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## Resurrection from the Dead?

### The Brāhmaṇical Rite of Renunciation and Its Irreversibility

This paper deals with Brāhmaṇical concepts of the rite of renunciation, the ritual act that marks the transition from the “worldly person” to the renouncer.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on one particular feature of the concept of this ritual, its irreversibility. The term irreversibility refers to the idea that becoming a renouncer is a final act; once this ritual has been performed, a person remains a renouncer for the rest of his/her life.<sup>2</sup> First, I will present the concept of the irreversible rite of renunciation, as it appears in the Brāhmaṇical literature on renunciation. Then I shall examine textual accounts that indicate tensions between this theoretical concept and actual social practice. Considering such tensions, I attempt to sketch the social background against which the idea of irreversibility may have developed. Finally, I shall reflect upon the relations of Brāhmaṇical theory and social practice regarding this issue.

#### The Irreversible Rite of Renunciation

Tracing back the history of the rite and the idea of its irreversibility, we first have to consider the accounts of the Dharmasūtras, our earliest Brāhmaṇical sources that deal at some length with renunciation. These codes of social and religious behaviour can roughly be dated between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. and the

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2 Axel Michaels has suggested that every ritual can be considered irreversible—to reverse the process, you need to perform another ritual. See Michaels 1999: 35. The concept of the rite of renunciation, however, demands the ultimate transformation of the individual person: once a person is transformed into a renouncer, there is no return, and there is no ritual for re-transforming this renouncer into a “worldly person”.

beginning of the Common Era. Although the Dharmasūtras contain a number of rules concerning the life style of a renouncer, its authors are rather tight-lipped when it comes to a rite of renunciation. In these accounts, which I examine in the appendix to this paper, they generally advocate the life-long vocation of the renunciation state (*āśrama*), but contain very little information alluding to a ritual procedure. We find a short description of a renunciation ritual only in the *Mānavadharmasāstra* and then frequently in the subsequent Dharmasāstras. These accounts (*Viṣṇusmṛti*, *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*, and also the elaborate ritual descriptions in the *Vaikhānasa Smārtasūtra*), are already contemporaneous with those texts I shall discuss in greater detail, the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads (cf. appendix).

These twenty Upaniṣads, composed in Sanskrit, belong to what scholars have labeled the “Minor Upaniṣads”, compared to the „Major” or „Classical Upaniṣads” which are generally considered to be older. The composition of the earliest Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads has to be dated presumably to the first centuries of the Common Era; the youngest can be dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In spite of this very wide time frame, Friedrich Otto Schrader, who provided the critical edition published in 1912, decided to put them together, for good reasons. As Patrick Olivelle (1992: 5) says in his introduction to his translation of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads, “from the viewpoint of Brāhmaṇical theology, these Upaniṣads provide the basis in Vedic revelation for the institution of renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) and for the rules and practices associated with that state. They played a central role in the theological reflections and disputes concerning that key institution of Brāhmaṇical religion”.

The contents of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads are by no means uniform.<sup>3</sup> They contain various views on almost every issue of renunciation, and this is true also for the rite of renunciation, which is described in nine of the twenty Upaniṣads.<sup>4</sup> The descriptions of the rite vary with regard to length, elaborateness, and con-

3 Cf. Sprockhoff’s comprehensive study (1976), and Olivelle’s introduction to his *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads* (1992). The references to these Upaniṣads given in this paper refer to page and line of the critical edition by Schrader (1912).

4 *Āruṇi*, *Laghusaṃnyāsa*, *Kuṇḍikā*, *Kaṭhaśruti*, *Jābāla*, *Nāradaparivrājaka*, *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsa*, and *Paramahaṃsaparivrājaka Upaniṣads*; the *Yājñavalkyopaniṣad* quotes verbatim the ritual section of the *Jābālopaniṣad*. Certain elements appear in a rather general formulation in other Upaniṣads, too. The *Paramahaṃsopaniṣad* 46,3f. for example, says, “The man should renounce his sons, friends, wife, relatives, and so forth, as well as the topknot, the sacrificial string, Vedic recitation, and all rites” (Olivelle 1992: 137). Although such statements parallel elements of the ritual procedure, they are not considered here when they do not appear in an actual ritual context.



tents. We face a general methodological problem in dealing with the ritual descriptions of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads. To what extent is it justifiable to supplement a seemingly “incomplete” ritual description with data from other Upaniṣads? Was there a common ritual procedure all Upaniṣads refer to, some more extensively than others? And is the mere allusion or the lack of certain elements merely due to the specific purpose and aim of the respective Upaniṣad? It is difficult to answer these questions.<sup>5</sup> And it becomes even more difficult when we take the diachronic change into consideration. Apparently, the ritual procedure was further developed in the course of time, and became increasingly elaborate. The accounts of the older group of Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads contain a number of “basic” elements,<sup>6</sup> but we find the most detailed and extensive description only in the late and “encyclopaedic” (Sprockhoff) *Nāradaparivrājakopaniṣad*, the longest of the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads, composed not before the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> Not only the older ones but even this detailed description could hardly be used as a manual for a ritual performance—it still appears too unspecific and sketchy.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is also difficult to use this description as a basis for the examination of ritual performances. Although it may be possible to detect van Gennepe’s three phases of the ritual process in the more elaborate formulations,<sup>9</sup> we have to remind ourselves that these accounts are normative, theological conceptions and by no means ethnographic observations.<sup>10</sup>

5 Some passages clearly allude to more detailed descriptions, particularly when they are connected with quotations; others are less obvious. Although there is a family resemblance among the different procedures, it would be problematic to supplement lacking elements, especially when the supplementing text is much younger than the Upaniṣad in question.

6 These are not necessarily identical even in those Upaniṣads of the older group; but it would go beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them in detail.

7 *Nāradaparivrājaka* 136–139; 149–151; 162–170. Cf. Sprockhoff 1976: 174–186.

8 In the older Upaniṣads, the prescription of the single act can be fairly concrete, as for example, “I have renounced! I have renounced! I have renounced!—having proclaimed this three times, he should say, ‘Safety from me to all beings!’”. But it can also appear rather unspecific, as in the statement, “He should abandon father, son, fire, sacrificial string, rites, wife, and everything else here below” (both quotations *Āruṇi* 9,2–4 [Olivelle 1992: 117f.]). Although the latter quotation directly precedes the former one, it is unclear whether the abandonment of relatives and rites is to be regarded as an integral part of the ritual procedure. While the sacrificial string (*yajñopavīta*) may be abandoned ritually, as other Upaniṣads prescribe, it is difficult to imagine how this can be done in practice with an unspecific item such as “everything else here (below)” (*anyad apiha*).

