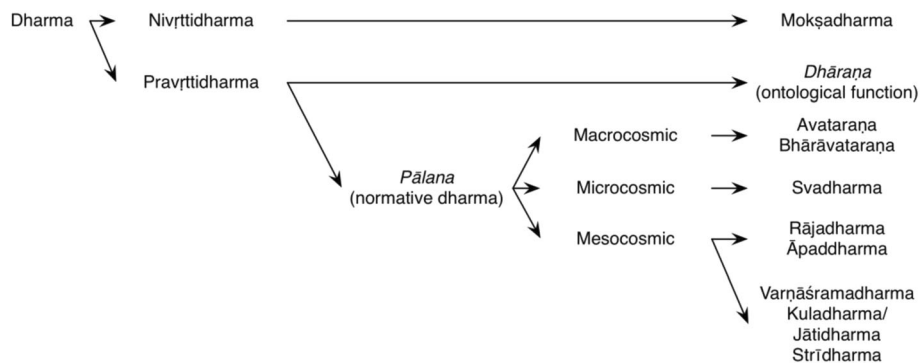
Definitions of Dharma

These failures are exacerbated by the fact that Hudson does not explain what she, if not the text, means by "*dharmā*." She notes that the term "has been used in a bewildering variety of ways" and that it "has no single semantic equivalent in English . . . in various contexts [it] may mean law, justice, custom, morality, ethics, religion, duty, nature, or virtue" (36). But she does not engage with the concept beyond these observations. Even though it is one of the most notoriously difficult terms in Indian thought to define,⁸ she merely glosses it as a social/anthropocentric concept, analogous to the idea of the law in the West. There is no discussion of the way the term operates in the Mahābhārata (that is, as *pravṛtti* and *nivṛtti dharmas*, as *varṇāśrama* and *kṣatriya dharmas*, or as *mokṣa* and *ṛṣi dharmas*). These manifold senses of *dharmā* are conflated to one, amorphous category "*dharmā*" and a pseudo-problem constructed: "If the path of *dharmā* . . . does not protect one from misfortune and sorrow . . . is the dharmic path even a noble or worthy pursuit?" (103).

Hudson makes much of the fact that the nature of *dharmā* is "subtle,"⁹ but overlooks the first occurrence of the term *sūkṣma dharmā* right at the Mahābhārata's outset in the story of King Vasu in the Ādiparvan, as the king ponders over his spilt ejaculate. Vaiśampāyana narrates that King Vasu was asked by his ancestors to go hunting while his wife was in her season. Thinking of her on the way, the king spontaneously ejaculated; but being "aware of the subtleties of Law and Profit" (*sūkṣmadharmārthataṭṭvajño jñātvā*, Mahābhārata 1.57.42e), he caught his sperm as it fell on a leaf and entrusted it to a kite to carry home to his wife. This is the first occurrence of the notion of *dharmasūkṣmatā* in the epic and, as such, a key indication that the problem of the subtle nature of the *dharmā* is linked to the "fall" into *pravṛtti*.¹⁰ More problematic still, Hudson consistently glosses the *sūkṣmata* of *dharmā* as referring to the ambiguity of *dharmā*, that is, to its being difficult to state in some undefined sense,¹¹ when, in fact, the reference is most likely to an esoteric doctrine of the soul. Adam Bowles has shown the connections between the Mahābhārata's use of the term and its Upaniṣadic predecessors. He comments, "in KU [Kaṭha Upaniṣad] 1.21, in the dialogue between Naciketas and Death, the *ātman* doctrine is said to be 'not easily understood, it is a subtle *dharmā*' (*na . . . sujñeyam aṅur eṣa dharmāḥ*), repeated in similar terms in 2.13 (*dharmyam aṅum*). This is quite remarkable, especially since this 'doctrine' (*dharmā*) is further described as *OM*, the syllable *brahman* (2.15–16ff.), precisely what CU [Chāndogya Upaniṣad] 2.23.1 contrasts to *dharmā*" (Bowles 2007, 101).¹² Bowles further notes that "KU [Kaṭha Upaniṣad] 2.14 seems to contrast the *ātman* theory to the pair *dharmā* and *adharmā* in answering the question, what is 'different from *dharmā* and different from *adharmā*' (*anyatra dharmād anyatrādharmād*). In this case, the 'subtle doctrine' appears to transcend *dharmā* and *adharmā*, which, if I

understand this correctly, must mean something like the traditional rituals, laws and duties, and their opposites, of Brāhmanism” (ibid., 101–2). The subtlety referred to thus must be intrinsically connected with the difficulty of stating the *dharma* with respect to the *ātman*, which, as eternal, unchanging, and eternally free, remains beyond good and evil (cf. Bhagavadgītā 5.15a: *nādatte kasya cit pāpam na caiva sukṛtaṃ vibhuḥ*).

In the Upaniṣads, the term *sūkṣma* occurs in Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.12 (*sūkṣmadarsin*); Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad 11.9 and Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 4.14 (*sūkṣmātisūkṣmaṃ*); Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad 5.12 and 6.3 (*sūkṣmāṇi* and *sūkṣmaiḥ*); and Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1.7 (*sūkṣmācca sūkṣmatara*). It is also found in the Bhagavadgītā at 13.15 (*sūkṣmatva*). If we look at what the term qualifies in these verses, we see that *in all these instances*, the reference is to the Self (*ātman*). Thus, in Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.12, Yama explains to Naciketas, “He [the *puruṣa*] is hidden in all beings, and hence He does not appear as the Self (of all). But by the seers of subtle things, He is seen through a pointed and fine intellect.” Note that here it is precisely on account of his *ubiquity* that the *puruṣa* is referred to as subtle. Likewise in Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.1.7, Aṅgiras explains to Śaunaka, “It [*brahman*] is great and self-fulgent; and Its form is unthinkable. It is subtler than the subtle.” Śāṅkara in his commentary on the Kaṭha Upaniṣad states: “Now, then, the senses are gross. The *arthāḥ*, sense-objects, by which those senses were created for their (that is, of the sense-objects) own revelation; are certainly *parāḥ*, higher—subtler, more pervasive, and are their inner selves.” For each element of this hierarchical order (*manas*, *buddhi*, *mahān ātmā*, *avyakta*, *puruṣa*) he repeats this argument, arguing each time that it is “more subtle, pervasive, and is their/its inner self.” Regarding the last element of this series he notes: “He, the Puruṣa; is *kāṣṭha*, the acme, the culmination—of subtleness, greatness, and inwardness, as Self. Here, indeed, culminate all subtleness, etc., commencing from the senses.”¹³ The implication is that when the Mahābhārata refers to the subtlety of *dharma*, it does not mean to cast *dharma* into doubt. Rather, it means to underscore the extreme difficulty of perceiving the *dharma* with respect to *puruṣa* or *brahman*, and it is for this reason that the text engages in extensive discussions about it, just as, according to the logic of *arundhatī-darśana-nyāya*, in order to see a fine star such as Arundhatī, the student is first shown a large star and then her attention is progressively directed to smaller and smaller stars.¹⁴



Thus, when Hudson turns her attention to her main theme, the “subtle” nature of *dharma*, the reader is at a loss to understand what she means by “*dharma*” if it refers neither to the nature, order, or causal operation of the universe nor to the contrast with *nivṛtti* and *mokṣa* nor to the antithesis of *adharma*. In a work whose central thesis hangs from the fact that “Bhīṣma tries and fails [to answer Draupadī’s question], deeming *dharma* to be too subtle (*sūkṣma*) to be interpreted” (101; the reference is to Mahābhārata 2.60.40), it is striking that she does not point out that this is a response to a specific question, where the *dharma* point is not clear. Bhīṣma is far from declaring that *dharma* as a whole is subtle in Hudson’s sense (that is, that it is deceptive or impotent and hence worthy of abandonment). In the term’s very next occurrence (Bhīṣma’s soliloquy at Mahābhārata 2.62.14–21), he upholds the principle of *dharma*, stating, “the course of the Law is sovereign” (*dharmasya tu parām gatim*, Mahābhārata 2.62.14a).¹⁵ Hudson states that Draupadī in the *sabhā* appears to criticize both *dharma* and the Dharmarāja, but does not mention that, in the Āraṇyakaparvan, when Draupadī casts aspersion on *dharma* a second time, Yudhiṣṭhira repudiates her with the words: “The words you have spoken and we have heard, Yājñaseni, are beautiful, well-phrased and polished; but what you are saying is heresy” (Mahābhārata 3.32.1).¹⁶

I could multiply almost endlessly such instances of textual oversight. Duryodhana is not “a figure of tentative sympathy” (81); he is already marked out in the Ādiparvan as born from a portion of Kali (*kaler aṃśāt*, Mahābhārata 1.61.80a). Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s lament in the Ādiparvan does not “convey . . . an emotion very close to *vairāgya* or world-weariness, the underlying emotion of *sāntarasa*, the aestheticized emotion of tranquility” (114), because *sāntarasa* in Ānandavardhana requires the insight into Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva as the ontologically true (Dhvanyāloka 4.5A, cited according to the edition of Ingalls 1990), and this is precisely what Dhṛtarāṣṭra in his lament is unable to see.¹⁷ Hudson suggests that “the characterization of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a central component of the text’s aesthetics of suffering” and he is apparently supposed to “play a significant part in the audience’s moral refiguration” (107), but overlooks that his clipped refrain (“then, Saṃjaya, I lost hope of victory”) is a cipher for the rolling cycles of *pravṛtti* and that this lament is followed by the glorification of Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva, the sempiternal Blessed Lord (Mahābhārata 1.1.193–95).¹⁸ When Vidura in the nighttime sessions of the Udyogaparvan discourses to Dhṛtarāṣṭra on the *dharma*, elucidating a complex hierarchy of *dharmas*, he is not using “strategies of excess . . . to undermine our confidence in the category of *dharma*” (122) (what would the point of doing this to a king about to enter into a fatal war be?), but is illustrating the reach, the hold, and the inescapability of *dharma*.¹⁹ Hudson’s observation, “If *dharma* is everything, then is it anything?” (122), is illustrative rather of the viewpoint of the addled Dhṛtarāṣṭra, who at the discourse’s end, having listened with palpable boredom, says: “Is there anything, Vidura, that you have left unsaid?” (Mahābhārata 5.41.1).²⁰ Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā does not “argue that Arjuna should not grieve for those ‘he’ is going to kill because Kṛṣṇa, as time, has already killed them” (160, n. 56); he argues that Arjuna should not grieve for them because “the wise do not grieve either for the living or the dead” (Bhagavadgītā 2.10; all translations of the Bhagavadgītā are Van Buitenen’s). The dog that accompanies Yudhiṣṭhira to heaven does not “appear out of nowhere” (207, n. 125): a dog played a significant role in a previous episode. At the Mahābhārata’s inception, Janamejaya’s brothers beat a dog, Saramā’s son, and Saramā cursed King Janamejaya that an unseen danger (*adr̥ṣtam*, Mahābhārata

1.3.8d) would befall him. White (1989) points out that Yama is accompanied by two dogs who watch over the paths taken by the dead, Śyāma and Śabala, the Sārameyau or the sons of Saramā. In other words, we have a continuous motif, rather than a sudden accident and it only takes a little reading (the episode transpires in the Mahābhārata's third minor book) to see what is happening.²¹

