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RELG 213 – Hinduism

Response Paper #1

What is Hinduism?

When I was in high school, as a part of the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, I wrote my capstone paper on the role of women in Hinduism. I didn’t remember much from my research for that paper initially, but I reread it in anticipation for this class to refresh.

Sacred Texts: As mentioned in our discussion in class, I know that Hinduism is a religion with several texts, like *Vedas*, *dharma*, and *Manusmrti*. I also recalled that many of these texts are written in Sanskrit. Some of these texts are composed of poems. Others are legal texts that act as guidelines for living and worshipping.

Caste System: I also recall that the caste system plays a role in Hinduism even today. Although scholars believe that the caste system was not a part of the ancient text but rather in the writings of Brahmins later on, it has been pervasive in social and political dealings in India. It is officially outlawed. I know that there are thousands of hereditary groups called *Jatis* which are categorized into four categories. In the highest are *Brahmins* (priest) and in the lowest are *servants* outside of these four groups are the “untouchables”. Ones caste may dictate the types of jobs they can have, their social class, who the may marry, etc. The caste system is so pervasive in India that even non-Hindus practice it in some parts of India. Although upward mobility through the caste system is impossible during a lifetime, one may be reborn into a higher caste after death.

Reincarnation: For a Hindu, the ultimate goal is to attain “release” (*moksha*). Until they attain true enlightenment, they go through the cycle of death and rebirth through the process of reincarnation. Hinduism and its sacred texts offers guidelines and practices for transcending this cycle. An example of such a practice is yoga (prescribed some time ago by a certain *gurus*). There are also strict diets suggested by some texts. These physical practices are aimed at bringing the practitioner closer to enlightenment, and thus closer to *moksha*. By achieving good *karma*, as mentioned above, one may be reborn into a higher caste in the next life.

Theism: It is difficult to categorize Hinduism as either monotheistic or polytheistic. *Brahma* is the supreme being and other gods come from him. There are many other Gods. Some of the well known ones are *Vishnu* and *Krishna*. Hindu worship is often focused on rituals and ceremonies. There are many holidays and festivals in honor of different gods. Some gods may be more important to some Hindus than others so it is difficult to generalize the role of theism in Hinduism. There are many stories about the gods in the sacred texts, poems, and songs and these play a major role in the practice of the religion. Although I don’t recall any right now, I remember finding them to be very beautiful and poetic, full of magic and wonder.

Gurus: Priests, gurus, and teachers in the Hindu tradition have played an important role shaping it. Many of the major texts and important rituals come from these leaders. They are often charismatic and well respected members of the highest caste and are often said to have been born divine. Sacred texts are often studied and interpreted by the priests and then communicated to the people.

Art and Culture: Art I associate with Hinduism is often very ornate and colorful and portrays mystical depictions of gods. Famous Hindus I know include Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, first female prime minister of India, Indira Gandhi!

Doniger

The key take-away from *Time and Space in India* is summarized very poetically in the conclusion of the chapter. As Doniger closes with the story of “The Brahmin head and the Pariah Body”, she writes “such a conflation is not a monstrosity, nor is it a mistake – or if it is, it is a *felix culpa*” (64). Although I don’t know much about Hinduism yet, I have a feeling that this story will serve as a metaphor for the marriage of dichotomies we may encounter this semester. With regard to her account of the creation of the Indian subcontinent, Doniger’s juxtaposition of the Hindu creation myths with geological theory is also quite interesting as it draws attention to the often unexpected insight we find in religious mythology. She also writes of prior scientific theory that was later proven incorrect to show that what we call science can be as fallible as mystical cosmology. I found the story of Manu and his encounter with the fish (which may or may not have been *Vishnu*) very interesting because of its closeness to the Judeo-Christian account of Noah and the flood. There we find an initial destruction of the world with water (as well as a promise of a second, more permanent, destruction by fire) in contrast to the Hindu description of destruction by both fire and water, with the promise of rebirth each time: a balanced, cyclical passage of time to mirror the idea of reincarnation (although I believe that can be escaped).