9 Rites of separation (*rites de séparation*), of transition (*marge*), and of incorporation (*agrégation*). See van Gennepe 1909.

10 For the differences between textual prescription and actual performance (and for their dialectic relationship) cf. the papers of Ute Hüsken and Srilata Raman in the present volume.



As I intend to focus on the notion of irreversibility in these conceptions, it will suffice to mention a few basic elements of the rite.<sup>11</sup> We find a number of ritual acts expressing the end of the present life of the candidate and the beginning of his new life as a renouncer (*saṃnyāsin*). The person indicates the end of his former life by cutting his sacrificial string or discarding it on the ground or in water,<sup>12</sup> by shaving his head and cutting off his topknot,<sup>13</sup> by abandoning all his property,<sup>14</sup> by transferring his knowledge and ritual authority to his son,<sup>15</sup> by performing his last sacrifice with funeral *mantras*,<sup>16</sup> and by discarding his sacrificial vessels and burning his two fire drills.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, he is enjoined from “bringing back”, i.e. rekindling the fires and returning to ritual activity.<sup>18</sup> The candidate expresses the beginning of his new life by internalizing the fires with a *mantra* which indicates a new beginning,<sup>19</sup> by proclaiming the *praiṣa* “I have renounced!” three times,<sup>20</sup> by accepting the ascetic garment or the loincloth, the staff, and other ascetic requisites,<sup>21</sup> and by bestowing freedom from fear on all beings.<sup>22</sup>

As becomes apparent from this rough sketch, one crucial feature of this ritual is its relation to death. It has been pointed out various times that the procedure particularly implies the ritual death of the candidate; “the world” considers this

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- 11 See for a general analysis of the rites Olivelle 1992: 82–97; the description of the rite in the *Laghusaṃnyāsopaniṣad* has been analyzed in detail in Sprockhoff 1976: 52–66. Apart from abandoning relatives (or asking for their permission), three elements are particularly frequent: proclaiming the *mantra* “I have renounced” three times (*praiṣoccāraṇa*), bestowing freedom from fear on all living beings (*abhayaḍāna*), and internalizing the ritual fires (*agnisamāropaṇa*). Joachim Friedrich Sprockhoff (1994) has discussed this in detail.
- 12 *Āruṇi* 5,3–6,1; *Kaṭhaśruti* 39,2; *Nāradaparivrājaka* 167,11–168,6; *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsa* 251,6–8; *Paramahaṃsaparivrājaka* 280,11–281,1.
- 13 *Kaṭhaśruti* 32,3, 36,3f., 39,1f.; *Nāradaparivrājaka* 163,10–164,3, 167,10; *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsa* 251,6; *Paramahaṃsaparivrājaka* 280,11.
- 14 *Kaṭhaśruti* 31,6.
- 15 *Kaṭhaśruti* 32,4f., 36,5–8; *Paramahaṃsaparivrājaka* 280,4–7.
- 16 *Laghusaṃnyāsa* 15,2–17,7; *Kaṭhaśruti* 31,6–32,3, 38,1–5; *Jābāla* 65,1–66,6; *Nāradaparivrājaka* 162,5–165,2.
- 17 *Kaṭhaśruti* 38,5–7; *Laghusaṃnyāsa* 16,15.
- 18 *Laghusaṃnyāsa/Kuṇḍikā* 20,4; *Kaṭhaśruti* 40,1.
- 19 *Laghusaṃnyāsa* 17,8–11; *Jābāla* 65,4–66,1; *Nāradaparivrājaka* 165,7–11. Cf. Sprockhoff 1976: 63–65.
- 20 *Āruṇi* 9,3f.; *Nāradaparivrājaka* 167,5f., 168,6–8; *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsa* 251,9f.
- 21 *Āruṇi* 5,1f., 9,5–10,2; *Laghusaṃnyāsa/Kuṇḍikā* 20,8; *Nāradaparivrājaka* 169,8–170,10; *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsa* 252,3–253,1; *Paramahaṃsaparivrājaka* 281,11–282,5.
- 22 *Āruṇi* 9,4; *Nāradaparivrājaka* 167,8f.



person dead in terms of ritual.<sup>23</sup> Therefore a renouncer, once his life has ended, must not be cremated, but buried. He had already been cremated symbolically during the rite of renunciation and had given up the fire by which he could be cremated (Sprockhoff 1980: 282f.). The performance of the candidate's ritual death expresses the notion of irreversibility. Once the candidate has renounced "the world" with its ritual procedures, there is no return. He is considered dead, and "resurrection" is impossible. *Laghusaṃnyāsa* and *Kuṇḍikopaniṣads* clearly state, "Having renounced the fire, there is no turning around again" (*apunarāvartana*).<sup>24</sup> We can thus conclude that according to the view of "classical" Brāhmaṇical theory, the ritual of renunciation is irreversible; a renouncer is considered dead and cannot return to lay life.

### Social Reality: Apostate Renouncers

The issue of irreversibility appears in a rather different light when we shift the focus from Brāhmaṇical theory to social practice. There are indications that every now and then, the idea of a life-long vocation of *saṃnyāsa* remained unnoticed. Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, for example, the famous Sanskrit treatise on politics, mentions renouncers who return to lay life. It says, "One, who has relinquished the life of a wandering monk (*pravrajyā*), (and) is endowed with intelligence and honesty, is the apostate monk (*udāsthita*)".<sup>25</sup> This apostate renouncer shall be recruited and, equipped with money and assistants, shall provide other

23 Cf. Sprockhoff 1980; Olivelle 1992: 89–94. According to Sprockhoff, the oldest way of dealing with the problem of the renouncer's body in Brāhmaṇical theology is the performance of a ritual that aims at his disembodiment and at the symbolic replacement of his old body by a new one (besides religious suicide or the later philosophical idea of illusion). Sprockhoff mentions three ways for a candidate to do this, either (1) by transferring his sense organs, his breath, his (ritual) "works" (*karmāṇi*) and his habitat (*loka*) to his son before he begins to wander around; or (2) by a ritual performed by priests who place the sacrificial utensils on his body so that his breath can enter the sacrificial fires; or (3) by a symbolic execution of his cremation, performed by himself. Sprockhoff emphasizes the fact that in each case, "the world" considers this person dead in terms of ritual. Sprockhoff 1980: 270f. For the three ways, Sprockhoff refers to *Kaṭhaśruti* 36,4–37,4, *Kaṭhaśruti* 31,4–32,3, and *Laghusaṃnyāsa* 15,2–17,8, respectively. Cf. also Olivelle 1992: 86–89.