Adhikāri and Prayojana

When Hudson now declares that she will read the Mahābhārata from Dhṛtarāṣṭra's perspective, we wonder: why Dhṛtarāṣṭra? How is he a reliable guide? How does he fulfill the requirements of the "sensitive listener" (*sahr̥daya*)? How is he qualified to be the *adhikāri*? Hudson tells us that "this [Dhṛtarāṣṭra's appearance at the beginning of the Ādiparvan] is an important moment in the epic's aesthetics of suffering because the entire central story is encapsulated in Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament" (109), but what is the guarantee that Dhṛtarāṣṭra has correctly understood or even heard the epic's message? The blind king is rather the paradigm of the person who *should not read the Mahābhārata*, because, even after hearing the whole story and witnessing Kṛṣṇa's revelation of the Bhagavadgītā on the battlefield to Arjuna, he still succumbs to lamentation. Hudson considers this lament a work of great poetry and beauty. Citing J. P. Sinha, she argues that "no Sanskrit poet presents any character whose grief could match the grief of Dhṛtarāṣṭra as presented by the poet of the *Mahābhārata*" (106).²² According to her, Dhṛtarāṣṭra's experience in the epic has "the pure arc of a tragic life" (106). Yet, had she considered the relation of the *adhikāri* to the *viśaya* and the *prayojana* of the text for a moment, before declaring that "we are directed to see parts of ourselves mirrored and greatly magnified [in the person of Dhṛtarāṣṭra]" and that "the extremity of what Dhṛtarāṣṭra has to face . . . renders bearable what we ourselves have to face and are loath to face" (141), she would have seen that Dhṛtarāṣṭra *can in no way be the person from whose perspective we are supposed to read the text*. As the paradigm of the incontinent, vacillating, self-absorbed person in the epic, he is the worst person to choose as a guide to the epic. His apoplexy at the beginning of the Ādiparvan, ending in a swoon, already sets up in the epic the tragedy of the person who will gain nothing from reading it. It also brings a sharp rebuke from his charioteer Saṃjaya, who tells him that "those whose minds do follow the scripture do not fall into confusion" (*yeṣāṃ śāstrānugā budhir na te muhyanti bhārata*, Mahābhārata 1.1.184c).²³ The episode of Maitreya's curse in the Āraṇyakaparvan (see n. 23) marks the king out as a gossip, an idle mind, incapable of following good counsel and interested only in hearing tales. In the long session called Dhṛtarāṣṭra's Vigil, the king, suffering from sleeplessness, calls Vidura to advise him. But instead of taking the steward's advice regarding the proper *dharma* to heart, he urges him to carry on storytelling as he is still sleepless and suffering from unease (see Mahābhārata 5.34.1, 5.35.1, 5.36.48, 5.39.1). Instead of the wakefulness enjoined upon the spiritual aspirant (Bhagavadgītā 2.69), the king is interested in *dharma* discussions only as a means of passing the time.

Adhikāri and Dhvani

Hudson probably considers Dhṛtarāṣṭra the main character in the epic from the perspective of its "aesthetics of suffering" because of the great value she attaches to the lament (see Hudson 2007). But Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lament cannot be read straightforwardly as

a tragedy. This “dirge” (109), as Hudson calls it, is primarily a list of contents and major episodes and is too formulaic to be moving. Moreover, as anyone who knows literature is aware, a single calamity might be considered unfortunate and two or three a tragedy. But at a certain point the person’s suffering ceases to be tragic and becomes comic instead.²⁴ When a blind person repeats fifty-four times that he saw the impending destruction coming and, moreover, prefaces this with the comment that he possesses the “eyesight of insight” (*prajñācakṣuṣam*, Mahābhārata 1.1.101e), when even a person with normal eyesight could have seen from the events that destruction was inevitable, this is a clear indication that we are not supposed to take Dhṛtarāṣṭra seriously. Hudson is aware that “Balarāma links Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s physical blindness with his moral blindness at 3.119.11” (11, n. 22). Yet, she does not take this potent clue seriously.²⁵ She informs us that “the paradox of Dhṛtarāṣṭra” consists in the fact that “the blind king often ‘sees’ with insight, [but] he seldom makes decisions in accordance with it” (106), yet, in viewing the epic from Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s perspective, she only repeats that paradox. “The eyesight of insight” (*prajñācakṣus*) is not “a polite epithet for a blind person”²⁶ (110, n. 13); it connects with Kṛṣṇa’s speech in the Bhagavadgītā, when he accuses Arjuna of having spoken “to sage issues” (*prajñāvādāmś ca bhāṣase*, Bhagavadgītā 2.11a). Dhṛtarāṣṭra is emblematic of the person who, although he sees the destruction coming, is unable to turn to the soteriological dimension called Hari in the text (see Mahābhārata 1.1.22c),²⁷ due to his incontinence and his cupidity. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is not “the most human of all the characters” (69) in the epic; he is the most laughable. It is regrettable that Hudson has chosen to base a reading of the Mahābhārata upon the experiences of this one figure.²⁸ That she thinks Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s experiences have any pedagogic value illustrates that she has understood neither the concept of the qualified reader nor the concept of suggestion.

These problems in Hudson’s interpretation of Dhṛtarāṣṭra could have been avoided had she read the Kaṇikanīti, a passage of 230 lines found in the vulgate.²⁹ Although in the vulgate rather than the critical edition, this text should not be dismissed lightly, for the vulgate, as Madeleine Biardeau argues, represents the best guide to the epic’s interpretation. The Indian tradition is a text-commentarial tradition; ideas do not appear from just anywhere, but are developed within a strictly controlled system of commentary, meta-commentary, and sub-commentary. The Mahābhārata’s later recensions, as argued elsewhere (Adluri and Bagchee 2017), are not simply instances of uncontrolled contamination; they are the first glosses on the archetypal text. In the passage under consideration, we are offered a completely different view of Dhṛtarāṣṭra than the one Hudson works out so painstakingly. Dhṛtarāṣṭra is a hypocrite, an utterer of sanctimonious bromides, begrudging of others’ success, jealous of his privileges, and always on the lookout for bad counsel that will justify his actions. Kaṇika, the king’s minister, tells Dhṛtarāṣṭra that strong kings should never hesitate to render harmless their foes, whether through bribery, conciliation, warfare, or treachery. Kaṇika’s advice resonates well with the king, who queries him ardently on what he should do, either by bribery, or by sowing dissension, or by force, to destroy the enemy (*katham sāntvena dānena bhedair daṇḍena vā punaḥ | amitraḥ śakyate hantum tan me brūhi yathā-tatham*, App. 1, no. 81, lines 49–50). Kaṇika responds by comparing the king’s position with a jackal, fully acquainted with the science of politics (*nītiśāstra*, App. 1, no. 81, line 52), who, even though surrounded by stronger, braver, and nobler animals, is able to assert his authority. Kaṇika’s choice of the jackal, known from

the Pañcatantra for its cunning and ruthlessness, shows that he has correctly discerned the king's nature. It is also the first time in the epic that Dhṛtarāṣṭra listens to an advisor's counsel. By not taking seriously the view of Dhṛtarāṣṭra canonical in the continuing tradition, Hudson commits avoidable mistakes.³⁰

Prayojana and Mokṣa

This raises a serious question: what are the qualifications someone must possess to read the Mahābhārata? Who is the *adhikāri*? Is it simply anyone with a slight knowledge of the text? Does it suffice to have only the barest idea of the plot outline? Or must there be an intrinsic connection between the *adhikāri*, the *viśaya* or the text's subject matter, and the *prayojana* or purpose of study? The Mahābhārata, as Fitzgerald has shown (Fitzgerald 1980), is primarily a *mokṣa* text, effective in knowledge of the self. This means that without an appreciation of for whom and with what purpose the text was written, our interpretation of the text is likely to go astray.³¹ Yet, when we look at Emily Hudson's work, we see that not only is she ill-informed about the epic but she also consistently downplays the textual reality of *mokṣa*. She is well aware that "for Buddhist, Jain, and nearly all Brahmanical religions the soteriological goal is defined as liberation (*mokṣa*) from *samsāra*, that is, release from the cycle of rebirth" (45). She also cites Fitzgerald on the contrast in these systems between "two senses of *dharma*," the one "predicated upon the desire for some great good (in the end heaven—the ultimate 'protection' against suffering)" and the other "seek[ing] to expunge all desire (that is, to gain liberation or *mokṣa*)" (39). Yet, she thereafter completely ignores the topic. Discounting references to the titles of the works of other authors that contain the term, I counted the word *mokṣa* only five times in the book (39, 45, 58, 195, and 222), each time only in passing. In each of these instances, she suppresses the theme of *mokṣa*. She cites Ānandavardhana as stating that by depicting the sorry end of the Vṛṣṇis and the Pāṇḍavas Vyāsa intends to invoke detachment (*vairāgya*) in his readers and thus suggests that the principal subject of his poem is "the peaceful flavor [*śāntarasa*] and the human aim characterized by liberation [*mokṣa*]" (58; Hudson cites the translation of Ingalls 1990); yet, in the immediately following sentences and paragraphs, she never once mentions the theme of *mokṣa*. Likewise, in the term's next appearance, the hunter's discourse in the Āraṇyakaparvan (Mahābhārata 3.198–206), she cites the hunter's statement that "being in a state of constant suffering yet unsuffering, one is called happy. Therefore, in great agony one goes around in *samsāra* like a wheel because the fetters have not been cut and *karma* has come again" (194),³² yet cuts the statement short before his concluding words: "When the bondage has been terminated and he is freed from it, he attains to the worlds of merit, *where, once he has reached them, he will no more suffer [yatra gatvā na śocati]*" (Mahābhārata 3.200.38, italics added; cf. Bhagavadgītā 15.6: *yad gatvā na nivartante*; obviously the soteriological goal and the place attained when there is no more suffering are the same).

Mokṣa and Svarga

The problems with *Disorienting Dharma* thus cannot simply be put down to Emily Hudson's insufficient knowledge of the text. Rather there is a repeated pattern of stopping short of the text's actual soteriological doctrines. Hudson's thesis that the Mahābhārata means to "disorient" our ideas of *dharma* (30–32) so as to "refigur[e]

the sensitive reader/spectator's understanding of suffering . . . and by extension . . . of the world" rests on her claim that "heaven is the ultimate reward," as "the absence of suffering is inherent in the idea of heaven" (219–20). This is, in fact, a feature of Christian theology; Hudson's repeated efforts to substitute the *mokṣa* question with a heaven question suggest that she is conflicted about which tradition she is arguing with. In Indian thought, "the conception of an 'after-life' which, though interrupted by intervals of heaven and hell, remains on the same level as the present life, and, although its varying degrees of 'spirituality' (*caitanya* and related terms) encompass the entire range from worm to Brahmā, cannot be regarded as essentially different from human life" (Van Buitenen 1957, 33). One cannot ask Indian systems to justify their theology in terms of heaven, when they reject this category as deficient, both ontologically and soteriologically.³³ As the maximization of *pravṛtti*, *svarga* or heaven is censured in the Mahābhārata. Not only are the joys of heaven temporary, but even Indra, Lord of heaven, is perpetually insecure, fearing a rival who will unseat him. Kings who ascend to heaven such as Vasu (Mahābhārata 12.324), Nahuṣa (12.329), and Yayāti (1.82) inevitably fall. Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā also critiques those who "inspired by desires, [are] set upon heaven" (Bhagavadgītā 2.43–44). When Hudson claims that "the epic's aesthetics of suffering is attempting to reorient the sensitive reader/receiver toward a notion of *dharma* that is divested of the idea of reward (heaven is the ultimate reward according to the logic of *dharma* in the first sense) as well as stripped of the notion that *dharma* would, or could, provide protection from suffering (for the absence of suffering is inherent in the idea of heaven)" (219–20), she conflates two things: the idea of heaven and the idea of the ultimate reward. It is only on this presupposition that it can seem as though the Indian epic, because it disparages heaven, must also be setting aside *dharma*.

