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World Religions
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Analysis/Response on Into the Fire: Chapter 4 - Islam

As the perils of war loom over the true meaning and notions of Islam, I have decided to take a stand on the sensitive issue and express my particular point of view regarding the history of Islam as portrayed from a more clarified perspective, such as that found in chapter four of Into the Fire. Although this chapter referred to many other details about Islam, I chose to discuss more in depth the concepts and ideas that always raised questions in my mind.

In the beginning of the chapter, Ariana feels intimidated and overwhelmed by Muhammad's presence - he is fierce and strong - the surroundings she's in scare her, and it seems like Muhammad is the type of person one would not wish to anger. Once she starts talking to him, he is a rather pleasant person to talk with, not at all frightening like his presence could suggest. This bittersweet feeling of intimidation and camaraderie mixed into one as Ariana meets Muhammad, echoes throughout the chapter, for such a feeling, in my opinion, is the essence of what Islam is supposed to be.

As the story progressed, I noticed that Muhammad made an enormous effort in getting across the point that the Muslim *version* of God was the least corrupted of all - he clarifies several clichés, such as the idea that many Westerners have about the name Allah. Allah is simply the name of God in Arabic - it is not a different God from the one

in the Torah and the Christian Bible. Muhammad also explains to Ariana about the concept of heaven and hell in Islam, emphasizing on the incorporation of both physical and spiritual aspects of pleasure or pain respectively. It is also interesting to see Muhammad refer to hell as a “reward” for the unfaithful - it reinforces the idea that in Islam, humans are servants of God, and anything coming from God should be accepted as a prize.

Although Islam seems very logical and intense through Muhammad’s eyes, I identified with Ariana in not really being convinced by Muhammad’s metaphors. They may clarify some Muslim ideas, but I felt unconvinced. In the long run, however, as the discussions begin to touch more details and raise more questions, the metaphors start making more sense. I admire Muhammad’s intensity as he affirms that if God is no other but God, then all is chaos; personally, I believe that dividing God into three different persons, or having him pick “favorites” leads to confusion and contradiction, which could be used by groups of people to rationalize their “superiority” over other faiths.

There were many debates between Ariana and Muhammad throughout the story, but one that interested me particularly, was the argument about the recitation and writing of the Qu’ran. This argument helped me obtain some insight as to how the Qu’ran was passed on through generations, and Muhammad’s explanations illustrated the idea that the Qu’ran could truly be the uncorrupted word of God - the beautiful poetry and the majestic sense of it all, it really makes you think and question yourself about what you believe to be the true word of God. Ariana’s actions and feelings in this chapter portray

some of my own, especially in the way she felt she was being introduced to herself as she gained more knowledge about philosophical discrepancies and misconceptions in many religions.

Being from a catholic country, I had many pre-conceived ideas about women's role in Islam - I viewed the religion as being completely degrading of women by making them seem inferior. However, Muhammad's metaphors and explanations (especially one about men and women being like different parts of the body, although different, being important in their own way), as well Ariana's experiences as a woman in Islam made me change my perception on women's role in Islamic societies. While I do not approve of polygamy, I believe that Islam is not as detrimental to women as it is often thought. Even though it *does* promote unfair male superiority, there are also many unfair misconceptions about women in Islam. It is not completely balanced for women, far from it, but Islam is more considerate to women than I thought. In Islam, women trade some of their freedom for security.

It was positive to see the concept of *jihad* explained further, because at first, I thought it to be a horrible and hostile notion - murder in the name of God - which would make Muslims just as barbaric as medieval Christians during the Crusades. Dying for God and the faith if necessary is much different than killing for God. It is amazing how man has corrupted these ideas in order to spread hysteria and intolerance throughout the world.

Like Ariana, I was, too, repelled by the excessive authoritarianism in Islam; nonetheless, there is something to be said about submitting to God and simply giving up control. I believe that it could be quite liberating to surrender and free oneself from the chains and responsibilities of control. The goal in Islam is to lead an ethical life at the service of God; heaven is like delayed gratification - the expectation, hard work, anticipation and obedience of a lifetime make the final reward that much more intense. If one is consistent in this obedience, after death, like a liberated slave, one will be able to enjoy the pleasures of physical and spiritual freedom.