24 *Saṃnyasyāgnim apunarāvartanaṃ* (*Laghusaṃnyāsa/Kuṇḍikā* 20,4). The *Kaṭhaśrutiyupaniṣad* states similarly, "having renounced the fires let him not bring them back" (*saṃnyasyāgnīm na punarāvartayet*; *Kaṭhaśruti* 40,1).

25 *Arthaśāstra* 1.11.4 (transl. Kangle 1960 & 1963).

ascetics with their needs in order to convince them to work as spies “in the interest of the king” (1.11.5–8).<sup>26</sup>

This account portrays an “apostate” in the literal sense, one who has given up the ascetic life and now acts as a rich lay donor, providing ascetics with food, clothes, and lodging. The question arises why the authors of the *Arthaśāstra* considered a former renouncer particularly qualified for this task—compared to any other lay person. Oftentimes, the economic situation of apostate renouncers was probably bad; later law texts portray them as outcasts and slaves of the king. For those vulnerable persons, “joining the secret service would have seemed an attractive alternative” (Olivelle 1987: 49), and for the state, they were reliable because of their material dependence. In addition to that, apostate renouncers may have been considered particularly qualified because of their insider knowledge of the ascetic scene; they probably knew the ascetics in their neighbourhood personally, and the authors apparently expect many ascetics to beg for food from them. If these assumptions are correct, the return to lay life as such did not pose a problem for the other ascetics who accepted food and the like also from a former colleague. In this case, of course, the political twist is the funding by the king and the secret order to recruit spies among the ascetics.

We can thus further speculate about apostate renouncers who were *not* recruited by the secret service. Did they become outcasts and slaves of the king as later law texts say? Some of them may have, because of their poor economic situation. But there are reasons to believe that others returned to a normal lay life, just as described by the *Arthaśāstra* account. These apostates were not funded by the king but lived on their own property, which they had not fully abandoned when entering the state of a renouncer (see below).

The *Arthaśāstra* thus clearly shows that in the social reality of its time, there were renouncers who returned to lay life. Our considerations lead us to the

26 In addition, Muṇḍa and Jaṭila ascetics shall be recruited as “seeming ascetics” (*tāpasyaṅjana*) who will act as holy men and pretend to prophesy certain events (secretly carried out by their assistants), in order to gain the authority to advise influential persons in the interest of the king (1.11.13–21). It is important to note that, whereas the Muṇḍa and Jaṭila ascetics, as well as those renouncers recruited as spies, keep acting as ascetics, the *udāsthita* in fact returns to lay life, as becomes evident from 1.11.5–8: “Equipped with plenty of money and assistants, he should get work done in a place assigned (to him), for the practice of some occupation. And from the profits of (this) work, he should provide all wandering monks with food, clothing and residence. And to those (among them), who seek a (permanent) livelihood, he should secretly propose, ‘In this very garb, you should work in the interest of the king and present yourself here at the time of meals and payment.’ And all wandering monks should make similar secret proposals to (monks in) their respective orders” (transl. Kangle 1960 & 1963).



assumption that in the period of the *Arthaśāstra*, such a return was not abnormal and not necessarily looked down upon by other ascetics. The authors of the *Arthaśāstra* themselves do not seem to be biased. When they talk about “apostate renouncers” (*udāsthita*), this is not a moral judgment; the term is used neutrally, only to denote this specific candidate for the secret service. The authors do in no way condemn the respective persons; but this may also be due to the *artha* genre, the major concern of which is the enforcement of political objectives.

In texts of other genres, such as the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads, the abandonment of renunciation is harshly condemned. The *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsopaniṣad* states, “One who lapses from renunciation, one who admits a lapsed man into renunciation, and one who hinders renunciation: these three are reckoned to be lapsed”.<sup>27</sup> The verbal root rendered here as “lapse” is *pat*, to fall, which can also refer to a person fallen from his caste, i.e. an outcaste. And this is probably meant to be the penalty for the three persons in question.<sup>28</sup> The *Śāṭyāyanīyopaniṣad* is even harsher. It states,

He who abandons this state of renunciation, the final *dharma* of the self, is a slayer of a hero, he is a slayer of a Brahmin, he is a slayer of an embryo, and he is guilty of a great crime. He who gives up this Vaiṣṇava state is a thief, he is a violator of his teacher’s bed, he is a treacherous friend, he is an ingrate, and he is banished from all the worlds. This very point has been declared in these Vedic verses:

A thief, one who drinks liquor, a violator of his teacher’s bed, and a treacherous friend—these become purified through expiations. But he who bears the manifest or the unmanifest emblem of Viṣṇu and then abandons it, is not purified by all the luster of the self.

The utter fool who, after abandoning the internal or the external emblem of Viṣṇu, resorts to his own order or to a non-order, or who undergoes an expiation—we see no happy issue for such people even after 10 million eons. Abandoning all other orders, let a wise man live long in the order devoted to liberation. There is no happy issue for one who has fallen from the order devoted to liberation.

He who takes to renunciation and then fails to persevere in his own *dharma* should be known as an apostate—so the Vedas teach.<sup>29</sup>

27 *Samnyāsam pātayed yas tu patitaṃ nyāsayet tu yaḥ | samnyāsavighnakartā ca trīn etān patitān viduḥ ||* (*Bṛhatsaṃnyāsa* 250,4f.; transl. Olivelle 1992: 241)

28 Cf. Olivelle 1992: 241f. n. 2.

29 *Śāṭyāyanīyopaniṣad* 329,10–330,14 (transl. Olivelle 1992: 285f). Certainly, “abandoning the emblem of Viṣṇu” refers not only to ascetics, but in this context, the authors apply the “Vedic verses” explicitly to the ascetic (“he who abandons this state of renunciation [...]”).

It is striking that on the one hand, these Upaniṣads emphasize the renouncer's ritual death and the irreversibility of his move, and on the other hand, they condemn this very reversion in great detail. This clearly reflects a social reality in which renouncers have in fact abandoned their state and returned to lay life; it would not have been necessary to waste words and thoughts if the return was an impossible and unreal option in practice.