Hudson also misunderstands the specific way Nārāyaṇa/Kṛṣṇa "saves" in the Mahābhārata. Via a reference to Sutton (2000),³⁴ she dismisses Nārāyaṇa's *avatāra* (incarnation or descent) as "a peripheral concept" (200, n. 94). She further criticizes Biardeau, James L. Fitzgerald, and W. J. Johnson for reading "the epic largely through the lens of the doctrine of the *avatāra*." In her view, although "many scholars have argued that the *Mahābhārata* concludes with the restoration of *dharma*[,] . . . this reading of the text is hard to reconcile with what actually happens at the epic's conclusion. In actuality, the *Mahābhārata* concludes, as Pollock aptly puts it, 'in anomie, ascetic suicide, and apocalypse'" (200, n. 94). However, *avatāra* does not save in the manner of Christian incarnation, assuring its followers of heaven. Given the epic's commitment to the circularity of time, those who attain heaven would only *re*-descend in the next cycle. Thus, the *avatāra*'s salvific function would not be preserved if only Nārāyaṇa's believers were sent to heaven or attained worldly success, while the disbelievers suffered torment. Rather, the destruction must be total:³⁵ purified souls, having received teaching and striving for self-knowledge, will be emancipated, while the souls of those intent upon heaven or other worldly desires will receive appropriate destinations.³⁶ Thus, *avatāra* must be intrinsically linked with *bhārāvatarāṇa*, contrary to Paul Hacker's claim that *avatarāṇa* initially only had the meaning of violent descent and only later developed into the idea of a salvific descent (Hacker 1960).³⁷ The argument also applies in reverse: *bhārāvatarāṇa* will not work as a lessening of the earth's burden, if *all* the souls involved were to reincarnate in the next cycle. It can only work if some souls attain emancipation; hence the connection between

Kṛṣṇa's apocalyptic and pedagogic aspects.³⁸ Further, since the *entire Mahābhārata* must be viewed in some sense as Nārāyaṇa's *avatāra* (according to the principle in Mahābhārata 12.327.85: "And when the work of the gods becomes unbearable for you I will manifest Myself, teaching Self-knowledge";³⁹ note that Nārāyaṇa's descent is not historical, but takes place as the manifestation of wisdom in the world), Hudson's thesis that the Mahābhārata's pessimistic conclusion militates against the *avatāra's* salvific significance is false: it is precisely through teaching the lesson of inexorable destruction in time that the *avatāra* enables some individuals to attain emancipation.⁴⁰ The operative contrast, however, is *not* between the virtuous and the wicked, the believers and the non-believers, and the saved and the damned (remnants of Paul's theology that still infiltrate Hudson's account), but between those capable of understanding the text's message and those resistant to it.

Thoughtful reading and theodicy

Indeed, if we look at Hudson's central contention against the Mahābhārata (that is, whether it "provides a rationale for the existence of suffering (i.e., a theodicy)"; 49, and see also 179: "in short, we will be exploring the question of whether or not the epic's aesthetics delivers a theodicy"), it proves to be ill-chosen. The origins of the term *theodicy* lie within a specific problem experienced in Christianity, namely, the Trilemma of reconciling God's omniscience and omnipotence with his omnibenevolence. The term itself was coined by Gottfried Leibniz in his *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*, better known as *Théodicée*, in 1710,⁴¹ and the problem becomes a major preoccupation of Western philosophy thereafter. Rousseau and Hegel struggle with its implications, and Kant rejects the possibility of a "positive" answer to it.⁴² In contrast, the problem of theodicy cannot arise in the Mahābhārata, because of its commitment to a monistic ontology. As (Ramanujan 1994) has shown, theodicy is never a problem within monism. The real problem in monism is how the One became the many—a problem that has as its correlate not theodicy, but a doctrine of procession that functions downwards as a cosmology and upwards as a soteriology.⁴³

Hudson introduces the question of theodicy into the Mahābhārata, using Weber's comment that the doctrine of *karma* provides "the most complete formal solution to the problem of theodicy" (190). However, theodicy is only a problem in a dualistic system, in which creation is a real event. In a monistic system such as that propounded by the Mahābhārata,⁴⁴ where the One does not become,⁴⁵ and creation is replaced by a logic of emanation (*śr̥ṣṭi*, Mahābhārata 1.1.39c) (and where emanation itself is explained in terms of a logic of reflection; compare Mahābhārata 1.1.197c: *pratibimba*), the problem of theodicy cannot arise. Because creation is ultimately unreal, explained as an effect of *ajñāna* or nescience, at most "theodicy" can mean that the individual must rise up from suffering and learn about her identity with the One. This is called *adhyātma* or (knowledge) of the soul in the text (Mahābhārata 1.1.196a) and the text is clear that all that needs to be done to reverse the fall into cosmology is to see the One—as do "the greatest of mystics, yoked and possessed of the vigor of meditation . . . lodged in their own selves, as an image in a mirror" (*yat tad yativarā yuktā dhyānayogabalānvitāḥ | pratibimbam ivādarśe paśyanty ātmany avasthitam ||*, Mahābhārata 1.1.197).

Hudson argues, "neither fate, human endeavor, *karma*, nor Kṛṣṇa provide conclusive answers to the theodicy question [in the Mahābhārata]" (49 and 179). She further

claims that the epic's purpose is not to provide "a 'straightforward' approach" to the "theodicy question" (49), but rather, to "undermin[e] the very formulation of the theodicy question itself" (220). According to her, the epic's answer to the "theodicy question" (49, 179, 190, 215–16) consists in showing "that suffering exists simply and totally and that there are no conceptual categories that one can rely upon to make sense of this suffering" (215). However, the Mahābhārata's silence on the "theodicy question" cannot be interpreted as a rejection of responses to suffering. It is, rather, *a rejection of the question's meaningfulness when formulated in this way*. Indian thought distinguishes between the impassiveness of the highest principle and the activity and agency of the demiurge Brahmā (or, in some systems, between the inert Puruṣa and the active Prakṛti). Even in its theistic variations such as the Mahābhārata, this distinction is maintained. Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavadgītā states that actions do not bind him because he has no desire for their fruits; he who understands him in this way is no longer bound by his own actions (*na mām karmāṇi limpanti na me karmaphale sprhā | iti mām yo 'bhijānāti karmabhir na sa badhyate* ||, Bhagavadgītā 4.14; see also 9.9 and 13.31). Actions are the sphere of *prakṛti* or the *guṇas* (Bhagavadgītā 3.27–29, 13.29, 14.19). Both Prakṛti and Puruṣa are beginningless, but the senses in which they are causes of the universe are different: "Prakṛti is stated to be a cause inasmuch as it is the agency in the production of products, while Puruṣa is stated to be a cause in that he experiences happiness and unhappiness" (*kāryakāraṇakartṛtve hetuḥ prakṛtir ucyate | puruṣaḥ sukha-duḥkhānām bhokṛtve hetur ucyate* ||, Bhagavadgītā 13.20). The Puruṣa's experience of both *sukha* and *duḥkha* is explained as a consequence of his attachment (*saṅga*, Bhagavadgītā 13.21c) to the *guṇas*; in reality, however, he is the transcendent "spectator, consenter, sustainer, and experiencer" (*upadraṣṭānumantā ca bhartā bhoktā*, Bhagavadgītā 13.22a).⁴⁶

The epic furthermore provides a clear statement of its position on the "theodicy question" (Hudson's expression) in the Uttāṅkopākhyāna of the Āśvamedhikaparvan (Mahābhārata 14.52–57). In this brief post-war episode, sage Uttāṅka confronts Kṛṣṇa and accuses him of having failed to prevent the destruction of the Kauravas, even though he was capable of doing so. Uttāṅka threatens to curse him. Kṛṣṇa responds by revealing a monistic ontology: he is the soul of the existent and the non-existent, the manifest and the unmanifest, as well as the indestructible and the destructible (*sad asac caiva yat prāhur avyaktam vyaktam eva ca | akṣaram ca kṣaram caiva sarvam etan madātmakam* ||, Mahābhārata 14.53.5). He is both the principle of Being, the underlying unity of all beings, and, through projecting himself into the creation, enables (individual) beings to be. This descent occurs according to or *as* the principle of *dharma* (which, for this reason, is called his "first-born son" or "*sutam agrajam*"; Mahābhārata 14.53.11a). Indicating the close-knit structure of the descent, the formation or the articulation of *dharma*, and righteousness of the process, he informs Uttāṅka that his births take place for the sake of protecting and establishing *dharma* (*dharmaśamrakṣa-nārthāya dharmasamsthāpanāya ca*, Mahābhārata 14.53.13a). Kṛṣṇa is therefore identical with *dharma*, even though its establishment only occurs through permitting beings to come into being, a coming-into-being that entails a wandering or turning in *adharma* (*adharme vartamānānām*, Mahābhārata 14.53.15a).

Hudson cites this very passage, but overlooks the key point: *in a monistic ontology, the One, though unaffected in itself, undergoes diminishment as it successively proceeds outwards and downwards from itself into a multiplicity*. This logic of emanation does

not mean, as Hudson suggests, that “passages that depict Kṛṣṇa as the all-powerful god-head, such as those found in the *Bhagavadgītā*, are placed in an ambiguous relation with those that suggest that his power is limited, such as the Uttanka episode” (201). The way Kṛṣṇa exhibits his “all-powerful” nature is identical in both episodes: he manifests himself as the *viśvarūpa*, a vision of the unity of all beings as a *manifestation*. Kṛṣṇa does not reveal his power in the *Bhagavadgītā* by taking up arms or directly influencing the battle’s outcome. As befits his status as the *puruṣa* and the *ātman* in all beings, he remains neutral in battle.⁴⁷ Hudson’s error is to confuse the sense of plenitude and power that accrues in a monistic ontology to the One Being with that ascribed in a monotheistic faith to the one God. Furthermore, she does not have a sufficiently sophisticated sense of how emanation differs in its operation from creation. For the text *and* for the tradition, Kṛṣṇa’s ultimate identity with the One Being (*Brahman*) is fully reconcilable with his diminished capacity as a mortal incarnation.⁴⁸ It is only Hudson, who regards not only Kṛṣṇa as *a* being but also any God whatsoever as *a* being, who experiences a contradiction here.⁴⁹

Antinomianism and absurdity

Indeed, the very question of whether *dharma* presents a satisfactory theodicy is false, evincing a confusion between *dharma* and the concept of law. Hudson frames the problem as: either the virtuous should be assured of heaven (and the wicked, in corresponding measure, of damnation) or *dharma* fails as a source of justification. Further, from the crucial episode in the *Mahābhārata*’s final book where Yudhiṣṭhira discovers that Duryodhana attained heaven while his brothers and Draupadī suffer torment in hell, she reasons that the epic, in the person of Yudhiṣṭhira, must mean to repudiate *dharma*.⁵⁰ However, both conclusions are false. First, as we have seen, the *Mahābhārata* does not regard heaven as the “ultimate reward” (219) so the loss of heaven cannot be equated with the failure of *dharma* to render just. Second, and more important, the concept of justification with its Christian resonances is out of place here. *Dharma*, as I have shown, functions more in the manner of a self-purification than a means of justification. While it is ultimately conducive to salvation, it does so through engendering the conditions for self-knowledge rather than itself being the *mokṣopāya*.⁵¹

Hudson, however, links *dharma* with justification, for she writes, we are “force[d] [, in this episode,] . . . to come face to face with the unimaginable possibility that the ‘good’ are doomed to suffer torments in hell and the ‘bad’ are rewarded with glorious lives in heaven” (212). The implication is that the measure of *dharma* is its ability to render us just, as evidenced by our ability to experience a pleasurable existence both here and hereafter. Presenting Yudhiṣṭhira’s censure of *dharma* at *Mahābhārata* 18.2.50⁵² as this episode’s ultimate message,⁵³ Hudson argues for seeing it as the ultimate index of *dharma*’s failure as a source of justification (211), a conclusion she buttresses with the observation, “David Shulman makes much of Yudhiṣṭhira’s curse here, particularly in terms of what it says about *dharma* and suffering. He sees it as a ‘rejection at the end of the day of the whole world of *dharma*.’ . . . Shulman also notes that since Yudhiṣṭhira is the Dharmarāja, this curse must include himself” (211, n. 145).⁵⁴

The problem with this interpretation is that Indian thought explicitly distinguishes the pleasurable (*preyas*) from the good (*śreyas*), where heaven is the ultimate goal of those set upon pleasure. In contrast, the goal of the wise is the Being that transcends

heaven,⁵⁵ and is not subject to reversal.⁵⁶ In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, Naciketas asks Yama, the god of Death, whether there is something after death or not. Initially, Yama refuses to answer his question and urges him to ask for goods, wealth, offspring, and a long life instead. When Naciketas remains steadfast, he commends him, saying, “The preferable is different indeed; and so, indeed, is the pleasurable different. These two, serving divergent purposes, (as they do), bind men. Good befalls him who accepts the preferable among these two. He who selects the pleasurable, falls from the true end” (*Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 1.2.1; Gambhīrānanda’s translation). Likewise, in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, we find that heaven is rejected as the ultimate soteriological goal. The text explicitly opposes heaven to *śreyas*, the ontological good.⁵⁷ After rejecting heaven in verse 1.2.10 (“The deluded fools, believing the rites inculcated by the Vedas and the Smṛtis to be the highest, do not understand the other thing (that leads to) liberation [*śreyah*]. They, having enjoyed (the fruits of actions) in the abode of pleasure on the heights of heaven, enter this world or an inferior one”; Gambhīrānanda’s translation), the text states, in the very next verse (that is, 1.2.11), that “Those who live in the forest, while begging for alms—viz those (forest-dwellers and hermits) who resort to the duties of their respective stages of life as well as to meditation—and the learned (householders) who have their senses under control—(they) after becoming freed from dirt, go by the path of the sun to where lives the Puruṣa, immortal and undecaying by nature.”⁵⁸ This is the very solution the *Mahābhārata* advocates: performance of one’s *varṇāśramadharmā* without attachment.

