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HIST 2A

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HIST 2A Final Essay (Questions 2 and 3)

There are two important themes that are prevalent throughout history: empires and religion. Empires, like the Han Empire of China and the Roman Empire, are the pivotal structures that created characteristics of society today, whether it be religions, ideologies, or other cultural influences. It then follows that religions grew from just ancestral reverence to more universal religions, such as Christianity and Buddhism, which tend to be more ethical than the earlier forms we see in the barbaric and savage stages.

Prompt 2 – Empires:

All throughout history, empires have had a characteristic rise and fall quality, needing to continually expand in order to survive. This means that empires do not only rule over those of the same ethnic background as the core state, but rather conquers lands, or periphery states. It is when the empire stops expanding that causes its inevitable deterioration. However, empires also provide the trading of goods, as well as ideas and scientific discoveries and inventions. The Han and Roman Empires were not exempt from these characteristics.

In the November 25th lecture “The Qin and Han Empires,” Dr. Barbieri mentioned that the Han Empire sprouted during a civil war after the fall of the Qin Dynasty and, in 206 BC, was founded by Liu Bang, a peasant who snaked his way to becoming emperor. Bang then took over all the aspects of the Qin Dynasty, including its capital, their legal system, the bureaucracy, and the religious system. This meant that, like the Qin, the Han Empire’s political system was centralized by the emperor, rather than feudalist. So, throughout the empire, there were many provinces that were ruled by governors and military commandant selected by the emperor personally, which were then broken up into different counties ruled by specially selected magistrates.

Other than Liu Bang, the Han Empire had a few other important rulers, including Empress Lu and Emperor Wu. Empress Lü, the wife of Liu Bang, ruled as the first female ruler of China from 188 to 180 BC. Emperor Wu reigned from 141-87 BC and was responsible for doubling the size of the Han Empire, thanks to his wars against the Xiongnu to the west. Eventually, during the rule of Emperor Wang Mang, the Han Empire fell into turmoil as peasant-led civil unrest led to a civil war, which tore down the old Han Empire and created a much weaker Eastern Han Empire.

Moving from Asia to Europe, we see the Roman Empire, which has an incredibly rich history and foundation, dating all the way to the founding of the Republic in 509 BC. In Republican Rome, the people were divided into patricians, or the bureaucrats, and the plebeians, or the general population. The patricians acted as the political head, excluding the voice of the commoners, which had angered the plebeians. This led to political compromise and reform and the rise of the patrician assembly and the plebeian assembly, which were both equal and worked together.

This compromise had allowed the Roman Republic to finally have expansion campaigns, which, according to the November 25th lecture “The Roman Republic and Empire, and Silk Roads,” is argued to mark the expansive state of the Roman Empire. In other words, the Roman Republic is the expansive state of the Roman Empire. Most of the expansion occurs during the Punic Wars against Carthage in 264 – 146 BC, which unlocked Northern Africa, Spain, and parts of France. Concurrently, Rome expanded into and conquered Macedonia and Greece.

After all this conquest, Rome fell into a century-long civil war due to Roman social conflict brought on by the quick transformation from a city-state to an empire. At first, Rome was ruled by popular military figures, including Julius Caesar, who acted as leaders in a centralized manner. Julius Caesar’s nephew, Augustus Caesar, ruled from 27 BC – AD 14 as the first emperor of the Roman Empire. However, since the Romans were repulsed by the idea of kingship, Caesar refused to call himself a king or emperor, but rather the consul of the patricians and the tribune of the plebeians. The fall of the Roman Empire was due to its uncontrollable size and economic inflation and Germanic barbarian invasion in the north, as well as Sassanian invasion in the east. These crises led to the Emperors Diocletian and Constantine decentralizing the Roman Empire into two to four pieces, which allowed easier control due to a smaller size.

Though both have common themes, the Han and Roman Empires had different factors that led to their falls. The Han Empire was an inland empire, where communication was done via roads or rivers, and was subject only to northern barbaric invasion, since their gateway was only large grass plains before the building of the Great Wall. The Roman Empire, on the other hand, was a water-based empire, as the Mediterranean was the method of travel and communication, which was much faster than through land. Both Empires expanded through expansion wars – the Han through the Xiongnu wars, and the Roman through the Punic Wars, as well as Macedonian and Greek conquest. The Han Empire inherited the Mandate of Heaven ideology, which meant that ruler was divine and ruled as the son of heaven, and anyone who did not believe in this ideology would inevitably be conquered. Rome ideologies, on the other hand, were almost nonexistent. The empire was built upon the republic, which was a result of the overthrowing of the kingship, so they did not initially believe in a dictatorship-like rule. And unlike the Han Empire, the Romans were much more secular and initially expanded for the sake of self-defense against threatening barbarian tribes, and later changed their ideology to expand for the purpose of increasing their slave population, since their economy was built on the backs of slaves. Both the Romans and Han assimilated the conquered people into their society and slowly they became one of their own. The Han granted the title of “Chinese” to people if they acted Chinese, ate Chinese food, dressed in Chinese fashion, etc. However, the Roman method of assimilation was through legal means, so as long as people were granted citizenship, they would be called Roman.

Additionally, while the Han Empire had an abundant administration system, the Roman Empire did not, and were incredibly spread thin and lacked the control needed to maintain an empire of this size, which was one of the reasons why the Roman Empire disintegrated. In terms of succession, the Han really had no issue in finding a hereditary successor, since the system allowed for the emperor to have multiple wives. However, the Roman succession system was based on hereditary means, but largely allowed other military leaders to take the title of emperor by force, so many of the emperors died by murder or suicide, which led to political instability. The Han similarly fell after Emperor Wang Mang’s murder during the peasant rebellion.