The quoted passage predicts unpleasant future lives, possibly punishments in hell and the like. But apart from the religious effects of the defection from *saṃnyāsa*,<sup>30</sup> Brāhmanical lawgivers designed "this-worldly" penalties, as well. From the *Viṣṇusmṛti* (5.152) onwards, the authors of the Dharmaśāstras "agree that an apostate renouncer (*pratyavasita*) becomes a slave of a king. (The) *Yājñalkyasmṛti*] (2,183) specifies that this slavery lasts until death" (Olivelle 1984: 149f). These regulations once more corroborate the existence of apostate renouncers, as do later handbooks on renunciation.<sup>31</sup> We can therefore conclude that in social reality, a number of renouncers apparently returned to lay life.

### The Emergence of the Idea of Irreversibility and the "Liberation of the Household"

To this point, we have discovered two sides of the ritual of renunciation. On the one hand, there is the theory of ritual irreversibility; on the other hand, there is

30 Considering this tension, Joachim Friedrich Sprockhoff points at the difference between the ritual and legal dimensions, saying, "The *impossibility* of returning in terms of ritual is made a *prohibition* by legal literature. [...] A mere 'priestly law' guarantees gruesome punishments in hell for a renouncer even if he only intends to—literally—revoke his call of renunciation (*praiṣa*) which amounts to a defection from *saṃnyāsa*". „Aus dieser ritualistischen *Unmöglichkeit* der Rückkehr macht das Rechtsschrifttum ein *Verbot*. [...] Ein bloßes 'priesterliches Recht' versichert demjenigen grausigste Höllenstrafen, der seinen Entsagungsspruch (*praiṣa*) im durchaus wörtlichen Sinne auch nur zu widerrufen trachtet, was dem Abfall vom *saṃnyāsa* gleichkommt" (Sprockhoff 1980: 272f).

31 Later *nibandha*-type treatises on renunciation include Yādava Prakāśa's *Yatidharmasamuccaya* (11<sup>th</sup> century), Viśveśvara Sarasvatī's *Yatidharmasangraha* (16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century), or Vāsudevāśrama's *Yatidharmaparakāśa* (17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century). *Yatidharmasamuccaya* 4.45 (see Olivelle 1995). *Yatidharmasangraha* 5,22f. *Yatidharmaparakāśa* 68.158–167 (see Olivelle 1976–77). Interestingly, the *Mānavadharmasāstra* is silent on renouncers who returned to lay life; apparently, for the author it was not an issue worthy of specific regulations, as it was for his Dharmaśāstric successors. According to commentators, Manu refers to them by mentioning a *daṇḍadāsa* ("a man enslaved for punishment") among the seven ways of becoming a slave (*Mānavadharmasāstra* 8.415). See Olivelle 1984: 151. This term appears to be rather general, and it remains debatable whether Manu refers to enslaved *renouncers* in particular.



evidence of renunciators having returned to lay life. What is the relation of these two levels of theory and practice? One simple and plausible answer is that a rule was violated in practice; some renunciators ignored for whatever reasons the deeper meaning of the renunciation ritual, “resurrected from the dead”, and illegally returned to lay life. In this case, the norm had existed before its violation in practice.

Is the opposite conceivable, too? May the existence of apostate renunciators have had an effect on the development of the rite? Thus viewing the relation between theory and practice from a different angle, we can ask why Brāhmaṇical scholars actually developed the idea of irreversibility. Apart from religious reasons, that is, for emphasizing the state of a person who has abandoned the world in order to attain liberation, there may have been tangible social motives, too. A story from an early Buddhist canonical work may help us in this matter. In the introductory story of the first *pārājika* rule in a law book of early Buddhist monasticism,<sup>32</sup> Sudinna, the son of a wealthy merchant, wishes to enter the monastic order (*saṅgha*) and has a hard time convincing his parents to give their consent. When they, under pressure, finally agree, he becomes a *bhikkhu*, a Buddhist monk. A little later, this *bhikkhu* returns to his parents’ house in order to beg for food. The story then tells us in a colourful and very realistic way how his family members do all they can to convince Sudinna to return home. They present before him heaps of coins and gold which he would own and could use for meritorious works; his former wife displays herself adorned and attractive; and they entreat him to return to his family and to come together with his wife in order to beget offspring. He finally consents only to the latter, which then becomes the occasion for the Buddha to prescribe the *pārājika* rule of celibacy.<sup>33</sup>

There is no doubt that Sudinna’s family would have highly welcomed his return to lay life. He just would have to take off his robe, return to his wife, beget offspring and inherit the wealth. For the family, Sudinna is obviously not “dead”; if it were for them, the act of renunciation would be easily reversible. In fact, Sudinna’s friends reportedly convinced his parents to give their consent to his going forth by saying, “If he does not enjoy the going forth from home into

32 The following refers to the monastic law (*vinaya*) of the Theravāda school, composed in Pāli.

33 *Vinayaṭīkā* III 11–21 (Oldenberg 1881). The four *pārājika* rules are the gravest offences of Buddhist law and involve the permanent and irreversible expulsion from the monastic community. They comprise abstention from sexual intercourse, from theft, from the killing of a human being, and from falsely boasting about superhuman knowledge and insight.

homelessness, what alternative (*gati*) will he have than to come back here?"<sup>34</sup> In short, a return certainly would have posed no "ritual problem".

This story shows that at its time,<sup>35</sup> at least in the segments of Indian society represented by the agents, the theory of an irreversible rite of renunciation was not an issue in practice. Although we may not expect to find this Brāhmaṇical theory displayed in Buddhist texts, they can provide us with valuable information about social practice in ancient India.<sup>36</sup> It is likely that the story reflects "real life" in showing that it could be unproblematic, even welcomed, for a renouncer to return to lay life. Sudinna's family does not care about any idea of ritual irreversibility and wishes the return of their son for a clearly expressed socio-cultural reason: he has to prevent the family from an heirless fate. This householder ideal is very common and well-known to the Brāhmaṇical tradition, too, and for such cases, it would not have been reasonable to develop an irreversible ritual. From a socio-cultural perspective, it would have been even counterproductive.