The interpretation that “if the virtuous go to hell and the sinners to heaven, then these categories, *dharma* in particular, are rendered meaningless” (212) thus only works from the perspective of a worldview that identifies the pleasurable with the ultimately salvific and, furthermore, assesses an individual’s predestination in terms of her ability to experience the pleasurable instantly.⁵⁹ From *any other perspective*, even one that equates pleasure with salvation, but allows for deferral or testing, the conclusion is invalid.⁶⁰ Hudson’s account of *dharma* is thus not only technically flawed; it also reflects a very specific understanding of *dharma*. The roots of this understanding are ultimately Christian and Lutheran. In making the justificatory rather than the ontological or purificatory functions of *dharma* normative for her enquiry, Hudson evinces a Christian understanding of law. Further, because her analysis aims to show that *dharma* fails as a source of justification, we are justified in seeing the proximate inspiration of her criticism as Luther. In his writings,⁶¹ Luther specifically criticized the expectation, characteristic of Judaism, that the law can render just. At the core of his objection is the view that if we are justified by law, then it is impossible to render ourselves just and we are lost.⁶² Hence, while he retained the law in its function of revealing sin,⁶³ he rejected the view that it could have any role in salvation. He expresses this rejection in characteristic terms: “But we will not have this sort of thing [that is, permitting ourselves to be “governed” “according to the letter of the law of Moses”]. We would rather not preach again for the rest of our lives than to let Moses return and to let Christ be torn out of our hearts. We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Indeed God himself will not have it either. . . . [If someone should say,] ‘Thus says Moses, etc.’ . . . you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us,” and then he adds: “Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service” (Luther 2012, 96–97).

Hudson's emphasis on *dharma* as theodicy, the formulation of theodicy itself in terms of the differing fates of the virtuous and the wicked, the emphasis on heaven as the mark of salvation, and the rejection of salvation itself for a this-worldly satisfaction are thus not innocent moves. They attest to the long tradition of antinomianism in secular modernity, which has struggled with the philosophical implications of Luther's theology of *sola fide* and *sola gratia* and, indeed, has preferred to throw away a rational soteriology rather than accept the role of law in salvation or—another consequence—the validity of *dharma*- or *Torah*-based traditions.⁶⁴ The rejection of *dharma* on the grounds that it fails to render just, as measured by our experience in this world, and the suggestion that we should henceforth perform *dharma* only ironically (that is, as though it mattered, but knowing in our hearts that it is powerless to save)⁶⁵ are the clearest indications of this Lutheran antinomian inheritance.⁶⁶ In the wake of this Lutherizing interpretation, the conclusion, "all the suffering in the epic simply took place and that is it" (214) and "what is at stake in many, if not most, discussions of *dharma* in the Mahābhārata . . . is the issue of human despair" (224), not only appears inescapable; it also appears as the text's genuine doctrine,⁶⁷ legitimately read out of it in an act of well-intentioned exegesis.

Secular modernity and the academy

I have focused here on Hudson's work, because, in my view, it offers the most eloquent testimony for what Smith has described as the unacknowledged Protestant character of our entire academic enterprise. Hudson's work is also testimony to our willingness in modernity to privilege absurdity, meaninglessness, and anxiety over well-grounded, philosophical interpretations. Paradoxically, it is then these philosophical interpretations that appear "religious" to us because they contrast with the academy's antinomian, anti-traditional stance. I have argued throughout this article that Hudson's errors are not innocent: too consistent is the pattern of reading the epic against its grain, too consistent the pattern of ignoring or misquoting existing scholarly literature on it.⁶⁸

There is also, in my opinion, a clear indication for Hudson's Christian theological concerns in her repeated citation of James W. Laine. As I have argued, Laine is not a reliable source. He makes no secret of his commitment to a vision of exclusive truth, when, for instance, he writes, "the decision for an inclusivist universalism appears to be no decision at all: in choosing to worship a form of Viṣṇu, one does not deny the existence of Śiva, or vice versa. But to deny nothing, and include all, is to deny the possibility of specificity, concreteness, exclusive truth. This has been Hinduism's choice" (Laine 1989, 276).⁶⁹ Later, he provides an even stronger affirmation of his commitment to Christian exclusivism: "Unlike the docetic Mahāyāna Buddhists and brahmin Vaiṣṇavas, and unlike the gnostics of the West, orthodox Christians affirmed the true humanity of their heroic savior God. However little Paul was interested in the actual life of Jesus, he still emphasized the essential humanity of Christ. . . ." (ibid., 280).

It cannot surprise us then that Hudson, who draws crucially on Laine's work to dismiss the doctrines of *avatāra*, *devarahasya*, *dharmayuddha*, and *pralaya* in the Mahābhārata,⁷⁰ provides an interpretation of the Mahābhārata brimming with Christian theological motifs. Yet had she read Laine more carefully, she might have seen that he makes no secret of his commitment to historical criticism as a form of Christian apologetics: "As an historian of religion, I have sought to reveal the pattern of meaningful history, the history of the shift from an epic style of expression to a mythological, the

shift from an heroic understanding of theophany to one more docetic and universal. This history in part accounts for the formulation of the Hinduism which has perdured to this day. It is a history which contrasts with the formulation of the Western pattern of religion and society. As these histories of India and the West no longer remain in isolation, a profound reflection on the choices our predecessors made may allow us to consider afresh the religious possibilities open to us" (ibid., 283). In fact, the historical method is activated precisely as a means of retrojecting fantastic histories of the text so as to frustrate a coherent philosophical interpretation.

Thus, without evidence for the disparity of the text's contents (or its origin in disparate historical contexts), Laine posits a distinction between "the world of the epic" (heroic, individualistic, historical, and potentially capable of developing into or at least being open to Christianity) and "the world of the Purāṇas" (speculative, docetic, mythic, and only able to accept Christianity in a way that denies its claim to exclusive truth).⁷¹ He writes that, "whatever the frustrating uncertainties of chronology in Indian history, the world of the epic and the world of the Purāṇas are not the same world, and any 'universe of *bhakti*' which would include them both must be so catholic and capacious as to mask the distinctiveness of the Mahābhārata as the unique product of a particular historical situation" (ibid., 247).⁷² Laine also cautions that, while "in the modern West[,] there are those who would recommend the Indian style of universal inclusivism [that is, the "perennial philosophers"]" and while "in a climate of liberalism and relativism, in the historical context of cosmopolitan pluralism, the 'perennial philosopher' proposes an attractively tolerant position," we must remember that "the 'perennial philosopher' . . . like the brahmin author of a Purāṇic mythology, is unable to accept all and deny nothing, to excuse himself from choice. The brahmin and the 'perennial philosopher' have both chosen to deny the possibility of a concrete, exclusive, specifically defined image of deity, and have affirmed instead a transcendent abstraction beyond human understanding or rational critique" (ibid., 281). That the concern uppermost in his mind is to preserve his own religious conviction is clear from his next statement (incidentally, the book's concluding words): "We in the West should think clearly about the meaning of the divergent ventures of Western and Indian religion and civilization, for we live in a society where the choice for a universal inclusivism is a live theological option. In a sense, one must always be both a relativist and an absolutist. One must admit that in matters religious, the justifiable and reasonable choices are indeed several. One may appreciate the tolerance of Hinduism, the social conscience of Islam, the psychological insight of Buddhism. [But] [t]hen one must live, and live in a coherent manner, *proclaiming clearly in action if not articulately in confession, the truth that one is able finally, that is absolutely, to affirm*" (ibid., 283; italics added).⁷³

It appears implausible that Hudson, having read James Laine, could be ignorant of these details. But, in that case, is her Lutheran antinomian interpretation of *dharma* in the Mahābhārata merely an instance of the inevitable misinterpretations that occur when reading the texts of another tradition or is it expressive of a deeper project?

More important, the preceding analysis of Hudson's book reveals systematic problems with the academic study of Hinduism. Hudson's errors were so manifest that no one with the slightest familiarity with either the Mahābhārata or basic concepts in

Hinduism could have been convinced by *Disorienting Dharma's* argument. Even basic precepts of good academic practice such as citing an author correctly were not followed. Red flags ought to have gone up—and would have gone up for anyone familiar with current literature—at Hudson's misrepresentation of scholars such as Sinha, Sutton, Shulman, and Hildebeitel. Many times simply reading the sentence quoted to the end would have sufficed to know that Hudson was using the author to make the opposite point than the one he intended. The interpretation produced was in a significant sense tangential to the text under discussion. Yet Hudson's book passed the review not only of a senior dissertation advisor and three dissertation committee members but also an external expert, the editor of the series *Religion in Translation*, and the Book Awards Jury at the American Academy of Religions. I do not include in this list non-specialist reviewers for the simple reason that academic standards are neither their domain nor their responsibility: hyperbolic praise of the kind Murali Sivaramakrishnan (2013) expresses in his review in *The Hindu* merely reflects popular faith in academic scholarship.⁷⁴ The very systems of review in place to ensure scholarship is textually grounded, cognizant of its historical situation, self-reflexively aware of its interpretive presuppositions, and accurately reflects the traditions it studies thus appear to be failing. If we in the academy wish to continue to claim that we provide objective, well-researched, and not only critical but also *self-critical* accounts of Hinduism, we cannot avoid an urgent conversation about the future of Hindu studies at American universities. Without greater transparency and accountability, we risk betraying those selfsame academic freedoms we justly hold dear.

Endnotes

¹See especially 1139: "Tillich remains the unacknowledged theoretician of our entire enterprise"; *ibid.*: "the study of religion in secular public institutions . . . ground[s] itself in a Protestant Christian theological project"; *ibid.*, 1140: "religious studies in North America . . . ground their enterprise in a Protestant Christian 'apologetic' theological project" (Smith 2010).

²Sullivan correctly sees that "instances of self-willed death function as a literary device in the MBh, the purpose of which is to emphasize the futility of worldly aims and to bring the audience to a realization of the transcendent value of renunciation" (Sullivan 2006, 61).

³*ūrdhvaḥhur viraumy eṣa na ca kaś cic chṛnoti me | dharmād arthaś ca kāmaś ca sa kimarthaṃ na sevyate || na jātu kāmān na bhayān na lobhād; dharmam tyajej jīvita-syāpi hetoḥ | nityo dharmah sukhaduḥkhe tv anitye; jīvo nityo hetur asya tv anityah ||*

⁴See Mahābhārata 1.57.87: Nārāyaṇa is said to have been born amidst the Andhaka-Vṛṣṇis "in order to further the growth of the Law [*dharmasaṃvardhanārthāya prajajñe*]" (my emphasis).

⁵For a discussion of the way this key concept transmutes the violence of the *raṇa* narrative into the sacrificial violence of the *yajña* narrative and, finally, into the non-violent narrative of the Mahābhārata, see Adluri (2012).

⁶A Kṣatriya's *svadharmā* is to fight. While this might get him killed in battle, it will still enable a purification of the soul. Only on this presupposition can the epic assert:

“It is more salutary to carry out your own Law poorly than another’s Law well: it is better to die in your own Law than to prosper in another’s” (Bhagavadgītā 3.35; all translations of the Bhagavadgītā are Van Buitenen’s).

