

Excerpts from an Interview with Marty Glass¹: Tears, Laughter, Compassion and Wisdom in the *Kali-Yuga*

By Samuel Bendeck Sotillos

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos: You have had the privilege of studying under the direction of the doyen of the World's Religions, Professor Houston Smith. Is this how you came to learn about the "Perennialist" or "Traditionalist" school of comparative religion? And could you please underscore how this perspective has uniquely fashioned your writings, becoming its essence?

Marty Glass: I think I remember how I came to know Professor Smith. I think that it had to do with *The Sandstone Papers* (1986). That book was not published initially by Sophia Perennis. It was published by Threshold Books, Kabir Helminski. Either Kabir got in touch with Huston or I got in touch with him. Somehow Huston got the manuscript and he wrote an endorsement on the back cover of the book. So I guess we got to know each other that way. I would also see him annually at the Memorial Day Program of the Ramakrishna Order, events that were held in Olema [CA]. He always came there and we used to meet once a year there. I got to know him better, we went out and had pizza from time to time and I would visit him at his house. We became friends.

I think we became friends after both he and I discovered "traditionalism," he probably before me. He discovered Schuon at some point, perhaps after reading Jacob Needleman's anthology, *The Sword of Gnosis* (1974), or maybe just because he knew everyone, and I seem to remember that he said in an interview somewhere that this changed his whole life.

The exact same thing happened to me and probably happened to many people. I remember I walked into Shambhala Bookstore, which

¹ This is an edited and abbreviated version of an interview conducted earlier this year.

does not exist anymore, on Telegraph Avenue [Berkeley, CA] and casually picked up a book called *Understanding Islam* (1963) by somebody named Frithjof Schuon. I had never heard of him, but somehow this book got in my hand. I took it out. I read two paragraphs and I knew immediately that I was in the presence of something I had never seen before in my life. It was like a revelation, like lightning or something: this man was clearly speaking *ex cathedra*. I'd never seen anything like it. Then I found out about the traditionalists. I read him, Coomaraswamy, Guénon, all of them.

I realized that if I was a seeker of the Truth I could find it right there in the world of traditionalism: that is, in religion, in the spiritual traditions, as they were expounded by Guénon, Schuon, Coomaraswamy and the others. It wasn't Marx, wasn't Fidel and Che or Lenin or Chairman Mao, but this traditionalist school that was the real thing I had been seeking, and that school became the center of my spiritual understanding altogether. I still knew that the tradition that spoke to me directly was the religion of India. But the traditionalists enabled me to understand the "transcendent unity." Enabled me to find the Truth in any house of worship in the world.

SBS: The concept of the *yugas*, although broadly accepted in the perennial cosmologies or *cosmologia perennis* of the world's spiritual traditions, has not been embraced by the modern and post-modern mindset. You have written a celebrated work on the social-historical criticism from a spiritual underpinning: *Yuga: An Anatomy of Our Fate*. Would you mind further articulating on the concept of the *yuga* for readers who might not be familiar with this perspective?

MG: In the Hindu tradition, history is not linear but cyclical. And believe it or not, according to cyclical interpretations things are not getting better. The spiritual traditions are unanimous on this. It's the opposite of the doctrine of the Enlightenment, the doctrine of Progress.

Let me start again on this. The Hindu doctrine proposes four *yugas*, or Ages, in which we witness a steady deterioration of humanity's spiritual capacities. That's why in the final *yuga*, this one, we are given, by the grace of God, an easy practice, the Invocation of the Holy Name,