But there could have been another threat to society. It is evident from the texts that not only young men, such as Sudinna, became renouncers but also older householders who were settled and rich, persons like Sudinna's father, for example. If such a man were to leave his home without cutting off his bonds entirely, that is, without transferring his duties and property to his sons once and for all, the household would remain in a rather ambivalent state. Some householders apparently kept their property when they became renouncers. For them, of course, it was much easier to return to lay life whenever they changed their minds, because they could come back to their own house and property.<sup>37</sup>

In Buddhist texts, we find explicit evidence for such a practice. Already in the *Suttanipāta*, for example, we encounter the Jaṭila naked ascetic Keṇiya who

34 *Vinayaṭīkaṃ* III 14,22–24 (transl. Horner 1949: 25).

35 This story, as an introductory story to a *vinaya* rule, may be much younger than the *pātimokkha* rule itself; perhaps it was composed in the period of the Dharmasūtras. The *pātimokkha* (Skt. *prātimokṣa*) comprises the rules for the individual behaviour of *saṅgha* members. This list of rules, which is to be recited every fortnight as part of the *uposatha* ceremony, is considered very old, whereas its explanatory context in the *Vinaya Piṭaka* is for the most part much younger. For the relationship between the actual *pātimokkha* rules and their narrative introductions in the *Suttavibhaṅga*, many of which were verifiably composed later, see Schlingloff 1964; see also von Hinüber 2000: 13–15. A parallel story can be found in the *Raṭṭhapālasutta* of the *Majjhimanikāya* (II 54–74).

36 Such introductory stories only make sense if they are realistic, and in ancient Indian society, a "Buddhist laity" can rarely be distinguished from a "non-Buddhist laity".

37 Note that the practice of temporary renunciation is wide-spread in Buddhist countries such as in today's Thailand or Burma.



invites the Buddha and his entourage of 1250 *bhikkhus* for a meal. The text describes how Keṇiya's "friends and acquaintances, kinsmen and relations" help him to prepare this meal.<sup>38</sup> Another example can be found in the 5<sup>th</sup> century commentary of the *Samyuttanikāya*, the *Sāratthappakāsinī*. It reports on a *bhikkhu* who had joined the order in old age. According to the monastic rules, however, the individual status within the community depends not on the actual age of a person but on the period of time the person has been a member of the *saṅgha*. That old man, placed in status below younger colleagues, soon became dissatisfied with his lack of seniority among the other *bhikkhus*. He thus decided to subsist on family property which was still in his possession. Entering the order, he had deliberately kept his property, thinking, "Who knows what is going to happen?" (*ko jānāti kiṃ bhavissati*). After having received permission from a *vinaya* expert (!), he settled down in a village and became an "ascetic-householder" (*samaṇa-kuṭumbika*).<sup>39</sup> Moreover, as Gregory Schopen has shown in several publications, Buddhist *bhikkhus* in India did not only own property but spent it generously for religious donations.<sup>40</sup> We can easily imagine how members of the households of such persons panic when they see the wealth dwindle away. Such a situation was certainly unacceptable to Brāhmaṇical scholars and lawgivers who more often than not felt responsible for the prosperity of the household of the twice-born family.<sup>41</sup>

A renouncer who is dead to society, who has abandoned the world entirely and has left everything behind, is not only free to seek liberation—he is also completely cut off from his family and relatives. Viewed from their perspective, he has no influence on them anymore, no access to the property and no sharing. During the ceremony of the "classical" rite of renunciation, he hands over his "worldly" and ritual authority and power to his son and is symbolically cremated and transformed into one of the deceased relatives (cf. Olivelle 1992: 90f.). Henceforth, he is free to attain salvation, and the household is freed of him. Brāhmaṇical theologians may have aimed at such a "liberation of the household" when they developed an irreversible ritual of renunciation which cuts the ascetic off his household for evermore.

38 *Suttanipāta* 103,21–104,26 (Andersen & Smith 1965; Norman 1992).

39 *Sāratthappakāsinī* III 32,25–33,17 (Woodward 1937). This story is mentioned and briefly analyzed by von Hinüber (1995: p. 28). See also von Hinüber 1997: 73f.

40 See, for example, Schopen 1995; see also Schopen 1997 and other studies in this volume.

41 Already in the *Arthaśāstra*, we find an example of this sense of responsibility. In 2.1.29, it states that, "If one renounces home (to become an ascetic) without providing for his sons and wife, the lowest fine for violence (shall be imposed)" (transl. Kangle 1963: 65).

Thus, the social reality of apostate renouncers who returned to lay life must have been considered a threat to the household, a threat Brāhmaṇical lawgivers attempted to mitigate by developing a theory of an irreversible rite of renunciation. This theory may thus have been one reaction to social practice. At this point, we could continue to reflect upon the function of the ritual for the community or society, and its potential for mitigating social conflicts.<sup>42</sup> With this, we come close to modern theories on ritual, but again, we must not forget that Brāhmaṇical theory does not necessarily reflect social practice; even if the intention was to “liberate the household”, we cannot automatically conclude that it worked. Nevertheless, it seems probable that the social reality of apostate renouncers was one motive for developing the notion of the ritual’s irreversibility.

### Re-renunciation and Its Willing Helpers

As if it was not problematic enough, Brāhmaṇical theologians had to deal not only with renouncers who returned to lay life, but also with apostate renouncers who wanted to renounce again. As we saw before, the *Brhatsaṃnyāsopaniṣad* condemns a person who “admits a lapsed man into renunciation”. This statement too would be meaningless if such “lapsed men” who wished to renounce again had not existed at all. In the context of this very passage, which deals with persons not eligible for renunciation, we find some further remarks:

Children of apostate renouncers, those who have bad nails or dark teeth, those who suffer from consumption, and cripples are not at all fit to renounce.

One should never admit to renunciation apostate renouncers, mortal sinners, Vṛātyas, and the infamous.

One should never admit to renunciation those who have neglected vows, sacrifices, austerity, liberality, fire offerings, and Vedic recitation, and those who have fallen from truth and purity.<sup>43</sup>

These remarks suggest a historical situation in which apostate renouncers (*ārū-dhapatita*) seek to renounce again. In the *Nāradaparivrājakopaniṣad*, we find a similar rule, saying that, among others, persons who have “renounced two or three times” (*dvitrivāreṇa saṃnyastaḥ*) “are unfit for orderly renunciation”.<sup>44</sup>

42 Michaels (1999: 36) labels this aspect as “the modal criterion of action, *societas*”.

43 *Brhatsaṃnyāsa* 250,11–251,5 (transl. Olivelle 1992: 242). Note that not only apostate renouncers, but also their children are mentioned. The text adds that an exception is made only for those who are in mortal danger (*ātura*).