⁷Indian tradition is explicitly aware of this. In the Bhāgavatam, which situates its dialogue in the immediate aftermath of the Kurukṣetra battle, Kuntī praises Kṛṣṇa (who has just saved the unborn Parikṣit from Aśvatthāma’s Brahmā weapon) thus: “May calamities befall us at every step through eternity, O Teacher of the world; for it is in adversity alone that we are blessed with Your sight, which eliminates the possibility of our seeing another birth. A man whose birth, power, learning and affluence only serve to swell his pride is unable even to utter Your name, You being open to the perception of only those who have nothing to call their own. You are the only wealth of those who have no sense of possession. Beyond the realm of the three Guṇas or modes of Prakṛti [*nivṛttagunavṛttaye*], You delight in Your own Self and are perfectly calm; You are the Lord of Mokṣa (final beatitude) [*kaivalyapataye*]” (Śrīmad Bhāgavatam 1.8.24–27 [Goswami and Sastri’s translation]; also see Bhāgavatam 9.21.12: King Rantideva *willingly* takes on other people’s suffering that they may be emancipated). Thus, instead of associating her personal trials with lack of grace, Kuntī interprets them as *salvifically valuable*. Misfortune represents a spiritual goad essential to generating *vairāgya* or detachment in the aspirant seeking God and not a prompt to question either the goodness of divinity or the rule-governed order of the world, as Hudson does. Indian thought, at least in its *āstika* and also some of its *nāstika* variations, does not yield its commitment to *dharma*: engaged in a kind of “saving the phenomena,” when confronted with the spectacle of good people suffering calamities it will rather uphold *dharma* than question the justice and perfection of the world.

⁸Van Buitenen, in his translation of the Mahābhārata, opts for “Law,” but notes that other meanings such as order, justice, morality, righteousness, virtue, custom, and ritual are also possible (Van Buitenen 1973, xli). Fitzgerald offers the suggestions good deeds, merit, meritorious deeds, duty, and in specific contexts: rule, norm, custom, obligation, responsibility, a law, the laws, the law, law, lawful deeds, meritorious lawful deeds, the good law, right [as noun and as adjective], justice, just, virtue, good character, and virtuous (Fitzgerald 2004, 641–42). In contrast, Biarreau rejects translating the word at all: “It [*dharma*] is neither morality, nor God, nor law, nor justice. It is the socio-cosmic order, which can be said to be desirable simply inasmuch as it is necessary to the maintenance of the happy existence of the whole constituted by the ‘three worlds’—*trailokya* (earth, heaven and the space between, or later, earth, heaven and the infernal regions)” (Biarreau 1989, 41).

⁹See Hudson 2013, 3 for the claim that “the ‘subtle’ nature of *dharma* is the central theme, if not the central problem, of the epic”; *ibid.*, 4 for the claim that “The narrative describes the path of *dharma* as ‘scarcely discernable (*sūkṣma*) and depicts this path as being so subtle that it resists straightforward interpretation. Characters who struggle to determine the virtuous path often lose their way, and frequently *dharma* is transgressed with disastrous, apocalyptic consequences”; and see also 37, n. 94; 38, 75, 101, 218, 221.

¹⁰For the entrance into *pravṛtti* as a fall see the story of Cyavana, a *brāhmaṇa* who is so called because he fell (*cyu*) into existence from his mother’s womb. For the story and for the contrast with Acyuta, “the unfallen one,” as the unfallen *brahman*, see Adluri and Bagchee (2012).

¹¹Thus, for example, at Hudson 2013, 4 (“The narrative describes the path of *dharma* as ‘scarcely discernable (*sūkṣma*) and depicts this path as being so subtle that it resists straightforward interpretation. Characters who struggle to determine the virtuous path often lose their way, and frequently *dharma* is transgressed with disastrous, apocalyptic consequences”), 38 (“The *Mahābhārata* was composed during this turbulent period, a fact that helps explain why the depiction of *dharma* in the epic is ‘varied and elusive’ and why its definition is often under contestation both ‘explicitly and implicitly”), 74–75 (“What is particularly disturbing about the fact that the elders act as ‘passive witnesses’ to Draupadi’s abuse is that they claim they are paralyzed by the ‘subtle’ (*sūkṣma*) nature of *dharma*, a claim that implicates *dharma* in this instance of violence and sorrow), and 221 (“As characters struggle to determine the path of *dharma*, they are frequently ‘disoriented’ by *dharma*’s ‘subtle’ nature and they become confused and often lose their way”).

¹²Hudson recommends this book for its “excellent discussion of the development of the term *dharma*” (38, n. 96; the reference is to the exact section from which the passage is taken). But she seems not to have made use of Bowles’s insightful exposition.

¹³Śaṅkara, *Commentary on Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.3.10–11 (Gambhīrānanda’s translation).

¹⁴Śaṅkara’s commentary confirms this interpretation. Against those who assert it is contrary to state both “He does not appear” and “He is seen” (Kaṭha Upaniṣad 1.3.12), Śaṅkara observes, “This is not so. Since He is not known to a man whose intellect is not purified, it is said, ‘He does not appear’. *Tu* (but); *drśyate*, (He) is seen; through the purified (intellect) . . . through that (intellect) which is associated with concentration, *sūkṣmayā*, through the subtle (intellect) that is engaged in ascertaining subtle things. By whom? *Sūkṣmadarśibhiḥ*, by the seers of subtle things. The seers are those who have become skilled in penetrating into the subtlest thing through their perception of an ascending order of subtleness by following the process as indicated in the text, ‘The sense-objects are higher than the senses’, etc. (I.iii.10) By them, i.e. by the wise people.” Śaṅkara, *Commentary on Kaṭha Upaniṣad*, 1.3.12. The subtlety implied is thus a technical notion of subtle as higher, more inward, and more pervasive. Compare Śaṅkara’s *Commentary on Bhagavadgītā*, 3.42: “The learned ones *ahuh*, say; that *indriyāni*, the five organs—ear etc., are *parāni*, superior, to the external, gross and limited body, from the point of view of subtlety, inner position, pervasiveness, etc.” Note also that when Śaṅkara says something is subtle he does not mean it is unknowable per se: he only means it is not knowable through the senses. The proper means of knowledge in these situations is *śabda* (verbal testimony), especially as contained in the *śruti*, the revealed texts. Compare Śaṅkara’s *Commentary on Bhagavadgītā*, 13.15: “Therefore, although It is the Knowable, *tat*, It; is *avijñeyam*, incomprehensible to the ignorant people; *sūkṣmatvāt*, due to Its intrinsic subtleness. But to the enlightened It is ever known from the valid means of knowledge such as (the texts), ‘All this is verily the Self’ (Ch. 7.25.2), ‘Brahman alone is all this’ (Nr. Ut.7), etc.” The ultimate reason the *ātman* cannot be seen is, as Śaṅkara explains in his commentary on verse 13.22, is that it is “the inmost as also the proximate observer, compared with which there is no other higher and inner observer.” Hudson’s suggestion, “the narrative describes the path of *dharma* as ‘scarcely discernable’ (*sūkṣma*) and depicts this path as being so subtle that it resists straightforward interpretation” (4), thus entails a serious misunderstanding. The epic does not “call into question the idea that *dharma* is codifiable” (38); it underscores the need to refer to the normative

scriptural texts, the *śāstras*, to learn about *dharma*. The idea that we can know *dharma* independently of its scriptural formulation is a modern notion, whose source must be sought in the Kantian notion of a “pure,” that is, a priori ethics that the subject qua autonomous in the literal sense of self-legislating sets up for itself as a system of moral maxims.

¹⁵Incidentally, the *sūksmata* of *dharma* is not an excuse for *adharma*. Bhīṣma and Droṇa try to hide behind the principle and commit *adharma*, but they pay with their lives for this error in the war. We do not have to read this far to know this: In the dicing scene, Vikarṇa narrates that the *asura* Prahlāda once approached sage Kaśyapa with a doubt concerning *dharma* and the sage issued the following warning: “He who knows the answer but either from love, anger, or fear fails to resolve the question lets loose on himself a thousand of Varuṇa’s nooses; and for each noose to be loosened takes a year. Therefore say the truth straightaway, if you know the truth! Where a Law comes to the hall pierced by Unlaw and they do not pull out the thorn, there it will pierce the men in the hall. . . . But they who explain the Law falsely, Prahlāda, to the one who brings the question, kill their own offerings and oblations for seven generations upward and downward” (Mahābhārata 2.61.67–68, 72).

¹⁶As an eloquent rejection of the *nāstikya* (nihilist) view, the passage is cited in full here: “The words you have spoken and we have heard, Yājñaseni, are beautiful, well-phrased and polished; but what you are saying is heresy [*nāstikyam*]. I do not act in quest of the fruits of the Law; I give because I must! I sacrifice because I must! Whether it bears fruit or not, I do, buxom Draupadī, according to my ability, what a person who has a household is beholden to do. I obey the Law, full-hipped woman, not because of its rewards, but in order not to transgress the traditions and to look to the conduct of the strict. By its nature my mind is beholden to the Law. He who wants to milk the Law does not obtain its reward, nor does the evil-minded man who after performing it has doubts out of a lack of faith. Don’t doubt the Law, out of argumentativeness or mere folly, for the man who doubts the Law ends up an animal. The weak soul to whom the Law or the way of the seers is doubtful is as destitute of the undying and unaging world as a serf is of the Veda. If one studies the Veda, is dedicated to the Law, and is born high, glorious Kṛṣṇa, then kings who live by the Law must reckon him among the old. Worse than serfs, worse than thieves is the nitwit who transgresses the scriptures and casts doubt on the law” (Mahābhārata 3.32.1–9).

¹⁷Even though Dhṛtarāṣṭra has heard that Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa are Nara and Nārāyaṇa (Mahābhārata 1.1.117, 5.48.1–22) and that, when threatened by Duryodhana and Karṇa in the Kuru assembly hall, Kṛṣṇa displayed his divine majesty (Mahābhārata 1.1.1191; the incident takes place at 5.129.1–11) he is unable to transcend the cycles of grief of *pravṛtti*. He has not understood, as the bard says a few lines later, that *sa* [he, Kṛṣṇa] *hi satyam ṛtam caiva pavitraṃ puṇyam eva ca* (Mahābhārata 1.1.193c).

¹⁸For Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s lament as a Bhavagītā or “lament of Becoming” that anticipates and echoes the Bhagavadgītā (a “Song of Being”), see Adluri 2011, 160–61.

¹⁹There is a point at which Hinduism recognizes a release from *dharma*, but it does so only at the point Reiner Schürmann describes when he writes: “the singular point of departure from which the law arises, a singularization, will fracture from within the universal endowed with the force of obligation” (Schürmann 2003, 343). That is to say, the release is always individual, never communal, and takes place within history only to the extent that the individual is embedded in it. There cannot

be a conception of salvation more opposed to the generalized absolution from the law that Paul professes and Luther further radicalizes.

²⁰Note also that Hudson's view that the "conclusion of the *Mahābhārata* [is] that all the suffering in the epic simply took place and that is it" (214) perfectly replicates Dhṛtarāṣṭra's view of life at the beginning of the *Mahābhārata*, when he cries out, "woe!" (*kaṣṭam*, *Mahābhārata* 1.1.158a). The *Mahābhārata*, however, sees this cry merely as the starting point of its inquiry and not as its conclusion. It devotes eighteen books to refuting Dhṛtarāṣṭra's view and it regards it as arising from a cognitive error (such as seeing the universe from the perspective of one's finite ego rather than as Kṛṣṇa's play). Hudson's attempt to import suffering into the *Mahābhārata* and claim it as a religious insight finds no support from the Indian tradition: even Buddhism, which maintains explicitly—and not just through an implicit "aesthetics"—that suffering is universal regards this axiom as the starting point and not as the conclusion of its intellectual enterprise.

²¹The *Mahābhārata* is narrated to sage Śaunaka, son of Śunaka, meaning "a young or small dog."

²²This passage is another example of Hudson's tendency to cite authors out of context (see nn. 34, 54, 67, and 68 for more examples). Sinha makes the comment in the context of a wider point about the sentiment of quietude and he regards Dhṛtarāṣṭra's grief only from the perspective of its categorization and analysis in Sanskrit aesthetics. The comment, furthermore, refers to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's lamentation in the *Strīparvan* rather than the *Ādīparvan*; by citing him out of context, Hudson generates the impression of greater scholarly support for her thesis than exists (Sinha 1977, 77–78).