Prompt 3 – Religions:

Religions grew from apart from its usual local and ancestral worship nature and began to revolve around the striving for ethical goodness of humanity, as is evident by most universal religions today, such as Buddhism and Christianity. As Dr. Barbieri expressed in the “Judaism and Christianity” lecture on December 10, 2020, these universal religions were able to spread beyond its source by making some modifications and adaptations when reaching new lands and philosophies, via trade routes and merchants.

Buddhism is the Asian religion, with the Buddha as its main deity figure. According to the lecture “Buddhism in India, Central Asia, and China” on December 8, 2020, the main philosophies of Buddhism are called the “Four Noble Truths,” which are:

* Everything is suffering
* The origin of suffering is desire
* There exists a nirvana, an ending to suffering
* An eightfold path leads to nirvana

These teachings were a result of how the Buddha lived his life as an ascetic for six years, which eventually led to him reaching enlightenment. It can be argued that these teachings are examples of Roy Rappaport’s sacred propositions since they can neither be falsified nor verified, as is explained in “The Sacred in Human Evolution,” while enlightenment is an example of a numinous experience. Enlightenment is only achieved by living like how the Buddha lived, without desire, which drove the way in which all Buddhists seeking enlightenment lived.

While early Buddhism was prevalent in India, as Hinayana Buddhism, which meant “small vehicle.” Hinayana Buddhism is the closest form of Buddhism to the original and taught that only monks can achieve enlightenment, but they can only do it by themselves. However, a second form of Buddhism called Mahayana Buddhism was born, which meant “greater vehicle” and taught that everyone can achieve enlightenment and nirvana. This form of Buddhism began to expand the pantheon, forming an incredibly large polytheistic religion, with many different Buddhas everywhere, at any point in time. Another difference is that people can achieve enlightenment with the help of spirits through prayer, which is an example of a numinous experience in Mahayana Buddhism. So, Buddhism had evolved from a very rigid and pure religion to a much more open and welcoming one, which allowed the masses to achieve enlightenment, as well as reach nirvana much easier. And it was through this universal and appealing nature that Buddhism spread beyond India and traveled to the east.

In Han China, Buddhism was introduced during a period of disunity. Originally, it was a foreigner’s religion, but during this time of suffering, the Chinese began to appreciate the teachings and messages of the Buddha, particularly the first of the Four Noble Truths, which then helped unify and stabilize the Han Empire. Buddhism grew in China, starting with the elite leisure class, who were interested in philosophical matters. According to lecture, they also enjoyed the fact that this was a religion based on texts, because they liked reading and studying and discussing them. Eventually, the emperor was converted to Buddhism, which led to the building of monasteries and a monk population, and eventually the general population of China became Buddhist. While the adoption of Buddhism in China was smoother because Chinese concepts were not dissimilar to Buddhist ones, the Chinese still had to make adaptations to Buddhism for it to be acceptable for everyone. Some adaptations include the allowing of worship of other gods and ancestors, as well as making it easier to achieve enlightenment by removing a lot of the lifestyle and dietary restrictions prevalent in earlier forms of Buddhism.

The other famous religion is Christianity, a “hereditary offshoot of Judaism,” according to Dr. Barbieri during lecture. However, most universal religions drew inspiration from Zoroastrianism, a Persian religion which was born around 600 BC. Most aspects of Christianity are parallel with Zoroastrian ideas, including salvation and religion based on ethics. Christianity takes many of the Judaist teachings and appends the teachings of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who preaches of salvation and one of the Great Commandments that is to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22). Additionally, Jesus ate with sinners and lepers and generally appealed with people who are poor, since he taught that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19).

In Christianity, there are many sacred propositions, including the idea that Jesus Christ is the son of God and that you can only be saved, or enter the kingdom of God, through Him. However, the main and largest is the Bible, and can be argued to be a collection of most of the unfalsifiable and sacred propositions in Christianity. Prayer is also a sacred proposition, because it cannot be falsified or verified that it works today, and is merely faith-based, much like Christianity itself. In the past, miracles did happen, including Jesus rising up from the grave three days after His death, which could’ve been verified by those who witnessed it. However, in the present, miracles performed by God can be considered sacred propositions.

While prayer is a sacred proposition, it can be argued that prayer is also a numinous experience, especially in the practice or ritual of speaking in tongues. People who engage in speaking in tongues testify that they feel the presence of God, and overall feel more holy. Additionally, the practice of the Eucharist is another numinous experience, especially since the idea is that the wine and bread that they partake in is symbolically the blood and body of Christ, as well as a reenactment of the last supper. Sacred propositions and numinous experiences both play roles in fortifying the faith of believers.

At first, Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire since Christians rejected the Roman pantheon and would not participate in the local ceremonies for these gods. However, since Christianity appealed to the common people and taught that people of any ethnicity and gender and age could be saved, and was overall a very forgiving religion, it spread. Once Emperor Constantine was converted during a time of disarray in the Roman Empire, as we discussed in the previous prompt. His conversion was due to a dream he had, where he was instructed to conquer under the sign of the cross, which could be argued to be a numinous experience, especially since he was successful after following those instructions. In turn, he decriminalized Christianity and legalized all religions as thanks and to maintain his empire. Eventually, like Buddhism, Christianity developed multiple facets and denominations, which cause disagreement and strife in the interpreting of the Bible, evident even today.

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