44 *Nāradaparivrājaka* 137,3f. (transl. Olivelle 1992: 174). Here also, an exception is made when they are in mortal danger.



Thus the authors of our texts had to cope with former renouncers who wished to renounce again, a second or even a third time. Do we have to assume that these persons take so little notice of the renunciation ritual and its deeper meaning that they attempt to “resurrect from the dead” and return to lay life—just to renounce again later on? And that after having renounced a second time, they once more ignore the irreversibility of the ritual and return to lay life a second time—just to begin the procedure a third time? It is difficult to imagine that the procedure of the renunciation rite, including paying the officiating priests, being symbolically cremated, handing over one’s property to the son etc., can be carried out a number of times. This would be particularly true for persons who are already cut-off from their property and family and who, apostate renouncers as they are, would be bound to become lifelong slaves of the king according to the law.

There is a second interesting aspect in the mentioned text passages. The *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsopaniṣad* says that not only one who lapses from renunciation was reckoned to be “lapsed” (*patita*) but also a person who admits a lapsed man into renunciation (*patitaṃ nyāsayet tu yaḥ*).<sup>45</sup> The Upaniṣad continues by saying that one “should never admit to renunciation” (*saṃnyāsaṃ naiva kārayet*) apostate renouncers (*Bṛhatsaṃnyāsopaniṣad* 251,2). These rules clearly are not targeted at the apostate renouncers themselves but at other persons, persons who admit them to renunciation and thus make such “re-renunciations” possible, even several times.

Who are these persons? We could think of the priests who perform the rite for the future renouncer. It is, however, unlikely that they would agree to perform the same (irreversible!) ritual for the same person a second or a third time, particularly when the person has given up his property and is thus unable to pay for their service and, furthermore, would become a slave of the king. It is more likely that the rules are targeted at another group of persons, persons the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads merely allude to, the “teachers” (*guru, ācārya*) of the candidate. Such a teacher, with which the new renouncer stays for one year, is supposed to give him instructions on upaniṣadic doctrine, to provide him with staff, water pot, waistband, loincloth, and garment, and, finally, to invest him with the *yoga* band (*yogaṭṭa*), which appears to be a form of higher ordination.<sup>46</sup>

If the rules are targeted at teachers who admitted candidates several times, such teachers in all likelihood existed in social reality; otherwise there would be no need for a regulation. If this assumption is correct, we can conclude that in

45 *Bṛhatsaṃnyāsa* 250,4f.; see above, note 27.

46 *Nāradaṣarivṛājaka* 169,7–170,10; *ibid.* 195,13–196,7; see also *Paramahaṃsapaṣarivṛājaka* 282,5–7; *Śāṭyāyanīya* 333,2–10. Cf. Olivelle 1992: 96f., 195 n. 52.



the period of the younger Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads, there were ascetic teachers who admitted apostate renouncers to renunciation, even several times, and who obviously did not consider the act of renunciation an irreversible move.<sup>47</sup> Even if we assume that due to the authority of the texts, the procedure of the irreversible rite became widespread in Indian society, the texts suggest that there were alternative procedures which remained unaffected by the theory of ritual irreversibility.

### Alternative Concepts of Renunciation?

The indications that in social reality, alternative, more easily “reversible” procedures of renunciation were carried out by some unknown teachers, lead us to ask whether there were also alternative concepts of renunciation which did not emphasize ritual irreversibility. Our sources contain too little data to answer this question properly. There are only a few hints in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads pointing to this direction, when some of the later Upaniṣads reflect upon the relevance of certain ritual elements. One passage, for example, allows the candidate alternative ways of renouncing, among them the mere mental (*manasā*) utterance of the renunciation call (*praīṣa*).<sup>48</sup> This option reduces the ritual performance drastically; apart from the person concerned, nobody would recognize it as a

47 Likewise, reentering the *saṅgha* was possible in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition. As for the first *pārājika* rule concerning sexual intercourse, which involves expulsion from the *saṅgha* (see above, note 32), the Buddha declares that a *bhikkhu* who indulges in sexual intercourse while being a *bhikkhu* should not receive the higher ordination (*upasampadā*) (once again). He continues, “But, monks, if one comes, disavowing the training and declaring his weakness, yet indulging in sexual intercourse, he should receive the *upasampadā* ordination” (*Vinayapiṭakaṃ* III 23,29–31; transl. Horner 1949: 41). If he thus orderly leaves the *saṅgha* first before he has sex, he does not commit an offence and is therefore eligible to enter the *saṅgha* again. This interpretation is also held by the 5<sup>th</sup> century commentary on the Pāli Vinaya; see Takakusu & Nagai 1924–1947: 230,7–15. Cf. also Hüsken 1997: 44f.

48 A verse of the *Nāradaparivṛājakopaniṣad*, for example, mentions three alternative ways of renunciation. It says, “A wise man should renounce either mentally, or by reciting the *mantras* given in the procedure, or after he has offered the oblation either into water or as laid down in the Veda. Otherwise he shall become an outcaste” (*Nāradaparivṛājaka* 138,6–8; transl. Olivelle 1992: 175). Olivelle comments on this verse (Olivelle 1992: 175 n. 18): “One renounces mentally by saying mentally the Call: ‘I have renounced’ [...] The two other alternatives are (1) to recite orally all the *mantras* contained in the renunciatory rite and (2) to actually offer the sacrifice that precedes the renunciatory rite. The latter sacrifice, furthermore, may be offered either into water or into the sacred fires, as prescribed in the Veda”.



ritual. It is a challenging question whether this should still be regarded as a ritual at all—or rather as an internalization or reinterpretation of the act of becoming a renouncer.<sup>49</sup> Another passage emphasizes that the essence of renunciation does not lie in formal procedures such as “forsaking rites or chanting the call (*praiṣoccāraṇa*)”, but in meditation and insight.<sup>50</sup> We can speculate whether this view and the idea of a “mental renunciation” were inspired by, or even themselves reflect, the factual practice of certain teachers who had a critical stance towards extensive and irreversible renunciation procedures, teachers who emphasized the individual spiritual progress more than formal requirements and advocated a “reversible” procedure that can be performed even several times for the same person.<sup>51</sup>

Whether these accounts reflect concepts that were realized in practice or mere theoretical speculations upon hypothetical cases, at any rate they remind us of the possibility that within religious traditions, we find tensions not only between theory and practice, but also between certain theories. It may well be that some Brāhmaṇical thinkers considered the idea of performing a ritual in order to renounce all rituals superfluous, if not absurd. This example may thus inspire us to take into consideration also the (conceptual) criticism of ritual within one religious tradition or culture. It may be challenging to ask whether modern ritual

49 It is possible that the verse refers to a special situation in which the person is gone to a foreign land (*deśāntaragata*), as said in the previous verse. The connection between the two verses, however, is loose and arguable. But even in that case the passage would remain remarkable; renouncing mentally does not include the transfer of obligations and property to the son, the ritual death and the complete cut-off from the family. The idea of irreversibility is definitely lacking. One might wonder what would happen when this person returns from the foreign land.