²³This is not the only time he is censured in the epic. In the *Āraṇyakaparvan*, when sage Maitreya comes to lecture the Kauravas, Duryodhana draws arabesques with his foot, Maitreya curses him, and Dhṛtarāṣṭra asks him to forgive his son. When Maitreya says that if Duryodhana seeks peace the curse will not fulfill itself, but if he does not it will, Dhṛtarāṣṭra leads away from his original topic of *dharma* and asks instead to hear about how Bhīma killed the demon Kirmīra. Maitreya snaps: "I will not tell. You grumble [*asūyā te*], and your son is disobedient" (*Mahābhārata* 3.11.38). The absence of resentment of any kind is also a *sine qua non* for hearing Kṛṣṇa's message; see *Bhagavadgītā* 3.31–32.

²⁴Michel Tournier, in his short story "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," provides the archetype of all such characters (and, simultaneously, also an explanation for why we find them laughable): "The chansonnier he had to accompany was called Gabbler. Enormous, flabby and flaccid, he trundled from one extremity of the stage to the other, relating in a whining voice all the sorrows and misfortunes that life never stopped heaping on him. The whole secret of his burlesque lay in this very simple observation: if you are the victim of a misadventure, you interest people; of two misadventures, you inspire them to pity; of a hundred misadventures, you make them laugh. Hence, you only have to exaggerate the pathetic and calamitous side of a character to get the audience roaring with laughter at him" (Tournier 1984, 63).

²⁵Thus, she dismisses it in the first chapter directly on the *Mahābhārata* with the comment "while the discussion centers on Dhṛtarāṣṭra's moral blindness here, remember that the king is also physically blind" (85, n. 45) and buttresses this observation with a reference to the work of Angelika Malinar (2005, 97–114). An entire chapter

titled “The Eyesight of Insight: Dhṛtarāṣṭra and Moral Blindness” cannot compensate for this mistake.

²⁶Apte 2003 notes that the term *prajñācakṣuḥ* first occurs in Sanskrit literature as an epithet for Dhṛtarāṣṭra (where it means “having understanding as the only eyes”: *tato jñāsyasi māṃ saute prajñācakṣusam ity uta* ||, Mahābhārata 1.1.101e). Apte, s.v. “*prajñācakṣus*.” Through *rūḍhi* (that is, the conventional acceptance or usage of a word), it comes to mean “a blind person.” It is anachronistic to apply this meaning to the Mahābhārata, since it acquires this meaning from its application to Dhṛtarāṣṭra.

²⁷Hari is the soteriological form of Viṣṇu in the text; references to Hari are particularly clustered in the Mahābhārata’s *mokṣa* tracts (see Mahābhārata 12.47.65d, 12.202.3b, 12.209.5b, 12.321.9d, 12.323.32f, 12.324.29b, 12.330.63d, 12.331.13f, 12.331.52b, 12.335.53d, 12.335.67d, 12.335.69b, 12.336b, 12.336.42d, 12.336.67d, 12.336.71d, 12.337.26b, 12.337.66b).

²⁸Hudson acknowledges that Dhṛtarāṣṭra’s responses are not meant to serve “as a model for ours” (140). According to her, we are “not encouraged to identify and emulate him, but to stand back and critically reflect on his moral—and very human—failings” (141). Yet she still arrives at similarly nihilistic conclusions as Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Her criticism of Dhṛtarāṣṭra is restricted to his “refusal to come to terms with the real sources of his sorrow” (140), namely, “that all the suffering in the epic simply took place and that is it” (214). This conclusion is not very different from his.

²⁹The passage is removed to the appendix in the critical edition; it is number 81.

³⁰Hudson cites the vulgate on pages 87, 88, 102, 221, and 222 in support of her thesis, so why not consult it here where it really matters? One must read a text in its entirety before making assertions about it.

³¹For a history of the errors committed in Mahābhārata scholarship to avoid acknowledging the tradition’s normative authority, see (Adluri and Bagchee 2014).

³²Hudson’s translation. Van Buitenen’s translation reads: “Thus being in a state of constant suffering, yet unsuffering and called happy, he keeps transmigrating, because the bonds have not been cut and his deeds once more prevail—keeps transmigrating around a wheel of lives, living in much pain.”

³³In texts of the vedic period, especially those dealing with sacrifice, attainment of heaven is often a goal. But this view is already superseded in the Upaniṣads (for example, in the Kaṭha Upaniṣad, where the sacrifice leading to heaven is discussed, but is only the second of Naciketas’s three boons) and certainly rejected in the Mahābhārata.

³⁴Hudson misquotes Sutton; what he actually says is: “*in didactic terms* the notion of *avatāra* remains a peripheral concept” (Sutton 2000, 167; italics added). Sutton acknowledges that the epic “espouse[s] a doctrine of *avatāra*”; he also notes that “the concept [of *avatāra*] is central to the narrative which describes how Viṣṇu descended to earth to bring victory to the Pāṇḍavas and annihilate the asuric kings” (Sutton 2000, 167 and 156; these are the very pages Hudson cites). Sutton’s focus is on the *avatāra* lists, and here the account the Mahābhārata presents is, indeed, less well developed than those in the later Purāṇas.

³⁵Total, that is, in the sense of involving all the participants in the drama and not in the sense of a final, apocalyptic event, which would be contrary to the notion of cyclical time in Indian thought.

³⁶Biardeau is aware of this when she writes, “it is not true to claim that the *avatāra* comes to destroy the ‘wicked’ and save the ‘good’. . . . Not only is a manichean vision of

Viṣṇu's incarnation untenable, but his ambiguous behavior is consistent with his identity as Nārāyaṇa. As the divinity presiding over the cosmic night he holds in himself all creatures, consequently both the 'good' and the 'wicked,' the *devas* and the *asuras*, dharmic and adharmic men. . . . *Dharma* is born from their reciprocal destruction. In everyone present he recognizes his own and promises them salvation, which is not of the same order as *dharma's* restoration on the earth and the triple world" (Biardeau 1991, 102). Hudson could have learned much from this profound and generous scholar.

³⁷Hudson does not cite this work, so her ideas of the distinction between *bhārāvataṛaṇa* and *avatāra* (see 200, n. 94: "the manifestation of the *avatāra* when it is required to assist the purposes of the god (i.e., to relieve the burden of Earth) and/or to preserve *dharma* (it is important to note that *these two ideas are not necessarily linked*)" [italics added]) are probably mediated via Laine's work, who cites Hacker's *Prahlāda* (Hacker 1959).

³⁸I cannot agree with Sutton when he, citing unnamed "Christian commentators," writes, "an essential distinction between the *avatāra* and incarnation . . . is the non-salvific nature of the *avatāra*. The *dharma* that is sustained by the *avatāra* falls under the purview of *pravṛtti* and *sva-dharma*, rather than *nivṛtti* or *mokṣa-dharma*, and it is hence completely consistent that the principle role of the divine manifestation is not soteriological" (Sutton 2000, 173). Sutton acknowledges that "this, however, does not mean that the Deity's manifestation on earth has no understanding of or no imperative towards salvation," and, as an example, cites "Kṛṣṇa's instructions to Arjuna in the *Gītā* [, which] focus overwhelmingly on the subjects of salvation and the love of God for the individual." But he misunderstands the Mahābhārata's concept of salvation when he continues, "in terms of soteriology, however, the *avatāra* is not an essential element; salvation may be gained through yogic self-transformation or by the grace of the Deity but in neither process is the *avatāra* an essential conduit" (Sutton 2000, 174). Actually, *avatāra* is essential for salvation, provided we understand it as the manifestation of wisdom rather than the incarnation of a historical person: it is significant that the chapter containing the Bhagavadgītā's classic articulation of *avatāra* (*yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānir bhavati bhārata | abhyutthānam adharmasya tadātmānam sṛjāmy aham ||*) is also the chapter that begins: "I propounded this imperishable Yoga to Vivasvat. Vivasvat transmitted it to Manu; Manu told it to Ikṣvāku. Thus came down the tradition of Yoga which the royal seers knew."

³⁹This also explains why Indian tradition identifies Nārāyaṇa and Vyāsa (see Mahābhārata 12.334.9: "Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa—know him to be Lord Nārāyaṇa. Who else, indeed, O tiger among men, could create the Mahābhārata?"; *kṛṣṇadvaipāyanaṃ vyāsaṃ viddhi nārāyaṇaṃ prabhum | ko hy anyaḥ puruṣavyāghra mahābhāratakr̥d bhavet*; my translation). It is not a matter of dogmatically declaring one individual to be the Lord, but a reflection of the underlying monism of Indian thought that teachers of soteriological knowledge are considered manifestations of divinity (for example, sage Kapila, identified with Vāsudeva at Mahābhārata 3.45.25, 3.106.2, and 12.330.30). Similar identifications exist for Patañjali (Śeṣa) and Śaṅkarācārya (Śiva).

⁴⁰Bhagavadgītā 11.32: "I am Time grown old to destroy the world, / Embarked on the course of world annihilation: / Except for yourself none of these will survive, / Of these warriors arrayed in opposite armies" (*kālo 'smi lokakṣayakṛt pravṛddho; lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ | rte 'pi tvā na bhaviṣyanti sarve; ye 'vasthitāḥ pratyānikēṣu yodhāḥ ||*).

⁴¹Its earliest formulation, however, is typically traced back to Epicurus (via an attribution in Lactantius's *De ira Dei* of 313–14), where the problem, if it existed, was specifically triggered by his mechanistic cosmology, according to which the world is composed of eternal and indestructible atoms. The problem resurfaces in Augustine, where it emerges from his combination of Stoicism with Platonic philosophy: Stoicism conceives of the deity as *logos*, an active principle immanent in the world, and is therefore radically deterministic. Augustine's solution is to revert to a neo-Platonic hierarchy of descent and reversion: evil, in this system, is explained not as an other to the Good, but as merely its privation. This theory of evil as a privation of God's goodness allows Augustine to refute Manichaeism and other Gnostic dualisms and becomes the church's consensus view until the renewed reception of Stoic thought in early modernity challenges it. On this reception and its consequences for the modern West see Schmitt (2012).

⁴²For a discussion of Kant's approach to the problem, see Welz (2008), especially §5.2 "Kant On the Failure of All Philosophical Attempts at Theodicy."

⁴³This is an essential feature of both Indian and neo-Platonic ontology; for a discussion, see Adluri (2014).

⁴⁴The demonstration of the unity of Being is ultimately based on the principle of non-contradiction, and is a well-known aspect of the Mahābhārata's ontology (see Bhagavadgītā 2.16: *nāsato vidyate bhāvo*). References to Nārāyaṇa as the principle of unity are frequent in the Nārāyaṇīya: he is the *ekam puruṣam* (Mahābhārata 12.326.31c) and the One (*ekah*, Mahābhārata 12.328.35c and 12.339.9c). See also Mahābhārata 1.1.20c: Kṛṣṇa Vāsudeva is the *ekākṣaram brahma* (the One-Syllabled Brahman).

⁴⁵Brahmā is at most the creator and is never called *īśvara*. Furthermore, he is identified with the principle of egoity (*ahaṃkāra*; see Mahābhārata 12.326.58c, 12.327.26e, 12.335.18c). Nārāyaṇa himself never participates in creation; at most enabling it through the *vyūhas*, which end with the Aniruddha manifestation, also identified with *ahaṃkāra* (see Mahābhārata 12.326.39: "And from Saṅkarṣaṇa [arises] Pradyumna. He is called *mind-born*. That Aniruddha who [arises] from Pradyumna is Ahaṃkāra, the supreme controller [Maheśvara]"). Thus, the entire problem is moved from the level of "how can God permit suffering?" to "why does the illusion of individuality arise?" The correct answer will be not salvation through faith, but philosophy.

