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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 as a refresher.

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”. One’s caste may dictate the types of jobs they can have, their social class, who they may marry, etc. The caste system is so pervasive 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 by 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*, one may be reborn into a higher caste in the next life.

Theism: Hinduism is primarily polytheistic. *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Krishna* are among the most popular gods. 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: 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.

Flood

In *An Introduction to Hinduism* – “Ancient Origins”, Gavin Flood survey several theories concerning the origins of the Indian people and the Hindu religion. He attempts to balance the influence of the Indus valley civilization with the influence of the Aryan culture. He explains that the relationship between the two cultures is a major topic of debate in the assessing the origins of the languages, social conventions, and, especially, the religion of India. First, he explores the role of the Indus valley civilization which developed around 2500 BCE. It was an advanced civilization with water technologies, drainage systems and municipally managed waste systems. Its economy was likely based on grain. The high level of uniformity in architecture and urban planning suggests centralized, “sophisticated administration and a hierarchical structure of authority” (27). Since much of what is know of the Indus valley civilization is through archeological evidence there is little know about the origins of its language. With regards to religion, the Indus valley civilization included a figure that may be viewed as a precursor to the Hindu god *Siva*. The Indus valley civilization declined as a result of flooding or decrease rainfall. Flood goes on to explore the influence of the Aryans. The two major, somewhat opposing, ideas there are the “Aryan migration” thesis and the “cultural transformation” thesis. The migration thesis posits that the Aryans migrated or even invaded around 1500 BCE and took over as the “dominant cultural force.” This is supported primarily by the similarities in lingual and religious practice to Europeans of the time. The cultural transformation thesis is that Indus valley culture became the Aryan culture over time. This is supported by archeological exploration of “grey ware” and also similarities between Sanskrit and Indo-European languages.

Zimmer

In *The Parade of Ants*, the king of gods, Indra, commissions the god of arts and crafts, Vishvakarman, to build an extravagant residence. Over time, the king becomes more and more ambitious and demanding of Vishvakarman. As a result, Vishvakarman implores Brahma to help him. Brahma then consults Vishnu and together they manage to show the king the vastness of time as well as his insignificance. He takes their message to heart but he is eventually convinced of the importance of the balance between recognizing and acknowledging the grander scope of the universe in contrast to and balanced with the importance of the personal life. Heinrich Zimmer opens with this story to portray an instance of Hindu ideas of time and its nature. He contrasts the cyclical and predictable Hindu model of time, with is big picture view of all that has been and all that will be, an absolute schedule of creation and destruction that not even the gods can escape, to our Western, human-centered view of time and history. He also describes the four *yugas* (*Krita, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali*) of each cycle and what they entail (apparently we are in the worst, and briefest of the four, *Kali*!).

Eck

What *is* India? Is it a political entity that resulted from the cartographic craftsmanship of the British? Or rather a surprisingly cohesive conglomeration of regional entities with many diversities yet striking similarities? Perhaps something in between? Diana Eck explores a range of idea concerning how we think of the subcontinent, focusing on the geographical aspects of the topic. First, she discusses the 19th and 20th century European ideas that there was no “India” until British consolidation. So was India “invented” by the British? This idea does not seem to be very sound because *Bharata* existed far before the British came. Furthermore, Eck states that “Hindu narrative and mythology are richly interwoven with the geography of India…every story has a place and every place has a story” (48-49). This is a powerful idea that places the geography of the subcontinent in a central role in our analysis of the Hindu religion. It is rich with stories of, and homages to, physical features. For example, there exists many hymns to rivers in the *Rig Veda*. Eck argues that the Hindu religion is fundamentally location-centric. Ideas of place (and of time) transcend the physically discernable as Eck describes the “living cosmos” as portrayed in the Hindu tradition. She goes on to give on overview of the more practical (but, in my opinion, equally poetic) conventions of Hindu pilgrimage. One idea there being *pradakshina*, or “keeping the center to one’s right”, the tradition of walking around something or someone to show honor. There are those pilgrims who even venture to walk around all of India!