any Name of God. But it seemed to me, in my writing, important to understand or interpret the cyclic doctrines in terms of our concrete lives, our living experience. Progress is a very powerful argument, very powerful, and in certain respects very true, incontrovertible. In *YUGA* I listed, after a very great deal of reading, what I called the Five Hallmarks of the *Kali-Yuga*: the Prison of Unreality, the Fall into Time, the Reign of Quantity, the End of Nature and the Mutation into Machinery or the Mutation into Technology. I am just saying this in one quick sentence, but there's a very large bibliography behind it, an archive of deadly serious sociological analysis. To be able to think this way about what was happening in our lives I was especially helped by certain books. Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989), a profoundly significant book; *The Reign of Quantity* (1954), of course, René Guénon magisterial work; the Fall into Time comes from Mircea Eliade's body of work; the Mutation into Machinery has behind it an extensive archive of critical analysis addressing the meaning of technology in our lives; and the Prison of Unreality emerges from Jean Baudrillard's work and the work of many other thinkers expounding the ramifications of the insight that we live in what we now all accept as a "virtual" world where we think everything that we see and do on screens, Baudrillard's "hyper-reality of simulations," Disneyland, is reality, unaware that we have lost contact with an unmediated reality, with our own lives. This is definitely the trickiest, most elusive statement about our lives, our profoundest and most invisible entrapment, the most insidious and diabolical mutation of humanity. What we perceive and regard as *real* is fundamental to our lives. You have to read the book. Talking about this demanded a style of prose I can't duplicate in the spoken word.

One of the things that distinguishes me from some of the other traditionalist writers is that my bibliography was not just taken from the world of spiritual writing by any means. There were many, many authorities, many masters I read who were writing about the times that we lived in. They are all in my bibliography. I mention so many of them in the book, like Lewis Mumford, for example, you know: so many of them who write about our times and are not specifically religious writers but are saying very very important things to help us understand what the *Kali-Yuga* means even though they are totally unfamiliar with that term. I called them "unconscious prophets of the *Kali-Yuga*." Karl Marx, for example! He, talking about the universe of exchange value, and

Guenon, talking about *The Reign of Quantity*, who would have loathed each other, were both talking about the same thing from different perspectives. So what informed *YUGA* was not only my background in religious writing, spiritual writing, but a very much larger bibliography, a much larger range of insights contributing to our understanding of the contemporary world. And they were more down-to-earth than the metaphysicians, more compelling, more demonstrable. Neil Postman writing about amusing ourselves to death, talking about television. Theodore Roszak. There are a hell of a lot of books like that; there are tons of them as a matter of fact. There are movies about what's going down now. You can just go to the movies and see the dystopias. Read science fiction. It isn't as if it is a secret that something is amiss. It's presented in so many ways in our culture; there are so many people who know in different ways, different languages, different terminologies, that something is wrong. The Coen Brothers, and many other film-makers, certainly know. That body of knowledge became a very important part of *YUGA*. Cosmology, the four stages or the four *yugas*, is a form with no content. I was able to document the cyclical argument or prophecy simply by examining our daily lives.

I am saying that it's common knowledge that there is something profoundly wrong. I am happy about *YUGA* because it talks to people about their own lives, their lived experience. They can recognize themselves. It's standard procedure now to contrast modern society with traditional societies, to help us understand the alternative ways of being human. Did Native Americans need more information? They did not have computers! What a terrible fate! No information! (laughter). But they had something more important than information. The traditional societies knew that there was a God, knew that there was a divinity behind this world. They had something that we have sadly lost. I talk about that of course in *YUGA*, but it's almost a truism, it's a cliché; people know that there was something pure and wonderful about the way those people lived. They were not perfect, we are always human. There's a great formulation by Seyyed Hossein Nasr: "The traditional worlds were essentially good with accidental evil, and the modern world is essentially evil with accidental good."² (laughter) I always thought that that was a brilliant summary. And yet, and yet, it's *still* an oversimplification!

² S.H. Nasr, "What Is Tradition?" in *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), p. 85.

SBS: A core point that you make is that: “Kali-Yuga: The Age of Wrong Diagnosis”.³ Could you say more?