⁴⁶Interestingly, within such a conception, the solution to the problem of suffering cannot be to condemn either *dharma* or fate. Kṛṣṇa describes this attitude as *anārya-juṣṭam asvargyam* (Bhagavadgītā 2.2), that is, ignoble and not leading to heaven. Rather, the solution is to dehisce from the world and realize one's identity with the Self. This knowledge, called *guhyaṃ adhyātmam* in the Gītā (Bhagavadgītā 11.1), is known as *anugraha* or grace, rather than a simple promise of salvation. When Hudson describes suffering as a "universal truth," we must ask: From whose perspective? From the perspective of the Self? From the perspective of the world? Or from the perspective of a subject enmeshed in the world?

⁴⁷See Mahābhārata 5.7.10–20. The passage and the theme of Kṛṣṇa's "impartiality" are discussed in Hildebeitel (1984); the work is missing from Hudson's bibliography, as are all of Hildebeitel's other articles dealing with the Mahābhārata's theology.

⁴⁸Madhva's dualistic (*dvaita*) Vedānta differs slightly. Madhva uses the concept of a graduated ontological hierarchy (*tāratamya*) to explain the suffering of some souls. In

contrast to Christian theology, where free will is the cause of evil, he invokes the concept of the souls' *svarūpabheda* (difference of inherent natures) to explain why some souls experience suffering more than others. Individuals with lower selves are inherently bad: their suffering is a consequence of their nature. Since God creates neither good nor evil selves, their suffering cannot be attributed to him. Higher selves experience a greater degree of freedom (and therefore the capacity to receive God's grace) than lower selves. B. N. K. Sharma regards this theory as an "original and suggestive interpretation of the *Brahmasūtra* (2.3.51) in question by the Madhva school. It goes beyond the commonly accepted theory of Karma for an ultimate solution of the problem of distinction and inequality among souls. And the solution given is much more definite and precise than the vague one of 'original sin,' which would not be adequate as an explanation of inequality of nature" (Sharma 1962, 202). See also *ibid.*, 188–217 (with discussion in Buchta 2014). Thus, even though dualistic strains of Indian thought exist, we should be careful about conflating them with Christianity: "Madhva is no theological dualist. There is no place in his new creation theory of Sadasatkāryavāda and 'eternal creation' thro[ugh] 'Parādhīnaviśeṣāpti' for the 'Oriental Augustinian mono-archotheistic' idea of creation at a certain date by sheer fiat of God out of fathomless *nothing*" (Sharma 1962, 40, italics in original).

⁴⁹Uttānka represents the paradigm of the person who, confusing emanation with creation, loses access to not only liberation but also heaven: in a later episode, Kṛṣṇa offers him *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality, through Indra disguised as a Caṇḍāla. Uttānka, confused by appearances, refuses to drink the Caṇḍāla's urine and loses immortality. His consolation? To live in a parched desert, with occasional showers of grace. Two thousand years before Hudson's book, then, it seems that the Mahābhārata was already aware of and rejected a certain kind of subjective self-positing. For further reading on Uttānka, see Adluri (2013).

⁵⁰Her reasoning, expressed via a *monologue intérieure*, is as follows: "Yudhiṣṭhira is indicating that for him *dharma*—or, more precisely, his specific understanding of *dharma*—is meaningless. Indeed, Yudhiṣṭhira's logic for condemning *dharma* is as follows: 'Since my brothers and wife were virtuous and committed no evil, they, according to my understanding of *dharma*, deserve to win heaven, not hell. Since they did not achieve heaven, but were placed in hell, I will condemn *dharma*'" (218–19).

⁵¹Note also that the specific way God "saves" in Indian thought is through self-knowledge rather than self-sacrifice, as Nārāyaṇa's discourse to Brahmā in the Nārāyaṇīya shows (Mahābhārata 12.327.85: "And when the work of the gods becomes unbearable for you I will manifest Myself, teaching Self-knowledge."). Kṛṣṇa saves Arjuna who is receptive to his teaching (see Bhagavadgītā 18.73), but cannot save the Kauravas who are not. Grace manifests as the striving for knowledge, undoing Luther's distinction of *theologia crucis* from *theologia gloriae*.

⁵²*dharma krodham āhārayac caiva tīvraṃ dharmasuto nrpaḥ |*

⁵³Hudson misrepresents the text here. The term used is *garhya* ("deserving censure, censurable, blamable"; Apte, s.v. "*garhya*") (correctly glossed as "reproach" in the text but wrongly as "curse" in the attached footnote) and not *śāpa*. Further, Yudhiṣṭhira's reproach is explicitly tied to his anger and mental agitation, identified throughout the epic with an inability to perceive things aright (Bhagavadgītā 2.62–63, 3.37–39). Thus in an epilogue, Indra informs Yudhiṣṭhira that heaven and hell reciprocally replace each

other (that is, that the person who enjoys heaven now must endure hell later and vice versa), thus underscoring the temporal limitation of *pravṛtti*. The episode is consonant with the epic's central message rather than indicating "a rupture, or gap in meaning" (212) in the text, as Hudson argues.

⁵⁴Actually, by "rejection," Shulman does not mean a negation of *dharma*. His point rather is that the episode marks a transcendence of *dharma*. Yudhiṣṭhira's condemnation inaugurates "a process of reabsorption—that is, the transition from human to divine." Further, he notes, "given the axiology of this text, the epistemic change immediately entails an existential one. *To reject the world of dharma would thus not necessarily negate dharma itself*. . . . The hero's last linguistic act—he speaks no more after addressing the messenger in this vein—conjoins *dharma* and its negation, transforming human into divine. . . . Dharmarāja becomes *dharma*, at last. . . ." (Shulman 1996, 163–64). This is consistent with what we discovered earlier (see n. 22) about Hudson's practice of quoting sources out of context—that is, stopping short of their actual point.

⁵⁵See Yudhiṣṭhira's inceptive question in the Nārāyaṇīya: "What God ought one sacrifice to if one wishes to obtain perfection, whether he is a householder or a student or a hermit or a mendicant? How indeed can he obtain infallible heaven and [beyond it,] the ultimate good? By following what ritual practice to the gods and to the ancestors ought he to sacrifice? When liberated, to which state does one go? Of what nature is liberation? Having attained to heaven, what must one do so as not to fall from the celestial realm? Which god is the god of gods and likewise the ancestor of ancestors? And what transcends even that [heaven], tell me all that, grandfather!" (Mahābhārata 12.321.1–4; my translation).

⁵⁶See Bhagavadgītā 15.4: *tataḥ padaṃ tatparimārgitavyaṃ; yasmin gatā na nivar-tanti bhūyaḥ* |. Freedom from reversal is also the theme of the Bali–Vāsava-Saṃvāda (Mahābhārata 12.217): Indra, lord of heaven, having defeated the *asura* Bali, asks him why he does not grieve. Bali instructs Indra about *brahman* (Mahābhārata 12.217.46–53) and then tells him many thousands of Indras have passed away before him and he, too, will one day be destroyed by Time (*bahūnīndrasahasrāṇi samatītāni vāsava | bala-vīryopapannāni yathaiva tvaṃ śacīpate* ||, Mahābhārata 12.217.54).

⁵⁷This separation is not dogmatic. It is arrived at through a rigorous reflection, as can be seen from Śāṅkara's *Commentary on Brahma Sūtra*, 1.1.1. Evaluating the difference in goal between those who engage in sacrifices and those who pursue (self-)knowledge, he notes: "Moreover, the deliberations on virtuous deeds and Brahman differ as regards results and objects of inquiry. Virtuous deeds have secular prosperity as their results; and these depend on the performance (of some rites etc.). But the knowledge of Brahman has emancipation as its result, and it does not depend on any other performance. Besides, a virtuous deed that has to be inquired into is still to be accomplished, and it is not present at the time of its acquaintance (from scripture etc.), for it has to depend on human effort for its emergence. On the other hand, the Brahman to be inquired into here is a pre-existing entity; and It is not dependent on human effort, since It is eternally present." From Indian philosophy's perspective, since heaven does not exist in the present, it cannot be an eternal condition, according to the principle that only what is beginningless is eternal.

⁵⁸"Going by the path of the sun" or "entering the sun" is a common metaphor for liberation. In the Upaniṣads, the metaphor occurs at Īśa Upaniṣad 15–16 ("The face of

Truth (Brahman in the solar orb) is concealed by a golden vessel. Do thou, O Sun, open it so as to be seen by me who am by nature truthful (or, am the performer of rightful duties) [the word is *satyadharmāya*]. O thou who art the nourisher, the solitary traveler, the controller, the acquirer, the son of Prajāpati, do remove thy rays, do gather up thy dazzle, I shall behold by thy grace that form of thine which is most benign. I am that very person that is yonder (in the Sun)"; Gambhīrānanda's translation). In the Mahābhārata, in the Uñchavṛttiyupākhyāna (12.340–53), the concluding portion of the Śāntiparvan, we hear that the snake king Padmanābhā returned home to the Naimiṣa Forest after a week of drawing the Sun's chariot. The Brahman Dharmāraṇya, whose name literally means "Forest of *Dharma*," asks the snake king about his "highest *dharma*," but before that he wishes to hear the "highest wonder" (Mahābhārata 12.350.7) the king saw on his journey. The king recounts how, as he was drawing the chariot, he saw a blazing Brāhmaṇa shoot up into the sky and enter the sun's disc, attaining liberation. This Brāhmaṇa, the king says, has gone to heaven avowed to the way of gleaning (*uñchavṛttivrate siddho munir eṣa divaṁ gataḥ*, Mahābhārata 12.253.1cd). With this Dharmāraṇya's question about the highest *dharma* is also answered. The Brahman says he will take up the way of gleaning as the highest *dharma* (*āsīt tu me bhogapate saṁśayaḥ puṇyasamcaye | so 'ham uñchavratam sādho cariṣyāmy arthadarśanam || eṣa me niścayaḥ sādho kṛtaḥ kāraṇavattaraḥ/āmantrayāmi bhadraṁ te kṛtārtho 'smi bhujamgama ||*, Mahābhārata 12.352.9–10).

⁵⁹In other words, this interpretation only holds from the perspective of a Calvinist doctrine of predestination and its theological descendant, secular modernity. Even Christianity would not accept this interpretation, because it undoes the notion of trial central to the concept of earthly witnessing in anticipation of a beatific afterlife.

⁶⁰In the ancient world, we would be hard-pressed to find a tradition that so resolutely identifies the pleasurable with the good. In Plato's *Republic* (Bk. X), the souls returning from heaven make a bad choice at the lot of lives, whereas those coming from under the earth, having suffered many trials, make judicious choices. Plato explicitly critiques virtue resulting from a conventional life only: these individuals have not had the lessons misfortune teaches inscribed on their souls. See also Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 176–78 ("Zeus put mortals on the road to wisdom when he laid down this law: *By suffering we learn [pathei mathos]*"; Carson's translation) for the source of the proverbial expression *pathei mathos* (though it may be earlier).

⁶¹For Luther's statements on the distinction between law and gospel see *Lectures on Romans* (1515–16), *Lectures on Galatians* (1519), *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), *Lectures on Deuteronomy* (1525), the sermon *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525), *Lectures on 1 Timothy* (1528), and *Lectures on Galatians* (1535) (the latter containing some of his most radical statements).

⁶²Schürmann describes Luther's innovation thus: "the Luther overwhelmed by this nightmare [that is, that he might fail to be just before the law] preferred that there be no God at all and consequently no damnation. . . . The justice which one can fulfill is always justice *before* a moral law, be this given from outside by some legislator or inscribed within hearts. Now, on account of this very exteriority, no human effort will ever make us unfailingly obedient to the moral law. In trying on one's own to become a just agent, one can only fail and be lost (hence the ineliminable anguish). Consequently, the judgment is foreseeable. If God is like a just judge, and if we remain always and

necessarily lacking in regards to the demands of the moral law, then the judgment can only be disastrous. Through his reading of Paul, Luther learns to pose the question otherwise. The question is no longer one of our rendering ourselves just, but of seeing us, of recognizing us as justified by a new understanding that we have of ourselves—rendered just, already placed *within* divine justice. This is the breakthrough. It consists in an inversion. From protagonists of a justice which destroys, we become beneficiaries of a justice which restores” (Schürmann (2003, 374, italics in original).