50 The *Maitreyopaniṣad* reflects on the essence of renunciation. It says, “Forsaking rites or chanting the Call (*praiṣoccāraṇa*) does not make renunciation. To meditate at twilight: ‘Soul and Supreme Self are one,’ is said to be true renunciation” (*Maitreyopaniṣad* 116,7f.; transl. Olivelle 1992: 163). For the authors of this verse, the essence of renunciation lies in meditation and insight rather than in formal procedures. In the “classical” procedure of renunciation, however, the abandonment of rites and the proclamation of renunciation (*praiṣa*) are essential elements.

51 The same may be true for a statement in the *Jābālopaniṣad* which is openly opposed to the *āśrama* system in its classical form. After declaring that one may renounce from each of the three other *āśramas*, it says, “Let him even renounce on the very day that he becomes detached, regardless of whether he has taken the vow (i.e., Vedic initiation) or not, whether he has graduated (from Vedic school; *snātaka*) or not, and whether he has kindled the sacred fire or is without a fire” (*Jābālopaniṣad* 64,3–5; transl. Olivelle 1992: 143). We can speculate whether those persons who are “without a fire” (*anagni*) would include apostate renouncers.

theorists, when they describe the fundamental and essential social functions of ritual, for example, tend to ignore voices within the tradition that totally reject certain rituals. From a History of Religions perspective, these voices, even if they represent a minority, are just as interesting as the mainstream or major tradition.

## Conclusion

Mainstream Brāhmanical theology, as represented in the texts discussed in this paper, portrays irreversibility as a central feature of the fully developed ritual of renunciation. There is no doubt that the more elaborate formulations of the rite became authoritative.<sup>52</sup> They had a strong impact within the Brāhmanical ascetic tradition, and later works quote them frequently.<sup>53</sup> In a paper dealing with this issue, Y. Krishnan (1969) raises the question “Was it permissible for a *saṃnyāsī* to revert to lay life?” Regarding those texts, we can generally agree when he answers the question in the negative.

On the other hand, it is obvious that “permissible or not, many did leave renunciation and reentered society” (Olivelle 1984: 149). A number of sources testify that apostate renouncers have existed in social reality. The accounts in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads and the zero-tolerance policy of the Dharmasāstras indicate that a renouncer’s reentry into society was a wide-spread practice and, for this reason, a serious problem. The development of the elaborated, irreversible ritual may have been a means of dealing with this problem. The notion that households have to be protected against claims of returning renouncers may be regarded as a socio-cultural motive for developing the idea of the rite’s irreversibility.

Some accounts in the Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads suggest that notwithstanding this theory, there were teachers who admitted apostate renouncers to renunciation a second or a third time. Obviously, those teachers did not worry much about the idea of irreversibility. Moreover, some passages indicate that this social practice had a theoretical basis, too; reflections upon the essence of the renunciation ritual could have led Brāhmanical thinkers to the belief that the traditional rite of renunciation was not the only way to renounce.

Despite the evident gaps between theory and practice in this case, both seem to have interacted vividly. These dialectics of theory and practice are still tangible in the texts, which, between the lines, reveal a diversity in Brāhmanical

52 Note that the *Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads* are considered *śruti* literature, “revealed” texts.

53 Cf. the works cited in note 31.



theory and social practice that is much broader than the advocates of the mainstream theology would have wanted us to recognize.

### Appendix: The Rite of Renunciation in the Older Brāhmaṇical *dharma* Tradition

The earliest relevant sources for the *dharma* of a renunciant, the Dharmasūtras, contain little information about a rite of renunciation. The *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* does not mention any ritual; it just says, “From that very state [of a novice student], remaining chaste, he goes forth;” “he should live [...] without fire” (2.21.8–10).<sup>54</sup> *Gautama* does not mention a rite either. The only possible hints on a general sphere of ritual are, “He shall be shaven-headed or wear a topknot” (3.22); “he shall not undertake (ritual) activities” (3.25).<sup>55</sup> *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 2.11 states that the candidate should “wander forth according to the rule (*yathāvidhi*)”.<sup>56</sup> There is no hint whatsoever what rule (*vidhi*) *Baudhāyana* has in mind. One could, of course, think of the long description of a renunciation rite in another chapter of the same Dharmasūtra (2.17–18). This would thus be the earliest account of such an elaborate ritual. But this description appears to be incongruous in its context; it “is probably a later addition and resembles the ritual accounts of medieval handbooks (*paddhati*)”.<sup>57</sup> In chapter 2.11, *Baudhāyana* continues with a few remarks that may hint at a ritual sphere. The renouncer “has his head shaven except for the topknot” and he was “rejecting Vedic rites”.

54 *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 2.21.7–17 (transl. Olivelle 2000: 105).

55 *Gautama Dharmasūtra* 3.11–25 (transl. Olivelle 2000: 129). Note that in the ritual procedure of later texts, the candidate is required to pluck out his topknot, thereby demonstrating the abandonment of ritual, as he does by discarding his sacrificial string (see above). Here, he has the option to keep his topknot.

56 *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 2.11.16–26 (transl. Olivelle 2000: 281).

57 Olivelle 2000: 610; Olivelle regards this passage as belonging to a “Deutero-Baudhāyana” (Olivelle 1984: 118). One reason for the assumption that it is a later addition, besides the incongruous form of the description, is that *Baudhāyana* is otherwise not at all in favour of renunciation; just like *Gautama* (*Gautama Dharmasūtra* 3.36), he is of the opinion that there was only a single order of life, that of the householder (*Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* 2.11.27). One would not expect a critic of renunciation making such efforts to describe its ritual in detail. In his *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Kane (1974 vol. 2) merely retells this procedure of *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra* and remarks that it was “probably the most ancient among extant works”. He does not address the issue of the almost complete silence of the other Dharmasūtras. Describing the rite of renunciation, he quotes, in addition to *Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra*, only later works: *Baudhāyana Gṛhyasūtra*, *Vaiikhānasasmārtasūtra*, some *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads*, and some medieval works. See Kane 1974 vol. 2.2: 953ff.