MG: (Laughter) Yes, that’s certainly true, because while people know that something is wrong here, the diagnosis is always wrong; they can’t figure out what it is. The true diagnosis begins with the assumption that humanity is a spiritual entity, that we have strayed from our primordial spiritual identity, that the criteria which determine our collective behavior do not originate in that identity. We say this is the problem or that’s the problem and that’s what we have to do, scientist can handle this problem, technology will take care of these problems. But there is something much deeper that’s wrong, the whole of humanity has gone astray. And yet even this analysis is at fault because it assumes that something can be done, that a collective reorientation is possible. I think we have to simply say that what’s happening, the *Kali-Yuga*, is *inevitable, illusory and providential*. Those three descriptive adjectives all at once: they compose, I believe, an insight into the truth of the thing. Which means that only individual spiritual realization is the medicine. That’s why the subtitle to *YUGA* is “A Companion to Spiritual Practice.” It can be summed up this way: “In these times a spiritual path is an ark. The great task is to make the flood visible.” Which is exactly what I tried to do in *YUGA*.

I just read yesterday or a few days ago something that was dispiriting to me. In the Pacific Ocean there’s a huge patch of garbage as big as the state of Texas, or two states of Texas, that will never go away. Plastic, plastic stuff. You hear about irreversible things like that, the extinction of creatures, desertification, irreversible ecological disasters, and you realize how incredibly significant it is.

I have always been a storyteller for children, all my life, for my own children and my grandchildren. A few months ago I told my grandchildren a story about a place where all the animals who were extinct are all still alive, a quest story. First I showed them pictures from my bird book of certain birds that were now extinct and told them that there was a place where they were all still alive. In the story they go on a quest and find the place, and the story ends in great joy. The extinction

³ Marty Glass, “Last Chapter, End of the Book” in *Yuga: An Anatomy of Our Fate* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 323.

of species is genocide, a terrible thing documented exhaustively in the *National Geographic* magazine. It isn't as if humanity is deliberately malevolent. People are concerned about the extinction of species, deplore and lament it. They sense that it's an enormously significant thing. But the powers, the forces that are making it happen, the vast impersonal elemental economic forces that are controlling global affairs and making these things happen are autonomous. Nobody *wants* it to happen, but it happens anyway.

SBS: The spiritual doctrines and methods of the world's religions originate in what is non-human and beyond the contingencies of the physical world, known as *Nirguna Brahman* (beyond qualities) or *Paramātmā* (Supreme Self) in the Hindu tradition. There are nonetheless certain spiritual practices which are said to be more effective in the different phases of the *yuga*. Could you speak more about the current age known as the *Kali-Yuga* in Eastern cosmology or the Iron Age in Western cosmology and what has been ascribed as the most beneficial spiritual practice for our times?

MG: I discuss that in the Introduction to *Eastern Light in Western Eyes* (2003), in rather exhaustive detail. We are told that in the *Kali-Yuga* the practice is the Invocation of the Holy Name. Mantra repetition, a mantra, the Holy Name. This is understood in the Buddhist tradition, Islamic tradition and in the Christian tradition...

The teaching that God is present in his name is true. "Hallowed be thy Name" we find in the Lord's Prayer, in Latin *sanctificetur nomen tuum*. Of course, it isn't as if anybody can say the Name and the Presence will be affirmed in direct experience. There has to be preparation for this, and devotion. After that evening I read about mantra practice of the Holy Name in many places. The very last chapter in Whitall N. Perry's book *Treasury of Traditional Wisdom* (1971) is Invocation of the Holy Name. He gave it that dignity, that prestige, by preserving it for the final chapter. You must feel and know it to be true that *All I have is thy Name*. You must feel and know it to be true that *I have nothing in this world except the name of God and that's everything*. Feel it and know it and rejoice in it. There is a Hindu story about the *chintamani* stone illustrating precisely that truth.

SBS: In your book *Eastern Light in Western Eyes* you discuss the challenges of the path in a time where there is much confusion, if not subversion of the *dharmā*, leading seekers astray. You present the topic of spiritual guidance for those that have no human guide underscoring the important role that books currently play. Could you elaborate on this important matter that many seekers must tackle whether they are looking for a guide or not?