⁶³On Luther’s three uses of the law, see Engelbrecht (2011).

⁶⁴A good place to begin is the long tradition of anti-Judaic interpretations in Protestant theology (many of them collected in Gerdmar 2009). Levenson (1993) details how these anti-Judaic tropes persist in contemporary scholars’ work. Worth mentioning for its illustration of the connection between historicism, supersessionism, and the rejection of law is Bruno Bauer’s *Die Judenfrage* (1843). Bauer accuses the Jews of failing to recognize that the Mosaic law has been superseded through their own history (that is, the advent of the Messiah) and argues that, insofar as they still attempt to live under the law, their lives are an “illusion,” a “contradiction,” indeed, a “wrong.” “Under these conditions he [the Jew] is no longer who he was: (the Jew who was capable of this specific development, who still had it before him and necessarily had to posit it): after the development he is rather the Jew who exists contrary to the intention of his history, hence in spite of his history; the Jew who exists in antithesis to his determination; in short, the historically contrary Jew [der geschichtswidrige Jude]” (Bauer 1843, 34; my translation).

⁶⁵Hudson offers several formulations for this: “one would, according to this understanding of the concept, perform *dharma* for the sake of nothing” (33); “one would, according to the logic of this understanding of the concept, follow *dharma* for the sake of nothing” (103–4); *dharma* [is] rendered meaningless” (212); “*dharma* . . . is meaningless” (218–19); “the notion of *dharma* performed for the sake of something, particularly for the sake of acquiring merit to safeguard one from misfortune—either in this life or beyond is a fundamentally flawed conception of *dharma*” (219); and “all our old notions about *dharma* must be renounced and transcended for a wider concept of *dharma* to be accessed” (222). Note that this corresponds to Luther’s view that the law has a social function in ensuring civic order; he merely rejects its salvific function. The existential terror that the rejection of the law initiates (in Luther already, though the best place to see this is in Kierkegaard) also has parallels in Hudson’s work (see, for example, her comments on 215, 217, and 224).

⁶⁶Antinomian (from Greek *anti*, against, and *nomos*, law) is the view that the Jewish law does not bind Christians, since Christ’s sacrifice atones for their sins. Even though its seeds are as old as Paul’s *Letters* (see, for example, *Romans* 7:4, 7:6; *2 Corinthians* 3:6; *Galatians* 2:19), it is actually Luther who coins the term in his polemics against Agricola—paradoxically so, since his theology of *sola fide* in many ways supports antinomian thinking (for instance, his commentary on Paul’s *Letter to the Galatians* [4:25] reads: “The scholastics think that the judicial and ceremonial laws of Moses were abolished by the coming of Christ, but not the moral law. They are blind. When Paul declares that we are delivered from the curse of the Law he means the whole Law, particularly the moral law which more than the other laws accuses, curses, and condemns the conscience”). For the relevant source texts, see Sonntag (2008).

⁶⁷But compare Bhagavadgītā 16.23–24: “He, who, discarding the injunctions of scripture, follows the prompting of [his] desires does not attain to perfection, nor happiness, nor the supreme course. Therefore, scripture as the valid means of knowledge [also: authority] [should guide] you in determining what is to be done or not done. Therefore knowing the scriptural rules prescribed, you ought to perform [the allotted] action here [in this world]” (*yaḥ śāstravidhim utsrjya vartate kāmakārataḥ | na sa siddhim avāpnoti na sukhaṃ na parāṃ gatim || tasmāc chāstraṃ pramāṇaṃ te kāryākāryavyavasthitau | jñātvā śāstravidhānoktaṃ karma kartum ihārhasi ||*; my translation; Van Buitenen’s translation is problematic for he translates *śāstra* as “teaching”). There is no place in the *smṛti* tradition that supports Hudson’s antinomian view because only by constantly subordinating our minds to scriptural injunctions do we attain the clarity of vision to see the Absolute. The “legislative/narrative” distinction (the former attempting to “assert *dharma*’s clarity, order, and perfection (the legal texts)” and the latter “its subtlety, ambiguity, and profundity (the narrative texts)”; 37) that Hudson, drawing on Hildebeitel (2011; Hudson does not cite a page number and I do not find a single place where Hildebeitel uses the term “legislative” with this meaning), posits is thus too simplistic. Narrative texts like the Mahābhārata do subject *dharma* to debate, but they do so to show a precedent for every situation exists, no matter how novel or aberrant, and not to suggest that the reader should determine the *dharma* autonomously (or, indeed, cast it aside altogether). The reader should thus always have recourse to *śāstra* (including the Mahābhārata) when seeking to determine the *dharma* appropriate for her situation.

⁶⁸Besides the problems with the citation of Sinha, Sutton, Shulman, and Hildebeitel, already mentioned (see nn. 22, 34, 54, and 67), there are also several other places where Hudson misrepresents authors. I will cite three. The first occurs at 202, n. 105, where she notes: “For scholarship on the paradoxes surrounding Kṛṣṇa, see Sukthankar, *On the Meaning of the Mahābhārata*, 24 and 26.” However, Sukthankar cannot be cited in support of the rejection of Kṛṣṇa’s divinity, for he provides its strongest defense. Thus, he notes: “About the cosmic character of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the epic itself is *not* in any doubt. He is an Īśvara. He is the Puruṣa of the Sāṃkhyas; the Brahman, the Ātman or the Paramātman of the Vedantins . . . there is to my knowledge not a single passage in the *Mahābhārata* which does not presuppose the divinity or the cosmic character of Śrī Kṛṣṇa. . . .” (Sukthankar 1957, 63). Although he later argues that Kṛṣṇa is “a person of the same order of reality as the other heroes of the epic,” he insists that “just as the latter are uniformly treated as incarnations of the minor gods and anti-gods of the Indian pantheon, so Śrī Kṛṣṇa is also consistently treated as the incarnation of the Supreme Being. As I said, there is no passage in the epic which does not presuppose, or which contradicts, his character as an incarnation of the Supreme Being . . . called in our epic Viṣṇu or Nārāyaṇa” (Sukthankar 1957, 67). The second instance occurs at 200, n. 94, where Hudson dismisses Biardeau’s studies of *bhakti* and *avatāra* with a lapidary “James Laine takes Biardeau to task on precisely this issue (i.e., imposing comforting ideas onto the epic story).” Had Hudson read Biardeau, however, she would have seen that the themes of *bhakti* and *avatāra* are central to the Mahābhārata. They are not “comforting ideas” imposed on the text; indeed, the *avatāra* which also entails a *bhārāvatarāṇa*, a lessening of the burden of the earth, entails horrific, apocalyptic violence. The third occurrence is at 138, n. 132, when Hudson writes, “both scholars [that is, Georges Dumézil and Madeleine Biardeau] have been criticized for their symbolic

interpretations of the epic,” citing (among others) the work of James Laine. Hildebeitel collects more examples (Hildebeitel 2015).

⁶⁹And see also Laine 1989, 280: “This approach of identifying in pluralism a common basis, such that rival creeds are said to be different versions of the one truth, different gods are merely different names for the One God, was the way taken by the brahmin apologists of the Purāṇas and it remains the approach to pluralism most advocated by modernist Hindu intellectuals. In such a theology, ‘truth’ is declared to be beyond characterization, a transcendent category which denies nothing. The problem with such tolerance is that the transcendent truth so proclaimed is by definition beyond critique, and it veils the actual affirmations of its adherents.”

⁷⁰Hudson relies crucially on James Laine to dismiss Biardeau’s work on issues (*bhakti*, *avatāra*, taking the text’s soteriological ideas seriously, appreciating its symbolic nature) that pose a problem for her thesis (see n. 68 for examples). Yet we cannot overlook Laine’s theological commitments: his book is an evangelically motivated attack upon “inclusivistic universalism” (his term) under the guise of an academic treatment of the Mahābhārata. As someone sympathetic to the religious and philosophical concerns of the Indian tradition, Biardeau also comes in for attack: she is too “catholic” in her approach and embodies the same tendency of “reconciling everything,” including “conflicting sectarian notions” within “the overall structure of ‘classical Hinduism’” (Laine 1989, 32). Laine adds, “Biardeau’s approach, like Dumézil’s, involves a theoretical superstructure; instead of an Indo-european ideology, we have the ‘universe of *bhakti*’, a hypothetical brahmanic worldview, based upon the notion of Viṣṇu as a supreme yogi who periodically, at the time of *pralaya*, reabsorbs the worlds. . . . Why Biardeau herself must construct this catholic hierarchy of values, she never explains, and she is confident that it informs the mythic meaning of the Mahābhārata. Presuming the ‘universe of *bhakti*’, she interprets the epic in the way brahmin redactors might, reconciling everything within this framework” (ibid., 31–32). Against Biardeau’s philosophic and syncretic approach, Laine therefore activates Paul Hacker’s pseudo-critical text-historical method to show “the distinctiveness of the Mahābhārata as the unique product of a particular historical situation” (ibid., 247).

⁷¹The origins of this distinction lie in the work of Adolf Holtzmann Jr., where it reflects his interest in recovering a heroic Indo-Germanic antiquity. However, we should not overlook its supersessionist potential: if the Mahābhārata originally espoused the kind of religion and subjectivity prevalent in the West, whereas its later development represents a corruption due to the priesthood, then Christianizing interpretations such as Laine’s and Hudson’s would not be a falsification of the text, but a *restoration* and a *realization* of its *true* potential. A similar supersessionist logic was also used by several historical critics of the Bible, above all by Wellhausen, with his well-known attacks against the “Priestly” source. As *The Nay Science* (Adluri and Bagchee 2014) demonstrates, there is no basis for assuming an earlier “epic” tradition in contradistinction to the so-called Purāṇic Mahābhārata (allegedly the product of a “Brahmanic redaction”). Arguments for an earlier epic are all circular and in bad faith, arising from Western scholars’ discomfort with the Hindu text and their need to posit a text more suited to their tastes. See especially chapters 1 and 2 for an account of how, in order to provide foundations for their “critical” researchers, scholars developed the thesis of an “Ur-epic.” For a consideration of the text-critical arguments underlying this thesis, see Adluri and Bagchee (2017).

⁷²See also Laine 1989, 257: “The catholic Hinduism of the Purāṇas is certainly more than this, for it has retained philosophical and ascetical elements of the *saṁnyāsin* tradition, as Biardeau appreciates in her description of the ‘universe of *bhakti*’.”

⁷³The introduction sets up this contrast: “Although the all-inclusivistic nature of Hinduism seems to avoid choice, its ‘denial of nothing’ is, of course, a choice in itself, a denial of the choice of more exclusivist theological affirmations. The Hindu ‘choice’ is brought into sharper relief by a comparison with the West. . . . Western orthodoxies . . . retained an exclusivism and taste for historic specificity, however much late apocalyptic, gnostic, and pagan syncretistic thought strained for mythic universalism. In Christianity, the gospels which became canonical, and the orthodox, creedal interpretations of those gospels, affirmed a view of Jesus which characterized the Christian God-man as an epic savior, mediating two worlds, and not a docetic figure of pure divinity” (Laine 1989, 10), affirmed once again in the conclusion: “Unlike the inclusivistic universalism of Purāṇic Hinduism, or its counterpart in the pagan syncretism of the Hellenistic world, Christianity and Judaism were willing to claim the specific, exclusive truth of their traditions, and the falsity of their competitors” (ibid., 279–80). That the form of “exclusive truth” Laine is most concerned with is his own Christian faith is suggested by the introduction, where he acknowledges the role of religion in his life “from an early age.”

⁷⁴Sivaramakrishnan (2013) describes *Disorienting Dharma* as “a delight to pore over—in some places as interesting as the basic text of the Mahabharata itself,” and locates it “in line with other Euro-American scholarly pursuits into Indian ethical and religious ideas like those of Max Weber, Paul Wilmot, David Shulman, Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty and James Fitzgerald.” Hudson is praised for her “sensitivity to issues that are culturally and geographically alien to her, and her willingness to take on a text that is absolutely reluctant to provide any straightforward answers to life’s riddles.” Which passages of Hudson’s book are “as interesting as the basic text of the Mahabharata itself” Sivaramakrishnan does not specify.

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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