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RELG 213

Response Paper 2

I began this semester with a very simplistic and Eurocentric idea of what Hinduism is (fueled primarily by an independent study I did a long time ago). However, I was very excited to learn all about it and I have found the material to be very fascinating and enlightening thus far.

One of the most interesting ideas I have come across in Hinduism is that we exist in the same realm as the gods. In Christianity (the religious tradition with which I am most familiar), there is something of a conflict between the emphasis on maintaining a close relationship with God and the continual reminder that God is an all mighty, all powerful entity that is only reachable through prayer (and perhaps in death). Christianity posits that we are made in the physical image of God but it emphasizes that we are flawed and God is perfect in every way. He does not exist in a reality that we can perceive or fathom but he affects ours in major ways. This construction of God allows for carte blanche in the doctrine, as incongruities can easily be written off as the will of God that we humans are unable to fathom. In contrast, the Hindu people and gods exist on something of a continuum, on which ordinary people, through rebirth, may achieve the status of a god, and gods may fall so low as to become ants. This realization of the divine places the Hindu practitioner in the narrative of the scripture. Rather than creating a greater heavenly reality in which spiritual beings exist and operate, it places the earth and the heavens on that continuum and gods and humans are able to interact extensively. In the earlier Vedic tradition, this allowed people to seek personal favors from the gods in order to improve their lives. Later, in the Upanishads, this idea facilitates the emphasis on the interconnectedness between all of us, humans, nature, and even the gods, through the idea of *atman.*

I really enjoy studying Hinduism because it acknowledges the uncertainties of life. In Hinduism, even the gods do not have all of the answers. Death himself, speaking on death, says “as to this even the gods of old had doubts for its too hard to understand, it’s a subtle doctrine…” (Katha Upanishad 1.21). In the Hindu scriptures we have read and discussed, the authors embrace the fact that not all the answers to life are known. In admitting this, the text is often very profound because it presents the ideas that some things cannot be known by anyone, god or man. Even the gods are unable to escape the universe and its cycles of death and rebirth and therefore the strongest force of all is not one that is conscious (in the traditional sense) or by design. Again, this is in contrast with the Christian tradition, in which God is the most total and absolute force.

Thus far, I have found the poetry of the Hindu texts to be absolutely captivating (I actually look forward to doing my readings for class this semester!). The structure of the text itself often mirrors the ideas that it expresses. The metaphors used to express lofty, often ethereal, ideas work on several levels. On the surface, they are a simplification of grand ideas that are digestible (and often entertaining) to the layman. But on a deeper level, the structure of the narrative, including setup, the main ideas, and, especially, repetition, mirror the message. Furthermore, the Vedic emphasis on the power that lies in the sound of words themselves (not just their meaning) is complemented by this expressive form of writing (although its difficult to tell how much of the form is lost or augmented in translation).

In chapter 6 of the *Chandogya Upanishad* (my favorite thus far), Aruni gives several lessons and repeats the phrase “*tat tvan asi, Svetaketu*” after each one: “that’s how you are, Svetaketu”. He explains *atman* through a series of metaphors that are quite creative and insightful. He repeatedly points to nature as a portrayal of Hindu truths. I find this approach to be lovely. This Upanishad does not attempt to set humans apart from the rest of the world. To contrast Christianity again, the message here is not that we should not trust the world we perceive and resist its trappings. Rather, it is that the higher truths we seek are evident in nature all around and also deep within us. The idea of the *atman* is complemented very nicely by the emphasis on overcoming the ego self. Although the *atman* is deep within you it is not about you.

I am very excited for what is next in Hinduism for a number of reasons. For one, we have already seen a paradigm shift in the tradition’s view on how individuals should live and what they should strive for. In particular, the early Vedic tradition emphasized sacrificial ritual and requests for personal, earthly blessings. This idea is opposed in the *Vedanta* where there is a shift toward renouncing the earthly desires and looking inward to attain enlightenment on what is beyond the immediate outside. This shift indicates to me that the religion is very dynamic and fluid. Hindu ideas found in scripture likely indicate a great deal about the societies of the times in which they were created. I look forward to learning where it goes next!