MG: That's a very important question, and I am aware that my particular story is in no way representative. The fact that I could, without a teacher, without being part of a *sangha* or a group, learn what I have learned and become what I have become is very much a minority thing. I am atypical.

Most people in these times want a teacher; they want to be part of a group of some kind. These groups exist. The public consciousness, the public world is atheistic. But there are many seekers because at the very time when a Divine Reality is denied there is consequently an experienced emptiness in people—not in everyone, of course, but in many—and they seek it with even greater fervor. People are desperate for some kind of meaning in their lives, some kind of durable meaning.

And there are many charlatans out there, of course. There is an endless, inexhaustible, kaleidoscopic and brilliantly conceived catalogue of misdirection that people will be offered as a spiritual solution. Something to alleviate the subterranean malaise. The ingenuity of charlatans and fakers in these times is something which should be celebrated! There should be operas written about it! They are successful because the longing is desperate. And it cannot be denied that many, probably the majority, of the teachers offering specious answers to spiritual seekers are themselves sincere. That happens. The funny thing is that almost every answer will have something true in it, something that rings true. The complexity here is quite ramified, to say the least.

I have heard it said that there are three million practicing Buddhist claimants in the United States now, people who have not been able to find an answer in Christianity or Judaism. There are Buddhists all over the place, Buddhism is very big thing, and it's a wonderful thing, and though some of the Buddhism that is given to people is western therapy laced

with Buddhism, it still works on some level and we must be grateful. People do find some kind of solace, some kind of meaning, some kind of comfort for them when they deal with tragedy or the rigors of life. The word *yoga* can mean literally anything! That's happening all over the place. All of this potpourri is being dished out and all of these answers are offered to people, by all sorts of people, and that is a good thing: it characterizes the *yuga*.

I know a lot of people whose Buddhism is not as rigorous as Buddhism really is, but it gives them something, it gives them something to hold onto. There are people who, on the other hand, will turn to the computer in the morning as if to some sort of deliverance: "I'm online, I'm okay—I'm real!" There are millions of people who feel that way, and of course they're deceived. The seduction of technology in these times merits, and indeed has received, an entire bibliography. Not to mention the Supreme Seduction, the Supreme False Answer: *Shopping!* There are seekers everywhere, people who are seeking, looking for happiness in some way in this empty world that doesn't offer them anything enduring.

This is not to imply that things can be turned around; the direction is going to be what it is. But there is a kind of mercy that's offered to people in these times. There's a phrase I remember from Mircea Eliade; we live in what he called "the descending trajectory of the [cosmic] cycle,"⁴ and he suggested that in a way it's a privilege to live in this time because you can see it, you can see it happening, and that itself is a kind of wisdom: to be able to perceive what is going on in the *yuga*. To see it is a privilege, a privileged position from which we can see the curtain coming down, we can see the whole thing, and we must still love the world while this is happening. The last part of *YUGA*, you will see, is a celebration. You are saved if you can just "Love one another as I have loved you."⁵ Those are the words, the teaching, of our Savior. You can still do that on an individual basis. You can extricate yourself. Love one another, love the world, love the beauty of creation, love the glory of God. Love your existence. "I was a hidden treasure and I wanted to be known: so I created the world." (*Hadith qudsi*)

⁴ Mircea Eliade, "Destiny and History" in *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 131.

⁵ John 13:34

I remember in *YUGA* I talk about the distinction between historical humanity and eternal humanity. Very important. The *yuga* is the direction of *history*, the collective movement in the dream of time, and it's a one way trip. But within that collective movement, and to the degree that you can disengage yourself from history, humanity is eternal and divine, *imago dei*, God is present in every soul all the time, even here in the *Kali-Yuga*. It isn't as if God has abandoned us—which is, of course, inconceivable. He is present in every individual soul. You can and should rise above this as individuals, rise above this “descending trajectory,” this one way trip, and still celebrate the whole thing. It's glorious!