Also in the *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra*, we search in vain for a description of a rite of renunciation. The only statements coming close to the ritual sphere are, “He should depart after giving the gift of safety to all creatures”<sup>58</sup> (10.1); “he should be shaven-headed” (10.6); “let him abandon all ritual activities; the Veda alone let him never abandon” (10.4).<sup>59</sup>

We find a short description of a ritual preceding renunciation only in the *Mānavadharmasāstra*, which says, “Only after he has offered a sacrifice to Prajāpati at which all his possessions are given as the sacrificial gift and after he has deposited the sacred fires within himself, should a Brahmin go forth from his home as an ascetic” (6.38), “bestowing freedom from fear to all creatures” (6.39), “he should live without fire or house” (6.43).<sup>60</sup>

Thenceforward, the subsequent Dharmaśāstras frequently describe the rite of renunciation. The *Viṣṇusmṛti*, for example, states, “He must offer an oblation to Prajāpati, in which he bestows all his wealth (upon priests) as fee for the performance of the sacrifice, and enter the order of ascetics. Having deposited the fires in his own mind, he must enter the village, in order to collect alms”.<sup>61</sup> The *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* has a very similar formulation.<sup>62</sup> These accounts, and also the elaborate ritual descriptions in the *Vaikhānasa Smārtasūtra* (9.6–8 and 10.6–8), are already contemporaneous with those earlier Saṃnyāsa Upaniṣads that contain such rites.

In sum, it is apparent that the earlier *dharma* texts contain little information about a rite of renunciation. For Patrick Olivelle, “it is beyond doubt, however, that such a rite, at least in a rudimentary form, did exist during the *sūtra* period”. He refers to Baudhāyana’s remark that a person should renounce “according to the rule” (*yathāvidhi*), which is corroborated by another passage in *Āpastamba Dharmasūtra* 1.18.31 saying that one should not eat the food of a man who has gone forth without following the rule (*avidhinā pravrajitaḥ*). Olivelle remarks

58 This is the *abhayadāna* (here: *abhayadakṣiṇā*), common in later ritual descriptions; see above.

59 *Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra* 10.1–26 (transl. Olivelle 2000: 387f). There is one verse in *Vasiṣṭha* which at first glance seems to point to the renouncer’s return to lay life: “After giving the gift of safety to all creatures, however, when someone backslides (*nivartate*), he brings to ruin the past and future generations of his family, as also anyone who accepts anything from him” (10.3). It is more likely, however, that the “backsliding” of the ascetic does not refer to a general return to lay life but to the directly preceding *abhayadāna*. Who backslides to harming living beings jeopardizes past and future relatives.

60 *Mānavadharmasāstra* 6.33–86 (see Jolly 1887; transl. Olivelle 2004: 101).

61 *Viṣṇusmṛti* 96.1 (see Jolly 1881: 194–199, here: 199; transl. Jolly 1880: 279–287, here: 279).

62 *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 3.56f. (see Stenzler 1849: 86; transl. *ibid.* vol. 2: 95).



that “the term *vidhi* (rule, procedure) no doubt refers to some rite or procedure of renunciation laid down in the *śāstras*”. Further hints to this rite or its procedure are the gift of freedom from fear to all creatures (*abhayadāna*), the sacrifice to Prajāpati, and the abandonment of ritual and fire (Olivelle 1984: 115–118). Despite these hints, the *vidhi*, which both *Baudhāyana* and *Āpastamba* refer to, remains hard to assess. The few accounts do not say much about the actual ritual procedure; the *abhayadāna* and the abandonment of ritual and fire are merely alluded to, and the sacrifice to Prajāpati is briefly mentioned only in the (later) *Dharmaśāstras*.

With this poor knowledge of the rite of renunciation in the period of the earlier *dharma* texts, we know even less about the idea of irreversibility. The few mentioned elements are not as clearly connected with the ritual death of the candidate as elements in later text are, such as reciting funeral *mantras*, burning the fire drills, or handing over the property and ritual authority to the son. On the level of ritual theology, the irreversibility is not yet tangible as it is in later descriptions.

This is different on the level of the *āśrama* theory. According to the “original” *āśrama* theory formulated in the *Dharmasūtras*, the *āśramas*, including *saṃnyāsa*, are life-long vocations. In the “classical” form of the theory, developed in *Manu* and later works, one can switch from one *āśrama* to another, but in one direction only. Here *saṃnyāsa*, the last *āśrama*, cannot be abandoned either. The idea of the life-long vocation of the *saṃnyāsa āśrama* is thus present in both formulations of the *āśrama* theory (cf. Olivelle 1993).

Why do the *Dharmasūtras* lack a ritual description which would correspond to this aspect of their *āśrama* theory? One possible answer is that those elements which emphasize irreversibility were not yet incorporated into this rite in the period of the earlier *dharma* texts. This could explain why they, as records of custom and convention, did not document this custom, and why it did not occur to the Brāhmaṇical lawgivers to prescribe such ritual elements. The idea of life-long vocations may not yet have been transferred to and realized in the sphere of ritual.<sup>63</sup> Another possible answer is that such a rite is not described due to the peculiarities of *dharma* literature. The rite appears rudimentary even in later *Dharmaśāstra* works, while at the same time contemporary texts such as the *Samnyāsa Upaniṣads* describe it in detail. The lack of a description does not necessarily mean that in the period of the *Dharmasūtras*, the rite was not in

63 For the definition of *dharma* literature as a record of customs and conventions see Lari-viere 1997; cf. also Wezler 1999. For the prescriptive character of *dharma* literature cf. Olivelle 1984: 108.

existence—the early *dharma* texts lack a description of the rite for marriage as well.<sup>64</sup>

It is thus difficult to explain the rudimentary form the rite has in early *dharma* literature and the lack of elements which would emphasize its irreversibility. From around the beginning of the Common Era onwards, there is eventually broad evidence for an elaborate rite and the idea of its irreversibility, whether this is due to their late development or to the different literary genre in which they are set forth.

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64 I thank Patrick Olivelle for having called my attention to this fact.



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