I remember I once got a letter from Seyyed Hossein Nasr and he said to me, “Nothing can separate us from God.” The *yuga*, everything that Schuon talks about or that Guénon talks about, the whole trip, has ultimately no power over us as individuals. “Nothing can separate us from God.” There's a passage, I think, in one of the epistles of Paul that says something like that too. So when you try to talk about this incredible business in a way it's over our heads. Something is happening, there's no doubt about it, yet at the same time *nothing* is happening: nothing can remove the core of divinity in every human being, nothing can extinguish it, nothing can erase the miracle of human birth. We are made in His Image, theomorphic, deiform, all of us, every single person, even in the *Kali-Yuga*, and nothing can change that. In a way the only answer to all of this, the way I ended *YUGA* because I didn't want to end it with a feeling of doom, which would have been a profound misreading, is with the celebration of each individual: “Love one and other as I have loved you.” *Love the world!* You can still fulfill the promise of human birth, even now.

I wanted to make that clear. And what I'm about to say may sound like a bit of a digression, but I don't think it is. There was something about the Traditionalists that I characterized as a *punitive elitism*. Simply and baldly put, I felt that the Traditionalists didn't really love people. I felt they blamed the victim in some way and I wanted to counter that. I have known a lot of people who aren't religious specifically, but they're wonderful people—maybe even as wonderful as the traditionalist writers!—and what their fate is in the eyes of God we don't know. People I love, people who have love in their hearts. There is as I have insisted, a divine presence in everyone. There was a divine presence in

Mick when he died. In a way it's not totally bad news; as Nasr said in his letter, "Nothing can separate us from God." And so this "descending trajectory" of cosmic time, the *Kali-Yuga*, while it undeniably has a certain power, cannot defeat us as individuals. I refer someplace to "the eternal magnetism of heaven." I wanted that to come across in *YUGA*.

SBS: Would you say that the *sophia perennis* or the perennial philosophy provides the theoretical core underpinning all of your work?

MG: What I learned from traditionalism, what I learned from those magnificent incomparably brilliant writers, has informed my writing. In my spiritual *practice* it means something, I suppose, but very little, really nothing compared to what the *Bhagavad-Gita* means, nothing compared to what the actual Holy Writ, the scripture in the tradition says to me. I find that now that I'm not writing anymore I almost never read any traditionalist literature. I gave almost my entire religious library away. I gave it to the second hand bookstore in Garberville. I kept only the books that still spoke to me, and they're all books within the Hindu tradition, almost all of them. I think I kept two books by Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (1953) and maybe one other. But I rarely ever look at them. They were important to me as a writer in understanding the "transcendent unity of religions," however you want to put it. That central priceless contribution of the traditionalist writers was indispensable to me as a writer, but in terms of my practice I don't need them anymore than anyone else practicing the religion of India would need them. You do not require the "transcendent unity" teaching of traditionalism to practice a religion. Traditionalism is not a Path.

When this question comes up, I always employ the analogy of music. If you're a musician you play some instrument. If you don't play any instrument you're not a musician. That's your religion: some particular instrument. You don't say that the other musical instruments are not musical instruments; they're all musical instruments. You play the base and the other guy plays the horn. It's that way with the religions. You understand that all of these instruments are music. Or all these styles: jazz is music, rock and roll is music, classical music, rhythm and blues, country western, they're all music. There's one instrument you play, one style that speaks to you. If you're a jazz musician that doesn't mean that

the other styles aren't music. I always point out that they are all the same kind of thing, it's all music, and you perform one instrument or you're in one particular musical tradition, but the others are just different kinds of music but still music. I would use that analogy of musical instruments or musical style to explain that they're all valid, but you play one. It's really true in music: if you're going to be a musician it's very very rare that you're going to be able to master more than one instrument, very rare; it's usually in one instrument that you find the whole truth of music. You find the whole of music in your one instrument. You find the whole truth of religion in the religion you practice.

SBS: You have also mentioned that there are no essential differences between the *margas* or paths of knowledge or *jnana* and devotion or *bhakti*, which has been confirmed by preeminent exponents of Advaita Vedanta, the foremost expression of Hindu spirituality (i.e. Sri Ramana Maharshi). Could you say more about this?

MG: I discuss that at great length in the Introduction to *Eastern Light in Western Eyes*. These are both orthodox paths, both traditional, two paths that lead up to the same mountain top. I believe that for me in my last moments it's going to be *bhakti*. The love of God is what's going to sustain me more than identity with an Impersonal Absolute. But who really knows? I can only say that I always come back to the love of God—tasting the sugar rather than being the sugar, as it's put. I'll always come back to tasting the sugar. But as I said, who knows? Lately Kashmir Saivism has been speaking loud and clear to me!

SBS: You describe yourself as a “down-to-earth” person, wanting to make your books more readily accessible to wider audiences outside the current “Perennialist” or “Traditionalist” readership. Could you perhaps articulate as to why you think this is important to the contemporary era and also why these writings are so challenging to the psychology of present-day readers?

MG: Guénon, Coomaraswamy and Schuon are not easy to read. Nobody I've known in my life is ever going to be able to read Coomaraswamy or any of those people. Only a very small microscopic percentage of

the human race is ever going to be able to read these guys. There are passages in Coomaraswamy, who was fluent in six languages, that he doesn't bother to translate. Who the hell is going to read this stuff? I have never suggested the traditionalist writers to anyone, and I never will. Those books are for a very small microscopic group of people.

In my own writing I have been fortunate to have absorbed the traditionalist writings with inexpressible gratitude, but I'm trying to address a much wider audience. *YUGA* itself is not that easy a book, but my other books are. I try to get across some of the basic "hits" in the traditionalist archive, pithy stuff, quick jabs. But in my writing, it's more in the style of the prose, the voice, the sensibility, the language, the feel, than in metaphysical vocabulary that I have tried to transmit something of the "transcendent unity."

SBS: For readers which are unaware of your recent and final book: *The Woodrat Chronicles* which you refer to as the *magnum opus* of your life's work, would you mind elucidating the central story and message of this work that you have called a spiritual allegory as it does not fit into the typical genre of the perennialist lore?

MG: In all of the things I've written, as I've been saying throughout, I address a wider audience than the Traditionalists, but *The Woodrat Chronicles* addresses everybody. My grandson, eight years old, is doing a book report on it. He's eight years old and he can read it. My adult friends, my age, who've read it, have laughed throughout and cried at the end, as I did. It has, to say the least, a broad appeal. I don't know what's going to happen to it. At this moment it's on an editor's desk at HarperCollins. I've sort of put it from my mind; whatever happens, happens. I sometimes feel a certain frustration because that book is so funny and so warm and so full of love, so accessible. It's written on two levels, for children and for adults. It's a *voice* that was born in me. Maybe somebody will discover it someday; maybe my kids will take care of it. I've made a complete tape of it. I've recorded the whole thing on a recorder that my son gave me and he plays it over the radio in Ukiah on a little radio program he does there with his wife. As I said, I originally wrote that book only for my children. The names of the characters

are Lifeboat, Joyride, Masquerade, Karma, Wilderness and Smithsonian. L.J.K.M.W.S. My five children and my son-in-law are: Loren, Julie, Katie, Meagan, Will and Steve. But when I finished it I realized it was for more than my children. It's for everyone. My only book written for everyone. Maybe they'll decide to take a chance with it at HarperCollins.



Marty Glass's Books:

The Woodrat Chronicles (forthcoming)

Heartbeats of Hinduism: Living the Truth of the Immortal Dharma
(San Rafael, CA: Sophia Perennis, 2008)

Yuga: An Anatomy of Our Fate (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004)

Eastern Light in Western Eyes: A Portrait of the Practice of Devotion
(Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2003)

Sandstone Papers: On the Crisis of Contemporary Life (first edition,
Putney, VT: Threshold Books, 1986; second edition, Hillsdale, NY:
Sophia Perennis, 2005)